



THE EDUCATION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

The Case of the Malaysian Chinese

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Tan Yao Sua and R. Santhiram

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BY DR. MAHATHIR MOHA

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and
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Preface

This book is essentially a study of minority education in plural societies, with special reference to the education of the Chinese in Malaysia. In any plural society, the education of ethnic minorities is influenced by, and reflects, the nature of overall majority–minority relations. The ethnic Chinese citizens of Malaysia are fairly unique in terms of minority education because they have substantial strength vis-à-vis the majority, who are ethnically Malay, and have long asserted their rights to propagate their language, culture, and identity via a distinct Chinese-medium education system. It bears emphasizing here that the Chinese minority are asserting their ethnolinguistic and cultural rights in a country where the major language of government, and everyday discourse – the national language – is Bahasa Malaysia. The reader must be mindful that the often conflicting linguistic and educational assertions of the Malays and the Chinese are embedded in a long and complex social, economic, and political history.

Chinese-medium education in Malaysia dates back to the early waves of Chinese labour migration to the peninsula in the nineteenth century. Strongly tied to education development in China, it grew during the colonial and postcolonial periods into an extensive network of schools somewhat paralleling that set up by the British and later by the federal government. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, the existence of the Chinese-medium schools, and the continuing separatist stance adopted by Chinese educationists over interlinked language and education issues, sometimes stands in opposition to the interests of the majority, and the discourse of national integration, as expressed in the Malay-medium national education system.

Nation-building aside, a key argument for the Malay-medium national system of education has been that it addresses historical neglect and provides the majority Malays with the much needed educational, social, and economic mobility they were deprived of under colonialism.

The Chinese are not totally deprived of their rights, however. The complex Malaysian national education system itself accommodates Chinese interests and allows for a substantial and wide network of Chinese-medium national schools, at least at the primary school level. Chinese children are allowed to study in their mother tongue (Mandarin) at the primary level on condition that they then transfer to the mainstream Malay-medium school system. At the secondary level, Chinese language then becomes available only as an optional subject.

This compromise obviously accommodates the interests of the Chinese within the broader interests of the Malays, the nation, and the national language policy in general. In language teaching terms, the Chinese are allowed to study and maintain their mother tongue language – in primary schools which follow a common national curriculum but are run by independent Chinese school boards and committees – during the first phase of schooling within the larger context of a late language transfer at the secondary and tertiary phases.

As this book demonstrates, this compromise is deeply flawed and has several unfortunate consequences for the Chinese. First, there is a surprisingly high drop-out rate of Chinese students in the national secondary schools. Most of these Chinese students fail because they are not adequately taught the Malay language in primary school, since the Chinese educationists who control the Chinese primary schools are more concerned with language maintenance than with language transfer. Indeed, they envision the Chinese primary schools as feeder schools for a putative complete Chinese education system rather than as part of the *national* Malay-medium education system.

Second, the language transition process itself is poorly designed and facilitated through the highly inadequate vehicle of a one-year immersion remedial class whose teachers are generally neither bilingual nor trained in second language teaching.

Third, and equally alarming, there is evidence of loss of competency in *both* first and second languages. While a substantial proportion of Chinese

students who transfer to national Malay-medium secondary schools never develop fluency in Malay, and hence drop out of the national school system, or fail later in national examinations, most of them also neglect their study of the Chinese language at secondary school.

What is less well known is how the abrupt marginalization of Chinese language learning in secondary schools is also detrimental to the acquisition of Malay as a second language. Education theorist Jim Cummins (1978, 1979, 1984, 1989) shows that there are common underlying skills required for proficiency between first and second languages, and that neglecting the first means that the second will not be learnt properly.

The Chinese are also disadvantaged in mainstream education by preferential policies that aim at enhancing the educational mobility of the Malays. These policies have been in place in one form or another since the 1970s under the aegis of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

In conclusion, this book focuses on the impact on the Chinese minority of the problematic discourse and persistent claims of Chinese educationists over mother tongue education; the dilemmas of language maintenance and language transfer among Chinese primary school students who progress to Malay-medium secondary education, and of systemic preferential education policies that favour the Malay majority, especially at the tertiary level.

