Australian Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 35 | Issue 8 Article 6

2010

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Recommended Citation
Gao, X., Leung, P. P., & Trent, J. (2010). Chinese Teachers' Views on the Increasing Use of Putonghua as a Medium of Instruction in Hong Kong Schools. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(8).
http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n8.6

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol35/iss8/6

Chinese Teachers' Views on the Increasing Use of Putonghua as a Medium of Instruction in Hong Kong Schools

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Abstract: The use of a particular language as medium of instruction (MOI) is a complex issue in multilingual and post-colonial contexts such as Hong Kong, on which teachers' voices are often neglected. To capture their voices, this paper reports on an interpretive inquiry of eight experienced Chinese teachers' professional experiences with a focus on their perceptions concerning the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes in Hong Kong. Through a collaborative interpretative process, the study revealed a wide spectrum of perceptions including reservations and enthusiasm for the switch to Putonghua as MOI. The findings suggest that the participants' perceptions could be explained by references to shifting political, demographical conditions, the participants' experiences of curriculum reforms and their concerns with pedagogical conditions. The paper ends with a discussion for the study's implications for Chinese language teacher education in Hong Kong and elsewhere.

The use of a particular language as medium of instruction (hereafter referred to as 'MOI') can be often associated with the ideological imposition of the dominant groups on the society at large to perpetuate a social structure to their advantage (Boyle, 1997; Gupta, 1997). Consequently, the MOI issue is often a highly complex one in multilingual and post-colonial contexts such as Hong Kong. In these contexts, any move to change the MOIs is likely to generate heated debates among different sectors of the society, leading to a chorus of different views and voices (on Hong Kong see

Chan, 2002; Davison & Lai, 2007; Tse, Shum, Wing & Chan, 2007; Tsui et al. 1999). Such MOI debates have profound impact on language teachers' professional lives as language teachers play a critical role in the implementation of MOI shifts. Unfortunately, "[in] many of the educational changes and reforms currently being undertaken with accelerating speed around the world", teachers' perspectives' on these changes are "too often missing", which potentially undermine their roles in these changes (Goodson & Numan, 2002, p. 274). To fill in this gap, this paper reports on an interpretative inquiry into a group of Chinese language teachers' professional experiences with a particular focus on their perceptions concerning the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese language classes in Hong Kong. In the coming sections, we will first provide a contextual description of Hong Kong to set the scene for the inquiry and interpretation. We shall then describe briefly our methodological approach before presenting the findings from the inquiry.

Socio-political and MOI Shifts in Hong Kong

At the outset of the inquiry, it is noted that teachers in many contexts have been made to feel ever more deskilled and threatened due to changing educational conditions such as educational reforms and socio-cultural shifts (e.g. Elliott, 2004; Gao, 2008, in press; Gordon, 2005; Kelchtermans, 2005; Law, 2003; Morris, 2004; Troman, 2000). In the case of language teachers in Hong Kong, their professional performance has always been a subject of public interest, especially in the light of frequent outcries against so-called "falling" language standards in recent decades (Bolton & Lim, 2000; Lin, 1997; Gao, in press). Influenced by Chinese culture, the majority of the residents, being ethnically Chinese, see education as the means to acquire skills and achieve upward social mobility while the government often regards it as a panacea for social problems and the key to societal transformation (e.g. Lee, 2000; Pong & Chow, 2002; Schoenhals, 1993; Thøgersen, 2002). Language has always been at the core of individuals' educational pursuits and the government's social planning with the political shifts at the backstage, making Hong Kong a unique place to examine language teachers' professional experiences.

Linguistic Complexities and the MOI Controversy

Hong Kong has a fluid, complex linguistic situation, an issue that has been the focus of a large number of studies (e.g. Chan, 2002; Davison & Lai, 2007; Lai, 2005;

Li, 2009; Tse et al., 2007). These studies confirm that English is widely used in the business and professional sectors and constantly promoted as an important asset for individuals' career and social development as well as a crucial means for Hong Kong to retain its international standing. Cantonese, often regarded as a regional variety of Chinese and mother tongue for most Chinese residents in Hong Kong, is the dominant language in daily life and the favoured language for most social, cultural, and political occasions. The importance of Putonghua (also known as Mandarin Chinese and closely associated with Modern Written Chinese), the national spoken standard variety on the Chinese mainland, has been rising since the handover in 1997 due to the rise of China and increasing exchanges between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. However, although the two Chinese varieties share the use of Chinese characters in writing (albeit traditional characters are used in Hong Kong and simplified ones on the Chinese mainland) and "the norms of correctness in writing have been always Modern Written Chinese" (Li, 2006, p. 168), the learning of Putonghua for most Chinese residents in Hong Kong "somehow exhibits certain characteristics of the learning of a second language" (Li, 2009, p. 76). The historical separation between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland has made it possible for Cantonese to develop its written form in Hong Kong, making it further differ from Putonghua and Modern Written Chinese in lexico-grammatical and phonological terms. As a result, most Chinese residents in Hong Kong are faced with difficulties in "learning to write a language variety that one does not speak" as they have "a tendency […] to model their writing on the way they speak" (Li, 2006, p. 152).

