

EDUCATION IN THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN HO CHI MINH CITY*

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1. General Information about the Situation of the Education in the Chinese Community in Ho Chi Minh City before “Doi moi”

1.1. The Period before 1975

Education in general or the teaching and learning of Chinese originate from the practical requirement of an improved educational and social level of the Chinese community when immigrating and settling in Vietnam. Educational activities help them to maintain their traditional culture and language. The first school of the Guang Dong Chinese group named *Tue Thanh hoc hieu*¹ was established in 1910. After that, many other schools of different language communities were established. Before 1931, all schools of Chinese people in Sai Gon - Cho Lon were primary schools; there was only one French-Chinese high school. However, after 15 years, there were 97 high schools in the Sai Gon - Cho Lon area, enrolling 25,226 students.² The education network of Chinese people had been more and more strengthened and by 1953 there had been 34,932 students (Intramural Magazine V. 2, 1956). The statistics in 1955 showed that there were 3,658 high school students. However, a variety of Decrees of

the Ngo Dinh Diem Government after the year 1955 had led to the collapse of this system of schools. Americans and their puppets and Taiwan invested both human and material resources in education in order to achieve two main objectives: holding back the revolutionary struggle movement and training the lackeys for them. At that time, the schools of Chinese people were also ruled over by the capitalistic class with support of France, the US, and Taiwan.

The Schools of Chinese people were divided into three types: *People-founded Schools* (established by communities and fellow-countrymen association); *Private Schools and schools founded by the religions*. The School Management Board, also called Hoi Hieu Dong, was in charge of everything from collecting school fees to hiring teachers. The Sai Gon government forced these schools to issue diplomas in Vietnamese, teach Vietnamese, and considered Chinese a foreign language. In reality, this policy was not successful as all schools had Vietnamese and Chinese teachers sneakingly teaching both curricula at the same time. Textbooks used for teaching were imported from such countries as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore. English books were imported from England and the US. Before the time when Japan invaded China, two big publishing houses in Shanghai, which were “*Thuong vu an thu*

¹ Now called *Mach Kiem Hung School*, which is close to the *Tue Thanh Fellow-countrymen Association*, No. 710 Nguyen Trai, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.

² According to *Oversea Chinese Chronicle*.

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quan” and “*Eastern Publishing Department*” shared the monopoly in providing books for China and many Chinese schools in other countries. The export of Chinese books to Vietnam stopped when Japan invaded China. Since then, Hong Kong replaced China and afterwards books from Taiwan were exported to Vietnam. Books of Nam Duong Publishing House (Singapore) were best-selling in South East Asia as they could reflect the activities of the region. Books of Trung Chinh Publishing House (Taiwan) were also sold well. However, only reading books of these two publishing houses were imported regularly while textbooks were imported in a certain quantity and had to be reserved. Therefore, before 1975, Chinese textbooks for Chinese students in Ho Chi Minh City were normally scarce.

In the past, Chinese students studied two parallel curricula: the Vietnamese and the Chinese one. However, none of the curricula met the requirements. The Vietnamese principal did not play any role while the Chinese principal managed all the school activities. After completing high school, students who wanted to continue tertiary education had to find their own tutors. Under the old regime, most poor Chinese children were illiterate or dropped out of school.

The teachers in the Chinese schools were very diverse: some were cultural secret agents coming from Taiwan, some were nationalist party members, some were teachers taking the power in religious schools, some were middle-class people coming back from their study in Taiwan,

some were from Sai Gon authorities, some were just teachers whose occupation was teaching and who did not incline to politics, some did join the French and American wars because they felt a solidarity with the Chinese people, some returned from Cambodia, and some belonged to the core cadre of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

1.2. The Period after 1975

After 1975, in the spirit of the Instruction No. 22/CT-TW, Chinese schools were all transformed into public schools and decentralized. The Party, State, city authorities, and various agencies tried great efforts to meet the educational demands of the Chinese people, especially teaching and learning the Chinese language. According to the Instruction No. 10 in 1982 of the Secretariat of the VCP Central Committee, Chinese students study the same curriculum (with) as Vietnamese students, except some classes for learning Chinese. The Instruction No. 256-CT dated 11 October 1986 of the Chairman of Council of Ministers and the Circular No. 43/TT dated 26 December 1988 of the Ministry of Education officially stipulated that Chinese is a subject for Chinese students organized in schools. In the decisive spirit of the above mentioned instructions, there had been a remarkable change in education in the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City.