This book comprises eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the educational dilemma of ethnic minorities in general and the Chinese in Malaysia in particular with regard to the need to balance educational mobility in the mainstream system while maintaining their language, culture, and identity. Chapter 2 provides theoretical insights on the education of ethnic minorities. It explores the dynamics of ethnic domination and subordination in plural societies, arguing that language and education become contentious issues when the communities involved have a dynamic balance of strengths within a particular society. We then examine minority claims over language and education, especially the assertion of the right to mother tongue education, in the context of the interrelationship between language, culture, and identity.

Chapter 3 moves the focus back to Malaysia, exploring the dynamics of Sino-Malay relationships by evaluating the comparative strengths of the Chinese and the Malays. We demonstrate how the comparative strengths of each community significantly affect language and education policy and practice in Malaysia. Chapter 4 provides a historical account of the development of education and education policy in Malaysia. It illustrates how language and education policies have often been a result of compromise between or accommodation of the often conflicting demands of the Chinese and the Malays.

Chapter 5 examines the state of Chinese education in Malaysia. It highlights problems faced by the Chinese educationists who are bent on propagating their vision of a complete system of Chinese education. Chapter 6 discusses the problem of ethnic integration at the primary school level, which is segregated by different media of instruction as a result of the government's decision to allow the coexistence of vernacular primary schools (teaching in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, respectively). The Chinese are particularly defensive over the status of the Chinese primary school, the only component of Chinese education that has been co-opted into the national education system, as the bastion of their language, culture, and identity. As such, they reject policy initiatives by the government to bring about greater interethnic interaction at the primary level.

Chapter 7 examines problems related to the transition of Chinese students from vernacular primary schools to Malay-medium post-primary schools. The discussion revolves around the state of mother tongue maintenance as well as the problem of educational mobility arising from the lack of competency in the mainstream language.

Chapter 8 provides a summary of the impact of pro-Malay education policies on the educational mobility of the Chinese. It discusses the establishment of special residential schools for the Malays as well as the implementation of a Malay-biased quota system of admission to local universities. Although the quota system was abolished in 2002 and replaced by a merit-based system, Malays continue to have some advantages in admission to local universities, for instance, through the matriculation system. However, the privatization of the tertiary educational sector has opened up more access to tertiary

education to Chinese students and has thus improved their educational mobility – at a huge financial cost.

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Abbreviations

ABM	Amalan Bahasa Melayu
ACCC	Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce
BICS	Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills
CACE	Central Advisory Committee on Education
CALP	Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency
DAP	Democratic Action Party
Gerakan	Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia
ICSS	Independent Chinese Secondary School
IMP	Independence of Malaya Party
KMT	Kuomintang
LAN	Lembaga Akreditasi Negara
LCE	Lower Certificate of Education
MARA	Majlis Amanah Rakyat
MCA	Malayan/Malaysian Chinese Association
MCE	Malaysian Certificate of Education
MIC	Malayan/Malaysian Indian Congress
MQA	Malaysian Qualifications Agency
NEP	New Economic Policy
NOC	National Operations Council
NSS	National Secondary School
NTCPS	National-Type Chinese Primary School
NTCSS	National-Type Chinese Secondary School
NTTPS	National-Type Tamil Primary School
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah
POL	Pupils' Own Language

RIDA	Rural and Industrial Development Authority
SITC	Sultan Idris Training College
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
STPM	Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia
TAR College	Tunku Abdul Rahman College
UCSCA	United Chinese School Committees' Association
UCSTA	United Chinese School Teachers' Association
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UPSR	Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah
UTAR	Tunku Abdul Rahman University

1

Introduction

The education of ethnic minorities in plural societies has always been a hotly contested area, having a dynamic of its own, often involving minority linguistic and cultural claims that go against those of the majority. Although minority groups have a fundamental right to use their own language in a multiethnic culture, when such claims are pitted against the majority language, national cohesion, nation-building, and their own social mobility are bound to suffer. A common language policy is, of course, not the only way to promote national unity and integration; there must be social justice and economic equality and fair treatment of all to create a sense of belonging.

