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The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia: Problems and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The development of Chinese education in Malaysia has come a long way since the large-scale immigration of Chinese to Malaya beginning in the nineteenth century. It was the Chinese educationists who had played an instrumental role in safeguarding the development of Chinese education in Malaysia, especially beginning in the early 1950s. However, their efforts in this area were confronted by a host of problems and challenges. The Chinese primary schools, for instance, were not given a fair and equitable treatment by the government despite being an integral part of the national educational system since independence. Meanwhile, the Chinese secondary schools were required to switch to the national medium in the early 1960s to comply with the country's monolingual educational language policy at that level. Those that did not wish to comply had to exist as Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSSs) deprived of state funding. It was through a revival movement in the early 1970s that the Chinese educationists managed to sustain the ICSSs. But the development of the ICSSs was far from satisfactory. Nevertheless, some positive developments for the ICSSs of late have boosted the confidence of the Chinese educationists to further develop the ICSSs. But the Chinese educationists need to address emerging threat arising from the impressive development of international schools in the country. Meanwhile, the Chinese educationists were able to establish the New Era College, a private institution of higher learning that catered for the mother tongue education of the Chinese, in the late 1990s. This was made possible by the liberalization of educational language policy beginning in 1996 that allowed the establishment of more private institutions of higher learning in the country using other approved media of instruction. However, there were problems that hampered the upgrading of the college to a full-fledged university.

Keywords: Chinese education; Chinese educationists; Chinese primary schools; Independent Chinese Secondary Schools; New Era College

Introduction

In 1992, the Minority Rights Group Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia noted that "Malaysia has Southeast Asia's most comprehensive Chinese-language system of education" (1992, p. 13). This is certainly not an overstatement given the fact that the development of this Chinese-language system of education or Chinese education has come a long way since the large-scale immigration of Chinese to Malaya (Malaysia after 1963) beginning in the nineteenth century, initially as a response to political developments in China where the Chinese originated and subsequently to uphold their educational rights following the decision to take up permanent residence in Malaya. This development, especially starting from the early 1950s, was largely the result of untiring efforts by the Chinese educationists (huajiao renshi) to safeguard the interest of the mother tongue education of the Chinese in Malaysia, a plural society that comprised three main ethnic groups, namely Malays (the indigenous population), Chinese and Indians (the Indians are also originally immigrants who came to Malaya in large numbers beginning in the twentieth century). These Chinese educationists are affiliated to two umbrella associations established in the early 1950s, namely the United Chinese School Committees' Association (UCSCA or Dong Zong) and the United Chinese School Teachers' Association (UCSTA or Jiao Zong). Collectively, the two associations are known by the acronym of Dong Jiao Zong (Dong Zong and Jiao Zong) (see Tan, 1997; Tan, 2005; Kua, 1999; Lee, 2011). The Chinese educationists were able to safeguard the development of Chinese education from attempts by the British colonial government to replace the vernacular school system with a Malay-English bilingual school system in the early 1950s during the period of decolonization after the Second World War. But they were unable to block the monolingual policy advocated by the post-colonial government in the early years of independence (Malaya achieved its independence in 1957), despite their strong stand for cultural pluralism to safeguard the development of Chinese education on an equitable basis to ensure the "co-existence and co-prosperity" (gongcun gongrong) of all ethnic groups in Malaya (see Jiao Zong 33nian Bianjishi, 1987). This monolingual policy was underpinned by the Malay language, the national language, as the main thrust of the national building process. It only allowed a multilingual system of education comprising the Chinese primary school, the Tamil primary school, the Malay-medium primary school (commonly known as the national school) and the English-medium primary school (converted to Malay-medium primary school beginning in the 1970s), to exist at the most fundamental level of education and beyond that, educational instruction must be in the Malay language. Such a

monolingual policy was driven by the aim to make the Malay language the language of national integration among the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia via its adoption as the main medium of instruction in the national educational system. It was largely dictated by the Malays, who are the politically dominant group in Malaysia. As a result of this monolingual policy, the Chinese secondary schools were forced to convert to the national medium in the early 1960s in exchange for state funding (grants-in-aid) and came to be known as the National-Type Chinese Secondary Schools (NTCSSs) or conforming schools (Gaizhi Zhongxue). Those that did not conform to this state policy had to exist as Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSSs) or Duli Zhongxue (Duzhong) deprived of state funding (see Tan, 1997; Tan, 2005; Kua, 1999; Lee, 2011). This monolingual policy was also the main reason that foiled attempts by the Chinese educationists to establish a Chinese-medium university, namely the Merdeka University, in the 1960s and 1970s to fulfill their grand vision of establishing a complete system of Chinese education in Malaysia (see Yap, 1992). But the radical change of educational language policy beginning in 1996 presented an opportunity to the Chinese educationists to establish a private institution of higher learning, namely the New Era College, to cater for the mother tongue education of the Chinese in Malaysia. The establishment of this college finally fulfilled the grand vision of the Chinese educationists for a complete system of Chinese education in Malaysia with the Chinese primary schools and the ICSSs serving as the other components of this complete system of Chinese education. As we shall see, this complete system of Chinese education is confronted by a host of problems and challenges that impede a more rigorous development of Chinese education in Malaysia. This paper will provide a detailed account of these problems and challenges. It will first examine the problems and challenges faced by the Chinese primary schools. It will then move on to the ICSSs and finally the New Era College.

