

Characters, Romanization, and Anti-Colonialism: Historical Development of Taigi and Vietnamese

Paul Ueda

Abstract. When one considers the necessary ingredients for a social revolution, the written language would not always be at the top of the list. Yet, this situation can change in the circumstances where the written language itself carries a colonial legacy. Examples of this in history have been numerous as the world transitions to a post-colonial era and grapples with its aftereffects. However, these struggles do not occur in a vacuum—especially in the modern age of information. To this extent, the present paper conducts a comparative analysis of the historical and modern Romanized Taigi movement (Cockrum, 2023; Heylen, 2014; Klöter, 2005) and historically similar movements, such as the *Quốc ngữ* romanization movement of Vietnamese (Lo Bianco, 2001; Phan, 2013). This exploration reveals that the similar trajectories of colonialization experience by Vietnam and Taiwan present implications on how language activists should proceed—particularly with regards to the issue of acceptance in the language standardization process as described by Haugen (1966).

1. Introduction

Writing has always held a powerful position in society in both the definitions of the physical manifestation of words as well as referring the one's ability to record language that uses graphs. In Chinese history, an entire class of intelligentsia that held prominent status throughout history are commonly referred to by the term 'literati' (Tsien, 1962, p. 7). This term 'literati' make explicit that the most salient trait of these individuals is their ability to read the written word, as well as their ability to write, albeit to a lesser extent, as it comes from the Latin *litteratus* meaning 'one acquainted with letters.' History, law, philosophy, and even art, in the form of poetry, are all recorded with the vehicle of writing. Given the ubiquitous and powerful nature of these topics, it is not unreasonable to say the mere act of writing is powerful. Indeed, as the adage goes, "The

Paul Ueda  0000-0003-2317-8816

The Ohio State University, Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, 398 Hagerty Hall, 1775 College Rd., Columbus, OH 43210, USA
E-mail: ueda.18@buckeyemail.osu.edu

Y. Haralambous (Ed.), *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century 2024. Proceedings*
Grapholinguistics and Its Applications (ISSN: 2681-8566, e-ISSN: 2534-5192), Vol. 12.
Fluxus Editions, Brest, 2026, pp. 469–488. <https://doi.org/10.36824/2024-graf-ueda>
ISBN: 978-2-487055-12-4, e-ISBN: 978-2-487055-13-1

pen is mightier than the sword.” However, he controls what forms the pen writes can be said to be more powerful than either pen or sword, as their influence is cemented in such a way that most do not even notice their adherence. It is precisely this power—the control of what the written word looks like—that is the central focus of the present essay. Focusing on just the Localist Camp of Taigi, one of the three orthographic camps described by Cockrum (2022), we shall discuss the role of writing in both social revolution and sociopolitical identity construction.

For some societies, the transition to a post-colonial entity is coupled with the creation of a new nationalist identity, coupled with the construction of an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1983) that reflects the new identity that the country wishes to project. For example, Sebba (2007, p. 81) describes how Moldova, a member of the soviet bloc in the 20th century, transitioned the Moldovan writing system from Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet after gaining its independence. This transition was intended as a symbolic move of rejecting its previous soviet membership. Similarly, Schieffelin and Doucet (1994, p. 186) describe the sociolinguistic struggle between independent and colonial identities that occurred in Haiti during the standardization of Haitian Creole (Kreyòl).

In East Asia, this transition has played out differently for some societies. Due to its historical prominence, several East Asian countries—including Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam—at one point employed Chinese characters as the primary orthography of their respective languages. Yet this relationship was not necessarily one of admiration, as in the case of Vietnam, which was colonized for a millennium by China and then for a century by France (Chiung, 2007; DeFrancis, 1977). After gaining independence in 1945, the government led by Ho Chinh Minh and his contemporaries struggled with how to reform the Vietnamese language as to “cultivate national pride” and to “re-affirm confidence in the great possibilities of the mother tongue,” as described by contemporary political figure Le Kha Ke, (cited in DeFrancis (1977, p. 246)). To this end, the Vietnamese government implemented *chữ Quốc ngữ*—a romanization system with its roots in colonial Vietnam but, to that point, had failed to gain widespread acceptance. After a period of intensive promotion, *chữ Quốc ngữ* was used widely by the population, and its promoters celebrated its ability to instill national pride, promote the national language, and to create a post-colonial Vietnamese identity (ibid., p. 259).

Turning to Taiwan, the situation for Taigi is not so clear cut. Klöter (2005) describes the situation of Taigi in the 20th century succinctly as being in a state of “polyorthographia”—a language with multiple and mixed orthographies being used to represent the language. For Taigi, this is primarily defined by the usage of the Latin alphabet, Chinese characters, and even Japanese Katakana. This state is a result of the period of colonialization by the Japanese from 1845-1945, then followed by

intensive “re-China-ization” (Shih, 2021) by the Kuomintang nationalist government of the Republic of China. Repressive language policies were continuous until the end of martial law in 1987, after which Taigi served as a contested symbol of anti-colonial and anti-nationalist government policies (Khoo, 2021, p. 59). However, as Chiung (2007, p. 112) notes, this process of decolonialization is still ongoing on multiple levels in Taiwan. Today, several different groups employ Taigi as a tool for creating a local identity, including the modern democratic government. Cockrum (2023) described the sociolinguistic situation as being captured by a Three Camp Framework, in which the orthography employed by these various groups reflected their sociopolitical outlooks of Taiwan. One of these camps, the Localist Camp, is defined by its preference to use *Péb-ôe-jī*, a romanization system originating from the missionaries working in Fujian Province in southern China, and in Taiwan (Klötter, 2005, p. 90). Despite its missionary origins, this Romanized Taigi developed into a broader tool for the promotion of the Taiwanese people and society, particularly during the Japanese Colonial Period, spearheaded by activists such as Chhòa Pêh-hóe (Cai Peihuo 蔡培火; Heylen (2014, p. 53)). Even today, some language activists such a YouTuber Ayo (Tâi-lâm muē-á kàu lí kóng tàigí [Tainan Little Sister Teaches You to Speak Taigi]) promote the adoption of *Péb-ôe-jī*, claiming that it serves as a gateway to learn other—namely western—languages (Tâi-lâm muē-á kàu lí kóng tàigí [台南妹仔教你講台語], 2020).

