

A Study of the Use of Sinographs in Taiwanese¹ Lyrics

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This study investigates how Taiwanese lyrics of popular songs are written. I analyzed twenty lyrics of popular Taiwanese songs found in the inserts of cassette tapes and compact disks. Sinographs and their corresponding pronunciations were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. The number of times each appeared was tabulated. Inconsistencies of sinographs in representing the same words were noted. The use of sinographs in the lyrics represents common problems that ordinary people face when they try to write in Taiwanese using sinographs. Both semantic-based and phonetic-based strategies are common in choosing sinographs to represent in Taiwanese words. Evidence of the strong influence of written Mandarin in writing Taiwanese lyrics is reflected in: (1) when the sinographic reflexes for the Taiwanese words in question are known, the use of a semantic-based strategy is common. (2) Taiwanese words are often written using Mandarin equivalents. I will attempt to show, at the end, that teaching of phonetic symbols or phonetically-based writing in elementary schools is essential in making the written Taiwanese more available to the general public.

1. Introduction

This study investigates how Taiwanese lyrics of popular songs are written. I analyzed twenty lyrics of popular Taiwanese songs found in the inserts of cassette tapes and compact disks. Sinographs and their corresponding pronunciations were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. The number of times each appeared was tabulated. Inconsistencies of sinographs in representing the same words were noted. The use of sinographs in the lyrics represents common problems that ordinary people face when they try to write in Taiwanese using sinographs. Both semantic-based and phonetic-based strategies are common in choosing sinographs to represent in Taiwanese words. Evidence of the strong influence of written Mandarin in writing Taiwanese lyrics is reflected in: (1) when the sinographic reflexes for the Taiwanese words in question are known, the use of a semantic-based strategy is common. (2) Taiwanese words are often written using Mandarin equivalents. I will attempt to show, at the end, that teaching of phonetic symbols or phonetically-based writing in elementary schools is essential in making the written Taiwanese more available to the general public.

There are several different systems available for writing Taiwanese, e.g., exclusive use of sinographs or romanization or mixture of both, but none of them has yet to be accepted as the standard orthography. The method utilizing sinographs, with occasional use of National Phonetic Alphabet (ㄅㄆㄇ *bo-po-mo*)², is the most popular method used by ordinary people. Most Protestant and Catholic missionaries utilize Church Romanization and many activists of written Taiwanese³ know some type of romanization. There are publications written entirely in romanization, such as *Tâi-oân-hú-sián kàu-hōe-pò* ‘Taiwan Church News’, which

¹ Taiwanese in this paper refers to Taiwanese Hokkien, also known as Holo, or Southern Min.

² Hereafter NPA.

³ These activists have been promoting written Taiwanese and have actively been producing various works in written Taiwanese.

started publication in the late nineteenth century, and some textbooks published in the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century (see Chiung 2005:46-49 and 85 for some examples). The *hân-lô* system, a mixture of sinographs and romanization, is used by some activists. In the following sections, I will examine the merits and drawbacks of sinographs.

2. Merits and drawbacks of sinographs

In general, ordinary people in Taiwan use sinographs, and NPA when necessary. Since everyone who is educated in Taiwanese schools is already familiar with sinographs and NPA, they do not need to learn a new set of symbols. However, there are some problems using sinographs to write Taiwanese. Hu (1994:13) describes the situation of written Taiwanese as follows:

說起台文（用台語寫的文章）我想很可能還有不少人不知道其存在，更不知道其如何寫法，因為從來說要做文章或者寫信寫尺牘，都是用文言寫文言文，不然就是用普通話寫成白話文，凡是有學問的人是決不會用俗字去寫土話，寫下他們覺得粗俗下流……。只是到了近年，隨著社會情況的變遷，又有自我意識的抬頭，才有一些人開始想要用自己母語來寫作，並各人各自依著他們的方式或者想法去試寫其各不相同的台文來了。

When you mention the word ‘Tâibûn’ (written Taiwanese), my guess is that there are still many who do not know of its existence. As for how it is actually written, then I think even more people are not aware of such methods of writing. This is because when people write things, they used to write in the written language using Classical Chinese; otherwise, people write in the written language, closer to the spoken variety using Mandarin. Educated people would not use local characters,⁴ and writing in the local language is something which is less sophisticated, i However, in recent years, because of changes in the social environment and increased confidence in self-identity, some people have started to think that they want to use their native language to write. Because various writers are now using their own systems and methods, written Taiwanese now shows a greater number of varieties... [translation by Ota]

Hu also mentions that due to a lack of standardization, there is no coherence in representing some morphemes using sinographs. A particular morpheme may be represented in different sinographs. A certain sinograph may represent several different morphemes. This lack of standardization makes it difficult for readers to read written Taiwanese. Oh (2000 [originally published between 1960 and 1964]:59-61) also stresses the difficulty of reading Taiwanese written in synographs because people need to employ many different strategies for pronouncing them, and their usage is not standardized.

