Identity and Cultural Contestation in a Plural Society: The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia[1]

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Abstract: The development of Chinese education in Malaysia has come a long way since the large-scale immigration of the Chinese beginning in the nineteenth century. As a significant minority group in a plural society, the Chinese have shown a great deal of determination to maintain and propagate their cultural identity via the provision of Chinese education amidst the pervasive influence of the Malay language as the main thrust of the nation building process. It is inevitable then that there is a strong element of identity and cultural contestation in the development of Chinese education. This paper examines three issues that illustrate this contestation. The first issue, i.e. the Chinese language movement, involves the recognition of Chinese as an official language of the country in order to legitimize the position of Chinese education within the national mainstream. The second issue involves the preservation of the character of the Chinese primary schools, which entails the use of Chinese as the main medium of instruction as well as the language of administration and wider communication. The last issue pertains to the establishment of a complete system of Chinese education to strengthen the position of Chinese education in the country.

Keywords: Identity and Cultural Contestation; Chinese Education; Plural Society

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Introduction

Identity and cultural contestation among different ethnic groups is a salient feature in the nation building process of most plural societies. This contestation is often at the expense of the minority groups who are expected to conform to a national identity

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and culture advocated by the state to uphold the interests of the majority group. This is most evident in the area of educational provision. It is generally the case that most plural societies tend to adopt a monolingual policy based on the dominant language as the main thrust of the nation building process as far as the provision of education is concerned. Such a language policy is underpinned by the all-pervasive orientation of assimilation or dominant monism (Smolicz, 1981). This is particularly true in plural societies that subscribe to "the linear 'one language, one nation, one people' principle of linguistic or organic nationalism" (May, 2009, p. 91), which is premised on the notion that "the political and the national unit should be congruent" (Gellner, 2006, p. 1). Such a notion of linguistic or organic nationalism has worked against the interests of the minority groups, especially marginal minority groups who are most vulnerable to the assimilative intent of the state. But it is a different scenario for non-marginal minority groups who have the numerical strength to challenge the dominant group. As Rigg (1991) puts it, an ethnic group that has numerical strength would make it difficult for any government to assimilate it. It is against this backdrop that the development of Chinese education in Malaysia (Malaya before 1963) merits our attention as far as the issue of identity and cultural contestation in a plural society is concerned.

Malaysia is a plural society that comprises three main ethnic groups with diverse languages and cultures, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians. The Malays are the indigenous group, whereas the Chinese and Indians are originally immigrants who came to Malaya in large numbers beginning in the nineteenth century. The influx of these immigrants was largely drawn by economic opportunities created by the British in Malaya. While the Indians were brought in by the British, the Chinese were forced to leave their homeland to eke out a living on foreign land because of agrarian problems of overpopulation, natural calamities and landlord exploitation (Yen, 2000). Though transient at the beginning, these immigrants later developed roots into settled communities, resulting in the formation of a plural society in Malaya. In 1947, the ethnic composition of Malaya was 49.5% Malays, 38.4% Chinese, 10.8% Indians and Pakistanis, and 1.3% other ethnic groups. By the time of independence in 1957, this ethnic composition had not changed markedly – 49.8% Malays, 37.2% Chinese, 11.3% Indians and Pakistanis, and 1.8 % other ethnic groups (Hirschman, 1974). While the Malays are certainly the majority group, the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, are not a marginal minority group. They are in fact a significant minority group who has the numerical strength to challenge the Malays. Despite declining birth rates over the years, the number of Chinese in Malaysia remained significant. For instance, in 2000, the Chinese constituted 26.0% of the total population in Malaysia (Tey, 2006).

Since their large-scale immigration to Malaya, the Chinese have shown a great deal of determination to maintain and propagate their cultural identity. One of the

means through which they sought to maintain and propagate this cultural identity was to uphold Chinese education as a cultural bastion of the Chinese. However, since independence in 1957, the development of Chinese education has been strongly contested by the Malay nationalists who had been very assertive in upholding the Malay language as the main thrust of the nation building process via the provision of education. Meanwhile, the development of Chinese education had been circumscribed by the Malay-dominated coalition government, initially the Alliance government and subsequently the National Front government. The Alliance government was a tripartite coalition that comprised three ethnic-based political parties, namely the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) that served the interests of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. In the early 1970s, the Alliance government was expanded and transformed into the National Front government following political changes in the aftermath of the hotly contested 1969 General Election (Mauzy, 1983). Although both the Alliance and National Front governments subscribed to an "elite accommodation model" (Means, 1991, p. 2) based on "a spirit of give and take" (Tan, 1997, p. 178) in dealing with conflicting ethnic issues, the outcome of this ethnic accommodation generally favored the interests of the Malays given the UMNO's dominant position within the coalition governments, especially during the National Front era. More often than not, the interests of the non-Malays were only accommodated within the larger interests of the Malays.

