

Chapter 13

Appendix Two: The Schools and the Teachers' Profiles

13.1 The Grade-Estate School

The secondary sector building and the primary sector building in Grand-Estate School sit opposite each other across the central playground, connected by a column-shaped multi-function building. The administrative offices, such as the headmaster's office, are located on the top floor of the secondary sector building. The primary school teachers' offices are situated in the primary sector building where the classrooms join the multi-function building. Teachers can see the classrooms clearly through the window facing the courtyard and if walking out to the corridor, they overlook the central playground and the secondary sector teachers' office on the other side. The year 5 teachers' office is on the second floor, spacious, air-conditioned, and well-maintained by a designated cleaner (Figs. 13.1, 13.2).

Five teachers worked in the office, each being allocated a large worktop and a brand new desktop computer. There was no extra desk, so that I sat at a student desk by the window next to Miss Lee when I stayed in the office. Miss Lee, Miss Pan, and Miss Huang were the head teachers of the three classes in grade 5 respectively. In general, Miss Pan and Miss Huang taught Chinese, Miss Lee taught English, and Mr Chik and Miss W taught Maths, but they usually taught a few other courses, such as science and social studies. Miss Huang was the chief and the Chinese course leader of year 5. All the female teachers in the office were married, had young children, so casual talk in the office often concerned child-rearing. Miss Lee and Miss W understood little Cantonese, while Miss Pan, Miss Chik, and Miss Huang were born in Guangdong Province and were fluent Cantonese speakers. Yet the latter three rarely talked in Cantonese, except when addressing parents. Miss Tina, the Chinese teacher of class B, which I observed, worked in the year 4 office downstairs.

The teachers usually ate their lunch in the office and chatted with one another from 12 to 1 p.m. From 1 to 2 p.m. they would take a nap in the office if it was not their turn to supervise students who stayed in the classrooms rather than going home for the midday break.

As the head teacher of class B, Miss Lee taught not only English but also a number of social studies, practice, and activities courses. However, she never used the

Fig. 13.1 The central playground, the multi-function building, and the administrative offices of the Grand-Estate School (Photo taken by the author)



Fig. 13.2 The central courtyard, the teachers' office (where the air conditions are attached), and the classrooms (on the *left*) (Photo taken by the author)



designated textbooks for the latter courses, dismissing them as too simple and boring. Instead, she used that class time for extra English activities or the students' self-study. Miss Lee was 25 years old and just returned from her maternity leave at the beginning of the study. She received education up to college level in her hometown, Hunan Province, and remembered being taught in the Hunan dialect until senior high school. Her husband Mr Lee, also a Hunanese (by traditional standard), grew up in northern China speaking only Putonghua, because his parents could not speak each other's dialect. Mr Lee learned Cantonese during college in Guangzhou, but Miss Lee did not speak Cantonese, so that the whole family now spoke Putonghua at home. Miss Lee had no intention to teach her son Cantonese or Hunan dialect.

Like Miss Lee, Miss Pan, as the head teacher of class A, taught a number of different courses including Chinese to her own class, but she also taught science to class B. She was born in Zhanjiang, a coastal city in western Guangdong Province, where the local dialects include several Cantonese, Hakka, and Teochew varieties,

as well as some hybrid varieties. Miss Pan grew up speaking several varieties which she learned from her friends in school. While her parents spoke the Hakka dialect at home, she said she only spoke “Zhanjiang Baakwaa” (the local and dominant variety of Cantonese) to them. She had also started to use Putonghua regularly since very young because her family lived in the military community where different people mingled¹. She considered herself as gifted in learning languages, as both her Guangzhou Hua and Putonghua were rather standard. She achieved 1B (92–97 out of 100) in PSC, which is a rather high grade, because only professional broadcasters and anchors in certain TV stations are required to achieve 1A. She had been teaching in Guangzhou since 1990, first in kindergartens and later in primary schools, but always in Tianhe District. Her husband was from Sichuan Province and the home language was Putonghua. Her son was attending kindergarten when the study began, and she did not teach him Cantonese at home. Instead, she expected that he would pick up enough by himself through listening and talking to other kids.