2.1.1. Taiwanese morphemes lacking sinographic reflexes

There are many Taiwanese morphemes that lack sinographic reflexes. Many of these morphemes do not have cognates in Mandarin. Some of them may be non-Sinitic in origin, and some of them are pseudo-onomatopoeic words, such as *chhiⁿ-piàng-piàng* ‘very blue’, *oⁿ-mà-mà* ‘very black’ and so forth, which do not have conventionalized sinographic representations. Such morphemes are often called ‘morphemes without characters’ *ū-im-bô-jī* 有音無字 (lit., having sound no character) in Taiwanese (Tiuⁿ 1995:1). The assumption here is that every single morpheme in Taiwanese should have a corresponding sinographic representation. The notion arises from reader experience with the Modern

⁴ They are sinographs which are employed to write the local language whose usage may be nonstandard. They may contain characters which are not normally used to write the standard language. Some characters were uniquely created for writing the local language [KJO].

Written Chinese (MWC) and literary Chinese, which are written entirely with sinographs. Thus, people, in general, still regard sinographs as the only appropriate way to represent Mandarin and other Sinitic languages. According to Cheng (1989a:332) approximately five percent of Taiwanese morphemes lack sinographic reflexes. Most of them are function words, and thus they occur quite frequently. Such function words constitute about fifteen percent of running texts (Cheng 1989a:336).

2.1.2. Lack of standardization

Since people still favor writing Taiwanese with sinographs, how to represent morphemes which lack corresponding sinographic reflexes creates a problem. Because there is a lack of standardization in representing such morphemes, many idiosyncratic uses of sinographs are commonly found in written Taiwanese. A certain writer may represent a single morpheme using several different sinographs, sometimes even in the same text (Tiuⁿ 1995:2). According to Cheng (1989b:350-355), function words show the most variation in their written form.

2.1.3. Creation of new sinographs

Sometimes new sinographs are created to represent Taiwanese morphemes which do not have known corresponding sinographic reflexes. There are two strategies for creating new sinographs; phonetic compounding, and meaning aggregation. These new sinographs are called local characters. In general, many sinographs can be divided into two components: semantic and phonetic. The semantic component specifies the general semantic field to which the sinograph in question belongs, and the phonetic component, which may represent more than one pronunciation, acts as a general pronunciation guide.

2.1.3.1. Phonetic compounding

In phonetic compounding, a semantic key, which is drawn from a closed set of semantic keys called radicals, is combined with a phonetic key, which is a sinograph having the sound that needs to be produced, to create a new sinograph. For example, there is no known sinographic representation which can be historically linked to the morpheme *chiu* as in *bak8-chiu* ‘eye’. Therefore, *chiu* is sometimes written as 矚, where the radical 目, which is derived from the sinograph meaning ‘eye’, tells us that the sinograph in question should be categorized as something which is related to ‘eye’, or ‘seeing’, and the sinograph 周 pronounced ‘*chiu*’ serves as the pronunciation key. Thus the whole word *bak8-chiu* can be written as 目矚. However, this is not the only way in which this word is represented in sinographs. The word is often written as 目珠 (lit., ‘eye-pearl’, where the pronunciation of the second character is *chu* which is quite close to *chiu*), utilizing the existing sinographs. Some writers even use Mandarin, ignoring the pronunciation of both sinographs, e.g., 眼睛, which means ‘eye’ in Mandarin. Thus, some people write 眼睛 intending the pronunciation *bak8-chiu*. However, the phonetic value of these sinographs in Taiwanese should be *gán-cheng*. Therefore, if you read 眼睛 as *bak8-chiu*, then the phonetic value of both sinographs is completely ignored.

2.1.3.2. Meaning aggregation

In the meaning aggregation strategy, some basic sinographs are combined into one character to represent a certain meaning. Here are some examples. The sinographs 身 ‘body’ and 長 ‘long’ are combined to create a new sinograph 軀, which means ‘tall’ *lò*. The sinographs 遊, which represent the word ‘play’ *chhit-thô* (or *thit-thô* depending on the

dialect), are created by combining two sinographs 日 ‘sun’ and 月 ‘moon’ with the radical 辶, which signifies ‘running’. Thus, running day and night represents ‘playing’. These characters are listed below:

𠄎 lò ‘tall’
 𠄎𠄎 *chhit-thô* (or *thit-thô*) ‘to play’

The local sinographs representing *chhit-thô* (or *thit-thô*) ‘to play’ are well-known and often used in song lyrics and informal writings such as popular magazines. However, the word ‘play’ is written in other ways as well. The most common way makes use of the existing sinographs 七桃 to represent the word *chhit-thô*, and it literally means ‘seven peaches’. The pronunciation of the first syllable of the word ‘to play’ in Taiwanese is identical to that of ‘seven’, and the second syllable is identical to the pronunciation of the character for ‘peach’. The advantage of using existing sinographs to represent the word ‘to play’ is that the pronunciation can easily be guessed since they are extremely common sinographs. However, the word ‘to play’ is pronounced as *thit-thô* in some Taiwanese dialects. In these dialects, the pronunciation of the sinograph ‘seven’ *chhit* does not match with the first syllable of the word ‘to play’ *thit*. On the other hand, if novel sinographs were created just to represent this word, the problem would be obviated.