The assertiveness of the Malay nationalists to uphold the Malay language as the main thrust of the nation building process and the favoring of Malay interests by the Malay-dominated coalition government are strongly contested by the Chinese educationists affiliated to two Chinese associations, namely the United Chinese Committees' Association (UCSCA or Dong Zong) and the United Chinese Teachers' Association (UCSTA or Jiao Zong). Collectively, the two associations are popularly known by the acronym of Dong Jiao Zong (Dong Zong and Jiao Zong). The Chinese educationists affiliated to these two associations are guardians of Chinese education in the country. Since the early 1950s, they have played the role of an uncompromising pressure group to safeguard the Chinese schools as a bastion that maintains and propagates the Chinese cultural identity by demanding a fair and equitable treatment for Chinese education that could lead to the "co-existence and co-prosperity" (*gongcun gongrong*) of the different ethnic groups in the country (Tan, 1997; Tan, 2005; Kua, 1999). But such a role was construed by the Malay nationalists and the Malay-dominated coalition government as a threat to the nation building process. Meanwhile, the MCA, the main Chinese-based political party within the coalition government, was at odds with the Chinese educationists in many issues relating to the development

of Chinese education primarily because it had to adhere to the elite accommodation model adopted by the coalition government, though it had forged a close working relationship with the Chinese educationists in the first half of the 1950s prior to joining the coalition government. All in all, the Chinese educationists were under immense pressure to safeguard the development of Chinese education and at times, their efforts in this area had not brought about the desired outcomes.

This paper examines three hotly contested issues that have an impact on the development of Chinese education in Malaysia. The first issue involves the Chinese language movement launched by the Chinese educationists to demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language of the country with the aim to legitimize the position of Chinese education within the national mainstream. The second issue deals with the preservation of the character of the Chinese primary schools, involving efforts by the Chinese educationists to uphold Chinese as the main medium of instruction as well as the language of administration and wider communication in these schools. The third issue pertains to the aspirations of the Chinese educationists to establish a complete system of Chinese education from the primary to the tertiary levels to strengthen the position of Chinese education in the country.

The Chinese Language Movement

The Chinese language movement was launched by the Chinese educationists in the early 1950s as a response to the recommendation by the British to establish English-Malay bilingual primary schools (commonly known as the national schools) to replace the existing segregated vernacular primary school system during the period of decolonization after the Second World War. These English-Malay bilingual primary schools would serve as the crucible of the nation building process to unify students from different ethnic backgrounds. The establishment of English-Malay bilingual primary schools was first mooted by the Barnes Report promulgated in 1951 (Federation of Malaya, 1951). It was subsequently endorsed in a report prepared by the Central Advisory Committee on Education (CACE). The CACE report was then submitted to the Special Committee on Education tasked to complete a draft legislation of the educational policy. The Chinese educationists were alarmed by the dire consequences of this legislation on the development of Chinese education in the country. This prompted the Malacca Chinese School Teachers' Association to demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language to safeguard the Chinese school system. This was the first time that such a demand was made by the Chinese educationists (Jiao Zong 33Nian Bianjishi, 1987).

The demand to recognize Chinese as an official language was formally adopted by the UCSTA when Lim Lian Geok was appointed its President on 19 December 1953.

Lim was most noted for his "unwavering stand and fearless struggle" (Yen, 2008, p. 252) to safeguard the cause of Chinese education on the grounds of equality and natural justice throughout his tenure as the President of the UCSTA. He was of the view that the only way to legitimize the position of the Chinese schools was through the recognition of Chinese as an official language. Under his leadership, the UCSTA spearheaded the Chinese language movement with much aggression. The UCSTA maintained that the recognition of a language as the official language of a country should be solely based on practical consideration and no country in the world had ever sidelined a language that was widely used by its people. The USCTA's stand on the official language issue received the overwhelming support of the Chinese community (Jiao Zong 33 Nian Bianjishi, 1987). Much to the relief of the Chinese educationists, the British failed to establish English-Malay bilingual primary schools due to the huge financial outlay incurred. Nevertheless, this failure did not stop the Chinese educationists from pursuing the Chinese language movement.