Given this parity between Vietnamese and Taigi, why did Vietnamese shift to a Latin alphabet while Taigi remained in an unstable state of polyorthographia (Klötter, 2005, p. 249)? For the case of Vietnamese, there was a wide social upheaval that allowed for radical departures in policy and for revolutionary concepts. Meanwhile, in Taiwan, one round of colonialism was followed by a second. The second round was not a radical upheaval, but instead a changing of policy while maintaining the same government structures that enforced colonial policies in the first place. For that reason, one could argue that Taiwan has never left the state of being colonized at all—and indeed local language activists do take such a position. While Vietnam was able to usher in a radical revolution for the vastly monolingual population, Taiwan was grappling with the identity politics and power struggle between the *benshengren* 本省人 and *waishengren* 外省人, a fundamentally fragmented understanding of the national identity.¹ While Vietnamese may be able to serve as a model for the Localist Camp language activists wishing to switch to *Péb-ôe-jī*, activists are forced to reckon with the effects of a contested identity due

1. This *bensheng* and *waisheng* distinction arose based upon the familial status during the wave of migration from China during the Chinese Civil War, which ended in 1949 with the retreat of the Nationalist Party (KMT) led by Chiang Kai-shek to the island of Taiwan.

to the perceived kinship with China. This identity conflict is navigated, in part, through these respective societies' relationship with the written language—underscoring the utility of writing for the social and historical analysis of societies.

The present paper will be organized into three primary sections. First, we will briefly discuss the linguistic and political history of China and Taiwan that has given rise to the Localist Camp and some of the sociopolitical ideological underpinnings that dictate its views. Afterwards, we will shift considerably to briefly recount the over two millennia of Vietnamese linguistic history, with particular emphasis placed on the colonial and post-colonial period. Finally, with the case of Vietnamese to serve as a point of comparison, we shall analyze some of the actors of the Localist Camp to understand how these ideologies are not novel or unique to Taiwan but are just one of the manifestations of post-colonial identity building that can be seen across East Asia.

2. From Oracle Bones to *Pê-ōe-jī*

The modern situation of written Taigi cannot be discussed without first discussing the role of Sinitic writing broadly within Chinese history. Broadly, there are four time periods that are of particular interest to the present discussion. The first is imperial China, which is from antiquity until the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912. The second is the Republic of China (or Republican China) from 1912 until 1949. The third is the National Party Rule of Taiwan from 1949 to the end of martial law in 1987. Finally, the final time period is the ongoing democratic Taiwan. Dating back to at least as early as the middle of the second millennium B.C.E (Boltz, 1994, p. 11), the ancestor of the present Chinese script was utilized in several official purposes, with one major being divination, such as the writing found inscribed on the Oracle Bones, from which the orthography of this period derives its name (Tsien, 1962, p. 32). Later passing on to media such as clay, stone, bronze, bamboo, silk, and paper, for most of its history, writing has been a treasured part of Chinese heritage. Indeed, the form of characters still used today, known as *kaiti* 楷體, was introduced prior to the 4th Century (ibid., p. 203). Arguments over orthography date back to even the Han Dynasty, in which conflicting versions of the Confucian classics, written in different scripts known as *guwen* 古文 'old text' and *jinwen* 今文 'current text', were discovered that led to an ideological debate that still was raging as late as the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) with the advent of the *kaozheng* 考證 school (Nylan, 1994, p. 84). While this paper does not make any claims about the applicability of the term "*guwen*" which has still faced some debate, at heart is the idea that arguments over orthography, authenticity, and authority have a long-standing tradition in the Sinosphere. It was not only the

ideas contained within the writing that were esteemed culturally. The manifestation of the writing itself, a piece of paper with written characters, were items which were to be treated with respect, as told to children with the phrase *jing xi zi zhi* 敬惜字紙 ‘pay respect to your characters and paper’ (Zhao and Baldauf, 2008, p. 34). Fishman (2002) (cited in Zhao & Baldauf) even argued that written classical Chinese had been “sanctified” and given the status of a holy vessel, as reflected by the fact that writing was considered to be given to Chinese by mythological figures, typically attributed to either *Cang Jie* 倉頡 or *Fu Xi* 伏羲 (Boltz, 1994, p. 130). Indeed, Sullivan (1999) argued for the “three perfections” that a well-trained scholar would be expected to master: painting, poetry, and calligraphy. These complementary arts were often practiced in tandem: a classical Chinese painting was not truly completed until also inscribed upon a poem with a beautiful script. Given such a mythos around writing as an artifact of culture itself, it is not hard to see how political debates surrounding national identity and language necessarily included writing as one of the primary markers.

The importance of writing to successive dynastic structures has not gone understated. Confucius argued that one essential function of the rule was to perform the “rectification of names” *zhengming* 正名 (Cao Feng [曹峰], 2016, p. 148). Later, in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 222 CE), Xu Shen 許慎 presented the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 ‘Explaining Graphs and Explicating Characters’ to the imperial throne in 121 (Boltz, 1994, p. 150). With this manuscript, the Han Dynasty aimed to ‘rectify’ the names and unify the language and its people. By doing so, Xu Shen provided a piece of scholarship that is still studied to this day.

However, one does not even need to turn to antiquity to see how closely the ideas of language and national identity have been interrelated in the case of Chinese. In many regards, the May Fourth Movement of Republican China (Republic of China; 1912–1949 (China), ongoing in Taiwan) was a protest of all things old and expression of dissatisfaction with the perceived weakness of China in international relations (Weng, 2018, p. 616; Tam, 2020, p. 111). As part of this protest, there was a desire to “modernize” the writing system. Instead of using the historical Classical Chinese that was unreadable to modern speakers without training, writers and linguists during this time turned to the creation of a more representative writing—what was known as *baibuwawen* 白話文 ‘plain speech text’ (Zhang, 2013, p. 565). The *baibua* in *baibuwawen* is meant to convey the message of “clear [obvious] speech,” meaning that the writing was intended to represent the way people speak. But given the diversity of China’s linguistic make-up, which speech exactly does this choice represent? Such a choice was not so clear to contemporary scholars (Tam, 2020, p. 31). Eventually, this *baibuwawen* came to resemble more closely the Mandarin style of speaking, even being established in

the 1930s as the written corollary to the widespread national language *guoyu* that was being promoted at the time (Zhang, 2013, p. 565).