Miss Tina taught Chinese to class B, and other classes in grade 4 and 2. The examination performance of class B was not as good as the other two classes, so that she devoted a lot of classroom time for the students to do text-oriented drills. Miss Tina used to teach in a private secondary school in Tianhe District, where the students often spoke Cantonese. Based on that experience, she reckoned that the students would naturally use more Cantonese when they went to secondary school. She took up the current job in Grand-Estate School 1 year before the study began. Miss Tina was 25 at the start of the study. She went to school in Guangxi Province until senior 2 when (in 2002) she continued to study in an outer suburban district of Guangzhou, and had stayed in Guangzhou since then. She is a native speaker of the Guangxi variety of Yue dialects, but she said that a native Cantonese speaker (for example, vice-headmistress Miss Cheung) can immediately notice her “accent”. Nevertheless, she said she used quite a lot of Cantonese in the teacher’s office because there were other Cantonese-speaking teachers in the office.

Mr Chik was a probational Maths teacher at the beginning of the study, who taught Maths to two grade 5 classes and hosted the weekly science programme of the school radio station. He is from Qingyuan (Guangdong Province), a small city famous for its agricultural products, where the indigenous residents mainly consist of Hakka and Cantonese people. Mr Chik’s native dialect is what he called Fucheng Hua, a hybrid variety of Cantonese and the Hakka dialect. He is proficient in Cantonese and Putonghua, and understands some Sichuan Hua (one of the South-western varieties of the Mandarin dialect group) since he went to college in Sichuan Province. Mr Chik is younger than I am, aged 23 when the study began. He said Putonghua was the medium of instruction in all the schools he attended, whether situated in villages, towns, or big cities. Mr Chik rarely spoke Cantonese

¹ Such governmental, military, and research units were often “transplanted” from elsewhere and often functioned in a near self-sufficient way. The lingua franca in these communities is often Putonghua, and the first generation could live and work in it for a lifetime hardly knowing any Cantonese or the local dialect. Several teachers and students in the study are the first or second generation to grow up in such “Putonghua enclaves”

Fig. 13.3 The playfield and the teaching building of the Sandwood School (Photo taken by the author)



in the office even if only the two of us were present. Some students knew that he could speak Cantonese, but he had never spoken any in class. When chatting with friends online, he sometimes typed Cantonese, but he thought that he was just using homophonic characters to approximate speech and reckoned that there was no standard for written Cantonese.

13.2 The Sandwood School

All teachers' offices, including the administrative offices were located on the east side of the U-shape teaching building, with the classrooms in the south and north wings. The Chinese, English, and Maths teachers of 2 years shared one big office, in which there were 12 work desks, each equipped with one (often outdated) desktop computer. The whole campus was maintained by one cleaner and the students occasionally shared cleaning responsibilities.

Miss Wu and Miss Liang worked in the year 3 and 4 teachers' office on the first floor, where I had my own desk too. The grade 5 and 6 teachers' office on the second floor was where Miss Wong and Miss Chun worked. Through the door and the front window, the teachers could see the classrooms on both sides, while the back window opened towards the playground and the teachers' dormitory across it (Fig. 13.3).

Most teachers in the office were in their thirties or forties and had children who were attending schools or even universities. All of them were from Guangdong Province, with half of the teachers from Sandwood or the neighbouring townships. Most of them had been teaching in the school since they first became a teacher. Cantonese was the dominant language in the office when the teachers were chatting with one another. One of the female Chinese teachers was a native Teochew speaker and she tended to switch to Putonghua more often than the others. All the teachers tended to use Putonghua when they addressed students or quoted texts

from textbooks. The Chinese teachers were also the head teachers of their class, so that they usually taught a number of social studies, practice, and activity courses in addition to Chinese. The teachers usually ate lunch together in a large conference room on the ground floor with teachers of other grades and school administrators, and thus lunchtime was an important occasion for socialising. The conversations were almost exclusively in Cantonese. After that, most teachers went back to their dormitory for a rest.