But the Chinese educationists decided to halt the Chinese language movement prior to the 1955 Federal Legislative Election scheduled to be held in July to elect an interim local government to work towards the independence of Malaya. This decision was mediated by the Alliance, a strong contender for the election. The MCA, which had forged a close working relationship with the Chinese educationists prior to joining the Alliance, was instrumental in arranging a roundtable meeting between the Alliance and the Chinese educationists, which was held in Malacca on 12 January. The main reason for hosting the roundtable meeting was that the Alliance felt that the Chinese language movement had threatened its chances of winning the forthcoming Federal Legislative Election as it had been opposed by the Malay nationalists affiliated to the Party Negara. Like the Alliance, the Party Negara was also a strong contender for the forthcoming election. The Party Negara was led by Dato' Onn Jaafar, the former UMNO President who left the party because of irreversible differences with party leaders over his intention to accept non-Malays into the party to broaden its support base. The Chinese language movement became a prime target of the Party Negara's election campaign. In a speech delivered in July 1955 at Alor Setar, Dato' Onn warned the Malays that the non-Malays would never accept the Malay language if their languages were accorded legal status as the official language (Ramlah, 2005). More importantly, the Party Negara accused the UMNO of betraying the interests of the Malays by collaborating with the MCA. This was because, under the leadership of Tan Cheng Lock, the MCA had supported the Chinese language movement prior to joining the Alliance.

The accusation of the Party Negara alarmed the Alliance, more so when the Party Negara relied heavily on Malay cultural nationalism to woo the support of the Malay electorate (Ratnam, 1967). It was through the Malacca roundtable meeting that the

Alliance leaders managed to convince the Chinese educationists to halt the Chinese language movement by promising them a new educational policy that would safeguard the interests of Chinese education (Heng, 1988). Despite the strong challenge from the Party Negara, the Alliance was able to secure a resounding victory and form the first interim local government with the President of the UMNO, Tunku Abdul Rahman, elected as the Chief Minister. A cabinet that comprised members of the Alliance was also formed. Tunku subsequently managed to negotiate with the British for the independence of Malaya, which was granted by the British in 1957.

However, the promulgation of the Razak Report by the Alliance after winning the 1955 Federal Legislative Election could not fully satisfy the Chinese educationists, leading to their decision to revive the Chinese language movement. This was because the Razak Report was only willing to accept the Chinese primary schools as an integral part of the national educational system but not the Chinese secondary schools. Apparently, the Alliance government felt that such a measure was deemed sufficient for the Chinese in the country to maintain their culture and identity and beyond that, they had to comply with its ultimate objective to elevate the Malay language as the main medium of instruction in the national educational system. This ultimate objective was meant to ensure that the Malay language could serve as the language of integration across ethnic boundaries (Federation of Malaya, 1956). Such an ultimate objective was, however, construed by the Chinese educationists as a threat to the Chinese school system since there was an attempt to convert the Chinese secondary schools to national-medium secondary schools. This was because the Razak Report had recommended the establishment of one type of National Secondary School where students worked towards a common public examination (Federation of Malaya, 1956). Two types of public examinations at the secondary level were recommended by the Razak Report, namely the Lower Certificate of Education (LCE) examination taken at the end of Secondary Year Three and the Federation of Malaya Certificate of Education examination taken at the end of Secondary Year Five (Federation of Malaya, 1956).