With the political change in 1997, there have been hopes that Cantonese would play a bigger role in the educational system, leading to "a more balanced view of English language education and English as a medium of instruction" (Tung, Lam & Tsang, 1997, p.459). Indeed, one of the most important policies that the post-handover government implemented was an ambitious multilingual educational objective, in which students are expected to develop literacy skills in both written Chinese and English as well as oral competence in Cantonese, Putonghua and English. This multilingual educational policy promoted the use of Cantonese to replace English as MOI in secondary schools and turned out to be highly controversial among different sectors of the society (Lai & Byram, 2003; Morrison & Lui, 2000; Yip, Tsang, & Cheung, 2003). Immediately after its implementation, students reportedly "felt denigrated to not be able to study in English" while parents 'sought ways to put their children" in schools that use English as MOI so that "their children's future [will not] be greatly jeopardized" (Chan, 2002, p. 271). The public suspected that the government promoted the use of Cantonese because of the political shift without considering the public demand for better education (Tsui et al., 1999).Ten years after

the sovereignty change, English is still favoured by many as MOI due to a popular demand for more and better English, even though most teachers, parents and students acknowledged Cantonese "as the medium of instruction [that] enhances student learning" (Tung et al., 1997, p.458).

Ambivalent Attitudes towards Putonghua and the Increasing Use of Putonghua as MOI

Putonghua began to play a role in Hong Kong's school education in the 1980s as many schools began to have Putonghua classes in preparation for the political change in 1997. It became part of the official curriculum and a subject for the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in 2000. According to Davison and Lai (2007), "in the academic year of 2003-2004, 752 (97.6%) primary schools and 444 (90.7%) secondary schools offered Putonghua as a subject" in a variety of approaches, ranging from the teaching of Putonghua as an independent subject, using Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes and the use of Putonghua as MOI "for all subjects other than English" (pp. 122-123). Yet, the public attitudes towards Putonghua remain ambivalent.

Chinese residents in Hong Kong, though sharing the same cultural tradition with their counterparts on the Chinese mainland, often see themselves as having a separate identity because of their remarkably different historical, political and social experiences (Ho et al., 2003; Li et al., 1995; Ma & Fung, 1999; Schack & Schack, 2005). In particular, when the Chinese mainland was still in a state of political turmoil, Hong Kong had already achieved enviable economic success. For decades, it attracted large numbers of immigrants from the Chinese mainland who made great contributions to the thriving labour intensive economy in Hong Kong. After China was reconnected to the world in the late 1970s, Hong Kong lost most of its manufacturing plants to the Chinese mainland and its economy has been transformed towards a knowledge-based one. Over the years, immigrants from the Chinese mainland continued coming to Hong Kong to be reunited with their families. Many of these new immigrants were not well-educated and possessed few valued skills in the new context. Some of them had to live on benefits and thus were seen as competitors for welfare resources by local Chinese in Hong Kong. In the media, mainland Chinese are often portrayed as uncivilised and crude in contrast to modern cosmopolitan Hong Kong people largely due to these differences in the two peoples' experiences (Ma & Fung, 1999). Events on the Chinese mainland, such as the political unrest in 1989, also profoundly influenced residents in Hong Kong, giving rise to mixed perceptions of the mainland (Li et al., 1995). Thus, Putonghua, associated with the Chinese

mainland, was for some time regarded as a low status language in comparison with English and Cantonese while, at the same time, it was also considered a politically sensitive language (Davison & Lai, 2007; Lai, 2005).

Slowly, local Chinese residents' attitudes towards Putonghua have been changing due to the economic development on the Chinese mainland and shifting socio-political conditions. A small number of schools, in particular, international schools, have begun to use Putonghua as MOI in Chinese language classes and the teaching of other subjects (Singtao Daily, 2008). As Putonghua becomes an internationally important language due to the rise of China (Yang, 2008), the demand for education in Putonghua has been much more in evidence. The call to use Putonghua as MOI in schools, especially in Chinese classes, has also become more discernible in Hong Kong, indicating that Putonghua has become a socially important language (Mingpao Daily, 2008; Singtao Daily, 2008). After the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (hereafter referred to as 'SCOLAR') announced in 2007 a four-phase plan to support 160 schools in undertaking experimental use of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes (China Newsnet, 2007), it received applications from 151 schools for the 40 schools allocated in the first phase and had to increase the number of schools that it would support (Mingpao Daily, 2008). Though SCOLAR made it clear that this decision did not mean to be a whole-scale promotion of Putonghua as MOI in Hong Kong's Chinese classes (China Newsnet, 2007), many foresee that Putonghua will play an increasingly bigger role in schools. In fact, according to the school curriculum of Chinese Language for both primary and secondary schools (Education Bureau, 2002), teaching Chinese through Putonghua is the long-term goal though no definite date has been set for achieving this goal. This means that most Chinese teachers in the territory will eventually have to teach Chinese in a linguistic variety other than their mother tongue. Yet, there has been little research on the perceptions concerning this MOI shift among Chinese teachers who are coping or will have to cope with this shift in their professional settings.

The Inquiry

In comparison with the promotion of mother tongue education in Hong Kong's secondary schools, the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI in teaching Chinese has not been dramatic so far, thus attracting little research attention. However, given the critical role that teachers play in any educational change, we find it important to explore the following questions concerning the MOI shift in the inquiry:

- How do experienced Chinese teachers' perceive the increasing use of Putonghua

as MOI in teaching Chinese?

- On what basis have these teachers formed these perceptions?