Viewed against this background, the education of the Chinese in Malaysia – that is, the Malaysian Chinese – is an interesting case study. Malaysia (Malaya before 1963) is a classic plural society, where racial divisions tend to coincide with and are reinforced by linguistic, cultural, religious, and most important, economic divisions (Crouch 1996: 13). The demography of Malaysia, largely a legacy of British colonialism, reflects a distinct pattern of majority–minority relations among the three main ethnic groups: the Malays (the majority), the Chinese, and the Indians (the two substantial minority groups).¹

The majority–minority divide can also be described as Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera. *Bumiputera* (son/daughter of the soil) is synonymous for Malay-Muslim, and is the operative official category which also includes other indigenous peoples from Sabah and Sarawak; it is used in all affirmative action policies, including in education, as discussed below.

As a minority, the Malaysian Chinese are unique in that they are a significantly large section of the population and have the economic

clout to maintain their language and culture through a separate system of vernacular schools. These schools overlap with the main national education system, where schooling is conducted in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia (henceforth, Malay). The Chinese fear that they will lose their group identity if the state does not recognize their language or culture as either equal to that of the majority group or worthy of recognition in its own right (Watson 1984: 202). Indeed, there is a strong tendency among advocates of Chinese language education to equate the acquisition of Malay with linguistic and cultural assimilation.

Entrapped by an overzealous safeguarding of Chinese language and culture, the educationists who control the Chinese school system tend to ignore important reasons for Malay language proficiency – better interethnic relations and national integration and educational mobility. It has to be emphasized though, that the stance of the Chinese educationists are connected to policies which have strongly favoured the educational interests of the Malays.

The Pluralist Dilemma

Language and educational policies in plural societies tend to highlight the aspirations of the majority, whose interests are often treated as synonymous with national aspirations. Majority groups tend to advocate a unitary system of education, in which their language becomes the common medium that will unify ethnically diverse communities into a single citizenry.

Minority groups may reject such assimilationist policies by advocating cultural pluralism or multiculturalism. But the extent to which ethnic minorities are allowed to maintain their languages and cultures depends on their ability to secure their rights vis-à-vis the majority. Marginal minorities are often not officially recognized or assisted in their quest for linguistic and cultural maintenance and generally have no other choice but to adapt to the majority language and culture; or in the case of small, underprivileged minorities, be assimilated into mainstream society (Rothermund 1986: 2).

It is somewhat different for non-marginal minority groups that are able to withstand assimilationist moves, such as the substantial Chinese

minority in Malaysia. The Malaysian Chinese are often regarded as the only Chinese community outside of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan with the capacity to maintain a significant level of Chinese language education and culture. They are economically, politically, and numerically strong enough to maintain a system of Chinese language education. Historically, their demands have been taken into consideration by policy-makers in Malaysia.

The question is: To what extent should policy-makers accommodate the assertions of such minority groups? This is the “pluralist dilemma” (Bullivant 1981) that confronts policy-makers in multicultural societies who have to tread a fine line between accommodating the demands of the minority for cultural diversity within the larger context of nation-building.

In terms of education, both too many and too few concessions to minority groups could have an adverse impact on the process of nation-building. The argument here is that the nation will be stronger and more cohesive (for the good of all, regardless of ethnicity) if all ethnic groups attend a common schooling system with a common language and curriculum. For ethnic minorities, the acquisition of the majority language, and to some extent accommodating mainstream culture, would be a pragmatic move to enhance social and occupational mobility. In other words, ethnic minorities have to negotiate a delicate balancing act between sustaining their language and culture and enhancing their life chances.