Shortly after the release of the Razak Report, the Chinese secondary schools were notified by the Department of Education that the forthcoming LCE examination would be conducted in English. The Chinese educationists were caught off-guard by this directive and demanded that if public examinations were to be conducted in the official medium, then Chinese must be recognized as an official language of the country so that it could be adopted as a medium of instruction in these examinations. But this demand was not heeded by the Alliance. Much to the relief of the Chinese educationists, none of the Chinese secondary schools switched their medium of instruction to English to prepare their students to sit for the public examination. But subsequent developments showed that the Chinese educationists did not push on with the Chinese language

movement as they were deeply involved in efforts to prevent the conversion of Chinese secondary schools to national-medium secondary schools following the promulgation of the Rahman Talib Report in 1960 and the 1961 Education Act (Federation of Malaya, 1960, 1961; Jiao Zong Jiaoyu Yanjiu Zhongxin, 1986). Unfortunately, these efforts were compounded by the strong support of the MCA for the conversion of Chinese secondary schools to national-medium secondary schools (Jiao Zong Jiaoyu Yanjiu Zhongxin, 1984). In the end, the Chinese educationists were unable to block the conversion when a large number of Chinese secondary schools decided to convert to the national medium in exchange of state funding. These schools were known as the National-Type Chinese Secondary Schools (NTCSSs) or the conforming schools. Those schools that did not switch to the national medium existed as Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSSs) or Duli Zhongxue (Duzhong). They were not only deprived of state funding by the government but qualifications obtained from them were also not recognized by the government. The NTCSSs used English as the medium of instruction. But they were expected to switch to the Malay medium of instruction once the status of English as an official language of the country was reviewed 10 years after independence as prescribed by the Federal Constitution. This switch of medium of instruction was in line with the ultimate objection of the Razak Report to elevate the Malay language as the main medium of instruction in the national educational system.

The Chinese language movement was revived prior to the enactment of the National Language Act in 1967 (Protem Working Committee of Representatives of Chinese Associations and Guilds of Malaysia, 1965). By then, the movement was led by Sim Mow Yu who replaced Lim Lian Geok as the President of UCSTA; Lim was forced to resign from the UCSTA when his teaching permit and citizenship were revoked by the government as a result of his strong stand against the government's educational policy (Yen, 2010). Although the enactment of the National Language Act was meant to review the status of English as an official language of the country 10 years after independence as prescribed by the Federal Constitution, it was seized upon by Sim to revive the Chinese language movement. However, Sim's initiative was strongly contested by the Malay nationalists affiliated to the National Language Action Front (NLAF). The NLAF was led by Syed Nasir Syed Ismail who was then the Director of *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP) or the National Institute of Language and Literature. DBP was established in 1956 to oversee Malay language corpus planning as well as to promote the wider use of the Malay language and the development of Malay literature. The Malay nationalists affiliated to the NLAF construed the Chinese language movement as a threat to the supremacy of the Malay language as the national language of the country (Von Vorys, 1976; Haris, 1983). Syed Nasir accused the Chinese educationists of making unwarranted demand to recognize Chinese as an official language. He maintained that

the Malays would never accept such a demand and reiterated that the official language issue was a matter of national importance and, therefore, should not be politicized in any quarters (Loot, 1996). Meanwhile, the Chinese language movement was also not well received by the Alliance government. The MCA, in particular, was under pressure to thwart the Chinese language movement. This was because Sim Mow Yu, the leader of the movement, was also the Vice-Chairman of the MCA Youth and the MCA Youth had openly supported his role in the movement. In the end, the MCA was forced to expel Sim from the party (Cheah, 1984). It was not surprising then that the enactment of the National Language Act did not live up to the expectations of the Chinese educationists; the Chinese language was not recognized as an official language. Instead, the Alliance government stuck by Article 152(1) of the Federal Constitutions which only allows the use of Chinese for non-official purposes. Nevertheless, the Chinese language movement remained a significant attempt by the Chinese educationists to legitimize the position of Chinese education within the national mainstream.

The Preservation of the Character of the Chinese Primary Schools

The Chinese primary school is the only component within the Chinese school system that is accepted by the government as an integral part of the national educational system as a result of the promulgation of the Razak Report in 1956. The position of the Chinese primary schools as the cultural bastion of the Chinese community within the national mainstream is, therefore, strongly guarded by the Chinese educationists as far as the character of these schools is concerned. This character is manifested by the use of Chinese as the main medium of instruction as well as the language of administration and wider communication.