The Interpretative Framework for the Inquiry

In the inquiry, we took the position that teachers' perceptions and beliefs, as part of their agency, cannot be separated from the effects of mediation systems (Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005). Lasky (2005) contends that teachers' agency, such as perceptions and beliefs, cannot be understood without referring to the system of mediation, which includes educational policies, curricula, popular educational discourses, parents, principals and students. For this reason, we related teachers' "personal and practical knowledge" to "theoretical and contextual knowledge" when situating our interpretation of teachers' perceptions and beliefs in their professional experiences (Goodson & Numan, 2002, p. 272). In order to understand the participants' professional experiences, we make use of Layder's (1993, p. 9) "resource map" for social research, which specifies four levels of social organisation: "context", "setting", "situated activity", and "the self". For Layder, context refers to "the wider macro social forms that provide the more remote environment of social activity"; setting to "intermediate forms" with institutional characteristics; and situated activity to face-to-face social interaction. The level of the self is concerned with "the intersection of biographical experience and social involvements" at all three of these levels. As operationalized in the analysis, the macro-contextual changes refer to shifts in political, socio-economic, and demographic conditions. The macro-context has both "spatial" and "temporal" dimensions (also see Kelchtermans, 2005). Micro settings refer to schools where teachers have first-hand experience of various curriculum reforms and other professional activities. They are also the places where teachers interact with other stakeholders such as parents, colleagues and students in the educational process (Kelchtermans, 2005).

The Participants

Eight experienced Chinese teachers, proficient in both Cantonese and Putonghua, were included in the study. Based on their narrative accounts, we have constructed biographical vignettes as listed in Table 1. All the participants except Ma, who was a former student of the second author in a secondary school, were selected from among the Chinese teachers who attended courses at one teacher training institution, where

all of us work as lecturers. In order to explore a variety of Chinese teachers' perceptions, half of the participants chosen were originally from the Chinese mainland and the other half were born and grew up in Hong Kong (see Table 1). While all are practising teachers of Chinese, half of them have also taught Putonghua courses in schools. Such purposive sampling (Patton, 2000) helps reflect views among Chinese teachers of various backgrounds in Hong Kong's secondary schools.

Teacher	**Gender**	**Years of Teaching**	**Background**
Originally from the Chinese Mainland			
Yu	male	7	Originally from the neighbouring Canton province, he came to Hong Kong after he finished junior middle school education on the Chinese mainland. Cantonese is his first language. He attended evening school while working full-time before he attended the teacher education programme at the Institution. He teaches both Chinese and Putonghua courses and is now in charge of an experimental Chinese class using Putonghua as MOI.
Wah	female	8	Originally from Fujian, South China, she came to Hong Kong at the age of 12. She was educated in mixed codes of dialect and Putonghua. She attended a local school that welcomes newly arrived immigrants from the Chinese mainland, where she was encouraged by her teacher to use more Putonghua. She still speaks Cantonese with an accent. She taught Chinese and Putonghua in the school which she attended as a newly arrived immigrant. Now she teaches in an English-medium school.
Ling	female	8	Originally from Shanghai, East China, she came to Hong Kong at the age of 10. She was educated in mixed codes of dialect and Putonghua in Shanghai though her memory of it is vague. She still speaks Shanghai dialect, her first language, fluent Putonghua, and Cantonese. She worked on a Putonghua panel at the school and is now in charge of an experimental Chinese class using Putonghua as MOI.
Tong	male	12	Originally from Fujian, East China, he came to Hong Kong at the age of 10. He was also educated in a mixture of dialect and Putonghua on the Chinese mainland. He speaks a regional dialect as his first language, Putonghua and Cantonese. His parents were teachers but they could not teach after emigrating to Hong Kong. He wanted to become a Putonghua teacher when he was in secondary school. He taught Putonghua classes but he also teaches a Chinese

			class in Putonghua.
Born and raised in Hong Kong			
Huang	female	24	Since graduating from university, she has always taught Chinese in local schools except for a brief period when she left Hong Kong in 1990. She loves to learn and speak Putonghua. She practises Putonghua even though she does not have to use it in her teaching.
Lo	male	16	He has quite a few relatives in the neighbouring Guangdong province. He is an experienced local Chinese teacher in a prestigious English medium school.
Ma	male	15	Now a Chinese panel teacher in a low-banding school. He was heavily involved in the curriculum reform for Chinese. He also taught an experimental class of Chinese using Putonghua as MOI. He once worked in a school threatened by possible closure. He had to spend a lot of time promoting the school and could not concentrate on teaching. For this reason, he decided to join his present school although it is a low-banding school.
Wai	female	9	A Chinese teacher in a direct subsidy school. After graduating from the Institution, she did some part-time teaching before she joined her present school. Her present school has to compete with other schools in the neighbourhood for students. She was asked by the school to have an experimental Chinese class using Putonghua as MOI. She worked hard to improve her Putonghua.