Although *baibua wen* eventually won out and was established as the official writing system of Chinese in Republican China and continues to be the official writing system in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan, the fate of Chinese characters was not so ensured at the time. During the May Fourth movement, there were prominent reformers, such as Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942), who argued for the replacement of Chinese characters with the Latin alphabet (DeFrancis, 1984, p. 243). Given the intensely political milieu, it is little surprise that something that writing, being so important in the culture, became the focus of such intense heated criticism. Indeed, such an outlook on language would continue throughout the rest of the twentieth century in China with the efforts to simplify characters (Chen, 1999, p. 152) and develop a romanization system, Hanyu Pinyin, the latter of which was seen by some such as Su (2001) to be an intermediary step towards replacing the Chinese character script altogether. Indeed, there are still some scholars such as William C. Hannas who see characters as a hindrance to East Asia and believe that to progress further, they must abandon characters (for the severity of such claims, see Hannas (1997, p. 285)). In Taiwan, sociopolitical motivations for controlling script have extended to the banning of simplified Chinese script *jiantizi* 簡體字 as a method of "protecting authentic Chinese heritage" (Sui, 2011). This simplified script takes some basis in historical calligraphic forms, but the usage of these simplified characters in printed was first enforced by the People's Republic of China after the 1950's. Taiwan temporarily banned these simplified characters in order to combat the perceived communist threat. Today, China and Singapore use simplified characters. Only Taiwan and Hong Kong continue to use traditional characters, although there is some threat to this in Hong Kong due to increasing political pressure from the PRC government.

As evidenced above, writing has continued to be a sensitive topic for much of Chinese history even for the standard, or socially-dominant, written language. How, then, was it to be expected that the so-called 'dialects' of Chinese were to develop and maintain a thriving written culture? Many scholars (Liu, 2011, p. 59; Heylen, 2014, p. 187; Taylor and Taylor, 2014, p. 42) assert that these varieties either are not written at all, or if they are, are not a different writing system from standard written Chinese, but instead just include some potentially "locally flavored" graphs. In doing so, the underlying argument is that these varieties—or "dialects"—are not independent entities. They all exist under a subsumed structure of "written Chinese." If distinctly varietal Chinese is used, it used to promote a distinctly local, youthful, or counter-culture identity, such as in the case of some Shanghainese websites explored by Liu (2011, p. 65).

With some of the history behind Chinese writing explored, we can now turn more specifically to the case of Taigi. Sebba (2007, p. 32) asserts that variation in spelling/writing, from a sociolinguistics perspective, can be used to convey social meaning. However, important in this process is the comparison—what is subject to variation and what is it varying *from*. In the case of Taigi, it is important to understand that, invariably, any novel or distinct motivation to represent Taigi would be seen a variation away from Standard Written Chinese. This is why any discussion of Taigi orthographic reform must first begin from a place of understanding the process of orthographic reform that took place for the Chinese script generally.

The earliest extant example of written Southern Min, the language variety from which Taigi is derived historically, is the *Lijing ji* 荔鏡記 “The Story of the Lychee and the Mirror” dating back to 1566 (Klötter, 2005, p. 59). However, this text is not uniformly representative of Southern Min, as there were both vernacular and literary layers that would have served different communicative functions (ibid., p. 60). Additionally, such performance aids were not “unmediated” recordings of the way that people spoke, as they were written and rewritten for stage plays and to be a venue for scholars to show off their literary talent (Huang et al., n.d., p. 242). Not only were these not necessarily faithful adaptations, but these sources of writing were also disparaged by public officials as being crude or harmful to public morality (Klötter, 2005, p. 59). Similarly, the Taigi songbooks *kua-á-tsheb* 歌仔冊 are not even positively identified in which variant of Southern Min they represent, despite most modern lyrics and scholarship presuming readings based on contemporary Taigi (ibid., p. 74).

The previous cases of the opera script and songbooks present an interest challenge to this socially meaningful variation, as proposed by Sebba (2007). Given that socially meaningful variation exists only in relation from that which it is varying from, we must first determine to what degree the authors even saw their work as variation. Unfortunately, such a task is near impossible for the modern researcher, as many of these manuscripts are anonymous, removing any insight into the social motivations of their authors. However, given the domain of these manuscripts—specifically made for oral performance—it can be concluded that there was less interest in the written representation of Southern Min for the sake of writing it by itself. Instead, these texts are motivated to represent Southern Min due to the inherent performance-based aspect of their creation.

It is not until the period of Japanese occupation of Taiwan, 1895–1945, that we see perhaps the first efforts to write Taigi for the sake of writing Taigi. Ignored by scholars for a long time, the Romanized Taigi Movement has recently received more attention as debates have continued about the status of Taigi as an independent language (Heylen, 2014,

p. 54). While ultimately unsuccessful, the Romanized Taigi Movement was the first time that there had been even semi-widespread formal activism to establish Taigi as an independent language, and therefore with its own orthography. The lead individual behind this activism was Cai Peihuo (Chhoà Pôe-hóe 蔡培火, 1889-1983), who has been deemed the “protagonist” of this movement (Heylen, 2014, p. 53). During this time, Chhoà promoted the usage of *Péb-ôe-jī* 白話字 (hereafter, POJ), a latinized orthography based on the system of “Church Romanization” that was developed by the missionaries who were proselytizing the Southern Min speaking areas of Fujian and Taiwan (Klötter, 2005, p. 130). While not overtly religious in the promotion, Chhoà himself has been converted to Christianity, where he first learned POJ (Heylen, 2014, p. 70). In 1925, Chhoà published his manuscript *Tsáp hāng kuán kiàn* 十項管見 [My humble opinion in ten points] that expanded upon his critiques of Chinese and Japanese culture, as well as his arguments for learning Taigi and its importance in Taiwanese society (ibid., p. 75). In this manuscript, he expressed views that would become staples of Taiwanese language activists later, such that romanized Taigi was not limited to religious contexts and can represent the language in a wide variety of contexts. For Chhoà, the linguistic romanization movement was directly a part of the political movement, even insinuating that the language was part of the underlying reason that the Taiwanese people were not motivated to push for their own advancement (ibid., p. 85).