Since the 1980s, the preservation of the character of the Chinese primary schools has been a matter of great concern to the Chinese educationists. In 1984, for instance, the Chinese educationists were caught by a directive from the Federal Territory Department of Education stipulating that the Malay language should be the main language medium in official functions hosted by schools within its administrative domain. Apparently, this directive was issued to ensure a wider usage of the Malay language within the schools, more so the vernacular primary schools. However, the directive was strongly objected by the Chinese educationists who feared that it would lead to the erosion of the character of the Chinese primary schools. The Federal Territory Department of Education subsequently released a statement to notify the Chinese educationists that the issuance of the directive was a technical error as it was not meant for the Chinese primary schools. But an additional directive issued after that indicated that the original directive was not entirely a technical error. Much to the

despair of the Chinese educationists, this additional directive imposed the condition that school administrators must, first of all, obtain the permission of the chairperson if they would like to deliver their speeches in other languages but a big portion of the speeches must still be in the Malay language. The directive cautioned the school administrators that as representatives of the Ministry of Education at the school level, they must be obliged to uphold the official language policy of the country when delivering their speeches during official functions (Tay, 2003). Such a directive posed a threat to the character of the Chinese primary schools. It was not surprising then that the Chinese educationists had stood up against the directive. One of the Chinese educationists, Loot Ting Yee, even staged a sit-down protest at the premises of the Federal Territory Department of Education. Soon after that, the stand of the Federal Territory Department of Education began to waver. A new directive was issued to the Chinese primary schools. This new directive stipulated that school administrators who were not proficient in the Malay language could choose to deliver their main speeches in other languages provided that their welcoming and ending speeches were in the Malay language (Tay, 2003). The new directive was accepted by the Chinese educationists and thus, ending the controversial issue of imposing language choice on official functions hosted by the Chinese primary schools.

The proposal by the government to establish integrated schools in the mid-1980s was also construed by the Chinese educationists as an attempt to change the character of the Chinese primary schools, though the proposal was driven by the intention of the government to desegregate the primary school students, which were divided along ethnic lines. It should be noted here that there are three different streams of primary schools in Malaysia that teach in the mother tongues of the students, namely the Malay primary school, the Chinese primary school and the Tamil primary school. These schools are generally regarded as the root causes of racial polarization within the school system in Malaysia, more so the Chinese and Tamil primary schools which are non-mainstream primary schools established to maintain and propagate ethnic cultures in contrast to the Malay primary schools which are recognized as the national schools. Some Malay politicians and intellectuals even go to the extent of urging the government to close down these schools (Lim, 1987), a strong indication of the contentious nature of the Chinese and Tamil primary schools in the eyes of the Malay nationalists.

The main thrust of the problem is that since the 1970s, the mainstream Malay primary schools have failed to attract substantial numbers of non-Malay students, in particular Chinese students, to serve as the crucible of the nation building process. Consequently, they remain largely a Malay enclave. The main reason is that the non-Malay parents, more so the Chinese parents, prefer to enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools, which generally outperform the Malay primary schools in

many areas of educational delivery, in particular academic attainment and disciplinary control. Also, the Malay primary schools had, over the years, created an internal environment underpinned by an Islamic milieu that deterred many non-Malay parents from sending their children to these schools (Lee, 2012). In fact, by the late 1970s, about 90 per cent of Chinese school-going children were enrolled in the Chinese primary schools (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1980). It was this lack of ethnic interaction at the primary level that had led to the government adopting the integrated school project in the mid-1980s. This project involved the merging of the three different streams of primary schools via two different models. The first model was the relocation of the three different streams of primary schools to newly built school complexes. The second model was to combine the three different streams of primary schools that were found located adjacent to one another (Sia, 2005). But the integrated school project was rejected by the Chinese educationists who feared that by being part of this project, the Chinese primary schools would lose their character. They were particularly wary that the widespread use of the Malay language in the integrated school project might be at the expense of the Chinese language. This was based on the results of their visit to the Teluk Sengat Integrated School located in Kota Tinggi, Johor – the first integrated school established by the government involving the Nan Ya Chinese Primary School, the Ladang Teluk Sengat Tamil Primary School and the Teluk Sengat National Primary School (Li, 1987). Also, they were not overly convinced that the mere contact between students from different races would in itself bring about better ethnic integration (Lim, 1987). Indeed, the intended outcome of ethnic contact has been a much debated issue and many contact theorists have pointed out the adverse consequences of ethnic contact (Banks, 1999; Stephan, 1992; Stangor, 2004). The strong stand adopted by the Chinese educationists against the integrated school project was the principal reason that forced the government to abort the project. But the idea to foster better ethnic integration among the primary school students was never dropped by the government. In the 1990s, the government came up with a rather similar project, i.e. the vision school project (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1995). This project was a modified version of the integrated school project. It allowed the Chinese and Tamil primary schools to retain their identity upon joining the project (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2008). However, the project was also rejected by the Chinese educationists. Again, the fear that the Chinese primary schools would lose their character was the main underlying reason. By 2005, the government could only established six vision schools in the country, namely the USJ 15 Vision School (Subang Jaya, Selangor), the Pundut Vision School (Lumut, Perak), the Taman Aman Vision School (Kedah), the Tasek Permai Vision School (Penang), the Pekan Baru Vision School (Parit Buntar, Perak) and the Seremban Vision School (Negeri Sembilan) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2008).