Table 1: Profile of the Participants (All names in the table are pseudonyms)

Data Collection

The career narratives of the teachers were collected through in-depth, biographical interviews (Cheung, 2005; Goodson & Sikes, 2002; Hayes, 2005). The interviews mainly consisted of prompts stimulating the participants to produce their career narratives and questions concerning their perceptions in the teaching of Chinese, including the shifts in the medium of instruction. In the interviews, we encouraged the participants to reflect on their professional experiences and develop themes to describe their career stories in the interviews. Before the interviews, a detailed explanation about the project was sent to the potential participants. After being given their written consent to participate, we sent them a list of questions prior to the actual interviews so that they could have some time for preparation (see Appendix 1). As the second author of the paper was once closely involved in the

participants' professional development, she had much personal knowledge of them. Though the interviews were conducted by the first author, the former's familiarity with the participants helped them open up quickly in interviews. In the actual interviews, the semi-structured interview schedule was only used as a guide; the participants in fact were very willing to share their professional experiences and expressed their opinions freely. Contrast questions were also used when interviewing different participants. We regularly asked a participant about his or her views on the responses given by another participant regarding a particular issue in relation to the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes, such as parents' attitudes towards the use of Putonghua. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviews took place in either Cantonese or Putonghua according to the participants' preferences and those cited in this text were translated into English. During the interviews, the interviewer also made visits to the participants' schools wherever possible to have a better understanding of the professional settings that these teachers were working in at the time of the interviews. Such visits helped us appreciate the diversity of students in the participants' schools as well as their needs.

Data Analysis

In data analysis, we adopted a "paradigmatic cognition" approach, in which narratives are analyzed paradigmatically to "produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5; also see Erickson, 2004; Smeyers & Verhesschen, 2001). First, we tried to obtain an overall picture of the participants' professional stories (as presented in Table 1). Then, we adopted grounded theory procedures, constantly questioning and comparing, in order to see how different processes and factors mediated the participants' professional experiences (Patton, 2000). In the process, we paid particular attention to the participants' experiences at both macro and micro levels (Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005; Layder, 1993). At the macro-contextual level, we examined the participants' references to changes such as political, socio-economic, and demographic ones. At the micro level, we looked at their experiences of educational reform and classroom realities. We then investigated how these contextual conditions interact with their professional practices, which led them to the adoption of particular perceptions concerning the MOI shift in Chinese classes. Moreover, a reiterative interpretative process between the data and the analytic framework helped refine the findings further. The involvement of three researchers, using their respective backgrounds and knowledge to examine the data in turn, also enhanced the quality of the analysis.

Furthermore, we tried to seek the participants' clarification and confirmation of the transcripts and interpretative findings emerging from the analysis (Hayes, 2005).

Emerging Findings

Through a collaborative interpretative process, we identified some ambiguous perceptions concerning the MOI shift in Chinese classes among the participants, which have been summarised in Table 2. While all of them were proud of Chinese becoming another international language, many in the interviews expressed their reservations about whether Putonghua should be promoted as MOI in the region's Chinese classes. It is also to be noted that all the participants expected more research to be undertaken to address the issue as to whether or not Putonghua could be an effective MOI in Chinese classes. Further analysis of the data revealed that the participants' perceptions could be explained by references to shifting political, demographical conditions, their experiences of curriculum reforms and their concerns with pedagogical conditions (Layder, 1993). These themes are demonstrated in detail in the forthcoming sections.

Shifting Political and Demographic Conditions

As we went through teachers' professional experiences reiteratively, we noted that the political change and demographic decline at the macro-contextual level had mediated these teachers' professional experiences and their perceptions concerning the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI (see Layder, 1993). In the cases of Ling, Wah and Tong, who migrated to Hong Kong a few years before the change, the political handover motivated them to join the Putonghua teacher education programme at the institution. This must be noted together with the fact that the teaching profession in Hong Kong as well as in other places was not a favoured career choice among secondary school graduates (Lai et al., 2005; Su et al., 2001). It seems that the political change made the teaching of Putonghua an attractive profession. Ling recalled why she became a student teacher as follows:

> At that time, I did not think about learning to be a Chinese teacher. I just wanted to become a Putonghua teacher. […] It was 1997. Yes, 1997 and 1998. It was a special time. Hong Kong returned to China. At that time, I thought that Putonghua would become a highly popular subject. Maybe it

> would be easier for me to find a job because Hong Kong might need more people speaking Putonghua. […] I did not try to become a Chinese teacher. I just wanted to become a Putonghua teacher. (Ling)

The job prospect was particularly important for these newly arrived immigrants. For example, Tong came to Hong Kong with his parents, who used to be teachers on the Chinese mainland. However, after arrival in Hong Kong, his parents could not use their previous qualifications to find teaching posts and could only find some odd jobs to do. Only through great efforts did Tong manage to get into a teacher training college (so did Yu).

Teacher	Perceptions
Yu	He has reservations about the uncritical use of Putonghua as MOI and wants more research to show whether or not Putonghua is a better MOI.
Wah	The use of Putonghua as MOI depends on students' levels of Putonghua. She sees some advantages of using Putonghua as MOI in teaching Chinese but she is uncertain whether the use of Putonghua really helps students learn better in all aspects.
Ling	She enthusiastically supports the use of Putonghua as MOI. She also supports a mixture of Putonghua and Cantonese in teaching Chinese.
Tong	He enthusiastically supports the use of Putonghua as MOI but he is not sure whether the learning of Chinese in Putonghua is well supported by educational conditions here.
Huang	She supports the use of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes but she is not sure whether students benefit from the use of Putonghua in learning as the surrounding conditions do not support it.
Lo	He strongly opposes the use of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes. He has reservations whether it helps students learn Chinese better and he even suspects that there is a kind of 'political conspiracy' behind the promotion of Putonghua in Hong Kong.
Ma	He supports the MOI shift in Chinese classes but does not think that the conditions are ready for the shift yet. He also doubts whether Putonghua is a more effective MOI.
Wai	She accepts the trend that Putonghua is becoming the MOI in Chinese classes but she is not sure whether Putonghua is a better MOI.