The counter argument is that, even if minorities accept the rationale for mainstream education and fluency in the majority language, there is no assurance that their children will be able to advance educationally or otherwise. More importantly, the ethnic majority not uncommonly uses the educational system as a tool to advance its own interests, rather than that of the nation, often to the detriment of minorities. This happens in particular in countries where the majority holds the political power, but perceives itself to be disadvantaged in other domains such as the economy vis-à-vis the minority. This is especially true in the case of Malaysia, as can be seen in the brief discussion below of affirmative action policies implemented for the majority Malays who were deprived of much needed social and economic mobility during the colonial period.

Preferential Economic and Educational Policies for Malays

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched through the Second Malaysia Plan (1971–75), a five-year national development blueprint, with the objective of achieving national unity by eradicating poverty irrespective of race to achieve interethnic economic parity over a period of 20 years. The NEP has had a profound impact on the nexus between language, ethnicity, and education in Malaysia.

The primary aim, however, was to restructure economic imbalances between the Chinese and the Malays in order to achieve 30 percent Bumiputera corporate ownership (see, for instance, Gomez 2000: 211; Reid 1988: 28). Linda Reid points out that the NEP was formulated on the assumption that this ethnic inequality derived from differential access to opportunities in the modern economy (Reid 1988: 28). Various measures were put in place, including an ethnic quota system in favour of Bumiputera students for admission into public tertiary institutions. Another measure was the establishment of elite fully residential schools and colleges that catered mainly or exclusively for Bumiputera children. This was to improve their educational mobility, to allow the Bumiputeras to participate more fully in the modern economy, which requires highly trained and skilled manpower.

Although these and other measures were designed mainly to redress the relative social and economic backwardness of the Malays, they nevertheless have disadvantaged the Chinese and other minority students in terms of equal access to educational opportunities.

The government continues to implement preferential educational policies for Bumiputeras in education despite the official end of the NEP.² It was only in 2002 that the ethnic admission quotas for public institutions of higher learning were abolished and replaced by a merit-based system. There are now, however, other measures put in place by the government to ensure that Bumiputera students are not disadvantaged under the merit-based system. Moreover, the system of fully residential schools and elite colleges, substantially only for Bumiputera students, remains largely intact.

The Educational Dilemma of the Chinese in Malaysia

Notwithstanding the preferential policies for Malays, Malaysia's education system caters for its multiracial citizenry. Since independence, Malaysia's education system at the primary level has been pluralist and multilingual. Chinese and Indian students can attend Chinese or Tamil-language primary schools. Secondary education at government schools is only available in Malay, however.

The vernacular medium primary schools are largely monoethnic whereas the national Malay-medium primary schools, especially those in urban areas, have ethnically mixed populations. Most students from the vernacular primary schools have to spend an additional first year of secondary education in a language immersion class – called the 'Remove Class' – that is meant to equip them with a greater command of Malay and facilitate this transition. There are also 60 private Chinese secondary schools that provide continuing education in Chinese but these schools do not receive any state subsidy, nor are their qualifications recognized by the government.

The educational dilemma of the Chinese in Malaysia lies in the mismatch between the primary and secondary school systems that most of them have to go through. The strong desire of the Chinese educationists to safeguard mother tongue acquisition at the Chinese primary schools has resulted in lacklustre efforts to teach Malay. Still, most Chinese primary school students choose to continue their studies at the national Malay-medium secondary schools rather than the Chinese language secondary schools, the Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSSs) or *Duli Zhongxue (Duzhong)*. At the secondary school level, their lack of proficiency in Malay adversely impacts their educational mobility.

From Chinese Primary to Malay Secondary Education

There are currently 1,289 National-Type Chinese Primary Schools (NTCPSs) spread across Malaysia (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 11 October 2007). The NTCPSs are overwhelmingly supported by the Chinese population and most Malaysian Chinese children now attend these

schools. Malay is taught only as a subject in the school curriculum. With such limited exposure, most NTCPS students are unable to acquire a sufficiently strong command of Malay by the end of their primary years. The monoethnic setting of the NTCPSs does nothing to facilitate the acquisition of Malay. The NTCPS students' inadequate grasp of Malay becomes a stumbling block when they progress to Malay-medium government secondary schools; they are also unable to use Malay for interethnic communication.

