

# A Tâi-gí Consumer Movement

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I'm pretty sure the readers of *Tâi-bûn Thong-sîn* understand how linguistic heritage connects and interacts with land and life, and how a people lives and dies with its language and so on and so forth. We're all clear on the importance of the Formosan languages to the future of Formosa, so I won't be exploring the theory of all those things in this article. A more realistic question — and *Tâi-bûn Thong-sîn* has always taken a realistic approach — is this: What steps are we going to take? How are we going to resurrect or revitalize the languages of this land?

Such concerns certainly have the attention of the scholars, “smiths,” and supporters of the Formosan languages at the present time. Meetings about language issues are always well-attended these days. Sadly, whenever the topic of “the orthographization of Taioanese”<sup>1</sup> comes up, the “experts” on Taioanese seem to be in constant disagreement; but as far as promoting Taioanese and the Formosan languages goes, everybody seems to see eye to eye. I got to thinking that if activism is about pooling and focusing our strength on one thing or one area at a time, maybe we could discuss just promoting the languages for now, and worry about building a consensus on the orthography later.

As it turns out, this view of things quickly met with the approval of friends and worthies in the field. Several meetings have since been dedicated to the promotion of Taioanese, with excellent results.

Figuring out how to define Tâi-gí 台語 is the first order of business at every meeting. At traditional society, Tâi-gí reflexively meant Holo<sup>2</sup> (Taioanese). But the language activists feel that, for the sake of the relative dignity and “Taiwan”-identifying feelings<sup>3</sup> of the various linguistic tribes, it would be inappropriate to equate Tâi-gí with Holo; rather, Tâi-gí should be defined as *the languages of Formosa*. This means that Hakka and the Indigenous languages

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes present in the original. “Orthographization” implies that Taioanese lacked an orthography, but this was never in fact the case. For reasons too complex to mention, Mandarin-literate people in the 20th century (and to this day, largely) imagined that Taioanese was scriptless; thousands of guys then took it upon themselves to cure the perceived problem in ways that were often mutually at odds, with the 1990s seeing the heaviest action.

<sup>2</sup> Or “Hoklo,” especially outside of the modern Formosan context. English “Hoklo” comes from Hakka Hók-ló 學老, maybe through Cantonese. English “Holo” is derived from Holo (Taioanese) Hóh-ló, which is related to the Hakka word and was probably borrowed from a Hakka-type language many centuries ago on the continent.

<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: I have translated Tâi-oân 台灣 as “Taiwan” in this context because the “Taiwanese” identity referred to here traces back to roughly the same era and causal backdrop as the (mainly) Mandarin-derived English term “Taiwan.” Psychologically and emotionally, something in addition to Formosan identity is involved here.

would be Tâi-gí too. Yet others ask whether the currently official Standard Chinese<sup>4</sup> — as heritage tongue of the so-called “Out-of-Province” settlers who arrived in 1949 and thereafter — would be Tâi-gí as well.

This question is logically beyond the scope of this article, but it seems necessary to comment on it. Those who arrived from 1949 on are unquestionably Formosans in an objective sense, whether or not they themselves subjectively recognize this. Their heritage tongues deserve respect. But how is Standard Chinese their heritage tongue? The languages of Canton and Szechwan and Henan and Beijing all differ from Standard Chinese. Standard Chinese is not their heritage tongue. Nor is it possible for the heritage tongue of any immigrant from anywhere to be considered a Formosan language. After all, it would be quite unreasonable for Taioanese-speaking immigrants to the United States to demand that Taioanese be regarded as an American language in an institutional sense. There is only an expectation that the people or the government of America ought to respect the right of Formosans to speak the Formosan languages and teach them to their offspring. Thus, when I refer to Tâi-gí — the Formosan languages — I do not include the Chinese Nationalist Party’s Standard Chinese; nor is Standard Chinese in need of further promotion, least of all on our part.

On December 20, 1992 — the day after Election Day — a good hundred concerned individuals gathered at YMCA in the heart of Tâi-pak 台北 to discuss how to revitalize the languages of Formosa. It would perhaps be necessary to act on two fronts — the official and the non-official — at the same time. On the official, legal front, Standard Chinese — the so-called “National Language” — is the sole, exclusive official language at present; our just-elected legislators could be leaned on to cosign new bills that would make Holo, Hakka, and the Indigenous languages official as well. Many of our freshly elected legislators relied heavily on speeches in Taioanese on the campaign trail. They are obliged to do the legwork to help make Formosa officially multilingual. Meanwhile, we can reinforce their efforts with demonstrations and petitions.

The non-official front is comparatively even more important than the official. After all, the point of official status is to enable the people to act. If the people feel no need for action, not only would legislation tend to fail, it would be pointless even if it passed. And the most actionable path at present is a Formosan-language consumer movement. At public and semi-public venues such as township and district offices, public health centers, Taiwan Railways offices, the Taiwan

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<sup>4</sup> Kok-gí 國語 — National Language — in the original, with the equivalent of scare quotes added. It seems that in the early 1990s, it would have been broadly politically incorrect to refer to Mandarin as anything but Kok-gí, yet this term is exquisitely illogical, inequitable, and untenable. Mr. Tân must have called Mandarin Kok-gí — in protest, hence the scare quotes — mainly because there was nothing else to call it at the time. Pak-kia<sup>n</sup>-gí 北京語 — “Pekinese” — would not have worked for this article, even if one saw fit to de-stress the distinction between Pekinese and Standard Chinese.

Motor Transport Company, libraries, and hospitals, we as taxpayers have the right and the responsibility to insist on service in a Formosan language. At restaurants, hotels, convenience stores, and other private places of business, we as consumers are even more directly entitled to demand service in the heritage tongue of the locale.

We can also make *Hakka Spoken Here* stickers and the like; volunteers would canvass places of business, putting these stickers up at businesses where they are applicable. This gives the consumer a bit more information to base decisions on. Business owners may also take into account that, for roughly the same expense, they would be better off hiring employees who speak a Formosan language in addition to Mandarin. In turn, Mandarin monolinguals would find themselves having to sharpen their Formosan language skills to stay competitive. Learning Formosan languages could even come into vogue some.

Likewise, should a radio station, television station, newspaper or magazine disrespect a Formosan language, we can either protest directly, or — as consumers — by making it clear to their advertising sponsors that we may boycott enterprises that patronize linguistically insensitive media companies. The power of the consumer was demonstrated during the *United Daily News* (聯合報) boycott [of 1992]. Some businesses did pledge to withdraw advertising from the *United Daily News*.

Two elements will be essential on both the official and non-official fronts: people, and a moniker of national import. So it was that all participants of the December 20 “action meeting” were in agreement that we should, being of hopefully one mind, establish an organization named Tâi-oân Gí-bûn Ûn-tōng Liân-bêng 台灣語文運動聯盟 (“Formosan Language Action League”) or similar; and further rally all concerned individuals and groups, in Formosa and beyond, to the cause of our very own heritage tongues and cultures.

This organization is currently in the planning stage. We hope to unveil it in March 1993. We hope each and every person who cares about the Formosan languages, whether in Formosa or overseas, will come forward to join us and share their views.