Table 2: The Participants' Perceptions of the Increasing Use of Putonghua in Chinese Classes

Over the years after the handover, Tong also noted the changes among local Chinese residents' perceptions of China and Putonghua in relation to their Chinese identity. In his opinion, these changes have important implications for the teaching of Chinese through Putonghua:

> Tong: I think that the standard of Putonghua has improved.

> [It has] truly improved. People here also become very aware of their nationality. In 1997, my students did not admit that they were Chinese. Some would say that they were English. 70% of them would say that they were Hong Kongers. Then gradually…
> Interviewer: It becomes Hong Kong, China.
> Tong: Well, more and more people think that they are Chinese.
> Interviewer: Maybe many of them still think that they are Hong Kongers.
> Tong: Well, for me, I am a Chinese forever.

As can be seen in the interview extract, Tong's experience of migration had not affected his self-identification as Chinese, making him one of the most enthusiastic proponents for the use of Putonghua in Chinese classes.

In contrast, teachers who were born and grew up in Hong Kong accepted Putonghua as an alternative MOI in Chinese classes with motives quite different from their counterparts originally from the Chinese mainland. These teachers witnessed and experienced increasing pressure in respect of their teaching on account of a demographic decline. Due to the low birth rate, it is estimated that there will be a drop of 20,000 students for secondary education within the coming five years (2009-2013) (Professional Teachers Union Reporter, 2008). Consequently, many schools began to put enormous efforts into recruiting students to avoid possible school closures. Among the various strategies used by these schools was the adoption of Putonghua as MOI, suggesting that Putonghua is increasingly seen as a language of value. This is what Wai's school did when it moved to its new location two years ago:

> When our school moved to this community two years ago, we saw that there were many schools nearby. So we had to improve our competitive edge. In order to improve our competitive edge, we decided to use Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes, which attracted parents to send their children to our school. (Wai)

It seems that teachers like Wai felt obliged to support the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI because of the marketable value of Putonghua as MOI, especially among parents. Parents in Chinese societies have been noted for their close involvement in their children's educational progress (Pang & Watkins, 2000; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). In the case of Putonghua as MOI, the shared view among the participants seems to be that parents would support the use of Putonghua in Chinese classes as they recognise the rising importance of Putonghua competence in

their children's future life.

Experience of Curriculum Reforms

The participants' experiences of previous and current educational reforms were found in the analysis to have profoundly mediated their perceptions concerning the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI in teaching Chinese. As can be seen in the participants' experiential accounts, these reforms, on the one hand, were indicative of macro-contextual changes such as the implementation of new education policies. On the other hand, they made the participants' professional lives increasingly complicated, in particular, in terms of job security and their relationships with other participants in the micro professional settings such as students (Layder, 1993; Kelchtermans, 2005).

Recognising the use of Putonghua as a good marketing strategy for schools, Lo strongly opposed the shift. He related the MOI shift in Chinese classes to the government's unpopular decision to promote mother tongue education after the handover. The promotion of mother tongue education has been widely associated with the political change (Tsui et al., 1999). Likewise, Lo suspected the MOI shift in Chinese classes was a "political conspiracy", reflecting an ambiguous and uneasy perception of Putonghua as a politically sensitive language in certain sectors of the society:

> If I was asked to use Putonghua to teach Chinese, I would be against it. I did not oppose mother tongue education [when the government decided to promote the use of Chinese in secondary schools]. However, if I have to use Putonghua to teach Chinese, I am emotionally against it. It has a political purpose. It has something to do with the political handover. I do not oppose our motherland, but I do not like to mix education with politics. I do not think that education should be mixed with politics. (Lo)

However, it should be noted that Lo's school is a prestigious secondary school using English as MOI in a respectable residential area, having little problem in recruiting students. The school was under no pressure to promote itself using Putonghua as MOI to attract potential applicants. In other schools, possible school closure had become a serious threat, undermining teachers' sense of professional security as Ma recalled his experience of working in such a school:

> In staff meetings, we always talked about school closure. […]

> We felt really stressful there. In order for the school to survive, we organized a lot of functions and events such as open days, which had a lot of promotional value. […] What the school valued most at that time was not the teaching and learning of the Chinese language but the promotional value of any educational initiative. If such an initiative had no promotional value, it would not have had much attention paid to it. (Ma)

The school had been involved in a few educational initiatives but it had been more preoccupied with their promotional value than their educational implications, much to Ma's disappointment. In the end, he felt that he had to leave the school.

The participants' experience of other reforms in the teaching of Chinese was also not entirely positive. For instance, in her attempt to introduce unit-based teaching, a new approach to teaching Chinese, Huang had the following complaint:

> The unit-based teaching is supposed to raise students' capacity. Whatever capacities the new curriculum wants to raise must somehow be related to the exams. Now, we are even more exam-oriented in teaching. […] In the past, we used the selected texts. Teachers were very familiar with these texts and students were very familiar with them, too. We could go deep into these texts and there were a lot of things for us to discuss and learn inside these texts. At least, my students learnt and mastered two dozen core texts. Now, students will say that these texts are not examined so why do we have to spend so much time analysing them? If they are not examined, why do I have to listen to your explanation about these texts? (Huang)

In other words, while the new teaching approach aimed to enhance students' proficiency, her professional authority was seriously undermined as her teaching was not respected by students who were only concerned with their examination results (also Kelchtermans, 2005).