Regarding material facilities, the government set up regulations for the transformation of schools into public schools, for their decentralization and for the transformation of some schools in the city. In addition to schools organizing Chinese classes, some districts also organized

continuation classes, and Chinese classes were organized in some places and also private houses. After foreign language centers were established where Chinese classes were organized, tutoring in private houses was reduced.

The transformation of private into public schools after 1975 resulted in an increased number of classes; however, old and damaged desks and chairs made studying more difficult. The transformation of schools caused difficulties in teaching and learning as teachers in each school had different teaching methods. On the other hand, the transformation of schools had also negative impacts on students when they moved from one school to another.

However, after the issuance of these instructions together with the educational reform, the strengthening of the organization and the improvement of the management, the teachers and students were trained to work scientifically. Now the management staff and teachers had a chance to improve their professional skills, and textbooks were distributed more timely than in the past.

In Ho Chi Minh City, Chinese teaching - was organized in two ways: in schools and in foreign language training centers. According to the statistics in 2000 of the Provincial Department of Education and Training, there were 6 primary schools organizing half-day class with 5 teaching periods/week for learning Chinese; and there were 11 primary schools organizing whole - day class with 10 teaching period/week for learning Chinese.

Foreign language schools organized Chinese training classes following the curriculum and universal Chinese textbook. Six schools in the city including Tran Boi Co, Mach Kiem Hung, Van Lang, Tran Huu Trang (District 5), Doan Ket (District 6), Go Vap (Go Vap district) taught Chinese in 184 classes for 7,124 students.

In 1991, there were 15 universalized Chinese centers in the whole city. One of the first centers was Vinh Xuyen Universalized Chinese Center (District 6). It can be seen that, before and after 1975, Chinese people still want their children to study in the schools established by their own community. However, in the past, public and private schools all used textbooks and learning materials written in Beijing language (Kouo-yu) (the language of Beijing which is used as the common language in China), which is different from the local language of the southern provinces of China, while teachers had to lecture in the local language. This caused a lot of difficulties for Chinese people in teaching and learning.

During the first years after the liberation of the South of Vietnam, there was a phenomenon that many Chinese students dropped out of schools. Looking at some figures about the number of students within 2 school years shortly after the liberation in some famous schools of district 5, we can see that the situation of reduction in the number of Chinese students is alarming:

In Tran Boi Co school, in the school year of 1977-1978, there were 2,998 students of primary level. However, this

number reduced to 1,746 in the school year of 1978-1979. At secondary level, in the school year of 1977-1978, there were 3,374 students, but in the school year of 1978-1979, this number reduced to only 1,891. In Mach Kiem Hung school, in the school year of 1977-1978, at primary level, there were 2,159 students; but in the school year of 1978-1979 there were only 1,772 students (Data of the Department of Education and Training in District 5).

The reduction of Chinese students year by year was due to many reasons, mainly to difficult living conditions of some Chinese families who could not afford the study of their children. Another reason was that some students thought that the study might have brought no benefit as when they went to work after finishing school, salary would have been too low.

In the years after the liberation, the schools launched the movement of “learning and practicing” and “teach well, study well.” This movement had provided students with vocational guidance early in their lives. Traditionally, in Chinese community, the parents do not want their children to study too much; they only want their children to have a career to ensure their lives instead.

During the period from 1985 to 1988, the number of Chinese students slightly increased; however, many children did not go to school, they studied at the foreign language training centers or at home instead. Learning of Chinese faced many difficulties as the number of classes was small, the teachers were not professional, textbooks were dry; this

could not attract the students. Therefore, the parents wanted their children to study at home in order to maintain and transfer their native language to the next generations. In the Ward 15, District 5, some parents suggested that: “attention should be given to human education” “to increase the number of school hours” and commented on the contents of the textbooks that “the textbooks are too dry, they should be more colorful”.³

Before 1979, in the whole city, there were 2,107 Chinese teachers and members of the staff working in the educational sector. After 1979, 54.5% (Report of the Public Relations Department of the City Party Committee - Chinese People Task Force, June 1984) of them were registered to go to China. In Ward 5 alone, before that time, there were 271 teachers teaching in 35 schools, however the “persecution” case forced 147 teachers to resign.