Perhaps the best way to characterize the Romanized Taigi Movement would be to see it as the Taiwanese manifestation of the May Fourth Movement that was occurring nearly simultaneously in China. Heylen (ibid., p. 53) argues that the Romanized Taigi Movement was not only influenced by the May Fourth Movement in China but was brought about by the present political situation of colonial Taiwan. As such, the ideas of progress, modernization, and reform are central themes of the Romanized Taigi Movement. In many ways, the Romanized Taigi Movement was an attempt to establish a uniquely Taiwanese identity when Taiwan was facing a cultural identity crisis (ibid., p. 93).

It is precisely due to the grassroots nature of the Romanized Taigi Movement that its solution—POJ—would end up being central to the attitudes espoused by the Localist Camp nearly a century later. Cockrum (2022) analyzed published sources of Taigi and found that there were broadly three camps in which modern written Taigi could be classified: the Modernist Camp, Localist Camp, or the Etymologist Camp. Membership in these camps was primarily determined by the manifestation of how an individual wrote Taigi. However, through the process of classification, it was discovered that it was not only the character, but the rationale behind selecting characters as well as general language attitudes that could motivate camp membership (ibid., p. 111). Of these camps, the Localist Camp are those who are most interested in the lo-

cal history and tradition of Taiwan (*ibid.*, p. 64). One mark of this camp membership is the intense political rebuke of the period of Nationalist Party (or Kuomintang; KMT) colonization that occurred after the retrocession of Taiwan back to (then Republican) China. This second period of colonization can be given the tentative dates of 1945 to the end of martial law in 1987, however, it is important to note that the process of de-colonization is something that is continually occurring in Taiwan to this day, a fact which complicates the matter of linguistic reform (Chiung, 2007, p. 112). This rejection of the colonial identity is something that is unique to the Localist Camp. Why is it the case that these political ideologies figure so prominently within the Localist Camp's linguistic assertions? Why do they not figure prominently in the Modernist or Etymologist Camps? In order to better understand the Localist Camp, it is essential to fully explore how the anti-colonial and post-colonial mentalities affect their rationale behind language usage and how it impacts their language attitudes. However, in order to do so effectively, we must first consider another post-colonial society in the Sino-sphere—Vietnam. As to be explored in the following section, understanding Vietnam's history and progression from a Chinese vassal during the dynastic times, to French colony, to independent nation will be an important point of comparison for Taiwanese studies.

3. The Case of Vietnamese and Chu Nom

Located to the south of China, Vietnam has had a complicated history with China and the Chinese language. Having a marginal, if any, position within the Sinosphere, Vietnam has often been ignored by scholars of Chinese, with only a select few, such as Chiung (*ibid.*) and DeFrancis (1977) discussing its linguistic situation in depth. For the purposes of the present discussion, John DeFrancis' (1977) investigation into the history of Vietnamese will serve as the base. DeFrancis' investigation is considered one of the seminal works on Vietnamese orthography, and is cited widely in other scholar's works, even in recent times (Lo Bianco, 2001; Chiung, 2007 amongst others). With this a base, we will now briefly explore Vietnamese linguistic history as divided into four eras: the millennium of Chinese colonialism (111 BCE – 939 CE), Monarchial Independence (939-1861), French Colonialism (1861-1945), and National Independence (1945-present).

3.1. Millennium of Chinese Colonialism (111 BCE – 939 CE)

Vietnamese is originally part of the Mon-Khmer language family, which is reflected in the fact that approximately 94% of the population is of

Mon-Khmer ethnicity (Chiung, 2003, p. 123). While a Mon-Khmer language, which is also an isolating language, Vietnamese has received significant influence from Chinese. Nguyen (1944, p. 250), cited in De-Francis (1977, p. 8), estimates that a third of all Vietnamese vocabulary has Sinitic origin, a number which increased to over 60% in the formal written context. Hence, the extent of Chinese influence on Vietnamese has been sizable. This is likely due to Vietnamese coming under Chinese control during the Han Dynasty in 111 BCE (*ibid.*, p. 10). During this period, the Chinese government imported its bureaucratic structure, including the usage of classical Chinese as the official language of governance. During this time, there was reportedly little to no literary productions that could be said to be more representative of Vietnamese than that of Chinese. However, once Chinese control ended in 939, this situation would change, although not as rapidly as one might have expected.

3.2. Monarchial Independence (939–1651)

The era of monarchial independence saw the introduction of more truly Vietnamese writing. Due to the social power and influence of Buddhism, Chinese retained a strong presence in Vietnamese society. Furthermore, with the ruling dynasty being backed by Buddhist support, Chinese remained the language of officialdom (*ibid.*, p. 14). However, by this point, scholars believe that the Chinese, when read aloud, would have been more of a “Sino-Vietnamese” reading, as it diverged from what may have been read in China (*ibid.*, p. 15). While this was occurring, in more marginal domains there was the rise of so-called “demotic writing” (*ibid.*, p. 24) which would eventually give rise to the writing system known as *Chữ Nôm* 字喃 [lit. characters for southern ‘babble’] (for graphic simplicity, we will omit the tone markings in the term *Chữ Nôm* rendering it as *Chu Nom*, or even more simply as *Nom*) which employed modified Chinese characters, as phono-semantic compounds 形聲字, to represent Vietnamese (*ibid.*, p. 28). The usage of *Chu Nom* was relegated to marginal activities, used by people such as ordinary people, relegated mandarins, and some “ultra-anti-Chinese nationalist elites” (Chiung, 2003, p. 29). *Nom* was used for “popular literature” that was aimed at the masses, such as Buddhist scripture (*ibid.*, p. 29).