Post-primary, however, very few attend the Chinese language secondary school. Given the fervent support for Chinese-language education at the primary level, the lack of support for Chinese-medium schools at secondary level seems puzzling. The ICSSs are institutions that elected to continue teaching in Chinese instead of switching to Malay as required under the Education Act of 1961, consequently losing their state subsidy. More importantly, ICSS qualifications are not recognized by the government, which is the major reason most Chinese enrol their children in (Malay-medium) National Secondary Schools (NSSs) and National-Type Chinese Secondary Schools (NTCSSs). NTCSSs were fully Chinese-medium secondary schools before they complied with the directive of the Education Act of 1961 to switch to the national medium (initially English and subsequently Malay) in the early 1960s. The 78 NTCSSs in Malaysia can absorb about 40 percent of Chinese students from the NTCPSs (Hua 1991).

Learning the Mother Tongue

Another contentious issue is the state of mother tongue maintenance at the secondary level. Most students from the NTCPSs neglect or drop Chinese as a subject once they move to Malay-medium secondary schools. A distinction must be made here between the significant differences in the teaching of Chinese in the NSSs and the NTCSSs.

In the NSSs, Malay students constitute the majority. Chinese language is taught through the Pupils' Own Language (POL) scheme outside of school hours because, it is argued, the number of enrolled students is relatively small. But Chinese is generally not taught well at the POL classes and many students choose not to include Chinese as one of their examination subjects.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the Chinese language is taught much more effectively in the NTCSSs. The NTCSSs are still popularly perceived as ‘Chinese’ schools although they are government secondary schools where most subjects are taught in Malay. Mandarin is, however, a compulsory part of the curriculum and an examination subject that is given extra emphasis by the NTCSSs. In addition, the internal culture of NTCSSs remains identifiably Chinese, and the schools maintain close links with the local community (Tan 1997: 1–2; Tan 2007).

The Role of the Chinese Educationists

Since the 1960s, the Chinese educationists affiliated with the United Chinese School Teachers’ Association (UCSTA or Jiao Zong) and the United Chinese School Committees’ Association (UCSCA or Dong Zong) have sought to establish a complete system of Chinese education in Malaysia. The UCSTA, formed in 1952, is an umbrella organization representing the Chinese School Teachers’ Association at the district and state levels (Tan 1997: 67). The UCSCA was formed later, in 1954, and comprises representatives of the state management committees or boards of directors (*dongsi bu*) of the Chinese schools (ibid.: 108). They are collectively known by the acronym *Dong Jiao Zong*.

By mobilizing the support of the community in general, and Chinese guilds, associations, and Chinese-based opposition political parties in particular, the Dong Jiao Zong have had a circumscribed measure of influence in national education policy (Freedman 2000: 44). Their lobbying has been rather successful, not because they have been able to force significant changes, but because they have helped to pressure the government into moderating some of its policies (ibid.: 75).

The Chinese educationists regard the NTCPSs as the bastion of Chinese language and culture in Malaysia. This clearly contradicts the official position of the NTCPSs as an integral part of the *national* education system. Ideally, the NTCPSs are supposed to facilitate the transition of Chinese students to the Malay medium of instruction at the secondary level within the context of a transitional bilingual education. However, the Chinese educationists are more concerned with the maintenance of their language and their vision of establishing

a complete system of Chinese education than with ensuring a smooth transition within the national education system. They are able to dictate the destiny of the NTCPSs via the school management committees. Since the 1950s, they have fervently sought to preserve the character of the NTCPSs, which entails the use of Chinese as a medium of instruction and a language of wider communication. Inevitably, the conflicting roles of the NTCPSs has disadvantaged the students who progress to the government secondary schools.

At the secondary level, the Dong Jiao Zong favour the ICCSs, regarding them as the crucial link between the NTCPSs and the New Era College, a Chinese institution of higher learning established by the Chinese educationists in the 1990s. For the time being, the community's lack of support for the ICSSs undermines the Chinese educationists' hopes of establishing a strong system of Chinese education in Malaysia.