Chinese Primary Schools

The Chinese primary schools have long existed in Malaysia. Most of the Chinese primary schools in existence today were established between the 1920s and 1930s and in the first postwar decade (Tan, 2002). They were accepted as an integral part of the national educational system in 1956 as a result of the promulgation of the Razak Report (see Federation of Malaya, 1956). When Malaya achieved its independence in 1957, there were 1,333 Chinese primary schools in the country (Tan et al., 2005). The Chinese primary schools received the overwhelming support of the Chinese community since the 1970s when English-

medium primary schools were converted in stages to Malay-medium primary schools, leading to an outflow of Chinese students to the Chinese primary schools and hence, a surge in enrolment in these schools (Chai, 1977), especially urban Chinese primary schools that had better facilities and teaching staff (Loh, 1984). By the late 1970s, about 90 per cent of Chinese parents enrolled their children in the Chinese primary schools (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1980). This impressive enrolment rate has not dwindled since then. Apart from wanting their children to go through mother tongue education for the sake of cultural maintenance, many Chinese parents are also attracted by the better quality of education offered by the Chinese primary schools as well as the tighter discipline imposed on the students by the school authorities. However, for some reason, the development of Chinese primary schools has not been given a fair and equitable treatment by the government. Instead, the development of national schools is the major concern of the government. This is most evident in the allocation of development funds. For instance, from 1971 to 1978, the bulk of development funds, i.e. 91 per cent, went to the national schools. The Chinese primary schools only received 7 per cent of the total development funds (Loh, 1984). In fact, since the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000), the allocation of development funds to the Chinese primary schools had dropped below 4 per cent (Tan, 2006). For instance, under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), the Chinese primary schools were only allocated 3.6 per cent of the total development funds. This allocation was not in proportion to the percentages of Chinese primary school students, which constituted 21.12 per cent of the total student population (Nanyang Siang Pau, 15 October 2006). This had become a hotly contested issue, in particular among the Chinese educationists who had demanded that the amount of development funds allocated to the vernacular primary schools should be in tandem with their student population. They had also demanded a high degree of transparency in the manner in which these funds were allocated. The main reason for this under-allocation of development funds lies in the fact that most of the Chinese primary schools do not fall within the category of fully-assisted schools (quanjin xuexiao). Instead, they are categorized as partially-aided schools (banjin xuexiao). In 1993, for instance, out of a total of 1,289 Chinese primary schools, only 402 were fully-assisted schools (Sia, 2005). It is inevitable that most of the Chinese primary schools are not categorized as fully-assisted schools as they originated as community schools built on private lands. The development of these schools is thus entrusted to key benefactors of the schools who are represented in the board of governors (dongshibu). The board of governors constitutes the management committee of the Chinese primary schools. One of its key roles is to seek development funds for the Chinese primary schools by

hosting various fundraising campaigns. More often than not, these fundraising campaigns are also co-hosted by the Old Boys' Association and the Parent-Teacher Association or other organizations that uphold the development of Chinese education. It is most fortunate that these fundraising campaigns are popularly supported by the Chinese community. It was reported that since the 1990s, charity concerts hosted by the board of governors had managed to raise large sums of money to fund various school-building projects (Nanyang Siang Pau, 26 October 2006).