However, even though *Nom* was a more locally coded language that was considered vulgar, Chiung (*ibid.*, p. 32) points out that writing in *Nom* was actually more difficult than writing in Chinese characters. Chiung argues that since *Nom* was comprised of Han Chinese characters, one must first know Chinese characters before one could read the *Nom* script. Knowledge of Chinese characters was restricted by the bureaucrats who wished to retain their power and status. Indeed, although more

aimed at the masses, that does not mean that Nom was entirely accessible in its representation of speech, nor consistent in its manner of doing so. Phan (2013, p. 21) notes that Nom can rightfully be considered a regional alternative to “literary Sinitic,” implying that it was still composed in such a manner that would have favored its usage by the erudite class. However, DeFrancis (1977, p. 46) asserts that literature composed in Nom, when read aloud, would have still been understandable by illiterate members of society, although laden heavily with classical Chinese allusions.

Nearing the end of this period, Vietnam saw an increased presence of Christian missionaries in the region. The missionaries brought with them several aspects of Western society, one of these items being the Latin alphabet (*ibid.*, p. 60). While there is some debate, creation of a romanized writing system for Vietnamese is typically attributed to the French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes (*ibid.*, p. 58). The usage of this new romanized system was very limited during this time, as it was primarily seen as a tool to aid other European missionaries in their efforts to speak the language of the people they were attempting to convert.

3.3. French Colonialism (1861–1945)

It was during the period of French Colonialism that there was the most diversity of languages, both spoken and written, in Vietnam. The present section will only touch on some of the broad themes of the period, and the reader is heavily urged to seek out additional information as interest provides, as the story will necessarily be simplified to a great extent here. The first topic that we shall discuss during the period of French Colonization is the continued presence of Chinese. During this period, Vietnam was divided into three different regions: Tonkin in the north, Annam in the central area, and Cochinchina in the south. Of these regions, the northern area of Tonkin was considered the stronghold of Chinese, as it still was the language used at the puppet court as well as the language used by serious scholars (*ibid.*, p. 128). However, with the promotion and rise of both French and *Quốc ngữ* (hereafter *Quốc Ngữ*, literally translated as ‘National language’), Chinese was on a steep decline by the early twentieth century. Indeed, such an end was welcomed by some, such as the lecturer Phan Chu Trinh, who delivered a lecture at the Tonkin Free School where he berated the Chinese orthography, stating that “Vietnam cannot be saved without getting rid of Chinese characters” (*ibid.*, p. 167). Nom, due to its close association with the Chinese script, declined similarly alongside Chinese. Thus, after over two millennia of intense Chinese influence on the language of Vietnam, Chinese finally was cast aside as a relic of antiquity, viewed as a Vietnamese

analogue to how western civilizations view Ancient Greek or Latin (DeFrancis, 1977, p. 205).

With the decline of characters, it is natural to ask what would rise to serve as its replacement. During the French colonial period, the answer to this question was not clear. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, there were individuals from both sides of the conflict, both colonizer and colonized, that wished to rid Vietnam of the influence of Chinese characters. However, there was significant disagreement as to what should instead take its place. From their role of a colonizer, the French desired the French language established as not only the language of education and government, but that all Vietnamese would eventually give up their own native language and instead speak the “civilized” language of French (ibid., p. 118). However, as our privileged place in history allows us to observe, such a drastic change would not come to pass, as Vietnamese remains spoken and written by the Vietnamese population today.

The real protagonist that saw a dramatic rise in popularity during this era was that of romanized Vietnamese. Introduced prior to the colonial era, romanized Vietnamese was spread alternatively by Vietnamese nationalist reformists and the French at different points in different areas, as it suited their goals (ibid., p. 79). Over time, the phrase “Quoc Ngu,” literally meaning national language, would come to be used to describe the writing system. The *Gia Dinh Bao*, a government newspaper published in the southern region of Cochinchina, provides the earliest extant record of such appellation from the 15th of April, 1865 (ibid., p. 81). Quoc Ngu was promoted as being the vehicle in which Vietnam could read modernity, knowledge, and success. As the reformist Truong Vinh Ky noted, “thanks to this writing, our poor disinherited country will be able to enter into the community of peoples and the great issues which the West has brought before the world” (ibid., p. 94). To a country, such as Vietnam, that was grappling with the questions of power, identity, and colonial structures, Quoc Ngu was seen as a tool that would allow the repressed people to finally enter the age of modernity. By the end of the colonial period, Quoc Ngu had indeed won out over its competitors, but it still had a long way to go before reaching wide usage, as only about 20% of the population was literate in Quoc Ngu by the end of the colonial era (ibid., p. 219).

3.4. National Independence (1945–Present)

By the end of the colonial period, it was becoming clear that Quoc Ngu was the forerunner to replace Chinese for widespread adoption. However, before Quoc Ngu could see widespread adoption, there were several significant barriers. One of the more fundamental issues was the perception of linguistic inferiority. After decades of French colonialism,

and millennia of Chinese influence and primacy, many were worried that the Vietnamese would have an “inferiority complex” and a “sense of rootlessness” in regards to their own language and national identity (ibid., p. 231). The reformer and political figure Le Kha Ke noted that one of the main struggles facing the Vietnamese people was to “struggle indefatigably” in opposition to this perception of inferiority and that it was essential to “cultivate national pride” and to “re-affirm confidence in the great possibilities of the mother tongue” (cited in DeFrancis (ibid., p. 246)). From Le’s statements, it is clear that there was a conflation between language and national identity. The usage of Vietnamese, in both its written and spoken modes, were seen as essential to crafting a national identity that freed Vietnam from the shackles of colonialism.