2.1.4. Phonetic substitution

There are three major ways to represent Taiwanese morphemes using existing sinographs when the sinographic representation of morphemes is not known. Sinographs in general include both phonetic and semantic information. However, in some cases sinographs can be used for their phonetic values alone, ignoring the semantic values. This practice is also found in Japanese and is called *ateji*, lit., assigning characters (Halpern 1990:53a-55a). According to Cheng (1989a), this is the most common way to represent Taiwanese morphemes whose sinographic representation is not known. 七桃 *chhit-thô* ‘lit., seven peaches’ to represent *chhit-thô* ‘to play’ is such an example. Examples of this type are common in song lyrics.

2.1.5. Special reading

Another common method of using sinographs to represent Taiwanese morphemes is to use sinographs based on their semantic values alone, ignoring the phonetic values. This is also commonly found in song lyrics, but this method may cause problems because readers cannot be sure if the phonetic value of a sinograph should be ignored. Also there may be more than one corresponding Taiwanese word for a specific combination of sinographs. Sometimes sinographs which have similar semantic values but slightly different phonetic values are also used.

2.1.6. Complicated sinographs

Some scholars have identified historically valid sinographic reflexes to represent some Taiwanese morphemes whose sinographic representation are generally not known. These sinographs tend to be complicated and rarely used. Some of these morphemes may have semi-standardized sinographic representation in Taiwanese. The following are some examples (Tiu⁵ 1995:5):

農⁵ lāng ‘people’

⁵ Some identified 儂 as the etymological sinograph [洪].

骹	kha	‘foot’
蠓	bóng	‘mosquito’

However, *lâng* ‘people’ is conventionally written as 人 since this sinograph means ‘people’. Likewise, *kha* ‘foot’ and *bóng* ‘mosquito’ are commonly written as 腳 and 蚊 respectively since they are so used in Mandarin. Sinographs with historically valid reflexes are generally not used in common Taiwanese writings.

2.1.7. Colloquial vs. literary readings

In Taiwanese, sinographs may have both ‘literary readings’ and ‘colloquial readings’, and the choice of which reading to use is lexically or pragmatically conditioned. Literary readings are borrowed from northern Sinitic languages (Oh 1987). Some lexical items which were formerly pronounced with literary readings are now pronounced with colloquial readings by younger people in Taiwan. It seems that Southern Min speakers in Fujian Province use fewer literary readings compared with Taiwanese speakers. The word 放假 ‘vacation’, for example, is *hòng-ká* for older speakers (*hòng* is the literary pronunciation of the first sinograph), whereas it is *pàng-ká* for younger speakers (*pàng* is the colloquial reading). The word is *pàng-kè* in Amoy Hokkien (p.c. Ying-che Li at University of Hawai‘i, a native speaker of Taiwanese.). All of these are written 放假 in sinographs, and the sinographs themselves cannot represent the differences in pronunciation described above. Another well-known example is the pronunciation of the word ‘university’. In Taiwan, ‘university’ which is represented in sinographs as 大學 is pronounced as *tai-hak8*, utilizing the literary pronunciation; whereas it is pronounced as *tōa-oh8* in Amoy Hokkien, utilizing the colloquial reading.

Because sinographs do not indicate the exact pronunciation, variations among the pronunciations of some sinographs found in song lyrics can be found among different speakers. The character 雨 ‘rain’, for example, has the following two readings:

雨	ú	literary reading
	hō̇	colloquial reading

According to Ikutoku Oh (1993), a native speaker of Taiwanese, the beginning part of the lyrics of a well-known Taiwanese folk song *Ú-iā-hōe* ‘A Rainy Night Flower’ should be pronounced as follows:

(1)	雨夜花，	雨夜花
	Ú-iā-hōe,	ú-iā-hōe
	rain-night-flower,	rain-night-flower
	‘A rainy night flower, a rainy night flower’	

受	風雨	吹	落	地
Siū	hong-hō̇	chhe	loh8	tōe
get	wind and rain	blow	fall	ground
	‘By the wind and rain, blown to the ground’			

However, many singers now sing the second line in (1) as *siū hong-ú* rather than *siū hong-hō̇*. Oh (1993:79) makes the following comment on how one sinograph can be read differently in Taiwanese depending on the reader:

‘雨’を *ú* と読むのは文言音。リズムの関係で *hō*（白話音）とも読む。漢字で書く限り、こういった欠陥を改めることができない。歌詞はとくに発音表記が必要である。でないと合唱すら不可能である。