Out of these six vision schools, only one, i.e. the USJ 15 Vision School, involved the participation of the Chinese primary school. But this Chinese primary school (Tun Tan Cheng Lock Chinese Primary School) was not selected from among existing Chinese primary schools. Instead, it was a new Chinese primary school established by the government (Ng, 2009).

Another effort by the Chinese educationists to safeguard the character of the Chinese primary schools is their rejection of the decision by some State Departments of Education to appoint administrators who do not have the required Chinese language qualifications (at least a Secondary Year Five qualification) to the Chinese primary schools. The appointment of such administrators was most serious in 1987 when 87 of them were appointed to the Chinese primary schools to hold various top positions without the knowledge of the Chinese educationists (Goh, 1989). The Chinese educationists feared that these administrators might adopt the Malay language as a language of wider communication due to their poor proficiency in the Chinese language and hence, their appointments were construed as a threat to the character of the Chinese primary schools. Despite the demand of the Chinese educationists to retract these appointments, the government refused to budge. Subsequently, a mass rally was staged by the Chinese educationists to protest the appointments. Unfortunately, the protest culminated in heightened ethnic tensions when sections of the UMNO came in to defend the appointments, forcing the government to invoke the Internal Security Act to detain those who were responsible for the ethnic tensions (see Goh, 1989; Hwang, 2003; Thock, 2005). In order to pacify the Chinese educationists, the government subsequently came out with a solution acceptable to the Chinese educationists in the appointment of administrators to the Chinese primary schools. This solution was based on the tacit understanding that only administrators with the required Chinese language background could be appointed to four administrative positions, namely headmaster, senior assistant I (in charge of academic affairs), senior assistant II (in charge of student affairs) and afternoon session supervisor. The other administrative position, i.e. senior assistant (in charge of extra-curricular activities), could go to those who have the minimum Chinese language qualifications (Sia, 2005).

The character of the Chinese primary schools was again under threat when the government implemented the policy of teaching science and mathematics in English in stages at the school levels beginning in 2003. This policy was implemented to arrest the sharp decline in the standard of English among Malaysian students as a response to the global spread of English arising from the accelerated pace of globalization beginning in the 1990s (Tan and Santhiram, 2014). As such, this policy did not invoke any form of linguistic contestation between the Chinese educationists and the Malay nationalists, though the policy was strongly opposed by both the Chinese educationists and the

Malay nationalists for different reasons. Despite the strong opposition by the Chinese educationists, the policy was terminated in 2009 in response to the fear of the Malay nationalists that it would erode the supremacy of the Malay language as the national language of the country. Notwithstanding the termination of the policy, the government was determined to address the lack of proficiency in English among Malaysian students. Much to the despair of the Chinese educationists, the government had opted for the policy of "upholding the Malay language alongside the strengthening of English" (*Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris*) in the recently released Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) (see Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). This policy was adopted to seek a delicate balance between the local and global linguistic demands of the country. It had resulted in the introduction of more Malay language teaching periods in the Chinese primary schools to ensure that students would pick up the required operational proficiency in the language to facilitate its role as the integrative language of the country. The introduction of more Malay language teaching periods was incorporated into the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* or the Primary School Standard Curriculum. This new curriculum defines fewer learning in the Malay language in the early years of primary education but converging to similar skill acquisition standard as in the national schools by the end of primary education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). In actual implementation, the Malay language teaching hours would be increased markedly from Year Four to Year Six, i.e. the second phase of primary education. However, there was much uncertainly as to the number of teaching hours that the government intended to impose on the Chinese primary schools. This was perhaps the biggest challenge faced by the Chinese educationists who wanted the teaching hours to remain at 180 minutes (six periods) per week in line with the teaching of the Malay language as a second language to the Chinese primary school students (see *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 19 December 2013). But it appears that the government had initially wanted to allot 270 minutes of teaching hours to the Malay language but eventually opted for 240 minutes per week (see *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 14 December 2013; 21 December 2013; *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 22 September 2013). Admittedly, this decision was not well received by the Chinese educationists. It was for this reason that they continued to oppose the Education Blueprint to safeguard the character of the Chinese primary schools (Yap, 2013).