Part of the issue of this assumed linguistic inferiority was the question of how to deal with new terms in science and technology that had not yet been represented in Vietnamese. Historically, such borrowings would have come from Chinese, but there was a growing need for the ability to import names and concepts from western civilization (ibid., p. 243). While loanwords and calqueing were a possibility, Le Kha Ke, in his role on the *Section on Scientific Terminology in the Social Science Committee of Viet Nam*, argued for the creation of new terms using Vietnamese language elements such that they retain the highest degree of “national character” (ibid., p. 244).

Finally, the other main barrier facing Vietnamese and Quoc Ngu was the question of education. Such a question would be swiftly answered by Ho Chi Minh, the leader of Vietnam post-colonial period, launched an extensive literacy campaign that would see much of the population gain literacy with Quoc Ngu (ibid., p. 239). Importantly, the promotion of Quoc Ngu for many was the first writing system that they acquired—it was not so much a language shift, but instead a fight against illiteracy that allowed such rapid expansion of Quoc Ngu during this time. During one year of intensive promotion, the newly established Vietnamese government was able to achieve more than what the French colonial government had in sixty years (Buttinger, 1967, p. 349, cited in DeFrancis, 1977, p. 240).

In all, Vietnamese, and especially Quoc Ngu, was a significant tool for the reformers both in the late colonial period and in the early nation-building era of Vietnam. Ho Chin Minh and other activists saw the value of Quoc Ngu as a tool to instill national pride, promote the national language, and to create a post-colonial Vietnamese identity (ibid., p. 259). With this abbreviated background, our attention will now return to Taigi, as we compare the situations that have led to different outcomes.

4. Taigi Revisited—Positioning the Localist Camp

The case of Taiwan surprisingly has a lot of common ground with the history of Quoc Ngu and Vietnamese. Like Quoc Ngu, Pê-ôe-jī was adapted from a missionary script. In both cases, the usage of this missionary script extended past the domain of the Christian church as it was adapted and promoted by revolutionaries, such as the Tonkin Free School in Vietnam and Chhoà Pêe-hóe in Taiwan, who were struggling for a distinct national identity against their respective colonial governments.

In fact, upon closer examination, many of the arguments made by both the Vietnamese revolutionaries and those promoting Pê-ôe-jī in Taiwan would use similar arguments. We shall briefly address three of such arguments here. One such argument is that the romanized system would allow the population to interact with more of the, presumably western, world. During the colonial era, French government officials wrote how the promotion of Quoc Ngu would offer “great convenience” in switching the population from Vietnamese to French (DeFrancis, 1977, p. 129). Similarly, Taigi language activist Aiong Taigi (2020) argues that Pê-ôe-jī is the more intuitive choice for representing Taigi as the majority of the world’s languages are phonographic, so such a choice is more rational for representing Taigi. Similarly, the YouTube channel Tâi-lâm muē-á kàu lí kóng tâigí 台南妹仔教你講台語 [Tainan Little Sister Teaches You To Speak Taigi] host Ayo also states that learning POJ would be helpful for learning other languages, such as English, stating that “*òb lô-má-jī tui òb kî-thann phing-im bē thóng ê gí-giân koh ù tsiok tuā ê pang-tso̍*” 學羅馬字對學其他拼音系統的語言閣有足大的幫助 [Studying romanization has a lot of benefits when it comes to studying other languages that make use of a phonetic character system] (Tâi-lâm muē-á kàu lí kóng tâigí [台南妹仔教你講台語], 2020).

Similarly, both languages are having to face issues of perceived linguistic inferiority. Ayo, in the same video, talks about how when the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) came to Taiwan, their main purposes was to “brainwash” everyone into believing that they were also part of this Chinese identity. As such, part of the brainwashing effort was to make everyone believe that Taigi was inferior and did not possess prestige (ibid.). Below is the original Taigi as well as a Mandarin translation, both provided by the video creator, and English translation by this author follows:

國民黨來台灣共咱殖民統治的時陣為著欲共逐家洗腦，一直欲予逐家感覺講
「喔～咱逐家攏是中國人」咱「兩岸一家親」按呢。咱若欲做中國人著愛講北京話啊閣用
罰錢的這個步數來打壓咱的母語予咱感覺「喔～～～咱講家己的母語足無水準」

國民黨來台灣把我們殖民統治的時候為了要洗腦大家，一直要讓大家覺得
「喔～我們大家都是中國人」我們『兩岸一家親』」這樣。我們如果要當中國人就要講北

京話。還用罰錢的這招來打壓我們的母語，讓我們覺得「喔～～
～～我們講自己的母語很沒水準」 (5:52)²

For both situations, promotion of the language in all contexts, included academic, was seen as important aspect of promoting a national identity. For Taigi, its exclusion in these realms contributed to its decline in social status.

Finally, in both contexts, there was an attempt to escape the influence of the colonizer. As addressed in the section detailing Vietnamese history, the promotion of Quoc Ngu was seen as a tool to create a national identity that was entirely focused on the Vietnamese identity. It was seen to throw off the legacy of French colonialism. When discussing the Taigi case, Localist Camp activist A-hoa 阿華 make a very similar argument, as seen in the quote below (Tsiok ing tâ sann siann tō pōng bí phang [足英台三聲道磅米芳], 2021; translation and emphasis mine):

咱知影「Tâi-gí是毋是閩南語」chit題tiō是愛hō所有講Tâi-gí人同齊來決定
nā毋是講Tâi-gí ê人袂用得參加chit題ê討論³

In A-hoa's statement, we can see that there is a distinct desire that Taiwanese themselves have the first say in the identity labels that are used to discuss them. More importantly, as also described by Ayo in her video, there is a rejection of the Southern Min label. Both videos claim that this label of Southern Min was an invention of the Kuomintang brought over in the 1950s in their efforts to subdue the Taiwanese and bring them into a pan-Chinese identity. As such, their rejection of this term is not only a rejection of the label, but also a rejection of the colonial identity. For these speakers, the colonial structure suppressing Taiwanese never actually changed with the end of martial law, it just took a new form in the current government. As pointed out by Klöter (2005, p. 195), this link between ideology and orthography has not gone entirely unnoticed.