Ú is the literary reading. It may be read as *hō* depending on the rhythm. As long as we write lyrics using sinographs, we will be faced with problems in choosing the intended pronunciation. If we do not solve this problem, we cannot even sing together. [translation by Ota]

Oh points out that it is sometimes hard for even native speakers to determine how some characters should be pronounced without having some sort of pronunciation key. Png Lâm-kiông, a pioneer teacher of the Taiwanese language, pointed out a similar problem in the pronunciation of the lyrics of this song. In the third verse, 雨無情 should be pronounced as *hō' bó chêng*, but it was incorrectly pronounced as *ú bó chêng* in the recording of the song included in the Taiwanese textbook, *Seekatsu Taiwango* ‘Living Taiwanese’ (Ng et al. 200:213). Png claims that this kind of problem can be solved by having a pronunciation guide, for example, by using Church Romanization, for the sinographs used in song lyrics (p.c. Png Lâm-kiông 2004).

2.1.8. Function words

Many function words lack commonly accepted sinographic reflexes. Therefore, a variety of different sinographs are often employed to represent a single function word. In these cases, the use of sinographs may cause confusion. For example, the morpheme *beh* ‘will’ is often written differently. The most common ones are, 要, 欲, and 卜. The following are some variations in sinographic representations found for the passive marker *hō'*: 讓, 使, 令,⁶ 給, 被, 俾, 後.

Some sinographs representing function words can be read in different ways. For example, the sinograph 給 is often used to represent both *hō'*, the passive marker, and *kā*, the benefactive marker, or the disposal marker, which marks the preposed object. Because in some cases either disposal or passive reading makes sense, the intended meaning sometimes becomes unclear.

2.2. A mixture of sinographs and romanization

Generally ordinary people opt for writing Taiwanese using sinographs. However, as it was mentioned earlier, there are many Taiwanese morphemes which do not have well-established sinographic reflexes. In order to remedy this problem, Oh (1957) first suggested an orthography which utilizes both sinographs and romanization. This system is most similar to the one written only in sinographs since romanization is used only for those unique Taiwanese morphemes where sinographic reflexes are not known. Robert L. Cheng then implemented this system, the *hàn-lô* system, in his writings, and it became one of the major types.

A mixed system of sinographs and romanization is relatively new, but this is preferred by some people who are active in writing in Taiwanese. Many Taiwanese works are published in this system in magazines, such as *Whale of Taiwanese Literature*. Many promoters of written Taiwanese, such as Khin-hoaⁿ Arnold Li, and Wi-Vun Taiffalo Chiung, contribute to this journal. The mixed system tries to minimize the difficulty of writing

⁶ The first three examples are taken from *Taiwanese-Japanese dictionary* published in 1931 and 1932 (Ogawa, ed.).

Taiwanese using only sinographs. As previously stated, this problem arises because there are many words which do not have a standardized sinographic representation. However, the mixed system is not yet well known to the general public. A major drawback to this system is that ordinary people generally cannot read the romanized portions. Therefore, writing morphemes without regular sinographic reflexes in romanization does not help readers. Education in Church Romanization, or other romanizations used in their version of *hàn-lô*, is essential in order to make this system a standard orthography. Song lyrics found on the inserts of cassette tapes and compact disks are not written this way unless they are produced by advocates of this system, many of whom are involved in the so-called *Tâi-bûn* movement, ‘the movement which promotes writing in the Taiwanese language’.

3. Use of sinographs in Taiwanese lyrics

Average people do not write in Taiwanese. They also do not see written Taiwanese on a daily basis except for a few common conversational phrases and expressions, such as 讚 *chán* ‘super’, 啥咪 *siá"-mih8* ‘what’, and 歹勢 *phái"-sè* ‘excuse me’. Another major exception is the writing of the lyrics of Taiwanese pop songs and examples can easily be found. People see song lyrics written in Taiwanese in the inserts of cassette tapes and compact disks and on the television screen at karaoke bars called KTV. Even those who do not know of the existence of written Taiwanese materials are familiar with this type of written Taiwanese. Almost all song lyrics use sinographs, with occasional use of the NPA, the Japanese *kana* syllabary, and roman letters.⁷

I decided to study the writing practices used in song lyrics since they are actually seen by ordinary people and represent common strategies for people who are not familiar with romanization or *hàn-lô* in writing Taiwanese.