The development of Chinese primary schools is adversely affected by demographic changes, especially rural to urban migration among Chinese youth. Over the years, the country's rapid economic development has accelerated the pace of urbanization and increasing numbers of youth have migrated to major towns in search of better employment opportunities, leading to a sharp increase in urban population. In 2002, for instance, 62 per cent of the national population lived in urban areas as compared to only 28 per cent in 1970 (Tey, 2006). By 2020, the urban population is expected to reach 70 per cent (Malaysia, 2010). The rate of migration to urban areas is particularly high among Chinese youth, with 90 per cent of them now found in urban areas, in marked contrast to only 47 per cent in 1970 (Tey, 2004). As a result of this rural to urban migration, there is a need to build more Chinese primary schools in urban areas to resolve the problem of overcrowding in existing schools. This problem is particularly acute in the Federal Territory, the greater Klang Valley and Johor Bahru (Nanyang Siang Pau, 11 October 2007). In Johor Bahru, for instance, eight Chinese primary schools there have an enrolment of over 3,000 students, far exceeding the optimum enrolment of 1,050 students stipulated by the Ministry of Education. Meanwhile, 50 per cent of Chinese primary schools in the Klang Valley have an enrolment of over 1,500 students (Nanyang Siang Pau, 27 May 2008). But the government has not responded to repeated calls by the Chinese educationists to build new Chinese primary schools in urban areas, especially in residential suburbs, to resolve the problem of overcrowding. It is only during elections that pledges are made to build new Chinese primary schools in urban areas. But these pledges are usually not honored by the government, despite the mediating role of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a Chinese-based political party within the Malaysian coalition government (Jiao Zong Tiaocha Yanjiu ji Zixunzu, 2009). Thus, the problem of overcrowding remains critical to many urban Chinese primary schools.

Meanwhile, as a result of the increased pace of rural to urban migration, enrolment in many rural Chinese primary schools has fallen below the sustainable level to the extent that they have become under-enrolled schools, i.e. schools that have an enrolment of below 150

students. The increase in the number of under-enrolled Chinese primary schools is certainly a cause for concern to the Chinese educationists. For instance, from 1991 to 2008, the number of under-enrolled Chinese primary schools increased from 462 to 567. Thus, out of a total of 1,290 Chinese primary schools in 2008, 44.0 per cent were under-enrolled schools. Within the period from 1981 to 2008, 40 under-enrolled Chinese primary schools had been closed down – a big majority of these schools were from the states of Johor and Sarawak (Jiao Zong Tiaocha Yanjiu ji Zixunzu, 2009). Ironically, some of these under-enrolled Chinese primary schools, especially those in interior areas, are predominantly attended by non-Chinese students, making their roles as providers of mother tongue education to the Chinese community dysfunctional. The state of Sarawak has registered the highest number of under-enrolled Chinese primary schools. It was reported that in 2010, out of a total number of 221 Chinese primary schools in the state, 119 were under-enrolled (Huajiao Daobao, 2011). There is thus a need to relocate under-enrolled Chinese primary schools to avoid closure of schools. The Chinese educationists are particularly vocal in demanding the relocation of these schools, especially to residential suburbs in urban areas where existing Chinese primary schools face the problem of overcrowding. As compared to their demand for the building of new Chinese primary schools, their demand for the relocation of under-enrolled Chinese primary schools is more successful as some schools are finally relocated as a result of election pledges by the government.

Another critical problem confronting the Chinese primary schools is the acute shortage of trained teachers. This problem is compounded by the lack of interest among Chinese youth to join the teaching profession. The lure from the private sector is too strong for them to consider the public sector. Also, the lack of promotion opportunities in the public sector has deterred many from taking up a position in this Malay-dominated sector. Although temporary teachers are hired to fill in the gap, there is a concern that these temporary teachers may not be competent enough to provide the required teaching and learning inputs to the students given the fact that they are not trained in the instructional process. The acute shortage of trained teachers in the Chinese primary schools actually began in the early 1970s when the Chinese primary schools experienced a surge in enrolment following the conversion of English-medium primary schools to Malay-medium primary schools. Consequently, the number of temporary teachers increased from 1,588 teachers in 1973 to 3,000 teachers in 1975 (Lee, 2011). Since then, the acute shortage of trained teachers in the Chinese primary schools has not been resolved. In 2004, for instance, the Chinese primary schools had a shortage of 4,167 trained teachers (Tan, 2006).

While the general lack of interest among Chinese youth to take up teaching as a profession is an important reason contributing to the acute shortage of trained teachers in the Chinese primary schools, the lack of resolve on the part of the Teacher Training Division has also contributed to this state of affairs. There is a strong feeling of distrust among the Chinese educationists over the role of the Teacher Training Division. They are of the view that the Teacher Training Division has favored the national schools over the vernacular primary schools in the recruitment of trainee teachers to the extent that the national schools are having an excess of trained teachers. From another perspective, the acute shortage of trained teachers in the Chinese primary schools is also due to the reluctance of the Teacher Training Division to waive the requirement of a credit in the Malay language paper for those who apply to become trainee teachers for the Chinese primary schools. Meanwhile, the discontinuation of the teacher training program conducted during school holidays by the Teacher Training Division has deprived many temporary teachers from becoming trained teachers. In the past, this particular teacher training program used to be a popular means through which many Chinese primary school temporary teachers were upgraded to the status of trained teachers. A more recent development that threatened the supply of trained teachers to the Chinese primary schools was the move by the Ministry of Education to introduce Chinese as an elective subject in the national schools in 2006. Prior to this, Chinese was taught under the Pupil's Own Language scheme outside the school hours. This move was driven by the aspirations of the Ministry of Education to elevate the national school as the school of choice for all races as outlined by the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010) (Malaysia, 2006). These aspirations were subsequently upheld by the Education Development Master Plan (2006-2010) (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2006). It is worrisome that the training of teachers to teach Chinese as an elective subject in the national schools may be given preference by the Teacher Training Division over the training of teachers for the Chinese primary schools. The Chinese educationists are particularly vocal in voicing their discontent over the lack of resolve on the part of the Teacher Training Division to address the acute shortage of trained teachers in the Chinese primary schools. On 25 March 2012, by taking advantage of the forthcoming general election, they staged a mass rally in Kajang, Selangor to pressure the government to give due attention to this long-standing problem. They called on the Ministry of Education to establish a committee to put in place effective measures to provide sufficient trained teachers to the Chinese primary schools.