Conclusion

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the education of the Chinese in the current Malaysian education system, which encompasses vernacular education at the primary level and officially, only Malay-medium secondary and tertiary education, is fraught with contradictions and competing interests that have little to do with an effective bilingual education. There are dilemmas for all involved – parents and the community as well as the government and policy-makers.

Chinese and Malay language teaching is not well coordinated through the education cycle, failing to satisfy both minority and nation-building objectives. Indeed, we will go on to demonstrate in greater detail that, despite (or perhaps because of) the Chinese educationists' successful championing of mother tongue education, most Chinese children in Malaysia undergo a largely dysfunctional and malintegrative education in terms of maintaining their first language and acquiring their second one. From the broader perspective of minority education within a plural society, this lack of coordination between mother tongue maintenance and majority language acquisition among ethnic minorities does not augur well either for interethnic relations or the national interest.

Notes

- 1 This book does not address the highly complex history and discourse of ethnicity and racism in Malaysia. There is a substantial literature on this (for e.g. Wan Hashim 1983; Abraham 1997). For the purposes of this discussion, perhaps it suffices to say that in Malaysia, one's 'race', simplified into the broad categories of 'Chinese, Indian, Malay/Bumiputera, or Other' is required information on one's identity card, and all official documents from birth to death; engraved into citizenship; and reproduced in everyday life and discourse. In Malaysia, 'race' as a label or category is noted in formal student records throughout the education cycle.
- 2 Although the NEP itself was scheduled to end in 1990, many of its elements have been incorporated into subsequent national development plans on the grounds that Bumiputeras had yet to achieve the desired 30 percent corporate ownership (although some scholars have argued otherwise [see Lim 2007]).



2

Minorities and Education in Plural Societies

Malaysian educational dilemmas have much in common with those of other plural societies. This chapter provides the theoretical framework to the case study of the education of the Malaysian Chinese minority. It begins by exploring the dynamics of majority–minority relations. A typology of minorities is then attempted to illustrate the characteristics of different ethnic minorities. The concept of ethnolinguistic vitality is introduced to examine factors that influence the capacity of an ethnic group to uphold its language and culture. The following section looks at ethnic minority assertions over language and education in plural societies, which are examined from different perspectives: the discourse of nation-building and the national language; the pluralist dilemma inherent to accommodating these competing assertions; the rationale for mother tongue education; the implementation of bilingual education and the transition to mainstream education; and finally, the contestation between privileged minorities and underprivileged majorities over educational provisions. This overview provides a comprehensive understanding of minority education in plural societies.

Theorizing Majority–Minority Relations

The Dynamics of Majority–Minority Relations

Defining an ethnic minority is not as straightforward an exercise as it may seem. A minority group is one which is ethnically, linguistically, religiously, or otherwise differentiated from the group that politically

This is a case study of the dilemmas of minority education in plural societies, focusing on the complex phenomenon of the education of the Malaysian Chinese. The Malaysian education system accommodates minority interests by allowing for Tamil and Chinese-medium primary schools. But since Malay is the main medium of instruction, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels, most minority students undergo a transitional bilingual education.

The authors review the background to this segmented system as well as relevant literature on minority education. Both colonial era and post-independence language and education policies have been contested and divisive. While nation-building remains a key concern, education and language policies often reflect majority–minority relations, rather than being focused purely on pedagogic goals—or interethnic socialization and integration.

The Chinese educationists have been a driving force in these developments. But their vision of a complete system of Chinese-medium education, as this book shows, is not fully supported by Chinese parents. Furthermore, the flawed implementation of transitional bilingual education has resulted in, among other problems, linguistic dysfunctionality. A substantial number of Chinese students have such a poor grasp of Malay that they drop out of secondary school, while overall Chinese-language competency also deteriorates after primary school.

This objective, scholarly analysis should be read by educationists, scholars, journalists, policy-makers, and parents who seek to learn more about the history, context, and longer-term implications of the education of the Chinese in multiethnic Malaysia.

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