Miss Wu was the Chinese teacher and head teacher of class A, year 4, as well as the mother of Kiki, a key participant in class C, year 5—the class I followed. Miss Wu was from Nanhai, a small city neighbouring Guangzhou. Miss Wu thought that the Nanhai variety of Cantonese is more similar to the standard variety spoken in the traditional city centre of Guangzhou than the Sandwood variety. There is some truth in that claim. Miss Wu started primary school in the late 1970s and continued her secondary and tertiary education in Guangzhou. Her husband is from Guangzhou and a native Cantonese speaker. She had been teaching at Sandwood School since she first became a teacher in 1991. She recalled clearly the difficulties she encountered when learning Hanyu Pinyin at first. She noticed a great change in the school language environment between now and her time at school. To prepare Kiki for the Putonghua-dominant environment at kindergarten, Miss Wu started to teach her some basics since she was 2 or 3 years old, but the home language was Cantonese.

Miss Liang is the Chinese teacher and head teacher of class C, year 4. When I first started the fieldwork in Sandwood School, I followed her class as arranged by the headmaster, but later I switched to year 5, class C and collected data systematically in that class. I still visited year 4 regularly, so that I was familiar with her routines. Miss Liang is a local of the Sandwood Township. She attended Sandwood School from the late 1970s, went to the same teachers' college with many of the current teachers (such as Miss Wu), and finally became a teacher in the school in 1991. She was my young cousins' primary school teacher, so that she knew of my family even before we met each other. It was the same with several other teachers, which made me feel familiar with the school even though I had never attended it. Miss Liang was married to a former teacher in the school who was from another province, and the home language was Putonghua. Miss Liang said she could not bear hearing her husband's broken Cantonese so she decided to accommodate him. Her daughter Nora, whose first dialect was Putonghua and who understood only a little Cantonese, was attending year 3 in Sandwood School. Miss Liang said that she decided to teach Nora Putonghua first because she considered it an advantage for schooling. Currently, she was trying to teach Nora some Cantonese to match her identity as a "half-Guangzhouer".

Miss Wong was the Chinese teacher and head teacher of class C, year 5 (the class I followed), as well as the computer teacher of class C, year 4, where I first got to know her. She was the second head teacher in year 5 whom I asked for permission to follow their classes. The first teacher was reluctant while Miss Wong promptly and happily agreed. We built a good rapport during the study and became good friends afterwards. Miss Wong was transferred to Sandwood School at the same

time my study started, as the result of a teacher mobility programme in the district. Her teaching approach was interactive and learner-centred—ostensibly from other teachers I observed in the school—which she said was inspired by her own teacher. Miss Wong designed a number of classroom activities and student projects that directed the students' attention towards the cultural heritage in the local community. She is a native Cantonese speaker born in Guangzhou, starting primary school in the mid-1970s. The teachers in her primary school taught in both Putonghua and Cantonese, but when she went to a key secondary school in the traditional urban district, the medium of instruction became Putonghua. Many students in that school were from the military or governmental units nearby (the Putonghua enclaves), and it was the first time Miss Wong realised that her Putonghua was not sufficiently standard. She became a primary school teacher in 1998 in a school that later became a "Model School". She reflected on her language-use practice there and in Sandwood School upon my prompt. She was married and her son was about to start college when the study ended. Their home language was Cantonese.

Miss Chun was the Maths teacher of class C, year 5. She code-switched between Cantonese and Putonghua in every lesson I observed, while she underestimated her tendency to do so. She is a local of Southport Township, the township neighbouring Sandwood where "Chun" is a majority surname. However, she grew up in the community of a state-owned research unit (a Putonghua enclave) rather than in the villages. She acquired Putonghua before she went to the community primary school in 1982, where the majority of students did not speak Cantonese. She claimed that she could not speak the Southport variety of Cantonese, although I could still recognise the Southport accent in both her Cantonese and Putonghua. She was married but had no child yet. She imagined that she would teach her children Putonghua first in the future because it would be more useful for schooling. On the one hand, she admitted that there were fewer and fewer native Cantonese speakers, but on the other hand, she was optimistic that Cantonese will continue to be used in Guangzhou.