In fact, the scarcity of Chinese language teachers was a problem which was very difficult to solve since the years after the Second World War in the South of Vietnam. Normally, teachers from China were invited to come; however, due to high costs together with language barriers and difficulties in immigration formalities, training of local teachers was considered. Unfortunately, after one year of testing, failure was revealed. To cope with the above mentioned situation, teachers who had a high-school diploma (equal to grade 9 at present) were recruited. The scarcity of teachers resulted in a reduced teaching quality. The percentage of teachers

³ Interviews with households living in Nguyen Kiem, Tan Thanh, Pham Huu Chi streets, Ward 5. Interviewers: Tran Hong Lien - Do Bich Lien, August 1987.

who had been teaching since the time before 1975 amounted to 50% and some of them were already old. The rest 50% came back from Cambodia or Hanoi and they did not understand well the Chinese community as well as the living conditions here in Ho Chi Minh City.

In 2000, in the whole city, there were 350 Chinese language teachers. Most of them, except some, were contract teachers. Their professional skills and pedagogic capacities were limited as most of them were not officially trained to be teachers. In order to overcome this situation, the Chinese Language Training Center in coordination with the Teacher Training University of the city organized refresher trainings for Chinese language teachers, helping 123/180 teachers to reach the college standard.

After 1975, the Ministry of Education and Training corrected and edited the textbooks twice. From 1989 to 1997, the compilation of textbooks had been completed and new textbooks were published. Although there were still some limitations, the textbooks provided the teachers and students with enthusiasm and encouragement for their teaching and learning of Chinese.

After the VI Party Congress, Chinese language textbooks were adapted, teachers received better treatments, many Chinese language universalization centers, Chinese language training centers, and foreign language training centers (providing Chinese language training) were established. However, the textbooks were not suitable for children because they were colorless and not

attractive for them. Teachers tutoring at home all used textbooks printed before 1975. Those books were used also for social science subjects. In that situation, many outside-working-hour foreign language training centers were established. Naturally, these centers were only a form of cultural business. In reality, there were two educational systems existing in parallel. The District Departments of Education and Training tried to avoid this situation by establishing outside-working-hour foreign language training centers managed by the training bureaus. After the VI Party Congress, the limitations and weaknesses in Chinese language teaching and learning had gradually been overcome.

The teaching and learning of the Chinese language have received attention and support from the Chinese Language Sponsoring Committee and the Chinese Language Sponsoring Association. The Association provided a fund for the compilation and production of Chinese textbooks and financial support for the operation of the teachers club as well as awards for excellent Chinese language students in the whole city.

2. Current Situation of Education in the Chinese Community in Ho Chi Minh City

2.1. At present, in the city, Chinese children and children from other national groups study the same curriculum, in the same school, and follow the same learning regulations. Chinese is taught in two ways: Chinese teaching in schools and Chinese teaching in Chinese language training centers or in foreign language training centers.

In primary schools where schooling is organized in half-day class, Chinese teaching is organized in 5 teaching periods/week. There are 6 schools of this type in the wards 5, 8 and 10 with 44 classes and 1,683 students (City Department of Education and Training, 2000).

In reality, 5 teaching periods/week for teaching Chinese were not effective. Therefore, from 1978 to 2000, the number of students decreased remarkably:

Year	Schools	Students
1978	64	8,400
1985	32	3,150
1994	08	2,260
2000	06	1,683

Source: Department of Education and Training of Ho Chi Minh City, 2000.

In primary schools where schooling is organized in whole-day class, Chinese teaching is organized in 10 teaching periods/week. There are 11 schools of this type in Wards 6, 11, Tan Binh, and Binh Chanh with 171 classes and 7,323 students (City Department of Education and Training, 2000).

Schools providing 10 teaching periods/week for Chinese teaching are appreciated by the students' parents. The Thai Phien School in Ward 11 organizes Chinese as well as Vietnamese classes for elder disadvantaged Chinese children. The Nhat Tan School (District 1) and the Vinh Xuyen School (District 6) have their own Chinese training centers with 49 classes and

1,772 students (City Department of Education and Training, 2000).