3.1. Method

I analyzed twenty lyrics of popular Taiwanese songs found in the inserts of cassette tapes and compact disks. Sinographs and their corresponding pronunciations were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. The number of times each word appeared was tabulated. Inconsistencies of sinographs in representing the same word were noted. The summary of entries is provided in the Appendix. The songs lyrics used in the study are listed below. Each entry is listed in the following order; Song code,⁸ Title, Lyricist, Artist, Album title, Year, and Publisher:

- 1) 命運的吉他, 張宗榮, 阿吉仔, 阿吉仔台語專輯 1 2004, Dragon Records 龍吟唱片.
- 2) 甬攔慙, 蔡振南, 蔡振南, 可愛可恨 1997, Feidie 飛碟企業股份有限公司.
- 3) 惜別的海岸, 董家銘, 江蕙, 江蕙真正精選 7 2004, Alpha Music 新點子音樂.
- 4) I love you 無望, 阿信, 五月天, 五月天第一張創作專輯 2000.4.28, Rock Music Publishing 滾石唱片.
- 5) 志明與春嬌, 阿信, 五月天, 五月天第一張創作專輯 2000.4.28., Rock Music Publishing 滾石唱片.
- 6) 補空夢, 三奇, 陳雷, 醜醜啊思相枝 1992, Golden Round Inc., Ltd. 金圓唱片股份有限公司.

⁷ The exclusive use of romanization is commonly found in representing the lyrics of church hymns. These lyrics are often accompanied by a text written in sinographs.

⁸ The song code corresponds to the number in the Song column of the Appendix.

- 7) 細妹仔按靚, 林子淵, 羅時豐, 移山倒海樊梨花 2002, Dashin Music Co., Ltd. 大信唱片.
- 8) 莎啞娜啦探戈, 吳嘉祥, 陳雷, 陳雷的台灣話 1995.3., Golden Round Inc., Ltd. 金圓唱片股份有限公司.
- 9) 世界第一等, 李安修/陳富榮, 劉德華, 男人的愛, 尙星唱片.
- 10) 我沒讀書, 阿弟仔, 阿弟仔, 我沒讀書 1999, E.O. Records Inc. 常喜音樂股份有限公司.
- 11) 愛拼才會贏, 陳百潭, 吉馬男女大對唱, 移山倒海樊梨花 2002, Dashin Music Co., Ltd. 大信唱片.
- 12) 慈母心, 蔣錦鴻/陳維祥, 葉啓田, 移山倒海樊梨花 2002, Dashin Music Co., Ltd. 大信唱片.
- 13) 黃昏的故鄉, 文夏, 蔡振南, 可愛可恨 1997, Feidie 飛碟企業.
- 13) 黃昏的故鄉, 文夏, 秀蘭瑪雅, 心故事 2001, Dachi music 大旗.
- 14) 夢中的情話, 黃煜峻/黃揚哲, 江蕙, 紅線 2002.12.12. , Plum Music 亞律音樂.
- 15) 追追追, 陳明章, 黃妃, 台灣歌姬之非常女 2000, Magic Stone Music 魔岩唱片.
- 16) 漂丿七藝郎, 蔡振南, Karaoke VCD, KTV 台語金曲, 花旗.
- 16) 漂泊(足日)(足月)人, 蔡振南, 郭桂彬, 極道演歌第 2 輯戀人啊 2003.8. , GMM8866 Co. Lid. 太空人音樂製作有限公司.
- 17) 有我有你, 魏寧/曾金虎, 王建傑, 有我有你 1999.9, Lei Chun Chiang Music 雷群將唱片.
- 18) 向前走, 林強, 林強, 向前走 1990.12, Rock Records 滾石唱片.
- 19) 癡情酷恰恰, 魏寧/曾金虎, 王建傑&賈子蕙, 有我有你 1999.9, Lei Chun Chiang Music 雷群將唱片.
- 20) 誰人甲我比, 張勇強, 楊宗憲, 十年金選 2003, Union Music 有容唱片.

I have examined the two different versions of songs 13 and 16. They are found in different albums sung by different artists.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Semantic-based reading and phonetic substitution

The two common strategies in choosing a certain sinograph for a certain word are using it (a) for its semantic-based reading and (b) as a phonetic substitution. For example, in the following two lyrics (1) and (2), the negative morpheme *m7* and the interrogative word *siáⁿ-mìh* ‘what’ are represented differently in the identical string of words, *síáⁿ-mìh lóng m7-kiaⁿ* ‘I’m not afraid of anything’.

- | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|------|-----|------|------|------------------------|------|-----|------------------|
| (1) | 有 | 你 | 有 | 我 | 什麼 | 攏 | 嚙 | 驚 |
| | ū | lí | ū | góa, | síá ⁿ -mih8 | lóng | m7 | kia ⁿ |
| | have | you | have | me, | anything | all | not | afraid |

‘Having you, having me, [we are] not afraid of anything.’ (有你有我／王建傑 Wang 1999)

- (2) Oh! 再會 吧! Oh! 啥物 攏 不 驚
 Oh! chàì-hōe pah! Oh! Siáⁿ-mih8 lóng m7 kiaⁿ
 Oh good-bye particle oh anything all not afraid
 ‘Oh! Good-bye! Oh! [I am] not afraid of anything. (向前走 / 林強 Lin 1990)