In short, the Chinese educationists have been very firm in their stand to preserve the character of the Chinese primary schools against the infiltration of the Malay language within the school domain. To them, the preservation of this character is central to the upholding of the Chinese primary schools as providers of mother tongue education to the Chinese in the country with the Chinese language serving as a tool for learning and socialization, and above all, enculturation.

The Establishment of a Complete System of Chinese Education

Since the 1960s, the Chinese educationists have attempted to establish a complete system of Chinese education in Malaysia. What was missing then was a Chinese-medium university that could serve as the pinnacle of Chinese education in the country. The Chinese were deprived of a complete system of Chinese education when Singapore was separated from Malaysia in 1965 due to irreversible political differences (Lau, 1998). The Nanyang University, established in the 1950s and located in Singapore, was then the pinnacle of Chinese education in the country (Hu, 2006).

The establishment of a Chinese-medium university became urgent in 1967 when the government imposed the condition that only students with the Senior Cambridge (SC) or Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) qualifications taken at the end of Secondary Year Five would be allowed to further their studies overseas (Jiao Zong 33 Nian Bianjishi, 1987). This condition deprived the ICSS students of opportunities to further their education abroad, especially in the Nanyang University, since they did not sit for the SC or the MCE examinations. But the proposal to establish the university was not well received by the Alliance government. The Minister of Education, Khir Johari, for instance, felt that the proposal would not serve the interests of the country (*Jiaoshi Zazhi*, 15 December 1974). The MCA, which represented the interests of the Chinese in the Alliance government, was also reluctant to support the proposal. The President of the MCA, Tan Siew Sin, was reported to have said that, "it would be easier for hell to freeze over than for Merdeka University to be established under the prevailing conditions in Malaysia" (Snider, 1970, p. 1078). Meanwhile, Malay political parties were strongly against this proposal. The UMNO Youth, for instance, regarded the proposal as a chauvinistic act by the Chinese educationists (Tay, 2003). Clearly, the lack of support for the proposal was mainly because it had gone against the language policy of the country, which was underpinned by the supremacy of the Malay language as the national language of the country. In spite of all this, the Chinese educationists were determined to go ahead and named the proposed Chinese-medium university as the Merdeka University (Quan Sheng, 1993). This infuriated the Malay nationalists who expressed deep regrets over the Chinese educationists' insistence to establish a Chinese-medium university. However, there was no turning back for the Chinese educationists. A private company, the Merdeka University Berhad, was soon incorporated with an initial injection of RM600,000 to kick start the project (Yap, 1992).

It was indeed most unfortunate that the Merdeka University project was one of the issues politicized by political parties in the hotly contested 1969 General Election (Vasil, 1972). The ensuing racial riots brought to a halt the proposal to establish the Merdeka

University. Although in the early 1970s, the Chinese educationists attempted to revive the project, this renewed attempt was complicated by the passing of the Universities and University Colleges Act in 1971, which made it mandatory to obtain approval from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (His Majesty, the King) and the Parliament before it could be established (Malaysia, 1971). Despite this complication, the Chinese educationists went ahead to revive the Merdeka University project. But the attempt to establish the Merdeka University was rejected again by the government. The Chinese educationists were deeply disappointed with this decision. They subsequently challenged the decision in the High Court by citing the constitutional provisions, especially Article 152(1), which they regarded as a provision that guaranteed the Chinese the freedom to teach and learn in their mother tongue. However, the suit was dismissed by the presiding High Court judge on the grounds that Chinese would be the medium of instruction of the Merdeka University and, therefore, constituted a violation of the constitutional provisions. This violation was underpinned by the fact that any university, be it public or private, established under the Universities and University Colleges Act, is a public authority and as such, had to use the Malay language for official purposes. The Chinese educationists went on to challenge this verdict at the Federal Court. But the Federal Court upheld the verdict of the High Court (Sinnadurai, 1986; Yap, 1992), bringing an end to the attempt by the Chinese educationists to establish the Merdeka University.