In the case of Tong, he saw that schools, which used Putonghua as MOI, did not necessarily use Putonghua as the medium for assessment in the teaching of Chinese in order to improve students' oral assessment results. As a result, he was not sure whether the use of Putonghua as MOI could be sustainable, as most students would find themselves using Cantonese in other courses and, even more importantly, in the formal assessment of the Chinese subject:

> The problem is that the TSA (Territory Wide System Assessment) uses Cantonese for examinations (even though

> the government tried to promote the use of Putonghua in Chinese classes). The recent news says that one can use Putonghua to take exams but many schools still use Cantonese as MOA (medium of assessment) because many people still believe that they are more fluent in their mother tongue. (Tong)

The extract indicates Tong's concern that the decision to promote Putonghua was half-hearted and did not reflect a vision of Putonghua being used consistently across the curriculum for teaching and assessment. As a result, in his view, those who insisted on students using it in teaching and assessment might find themselves in conflicts with their students who wanted to achieve best results in the assessment activities.

Pedagogical Beliefs and Concerns

Tong's reservations confirm that classroom realities and pedagogical conditions have largely determined their penchant for MOIs (Tung et al., 1997). The immediate classroom settings are sites where teachers undertake their professional practices, pursue their pedagogical goals and construct their professional identities (Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005). Interactions with students and curriculum have profound impact on their beliefs in what works. Those who were supportive of Putonghua as MOI did notice the advantages that Putonghua as MOI could bring to the teaching and learning of Chinese. For instance, Tong believed that the use of Putonghua in Chinese classes at least helped improve their writing in Chinese (see Li, 2006). To this end, he even organised a pen pal collaboration scheme with mainland Chinese school students for his students, which turned out to be popular. Teachers like Wah also recognised the pedagogical strength in teaching students Chinese through the medium of Putonghua:

> When they use the Chinese language, they use a lot of colloquial terms from Cantonese. They use Cantonese to express themselves. When we teach them to write Chinese essays, they should have used proper written Chinese to write but they use colloquial Cantonese. They use dialect as if it were their written language. (Wah)

As can be seen in the extract, Wah believed that the use of Putonghua helped reduce the influence of Cantonese as a vernacular on the students' written Chinese. However, in spite of the support for Putonghua to play a bigger role in schools, the

participants also expressed reservations about its uncritical use in Chinese classes because of their daily experience in classrooms. For instance, Yu argued that the "falling" standard of students' written Chinese could be related to their regular participation in online discussions but he was also not sure whether their use of colloquial Cantonese should be considered indicative of low language standards. Ling was uncertain about whether the whole-scale promotion of Putonghua in Chinese classes was necessary as she believed that Cantonese could be a better MOI than Putonghua when "teaching Chinese classics" as the writings in classical Chinese are more closely related to Cantonese. The participants were also aware of various constraints limiting the benefits that students could have in learning Chinese in Putonghua. First of all, the lack of a supportive environment for the use of Putonghua was cited by them as a crucial one. In the case of Huang, she "loved" to use and speak Putonghua and even made great efforts to learn and improve her Putonghua by herself. Yet she was unsure whether its use in Chinese classes would help students acquire better Chinese:

> Students could only use Putonghua in class but after class there was no place for them to use it in Hong Kong. […] If the government really wants to promote the use of Putonghua [as MOI in Chinese classes], you should at least have all TV dramas dubbed with Putonghua. At least, people should be given the choice to use the Putonghua audio channel when watching TV or listening to the radio. If they have done enough to ensure a facilitative learning environment, then they could ask schools to use Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes. If the government promotes it without creating a supportive learning environment, for instance, it should be regulated that all government agencies should use Putonghua or English. If they just want teachers to rush to the front without properly supporting them as such, I am strongly against the promotion of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes. (Huang)

Other participants felt that students in Hong Kong were not ready for learning Chinese through Putonghua. In the case of Ma, though he would like to see more exchanges between local and mainland Chinese through the shared medium of Putonghua, he still believed that his students might not benefit fully from the use of it as MOI in Chinese classes:

> Cantonese is the main language in our environment. When answering questions, students can use Cantonese in class. […] Well, maybe more and more people in the street speak

> Putonghua. And it is a common thing to speak Putonghua. However, students still have a psychological barrier in learning Chinese through Putonghua. Their Putonghua level is too low for this. (Ma)

The problem associated with the students' unwillingness to use Putonghua in class was not merely a perception. Ma and other participants in the inquiry had taught experimental classes and had mixed results in teaching Chinese through Putonghua. In these classes, Wah noticed that her students were less involved in the process:

> They did not participate much in speaking activities if I did not allow them to use Cantonese. Because when they spoke Cantonese, they would talk about anything they wanted, even when unrelated to the task or the issues you wanted them to explore. When they used Putonghua, they could not, really… while maybe they wanted to talk about a lot of things, they could speak only a little. Most of the students were like this, except those who were good at Putonghua. (Wah)

Consequently, participants like Ma and Wah could not tell whether students using Putonghua to learn Chinese performed significantly better than those who used Cantonese.