Example (1) uses a semantic strategy. *Siáⁿ-mih* ‘what’ in (1) is written 什麼, borrowing the same form for ‘what’ in Mandarin. Example (2) uses sinographic reflexes of the word *siáⁿ-mih* ‘what’ written as 啥物 which reflects its sound and its meaning. For the representation of the morpheme *m7* ‘not’, (1) uses a local character 嘸 which consists of the radical 口, often used to indicate that the character is used for its sound value without semantic content. However the sinograph includes the meaning part 無 ‘not’, pronounced *bô*. In this case the intended pronunciation is not *bô*, but *m7*. The character is created based on the semantic content of the part normally used as the phonetic key. Example (2) simply utilizes the sinograph 不 which means ‘not’ in Mandarin. The appropriate pronunciation of the sinograph 不 in Taiwanese is ‘*put*’. According to Cheng (1989a), most speakers tend to use the phonetic substitution strategy more often, but the semantic strategy is also quite common.

The morpheme *bô*, a negative auxiliary, has four different representations in the data analyzed, 無, 沒, 莫, and 不.

- (3) 我 沒 讀書 歹勢 歹勢
 Góa bô thak8-chheh pháiⁿ-sè pháiⁿ-sè
 I not study sorry sorry
 ‘I don’t study, sorry, sorry.’ (我沒讀書 / 阿弟仔 Aadia 1999)

In the above example, the sinograph 沒, which is used in Mandarin for negation, is used to represent the Taiwanese negative morpheme *bô*. The dictionary pronunciation of the Taiwanese reading of the sinograph 沒 is *but*, not *bô*.⁹

- (4) 莫 怨天 莫 優人
 bô oàn-thiⁿ bô iu-jîn
 not complain not blame
 ‘Don’t complain, don’t blame.’ (世界第一等 / 劉德華 Andy Lau)

Here the sinograph 莫, which is frequently used in literary Chinese, represents the Taiwanese negative morpheme *bô*. This usage was found in only one song. The use of the sinograph 不 to represent Taiwanese *bô* was found in one song as well (補空夢 by 陳雷 1992). The sinograph 無, however, is most frequently used to represent the morpheme *bô* in the data analyzed here.

There is another negative morpheme, *m7*, in Taiwanese. In the data, this morpheme *m7* is written as 不, or 嘸 as shown in Examples (1) and (2). The sinograph 不 is used to represent both the morpheme *bô* and the morpheme *m7*. Therefore, this use of the sinograph 不 may cause confusion in some cases.

⁹ The pronunciation is cited from *a dictionary of the Amoy vernacular spoken throughout the prefectures of Chin-chiu, Chiang-chiu and Formosa (Taiwan)* by Rev. W. Champbell 1913.

In (3), the character 書 ‘book’ is used to represent the Taiwanese word *chheh* ‘book’. The standard pronunciation of the sinograph 書 is *chu* in Taiwanese, and the correct sinographic reflex for *chheh* is 冊. The sinograph 冊 should be used here to represent the word *chheh* rather than 書 because both *chu* ‘book’ and *chheh* ‘book’ are used in Taiwanese. By consistently writing *chu* as 書 and *chheh* as 冊, these potential ambiguities could be avoided. For example, *góa bô thak8 chheh* ‘I don’t study’ in (3) could have been transparently written as 我無讀冊 rather than 我沒讀書. Since most speakers are more familiar with written Mandarin, titles tend to be written in the form which is closer to Mandarin as well.

Some Taiwanese speakers whom I interviewed reported that they felt that inconsistencies such as those above arise through the influence of written Mandarin. Since written Taiwanese is not yet well-established, the lack of standardization causes people to depend on their knowledge of written Mandarin in inconsistent ways. A similar situation can be found in writing Hawai’i Creole English commonly known as Pidgin English (as seen in *Pidgin to da Max*, Simonson 1981).¹⁰

3.2.2. Pronunciation of sinographs

Some sinographic representations in lyrics may cause confusion to readers who have not yet heard the songs. The sinograph 走 in the following example (5) is used to represent the word *kiáⁿ* ‘walk’, but the Taiwanese pronunciation for this character is *cháu*. The appropriate sinographic representation of the word *kiáⁿ* is 行. In Mandarin, ‘walk forward’ is written as 向前走 *xiàng qián zǒu*, not 向前行 *xiàng qián xíng*. In this case the more familiar orthographically conventional Taiwanese representation 向前行 *hiòng chêng kiáⁿ* was avoided in favor of the more familiar sinographic representation 向前走.