Chinese teaching has been improved. Provincial and District Departments of Education and Training organize refresher training courses for teachers on *how to transcribe Chinese by using Latin characters*. Students will receive the B Level Certificate when completing the primary education level, and the C level Certificate when completing the lower secondary education level. The testing and evaluation of the Chinese subject following the official dispatch of the Department of Education and Training contributed to the promotion of Chinese teaching and learning in the city. In July 2003, the city Department of Education and Training developed a plan to invite Chinese teachers to come to Vietnam and teach here.

In 2001, according to the data provided by the Department of Education and Training, the whole city had 23 schools teaching Chinese language with 1,513 students and 347 classes. In the school year 2004-2005, the whole city had 22 schools and 8 centers teaching Chinese with 351 classes; increased 7 schools and 118 classes in comparison with the school year 2003-2004. At the same time, outside-working-hour Chinese classes were also changed into regular classes.

Year	Schools	Classes	Students
2001-2002	23	347	1,513
2002-2003	23	233	7,995
2004-2005	30	351	11,864

Source: Chinese People Task Force in Ho Chi Minh City.

From 1999 to 2000, the city Department of Education and Training organized Chinese language examinations for primary Chinese students. The percentage of qualified students amounted to 83%. In the school year 2000-2001, the percentage of qualified students increased to 93%.

Educational socialization has been affirmed and implemented. The fellow-countrymen associations all respond and contribute to the implementation of this policy. In 2001, the Tue Thanh Fellow-countrymen Association granted 180 scholarships of 500,000 VND each on an average. The Ha Chuong Fellow-countrymen Association granted 234 scholarships for students with the total amount of 58,150,000 VND. The Hai Nam Fellow-countrymen Association granted 44 scholarships of 200,000 - 300,000 VND each on an average, and 176 rewards for excellent students, 200,000 - 400,000 VND each on an average...

During 5 years (from 1999 to 2004), the contributions of 6 big fellow-countrymen associations in the city for study encouragement were as follows:

- Tue Thanh Fellow-countrymen Association: 2,116,889,000 VND.
- Nghia An Fellow-countrymen Association: 378,000,000 VND.
- Nhi Phu Fellow-countrymen Association: 1,062,230,700 VND.
- Hai Nam Fellow-countrymen Association: 109,150,000 VND.
- Sung Chinh Fellow-countrymen Association: 222,080,000 VND.

- On Lang Fellow-countrymen Association: 625,254,000 VND.

It is estimated that in the school year 2005-2006, in the whole city, there will be 4 schools teaching Chinese at lower secondary education level and upper secondary education level: Le Hong Phong Specialized Upper Secondary School and Hung Vuong Upper Secondary School provide Chinese training for grades 10 and 11. Tran Boi Co Lower Secondary School provides Chinese training for grade 6 to 8. Hau Giang Lower Secondary School provides Chinese training for grade 6 to 9.

According to the statistics of the Chinese People Task Force, in the District 5, there were 12,235 Chinese students, making up 32.8% of the total number of students in the whole district (2003). In schools where Chinese teaching is organized, 100% of the students from the primary education level successfully graduate. This shows that, at present, there has been an improvement in Chinese teaching and learning.

To encourage Chinese students, organizations like Guang Dong, Trieu Chau language groups fellow-countrymen associations provide scholarships for poor studious students and excellent students; they also organize extra-classes for weak students. In 2003, the fellow-countrymen association granted 1,178 scholarships for poor studious students with a total amount of 667,793,000 VND (Party Committee of District 5, 2003).

Famous schools in the district 5 such as Tran Boi Co, Tran Khai Nguyen, Mach Kiem Hung all maintain a Chinese teaching program. Annually, there are over 200

Chinese students attending entry exams to colleges and universities. In 2003, there were 850 college and university Chinese students in the whole district.

The District 6 has the Vinh Xuyen Chinese Language Universalization Center which is one of the leading Chinese language universalization centers. At present, 20 teachers are here regularly teaching from grade 1 to grade 9. The improvement of the curricula still receives attention from the State and Party with the purpose of achieving a new development level in the education of the younger generation.

Educational socialization and study encouragement are receiving a greater attention in terms of investment and development by Chinese people in the District 11 and related agencies. Annually, in this district, there are over 200 Chinese students passing the entry exams to colleges and universities. In 2000, 305 Chinese students passed the entry exams to colleges and universities.