In addition, though the participants were either capable of teaching Chinese in Putonghua or had already begun to do so, they noted that many of their colleagues who traditionally used Cantonese in teaching Chinese would have problems in switching to Putonghua as MOI. The participants who taught in schools which had a hard time recruiting students found themselves pressurized into being ready for the change. As a result, adding to their heavy workload in schools, the need to improve their Putonghua proficiency has become an additional source of stress:

> I am trying to improve my Putonghua proficiency. (Although the school has not started using Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes), I think that it has become a trend for schools to promote the use of Putonghua in Chinese classes. As a teacher, I will have to speak the standard Putonghua. If I can speak the standard Putonghua, I can teach my students the standard Putonghua. I am trying my best to learn the standard Putonghua. […] These days I find it really stressful to cope with all these tasks. I really wanted to tell them that I could not cope with all of them. I really wanted to tell them. (Wai)

While the change will certainly bring extra work to Chinese teachers, an even more serious matter may be related to their professional identities as teachers. The

Chinese section in most schools has more teachers than the Putonghua section. The MOI shift in Chinese classes means that the two sections may be merged if the shift does happen. Although Ling referred to this merging as "the Putonghua section being taken over by the Chinese section", it is not difficult to see that Cantonese-speaking Chinese teachers will have to deal with a process of deskilling and deprofessionalization, in which their professional competence, in particular, their competence in Cantonese, may be no longer appreciated. For these reasons, all the participants in the inquiry would like to see more research demonstrating the effectiveness of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes since too much is at stake.

Discussion

By situating the participants' perceptions in their professional experiences (Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005; Layder, 1993), it was found in the inquiry that a variety of contextual processes and personal experiences have mediated the participants' ambivalent perceptions concerning the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI in Chinese classes in Hong Kong (see Figure 1). Among all the participants, it is noteworthy that some of them decided to join the teaching profession as Putonghua teachers due to the political change, which had made the teaching of Putonghua a promising career in their perceptions. The attraction of teaching Chinese through Putonghua, the national standard spoken variety, has been further enhanced by a demographic decline and mounting competition in recruiting students in the light of Chinese becoming another global language as a result of the rise of China (Yang, 2008). These contextual changes can be seen as forces underlying the participants' positive perceptions concerning the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI in teaching Chinese in their discourses. However, there are also participants like Lo, view that the promotion of Putonghua was being advanced as a marketing decoy by schools without seriously considering its educational implications and even considered it a "political conspiracy". These views also echoed the participants' recent experiences of socio-political changes and educational reforms, which tended to add complexity to their professional lives. Moreover, most participants, both out of their professional commitment and familiarity with classroom realities, revealed a strong desire to frame the MOI shift in Chinese classes as an educational matter rather than a political or marketing issue. All the participants, whether supportive of or having reservations about teaching Chinese in Putonghua, believe that, as an alternative MOI, it should be only promoted because of its proven educational advantages.