(5) Oh! 再會 吧! Oh! 向 前 走
 Oh! *chài-hōe pah!* Oh! *hiòng chêng kiáⁿ*
 Oh! Good-bye particle Oh! toward front walk

‘Oh! Good-bye! Oh! Walk forward!’ (向前走/林強 Lin 1990)

Misreading of the lyrics caused by the ambiguous use of sinographs is also common. The following is a line from a song called ‘Mài koh gong’ :

(6) 酒 空空
chiú khong-khong
 liquor ephemeral

‘liquor, it is ephemeral’ (甬攔慙/蔡振南 Tsai 1997)

The first line starts as ‘酒空空’ *chiú khong-khong*. When I asked five native speakers how to read this, four of them read it *chiú khang-khang* ‘the wine is empty’. They had never heard the song before. The only person who read the lyrics correctly knew the song. The most obvious semantic content of the sinograph 空 is ‘empty’ pronounced *khang*, but here the character is intended to represent the morpheme ‘ephemeral’, which is pronounced *khong*. This kind of misreading is quite common in

¹⁰ I would like to thank Prof. Michael Forman for pointing this out to me.

reading Taiwanese song lyrics. Sometimes one has to listen to the song first before knowing the intended reading of the sinograph in question.

3.2.3. Use of written Mandarin to substitute for written Taiwanese

Sometimes one can find variations in sinographic representation for the identical song lyrics found in different inserts. The following discrepancies were found in the song *Hong-hun ê kò'-hiong* ‘My hometown at sunset’.

Taiwanese word	Gloss	Tsai's version	Showlen's version
beh	auxiliary	[口麥]	要
chhù	house	厝	家的
eh	interjection	[口也]	的
gún	I	阮	我
hō ^m	give	乎	給
i	it	伊	它
m7-thang	cannot	不佻	不可
o	interjection	喔	喂
teh	aspect marker	地	的
teh	aspect marker	塊	在
tng2-khì	to return	轉去	返去

Tsai's version uses sinographs which reflect the Taiwanese pronunciation more closely. Showlen Maya's version simply uses sinographs which are used to represent the Mandarin counterparts of the Taiwanese words in question. Therefore, readers need to sight-translate Mandarin words into Taiwanese. It shows that many people do rely on their reading and writing ability of Mandarin in order to express Taiwanese in writing.

3.2.4. Code-switching

Another complication that makes reading Taiwanese song lyrics difficult is the frequent occurrence of code-switching, especially between Mandarin and Taiwanese, in some songs. Sometimes the language used for specific lines is indicated by (國) ‘Mandarin’ or (台) ‘Taiwanese’, but such indications are often not provided. Thus a reader cannot always tell which portion needs to be sung in Mandarin. The following are some examples of code-switching found in the data:

- (7) 卡早 聽 人 唱 台北 不 是 我的 家
 Khah chá thiaⁿ lāng chhiūⁿ Táiběi bú shì wǒde jiā
 earlier hear people sing Taipei not is my house

‘Before, I heard that someone sang that “Taipei is not my home”.’ (向前走／林強 Lin 1990)

- (8) 叫 一聲 My Baby 你 若 歡喜
 kio chhìt-siaⁿ my baby lí nā hoaⁿ-hí
 shout voice my baby you if happy

(來舊不) 沒有 問題
 lái-jiù-bù mēiyǒu wèntí
 no problem no problem

‘Say My Baby, and if you like, then (it's okay), [there is] no problem.’ (癡情酷恰恰／王建傑 and 賈子蕙 Wang & Chia 1999)

The parts 台北不是我的家 ‘Táiběi bú shì wǒde jiā’ in (7) and 沒有問題 ‘méiyǒu wèntí’ in (7) are supposed to be sung in Mandarin, but there is no written cue which indicates that these portions should be sung in Mandarin. In (8) the word in the parentheses, 來舊不, should be read using the Mandarin pronunciation *lái jiù bù*, to approximate the Japanese word, *daijoobu* ‘no problem’. Therefore, the readers in this case are required to use the Mandarin pronunciation of the sinographs in order to get the intended pronunciation.

The reverse situation can be found in the lyrics of some Mandarin songs. The following is an excerpt from the Mandarin song *Dānyǎnpí nǚshēng* ‘A girl with single-edged eyelids’. Even though it is a Mandarin song, the string of sinographs 三碗豬腳 in (9) below must be read using the Taiwanese pronunciation of each sinograph, *saⁿ oáⁿ ti kha*, with the apparent meaning ‘three bowls of pig’s feet’. This, however, approximates the Thai expression *sawàtdii khâ* ‘how are you?’.

(9)	三	碗	豬腳
	sa ⁿ	oá ⁿ	ti-kha
	three	bowl	pig feet

‘How are you?’ (in Thai) (單眼皮女生／中國娃娃 China Dolls 2000)

This increasing use of foreign expressions adds to the complexity of reading Taiwanese song lyrics. In the data, two songs used English expressions, four songs used Mandarin expressions, one song used Hakka expressions, and one song used a Japanese expression.

