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Abstract for University of MALTA

First All-Mediterranean Chinese Studies Conference

“Chinese Studies Beyond the Centre of Gravity”

MISSIONARY SCHOLARS AND HERITAGE LANGUAGES :
ADELE MARION FIELDE’S STUDIES ON THE SWATOW LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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A scholar, linguist and scientist, remarkably timeless in her pursuit of knowledge, Adele Fielde (1839-1916) was a highly independent American Baptist missionary, who incessantly questioned the precepts and beliefs of her religion. In the USA, she was in the forefront of social and political change at the turn of the 20th century, campaigning for the right of women to vote, to study at university, and to practice medicine, and was notably in one of the first cohorts of women to graduate from the Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1885. Yet her linguistic research on Chinese languages is little known, undoubtedly due to its focus on Swatow (Shàntóu 汕头 in Standard Mandarin), one of the less well-described varieties of Southern Min group of languages, and despite the importance of Swatow as a flourishing treaty port in northeastern Guangdong from 1861 onwards.

During the period of 25 years in which Fielde lived in Swatow and worked closely with the community and villages in the surrounding areas, she produced a manual of Swatow, several books of collected folk stories and customs, and an stunningly comprehensive Swatow-English dictionary (1883) of over 600 pages which rivals the classic work of Douglas (1873) on the related Southern Min variety of Amoy (厦门 Xiàmén).

The objective of this talk will thus be to highlight aspects of her research on the grammar and lexicon of Swatow, noting that Swatow and its ‘twin language’, the closely related neighbour of Teochew (Cháo zhōu 潮州) both show independent development from the better-known varieties of Amoy (Xiàmén 厦门) and Quán zhōu 泉州. This has been reinforced due to intermingling with Yue and Hakka languages spoken in the same region. The contact situation reveals a set of unusual features compared with Southern Min, that is, the Hokkien languages spoken in Fujian.

The study of Chinese dialects is the keystone for preserving China’s rich heritage of linguistic diversity and its cultural traditions : The oral art of storytelling is one of many such examples, (see Fielde 1887, 1893, 1894), as it may reveal interesting different regional customs in a southern part of China that has always been peripheral to the Northern centres of government and political power.

The value of Fielde’s work is inestimable for Sinitic linguistics for the window it opens on to the Swatow language in the late 19th century and the fact that there are no contemporary grammars on it. In the light of heightened interest in Chinese heritage languages (He 2008, Li 2016, Ye 2022), the case of Teochew will be briefly profiled, whose emigrant populations are widespread in Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore (Chappell 2019).

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