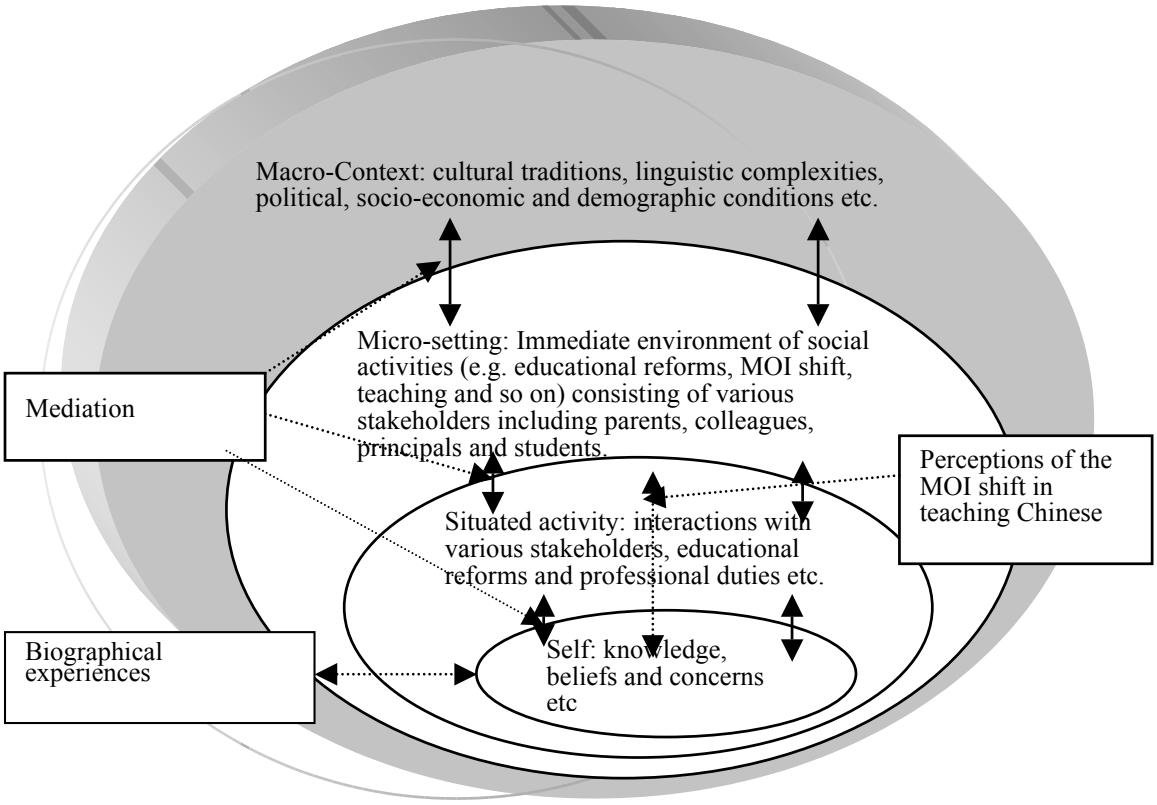

Figure 1 Teachers' Views on the Increasing Use of Putonghua in Teaching Chinese

Unfortunately in many contexts, the MOI policy is unlikely to be determined by the proven educational merits of a particular language variety such as students' mother tongue. Various contextual processes, such as the need for social cohesiveness through a shared language and demand for a prestigious language, often made the mother tongue not a preferred MOI in these contexts (Gupta, 1997; Lai & Byram, 2003). The promotion of a linguistic variety as MOI according to its proven educational merits may be a commendable ideal, but it can be difficult to be realized in Hong Kong given its socio-cultural traditions and current circumstances. In accordance with the Chinese cultural tradition, education is conceived by the public as not only for learning but also for individuals' social advance (e.g. Gao, 2008; Lee, 2000; Thøgersen, 2002), making it difficult to separate political and marketing incentives from educational concerns. When coming to the MOI decisions in relation to languages of rising socio-cultural importance, schools and teachers are confronted with a dilemma since they not only have to address pedagogical issues but also attend to socio-political consequences of education for their students. Like in many other contexts, the decisions made concerning these important issues often place teachers in a zone of discomfort and insecurity (Hargreaves & Lo, 2002; Law, 2003). In the case of the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI, many Cantonese-speaking Chinese teachers will have to teach the language in Putonghua, a language variety additional to

their mother tongue (Cantonese). These Chinese teachers' professional behaviour and competence, like other teachers', are always subject to close scrutiny since teachers are paradoxically placed by the Chinese cultural tradition "under a great burden to conform to society's moral norms" and made "more vulnerable to being shamed […], if [they] fails" (Schoenhals, 1993, p. 199). There have been already disparaging comments on local Chinese teachers' accents in speaking Putonghua, which likely make these teachers feel stressful when teaching Chinese in Putonghua (Gao, in press). Together with the threat of school closures as a result of the demographic decline, these contextual processes oblige language teachers and schools to please their students and parents in the educational process, further weakening their professional authority and undermining their role in the MOI shift.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have interpreted a wide spectrum of perceptions including reservations and enthusiasm for the increasing use of Putonghua (the national spoken variety of Chinese) as MOI in Chinese classes among the participants in the light of their professional experiences. We also related the diversity of their views to the contextual changes such as political and demographical as well as their experiences of curriculum reforms and pedagogical considerations. Such examination of Chinese language teachers' professional experiences has offered rich insights into their dynamic views and perceptions, adding complexity to our understanding of their stated perceptions (Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005; Layder, 1993).

Due to the limited number of participants in the inquiry, we cannot generalize the findings emerging from the inquiry but nevertheless, these findings could have important implications for Chinese language teacher education in Hong Kong and elsewhere. The Chinese language teacher education programmes offered by major teacher development departments in Hong Kong focus on the study of Chinese language, Chinese subject knowledge (linguistics and literary culture) and pedagogy. The findings suggest that there is a need for Chinese language teachers to develop a critical understanding of the roles of language in society and in education and apply such understanding to examine language issues in educational settings, in particular, those in multilingual and post-colonial contexts such as Hong Kong. Chinese language teachers need to be critically aware of the situation that the process of Chinese becoming a global language likely reinforces the domination of one particular Chinese variety (i.e. Putonghua) and threatens to undermine the existence of a plethora of other Chinese language varieties (e.g. Cantonese), many of which

function as regional lingua franca in different Chinese regions or societies (Li, 2006; Yang, 2008). As a result, Chinese language teachers in these Chinese regions and societies may find them 'deprofessionalized' with their own linguistic resources undervalued. For this reason, teacher education or professional development in these regions need to actively engage Chinese language teachers with critical reflections on the traditional cultural discourses and socio-political realities so that these teachers can appreciate their 'vulnerable' position to better execute their professional roles and assert their professional identities (e.g. Schoenhals, 1993). They also need to be empowered with the capacities to advance the case for the preservation of various regional Chinese language varieties in education because of the proven merits of mother tongue education (e.g. Gupta, 1997; Lai & Byram, 2003). Meanwhile, Chinese language teachers also need support to make informed decisions in the pedagogical process concerning educational changes such as the use of Putonghua in teaching Chinese. At present, most Chinese language teacher education programmes in Hong Kong do develop teachers' capacity to teach Chinese in Putonghua. However, research remains to be done to assure Chinese language teachers in Hong Kong of their unique advantages by having Cantonese knowledge and the ability to teach Chinese in a linguistic variety most familiar to their students. In particular, further research needs to be done to explore how Chinese language teachers utilize their own linguistic resources to enhance the teaching of Chinese to students in contexts Putonghua or Modern written Chinese is learnt as an additional language.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions (Full List of Questions Available in Chinese)

1. How did you become a Chinese teacher?
2. How did you divide your professional career as a Chinese teacher? Why did you divide your career stages as such?
3. Can you describe your professional experiences in different career stages?
4. What were the most memorable incidents in these career stages? Why were they so memorable to you?
5. What changes in your teaching beliefs occurred in each career stage? How and why did these changes happen?
6. What are most important changes in your recent career experiences?
7. How are your schools dealing with the shift towards to Putonghua as MOI in teaching Chinese?
8. What do you think that this shift towards the use of Putonghua as MOI?
9. What would be major barriers against the increasing use of Putonghua as MOI?