3.3. Summary

Almost all popular Taiwanese language song lyrics are written with sinographs. Although romanization could represent the pronunciation more accurately, romanization is not printed at all in song lyrics. NPA is sometimes used and appears to be preferred over Church romanization. People are educated using NPA in elementary school, but until recently, romanization for neither Mandarin nor Taiwanese was taught in schools.¹¹ Both semantic-based and phonetic-based strategies are common in choosing sinographs to represent Taiwanese words as previously discussed. Evidence of the strong influence of written Mandarin in writing Taiwanese lyrics is reflected in: (1) Even when the sinographic reflexes for the Taiwanese words in question are known, the use of a semantic-based strategy is common. (2) Taiwanese words are often written using Mandarin equivalents. As Oh (1993) mentioned, written popular Taiwanese song lyrics often confuse readers. In order to resolve this problem, the standardization of written Taiwanese or the use of romanization appears to be necessary.

4. Future of written Taiwanese

Even though roman-letter-based orthography is simpler and easier to learn compared to sinographs, such a system still needs to be explicitly taught. As mentioned in Chiung’s work, wiping out all sinographs in written Taiwanese is not realistic. However, I do think that the introduction of romanization as a learning tool at the elementary education level is achievable. Chiung (2001:518) states that ‘Over time, the Roman script might come into competition with Han characters [sinographs], or even replace Han characters if Romanization were taught together with Han characters at the time students enter elementary school.’ I will go a step

¹¹ Recently, Taiwanese classes are being introduced in some elementary schools. There are no standardized textbooks for Taiwanese language classes. However, many texts utilize some type of romanization.

further by saying that the success of introducing written Taiwanese depends on having a standardized Romanization system which is taught at the elementary level.

4.1. Towards successful promotion of Written Taiwanese

4.1.1. Attitudes of the general public toward Taiwanese education

Despite the fact that Taiwanese has gained popularity in recent years, the general public, including proficient Taiwanese speakers, is often reluctant to support teaching Taiwanese beginning in elementary school. Chen (1999:126) makes the following comments in his book:

A more important factor underlying the under-achievement of dialect writing in Taiwan, in my view, is that the wider community is not yet prepared to accept efforts to standardize and promote a separate orthography for Southern Min [Taiwanese].

I think his observations are still valid at the present time. There are frequent critical comments in newspaper columns against the introduction of Taiwanese and the teaching of romanization at school. For example, in April 2003, People First Party members took materials written in romanization to the Taipei City Department of Education demanding that the officials there read them. Since educated Taiwanese speakers such as those officials were not able to read the materials, PFP members demanded that they not introduce such romanization to school children (Huang 2003). It was not unexpected that the people at the Taipei DOE were not able to read the materials since they were not familiar with the system. Similar criticisms have been repeatedly made (see Hsieh 2004, for example). What can be done to change people's attitudes about romanization?

4.1.2. Importance of introducing romanization in elementary education

No matter what system of writing one decides to use for Taiwanese, some phonetic-based letters need to be taught in elementary schools when teaching Taiwanese. The importance of this is often overlooked. Even if a system which utilizes only sinographs is adopted, some type of phonetic symbols needs to be introduced at the elementary level so that students can learn to read sinographs correctly in Taiwanese. Mandarin writing in Taiwan essentially uses sinographs, but everyone in Taiwan learns the NPA before learning sinographs. Even though the NPA was not given full status as an official alphabet for writing, but as only as a pronunciation guide, people often use the NPA to represent words which do not have corresponding sinographs. Recently the slang word *piáng* 'super' is often written in the NPA. Such examples are easy to find. Students learn the basic sound system of Mandarin by learning the NPA. In the People's Republic of China, people use *pinyin* romanization. Even though it may not be a bona fide writing system, school children in the PRC learn the basic sound system of Mandarin by using the phonetic alphabet. The similarities are that school children in both Taiwan and the PRC learn Mandarin by learning some type of phonetic symbols first, not sinographs. Until the introduction of the Taiwanese language into the school curriculum in recent years, Taiwanese speakers, regardless of their proficiency level, never learned Taiwanese in school. Thus, most people in Taiwan, if not all, know that there are four tones in Mandarin. Most Taiwanese speakers, however, do not know exactly how many distinctive tones there are in Taiwanese. When you ask someone to write a certain Mandarin word in the NPA, most people can write it. Most people, however, cannot represent a Taiwanese word either in the NPA or in romanization. Therefore, it is imperative that romanization, or some other type of phonetic symbols (for example, a modified version of the NPA), be introduced in Taiwanese classes before sinographs are taught. Introduction of romanization in elementary school is extremely important for those

who advocate the mixture of sinographs and romanization, the *hân-lô* system because the majority of words written in such a mixed system are still sinographs. If people cannot read romanization, it defeats the purpose of implementing this writing system.¹²

¹² I observed Reading Taiwanese classes offered at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in 2001-2003. Many students from Taiwan simply skipped the romanization when they read the textbook written in the mixture of sinographs and romanization. Even though some students never improved their reading skills, they were able to get the gist of the text using their knowledge of Mandarin. These students never acquired a functional command of romanization.

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