

Eurasia Foundation International Lectures, Fall 2020 Semester
“The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology” Lecture Series (7)
Title: Chinese Characters Vocabulary Learning in Asia

For the 7th Eurasia Foundation International Lectures, we invited Associate Professor Yumin Chen, from the Department of Japanese Language and Literature at our University to deliver a speech “Chinese Characters Vocabulary Learning in Asia.” The theme of this lecture is about the learning of Chinese characters vocabulary in Asia, put emphasis on how Taiwanese learn Japanese characters. Professor Chen’s speech focuses on several topics: shares how she decided to go aboard study in Japan, shares how she chose Chinese vocabulary as research topics, contrasts the study of Chinese vocabulary, the studies on Chinese vocabulary learning, introduces the game on Chinese vocabulary. Professor Chen leads the teachers and students to realize the profoundness and pleasure of the studies on Chinese vocabulary learning.

First, Professor Chen mentioned that after she graduated from the Department of Japanese Language and Literature at Chinese Culture University, she became a Japanese language lecturer in vocational high school. She found that there was a need to equip herself with more advanced capability in Japanese language and hence she decided to go aboard studies in Japan. The initiation of choosing Chinese vocabulary as research topic was that inspired from the Chinese characters written on the signboard, she found that the differences in the meaning of Chinese characters in Chinese and Japanese could be a good topic. When she thought of research topics, she found that the differences between Chinese characters in Chinese and those in Japanese not only lie in “pronunciation,” but also lie in “meaning.” She then reviewed the existing literature and found that the studies on Chinese vocabulary include “form,” “pronunciation,” and “meaning.” Therefore, she decided to study the “meaning” of Chinese vocabulary.

The next section is from literature review. Professor Chen introduces the existing studies on the contrast between Chinese characters in Chinese and those in Japanese and these studies can be divided into four types.

1. Studies on Structure: In Japanese, it usually adopts “declinable style” combining noun with noun in most cases; In Chinese, most words combine adjective with noun.
2. Studies on reverse phenomena: Even for those shared Chinese characters, both used in Chinese and Japanese, have the phenomena that Chinese characters were reversed in some vocabulary.
3. Studies on parts: Some verbs in Chinese can be used as both verb intransitive and verb transitive, while those words are used as only noun and verb intransitive in Japanese. In addition, some Chinese characters may serve as adjective in Chinese while as verb intransitive in Japanese; verb in Chinese, while as noun in Japanese.

4. Studies on Typology: Agency for Cultural Affairs contrasted 2,000 words in Japanese and Chinese dictionary in 1978 and the result found that 66.67% of Chinese characters have “the same meaning (“Same” in the following sections),” 25% of those have “partially similar meaning (Overlap)” and “different meaning (Different),” and 25% of those “can be found in one language but cannot be found in the other (Nothing).”

For the third part, Professor Chen introduces the studies on Chinese vocabulary learning and discuss the ways of Taiwanese’s Chinese vocabulary learning. Professor Chen conducted a research survey with 295 Taiwanese college students and the result found that the ways of Taiwanese’s Chinese vocabulary learning can be classified into four types: learning from mother tongue, memorization, dictionary, and others (watching TV shows, comic books, memorizing the usages). Professor Chen, whose studies mainly focus on foreign language learning, explains the theory of “language transfer,” a theory in second language acquisition. To be specific, there are several styles of language transfer: ① positive transfer and ② negative transfer, depending on whether the transfer brought positive or negative impacts when speak foreign language; ③ avoid using the same words intentionally to avoid mistakes; ④ procedural transfer; ⑤ social-cultural transfers when learning foreign language, resulting from the habit or culture of mother tongue; ⑥ overused (Chinese characters), referring to those who understand Chinese characters tend to use Chinese characters in Chinese; ⑦ psychological transfer based on individuals’ subjectivity.

Professor Chen uses survey data from transverse section, which means collecting learners’ learning materials in certain periods; and from vertical section, which means collecting learners’ long-term learning materials. Professor Chen first explains “the typology of meanings of the Chinese characters with the same form in Chinese and Japanese”: ① Same ② Overlap 1 ③ Overlap 2 ④ Overlap 3 ⑤ Different ⑥ Nothing. Professor Chen further adopts the hierarchic theory (階層理論) which differentiates the level of difficulties in the second language acquisition, usually used in Europe and the United States. Referring to the typology offered by hierarchic theory, including separation, new, missing, fuse, consistent, Professor Chen creates a new typology to apply on Chinese characters in Chinese and Japanese.

The “Overlap” (whether 1, 2, or 3) in the Chinese characters in Chinese and those in Japanese are considerably similar; however, the frequencies of using the same Chinese characters are very different in Chinese and Japanese. Based on the survey, Professor Chen reclassified Chinese characters in Chinese and those in Japanese into 6 types: Same, Overlap 1 (Same meaning, same frequency), Overlap 2 (= same meaning, different frequency), Different, Nothing 1 (= may presume meaning from Chinese characters), Nothing 2(= may not presume meaning from Chinese characters). She predicts that “Overlap 2, Different,

Nothing 2” would be more difficult to learn than “Same, Overlap 1, Nothing 1.”

Based on the theories mentioned above, Professor Chen conducts an empirical survey on Japanese language learners in Taiwan with two types of tests, including ① knowledge of vocabulary: judge from the translation from mother tongue (母語翻譯判斷法), ② application of vocabulary: judge from true or false (文對錯判斷法). The result found that the two tests results of the beginner-level learners are consistent, falsifying the prediction of level of difficulty hierarchy. The survey continues to ask different levels of Japanese language learners to reply to tests and found that the “first-level” Japanese language learners do not have level of difficulty hierarchy, while the “second- and third-level” Japanese language learners have similar results with those of beginner-level. Moreover, Professor Chen also conducts empirical investigation on different learning environment with research targets JFL (Japanese language learners in Taiwan) and JSL (Japanese language learners in Japan). The result found that JSL, even for those who are second-level, do not have level of difficulty hierarchy. From the research on transverse section, we found that not only the proficiency level of Japanese but also learning environments may influence the usage (or misuse) of vocabulary in Chinese and Japanese.

The empirical research on vertical section was based on the analysis on the content of articles written by beginner-level learners in Taiwan and Professor Chen adds another type, “Chinese,” to the typology of Chinese character vocabulary. The result showed that many of them use vocabulary in the type, “Chinese,” because the beginner learners tend to write many Chinese characters in Chinese as if they have the same meaning in Japanese. Additionally, the survey analyzes the articles written by intermediate and advanced learners and found that ① the mistakes in Chinese characters vocabulary would not disappear regardless of their Japanese level or their colleges grades; ② there were mistakes in all types of Chinese characters vocabulary; ③ There are more misuses in the type of “Chinese,” even for those advanced learners; ④ the reason of misuses in Chinese characters with the same meaning is that the part of speech was different in Chinese and Japanese or though there are Chinese characters with the same meaning in Japanese, Japanese usually uses other vocabulary instead. ⑤ Coexistence of misuses and correct usages. At the end of the lecture, Professor Chen introduces two interesting games for students to learn Chinese characters vocabulary and gives students chances to operate them.

(To visit our websites: <https://Eurasia.pccu.edu.tw/faculty.php>)

(Written by Hsin-I Huang, Assistant Professor of the Department of Japanese Language and Literature)

(English Version Translated by Wenting (Florence) Yang, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Institute for National Defense and Security Research)