The grand vision of the Chinese educationists to establish a complete system of Chinese education in the country unexpectedly came to fruition in the later half of the 1990s as a result of a radical change of educational language policy that led to the phenomenal growth of private institutions of higher learning. This phenomenal growth of private institutions of higher learning was to cope with the surging demand for higher education in the country as well as to meet the aspirations of the government to make Malaysia the regional educational hub. To facilitate the establishment of private institutions of higher learning, the 1961 Education Act was reviewed and replaced by the 1996 Education Act, which incorporated private education into the national educational system. The 1996 Education Act also allowed the use of other languages as media of instruction upon approval by the Minister of Education. Several other Acts such as the 1996 National Council on Higher Education Act, the 1996 Private Higher Educational Institutions Act and the 1996 National Accreditation Board Act were passed to pave the way for private education to take root in Malaysia (Lee, 1999). The Chinese educationists took advantage of these provisions to push for the establishment of a private college, the New Era College. The Dong Jiao Zong Higher Learning Centre established by the UCSCA, the UCSTA and the University Merdeka Berhad in 1994 was tasked to establish this college. However, initial attempt by the Chinese educationists to establish the college was rejected by the government because

of the proposal to use Chinese as the medium of the instruction of the college (Ku, 2003). It took the Chinese educationists three years to finally obtain the approval by the government to establish the New Era College in Kajang, Selangor (Lee, 2011). The first intake of 180 diploma students started their courses on 1 March 1998. The diplomas offered by the college included Chinese Language and Literature, Commerce and Administration, Information Technology and Education (Kua, 2005). However, the Chinese educationists had to compromise by adopting a trilingual policy involving the use of Chinese, Malay and English as the media of instruction. Nevertheless, their long-term aim was to ensure that Chinese would eventually become the main medium of instruction of the college in line with their aspirations to have an institution of higher learning that catered to the mother tongue education of the Chinese. But there were problems in the upgrading of the college to a full-fledged university. There was a strong feeling of distrust among the Chinese educationists that the Malaysian Qualifications Agency had imposed more stringent accreditation requirements on the college (Tsao, 2010), indicating a deliberate attempt by the government to block the upgrading of the college.

The Chinese educationists have indeed shown a high level of conviction in their efforts to establish a complete system of Chinese education in Malaysia to ensure that there is continuity in the provision of mother tongue education from the primary to the tertiary levels of education. Such a complete system of Chinese education could help to strengthen the position of Chinese education in the country, though the Chinese educationists have to resolve problems that impede the upgrading of the New Era College to a full-fledged university.

Conclusion

The development of Chinese education in Malaysia has always invoked strongly felt positions primarily because it is a hotly contested area, involving contrasting ethnic interests as far as the provision of education in a plural society is concerned. This is clearly illustrated by the three issues examined by this paper. Underlying the three issues is the commitment of the Chinese to safeguard the development of Chinese education to maintain and propagate their cultural identity amidst the pervasive influence of the Malay language as the main thrust of the nation building process. This has resulted in a strong element of identity and cultural contestation in the development of Chinese education. Such a strong element of identity and cultural contestation stems from the fact that the Chinese are a significant minority group in Malaysia who have the numerical strength to assert for their educational rights. It is the Chinese educationists affiliated to the UCSCA and UCSTA who have played an instrumental role in upholding these rights. However, some of their efforts in this area have not brought

about the desired outcomes given the strong opposition from the Malay nationalists and the lack of support from the government. This is most evident in their failure to recognize Chinese as an official language of the country as well as to establish the Merdeka University. However, it is in the preservation of the character of the Chinese primary schools that the Chinese educationists have been able to safeguard the Chinese primary schools against the infiltration of the Malay language. It goes without saying that a change of character will bring about the demise of the Chinese primary schools and the Chinese educationists are certainly well aware of this danger. Meanwhile, the Chinese educationists are lucky that external factors have worked in their favor in the establishment of the New Era College. The establishment of this college has fulfilled their grand vision of having a complete system of Chinese education in the country. However, there is an urgent need to upgrade the college to a full-fledged university to ensure that it could play a more rigorous role in the development of Chinese education in the country.

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