In the whole District 11, there are 620 Chinese college and university students (Public Relations Department, 2003). The number of college and university students has significantly increased over the years. At present, there are 5 Chinese training centers in the district with nearly 5,000 students. There are 4 Chinese training center sponsoring committees including Pham Van Hai, Au Co, Hoa Binh, and Thai Phien (Public Relations Committee, Party Committee of District 11, 2003).

In 1989, after two times of Chinese textbook correction and editing, the Ministry of Education and Training

recompiled the textbooks. In 1997, this set of textbooks was assessed and published. The Department of Education and Training of Ho Chi Minh City also compiled a set of textbooks for experimental teaching in lower secondary schools.

The Chinese textbooks include the set of Chinese textbooks for primary level (10 books) published by the Ministry of Education and Training, and the set of extra-textbooks compiled by Ho Chi Minh City Department of Education and Training (10 books).

In addition to philological books and basic knowledge question books for primary and lower secondary students, there is also a Chinese literary collection. Teacher Huynh Duc Hoa said that “Students practice to analyze, get a general idea of how to review a literary work, and translate from Vietnamese to Chinese and vice versa”.⁴ Children in kindergarten only learn how to count numbers.

The Chinese Language Club established by the city Department of Education and Training plays an important role in exchanging experiences about teaching methods among teachers in schools where Chinese training is organized, especially among lower secondary teachers as at this level the curricula are not the same but each school has its own curriculum.

According to the statistics of the City Department of Education and Training, in the whole city, there are 350 Chinese teachers

⁴ In-depth interview with Ms. Huynh Duc Hoa, Head of the Vinh Xuyen Chinese Language Center (District 6) on 21 July 2003. Interviewer: Tran Hong Lien - Tran Hanh Minh Phuong.

(City Department of Education and Training, 2000). In 2003, there were 280 Chinese teachers, but in 2004 the number of Chinese teachers decreased to 277. Most of the teachers are contracted. The educational level of the Chinese language teachers is ranked as follows: college (38%), intermediate training school (36%), and middle training school (26%) (Ho Chi Minh City Department of Education and Training, 2000).

The City Department of Education and Training is now paying attention to the improvement of awareness, professional ability, and pedagogic methods of the teachers. Together with increasing professional skills and helping teachers to grasp changes in socio-economic and cultural activities of the country, the plan of inviting specialists from China to come and exchange experiences is also a measure to help Chinese language teachers to perform their work better. Some teachers attending short training courses in China and Taiwan have opened up a new direction of operation for the education of the Chinese community in the district and the entire city.

In fact, education in the Chinese community in the past years was well implemented partly because of the support by the *Chinese Teaching Sponsoring Committee* including educational benefactors who have contributed great efforts and money to expand the material facilities and school equipment, have rewarded excellent students, and have granted scholarships to poor studious students. In 2000, there were 10 Sponsoring Committees operating in the city.

The Chinese Teaching Sponsoring Committees are provided with operating permits by the City People's Committee. This is an organization established to provide financial support for various urgent issues relating to education such as the support of the production of textbooks and teaching materials or the support for the activities of the Chinese language teachers club, and rewards for excellent students.

3. Conclusion

The Party and State, together with social organizations and associations, have made great efforts to look after the work for the "human development" in the Chinese community. Chinese students study and play in the same environment as Vietnamese students, which help to strengthen the great national unity. The study as well as school facilities have been in order and discipline. Chinese people can learn their native language and maintain their traditional culture. The study of Chinese children being stabilized will contribute to an improved production and development of a prosperous Ho Chi Minh City.

The Chinese language teachers have increasingly been working under the management of the educational sector. Chinese language teaching is no longer implemented unsystematically and incoherently but it is concentrated in a whole under guidance and organization instead.

However, for the coming time, improvement of teaching and learning quality is still the objective of the city education sector. There should be also a differentiation between teaching Guang

Dong Chinese as the native language and Beijing Chinese as a foreign language. Educational socialization in Chinese language is an important factor which has been contributing to an improved intellectual standard level of the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City in the process of industrialization and modernization.

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The Lo Lo's traditional clothes in a funeral ceremony in Ha Giang province.

Photo: Nguyen Thang