Given this comparison between Vietnamese and Taigi, what can we conclude about why Vietnamese shifted to a Latin alphabet while Taigi remained in an unstable state of polyorthographia (ibid., p. 249)? While the colonial periods showed many similarities in situation between the two languages and their speakers, it is what has happened post-colonialization that perhaps has had the biggest impact in the different

2. When the Nationalist Party (KMT) came to Taiwan to colonize us, in order to brainwash everyone, they would continually force everyone to think "oh, we are all Chinese," we are "two straits, one family" and stuff like that. If we want to be Chinese people, we must speak the speech of Beijing. They also used fines and penalties to suppress our mother tongue, and make us think "oh, we are really unrefined when we speak our mother tongue."

3. We know the question of "is Taigi actually Southern Min?" is only for those who speak Taiwanese to decide together. **Those who don't speak Taigi do not have the place** to join in the conversation about this question. (7:57)

outcomes. For the case of Vietnamese, there was a wide social upheaval that allowed for radical departures in policy and for revolutionary concepts. Meanwhile, in Taiwan, one round of colonialism was followed by a second. The second round was not a radical upheaval, but instead a changing of policy while maintaining the same government structures that enforced colonial policies in the first place. For that reason, one could argue that Taiwan has never left the state of being colonized at all—and indeed local language activists do take such a position as illustrated above. The fact that Taiwan has continued to become more dominant in Mandarin has made it more difficult for the political ideals espoused by the Localist Camp to materialize.

In summary, while there are many points of comparison to be made between the Vietnamese and the Taigi situations, the period after colonization changed the trajectory of promotion of the indigenous language. While Vietnam was able to usher in a radical revolution for the vastly monolingual population, Taiwan was grappling with the identity politics and power struggle between the *benshengren* 本省人 and *waishengren* 外省人, fundamentally unable to agree on if they were Chinese or Taiwanese to begin with. While Vietnamese may be able to serve as a model for the Localist Camp language activists wishing to switch entirely to Pè-ōe-jī, they are forced to reckon with the aftereffects of a fragmented identity due to their perceived kinship with China.

5. Conclusion

The story of Taigi is not yet fully written. The past two decades have shown important milestones in a shift towards the revitalization of Taigi in modern society. However, there remain many questions about what that Taiwanese society looks like and how should Taigi be written to begin with. From the perspective of Chinese history, the issues surrounding Taigi at present are not new. There has been a fundamental connection between the written language and identity. Indeed, such a connection, amongst other factors, has allowed for the existence of such diverse varieties of Chinese that, due to the perception that they share a written form, are only dialects of a larger language Chinese. The issue that Taigi should identify its status so strongly as it relates to its written form is merely the modern continuation of what could be seen as an over 2000-year-old tradition.

It is precisely this association with Chinese tradition that the Localist camp wishes to sever. One of the original questions posed at the outset of this essay is why does the colonial mentality seemingly serve as a fundamental concern for the Localist Camp, while it is hardly, if at all, addressed in the other camps? Even more specifically, why does there seem to be so much more resentment towards specifically the colonial ef-

fects of the Kuomintang rather than the Japanese? The comparison with Vietnamese should offer some insights. While colonized by France and Japan, both Vietnam and Taiwan respectively were in the throes of an identity crisis—attempting to determine what it meant to hold their national identity. Vietnam exited this period of colonization with a complete overhaul of society that instilled pride in their national identity. On the other hand, Taiwan went directly into a second period of colonization, one that can be argued to still be ongoing today. In this round, the effects of colonization were much more intense and reached broader success than that of either the French or Japanese governments. As the vast majority of Taiwan is dominant in Mandarin, the question of what it means to be Taiwanese and to speak Taigi has, to some degree, slipped away. Those remaining and fighting for the local identity have to fight against this assimilationist ideology. For them, Taigi refers only to what it was prior to this colonization. The Mandarin influence of the KMT has only rendered the language “impure” or “weak.”

In summary, the Localist Camp focus on fighting against the concepts of colonization so strongly because it is precisely the issue that they see as most important facing the vitality of Taigi. They do not wish to identify with their colonizer, and they do not believe that colonization ever really ended. For the Modernist Camp, there is a degree of acceptance of this colonial identity, although they believe such an era to be in the past. They can safely accept the modern situation as simply the most pragmatic option and aim to create a language that reflects all shared experiences. On the other hand, the Etymologist Camp deepens this colonial association, as they wish to use classical Chinese etymology to determine what modern Taigi should look like. For the Localist Camp, Vietnam can serve as an exemplar of what it truly means to reach a post-colonial state. For the Localist Camp, if Vietnam was able to shed Chinese characters, and therefore their association with China, why should Taiwan not be able to do the same?

The case of the Localist Camp highlights the importance of viewing the history and present situation of Taigi through the lens of post-colonialism. The arguments for the linguistic movement, just as Chhòa Pôe-hôe argued back in the 1930s, are inexorably intertwined with the political. An analysis that does not understand the political views of each camp would fail to understand their rationale for their proposals.

More broadly speaking, the case of Taigi provides a detailed example for the world on the intricate issues of language, society, and nationalism. While Anderson’s (1983) “imagined communities” may have existed in the imagination, writing is encountered daily in a very real way. Given such a political nature in the mundane, it is no surprise that the question of how to write Taigi becomes such a heated issue. In Einar Haugen’s original formulation on the process for standardization language, he placed equal emphasis on the acceptance of the selected and codified

variety by the community. When the very nature of the community is cause for debate—as well as grappling with a post-colonial identity, the contemporary contested status of Taigi becomes less surprising. Individuals are not just arguing for orthography, but they are also arguing for identity.

References

- Anderson, Benedict (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Boltz, William G. (1994). *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*. New Haven, CN: American Oriental Society.
- Buttinger, Joseph (1967). *Vietnam, a Dragon Embattled*. New York: Praeger.
- Cao Feng [曹峰] (2016). “A New Examination of Confucius’ Rectification of Names”. In: *Journal of Chinese Humanities* 2, pp. 147–171.
- Chen, Ping (1999). *Modern Chinese: History and Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Chiong, Wi-vun Taiffalo (2003). “Learning Efficiencies for Different Orthographies: A Comparative Study of Han Characters and Vietnamese Romanization”. PhD thesis. Arlington, TX: The University of Texas at Arlington.
- (2007). “Language, Literacy, and Nationalism: Taiwan’s Orthographic Transition from the Perspective of Han Sphere”. In: *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 28.2, pp. 102–116.
- Cockrum, Paul (2022). “Taiwanese Southern Min: Identity and Written Sociolinguistic Variation”. MA thesis. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University.
- (2023). “Reanalyzing Variation in Written Taiwanese Southern Min: Proposing a Three Camp Framework”. In: *Buckeye East Asian Linguistics*. Ed. by Mineharu Nakayama, Marjorie K. M. Chan, and Zhiguo Xie. Vol. 6. Columbus, OH: Knowledge Bank, OSU Libraries, pp. 15–33.
- DeFrancis, John (1977). *Colonialism and Language Policy in Viet Nam*. The Hague: Mouton.
- (1984). *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Fishman, Joshua F. (2002). “‘Holy Languages’ in the Context of Social Bilingualism”. In: *Opportunities and Challenges of Bilingualism*. Ed. by Li Wei, Jean-Marc Dewaele, and Alex Housen. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 15–24.
- Hannas, William C. (1997). *Asia’s Orthographic Dilemma*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Haugen, Einar (1966). “Dialect, Language, Nation”. In: *American Anthropologist* 68.4, pp. 922–935.

- Heylen, Ann (2014). *Japanese Models, Chinese Culture and the Dilemma of Taiwanese Language Reform*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Huang, Chu-ren et al. (n.d.). "Chinese Language Arts: The Role of Language and Linguistic Devices in Literary and Artistic Expressions". In: *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Applied Linguistics*. Ed. by Chu-ren Huang, Zhuo Jing-Schmidt, and Barbara Meisterernst. New York: Routledge, pp. 237–255.
- Khoo, Hui-lu (2021). "Emerging Taiwanese Identity, Endangered Taiwanese Language: The Never-Matched National Identity and Language in Taiwan". In: *Taiwan: Manipulation of Ideology and Struggle for Identity*. Ed. by Chris Shei. New York: Routledge, pp. 55–74.
- Klöter, Henning (2005). *Written Taiwanese*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Liu, Jin (2011). "Deviant Writing and Youth Identity: Representation of Dialects with Chinese Characters on the Internet". In: *Chinese Language and Discourse* 2.1, pp. 58–79.
- Lo Bianco, Joseph (2001). "Viet Nam: Quoc Ngu, Colonialism, and Language Policy". In: *Language Planning and Policy: East Asian Perspectives*. Ed. by Nanette Gottlieb and Ping Chen. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, pp. 159–206.
- Nguyen, Van Huyen (1944). *La Civilisation annamite*. Hanoi: École d'Extrême-Orient.
- Nylan, Michael (1994). "The *chin wen/ku wen* Controversy in Han Times". In: *T'oung Pao* 80.1, pp. 83–145.
- Phan, John (2013). "Chữ Nôm and the Taming of the South: A Bilingual Defense for Vernacular Writing in the *Chí Nam Ngọc Âm Giải Nghĩa*". In: *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8.1, pp. 1–33.
- Schieffelin, Bambi B. and Rachele Charlier Doucet (1994). "The 'Real' Haitian Creole: Ideology, Metalinguistics, and Orthographic Choice". In: *American Ethnologist* 21.1, pp. 176–200.
- Sebba, Mark (2007). *Spelling and Society*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Shih, Fang-long (2021). "Taiwan's Culture Wars from 'Re-China-ization' to 'Taiwan-ization' and Beyond: President Tsai Ing-wen's Cultural Policy in Long-term Perspective". In: *Taiwan in the Era of Tsai Ing-wen: Changes and Challenges*. Ed. by June Teufel Dreyer and Jacques deLisle. New York: Routledge, pp. 284–311.
- Su, Peicheng (2001). "Digraphia: A Strategy for Chinese Characters for the Twenty-First Century". In: *International Journal of Society and Language* 150, pp. 109–124.
- Sui, Cindy (2011). *Taiwan Deletes Simplified Chinese from Official Sites*. BBC News. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13795301>.
- Sullivan, Michael (1999). *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry, and Calligraphy*. New York: George Braziller.

- Tâi-lâm muē-á kàu lí kóng tâigí [台南妹仔教你講台語] (2020). 【台語的迷思】台語為什麼不叫閩南語？學台語的重要性是啥？ | 台南妹仔教你講台語 [EPO Taiwanese Myths. Why is Taiwanese not called Southern Min? What are the important parts of studying Taiwanese? | Tainan Little Sister Teaches You to Speak Taiwanese]. YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFjSqu8HLpI>.
- Taigi, Aiong [阿勇台語] (2020). 阿勇，汝是安盞無塊用漢字？ [Aiong, why do you not use Chinese characters?] YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU8jtiiJ4QA>.
- Tam, Gina Anne (2020). *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Insup and M. Martin Taylor (2014). *Writing and Literacy in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese: Revised Edition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Tsien, Tsuen-Hsuei (1962). *Written on Bamboo & Silk: The Beginning of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tsiok ing tâi sann siann tō pōng bí phang [足英台三聲道磅米芳] (2021). 我按怎看「Tâi-gí是毋是閩南語」 [How I see “is Taiwanese Southern Min?”] YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgnUCI6k0SA>.
- Weng, Jeffrey (2018). “What is Mandarin? The Social Project of Language Standardization in Early Republican China”. In: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77.3, pp. 611–633.
- Zhang, Qing (2013). “Language Policy and Ideology”. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Ed. by Robert Bayley, Richard Cameron, and Ceil Lucas. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 563–586.
- Zhao, Shouhui and Richard B. Baldauf Jr. (2008). *Planning Chinese Characters: Reaction, Evolution or Revolution?* Dordrecht: Springer.