Yet another problem confronting the development of Chinese primary schools in Malaysia is attempts by the government to integrate the primary school students that could

lead to a change in the character of the Chinese primary schools, which entails the use of Chinese as the language of classroom instruction, administration and wider communication. As mentioned, the government has allowed a multilingual system to coexist at the primary level. This multilingual system was initially a political compromise to address contrasting ethnic demands over the issues of language and education but was subsequently regarded by the government as malintegrative to the nation building process. The main thrust of the problem is that since the 1970s, the national schools, as the mainstream primary schools, have failed to attract a sizeable number of non-Malay students, especially the Chinese, and became largely a Malay enclave. It is against this backdrop that the government was forced to implement the integrated school project in the 1980s to foster better ethnic integration among the primary school students. This project involved two models of implementation. First, the three different streams (Malay, Chinese and Tamil) of primary schools would be relocated to newly built school complexes. Second, the three different streams of primary schools found to be located adjacent to one another or in the same vicinity would be combined to become integrated schools. A coordinating committee comprising school administrators and teachers from the participating schools would be tasked to oversee the integrated school project. It was hoped that the establishment of integrated schools would lead to joint participation of students in co-curricular activities and thereby promoting ethnic interaction, understanding, cooperation and tolerance among students (Sia, 2005). However, this project was rejected by the Chinese educationists for the fear that the widespread usage of the Malay language in the integrated schools might erode the character of the Chinese primary schools, forcing the government to abort the project. 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 (see, for example, Banks, 1999; Stephan, 1992; Stangor, 2004). Despite this setback, the government went on to implement the vision school project in the 1990s, which was quite similar to the integrated school project but with the extra provision that participating schools were given the autonomy to administer their schools in order to maintain their original identity or character (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2001). Apparently, this extra provision was targeted at the Chinese

educationists. However, the Chinese educationists remained unconvinced and rejected the project. 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).

The appointment of administrators who do not have the required Chinese language qualifications (at least a Secondary Year Five qualification) is also alleged by the Chinese educationists as a threat to the character of 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 resort to Malay 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 Malay politicians came in to defend the appointments, forcing the government to invoke the Internal Security Act to arrest 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 qualifications 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 implementation of the policy of teaching science and mathematics in English in 2003 at the school level had also impacted the development of Chinese primary schools as far

as the maintenance of their character was concerned. This policy was implemented to address the drastic decline in the proficiency of English among Malaysian students as a result of the phasing out of English-medium education beginning in the 1970s. The Chinese educationists strongly opposed the policy but they were forced to accept bilingual instruction (Chinese and English) to teach science and mathematics in the Chinese primary schools (Tan and Santhiram, 2007; Gill, 2014). Fortunately, this policy was terminated by the government in 2009. But the termination of policy was more because of the opposition of the Malay nationalists who were firm in their upholding of the Malay language instead of the Chinese educationists who feared for the loss of character of the Chinese primary schools (Tan and Santhiram, 2014). This was clearly indicated by the subsequent implementation of the policy of "upholding the Malay language alongside the strengthening of English" (Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris, MBMMBI) which was incorporated into the recently released Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). This policy posed a threat to the character of the Chinese primary schools as they were required to introduce more Malay language teaching periods, i.e. from 180 minutes (six periods) per week to 240 minutes (eight periods) per week, to improve the proficiency of the Malay language among their students (see Nanyang Siang Pau, 14 December 2013, 21 December 2013; Sin Chew Jit Poh, 22 September 2013). It was for this reason that the MBMMBI policy was strongly contested by the Chinese educationists. But there was no indication that the government was going to abort this policy despite the strong stand of the Chinese educationists.

Independent Chinese Secondary Schools

The ICSSs were established in the early 1960s as a result of the promulgation of the 1960 Rahman Talib Report and the 1961 Education Act, which required the Chinese secondary schools to switch to the national medium in exchange for state funding (see Federation of Malaya, 1960, 1961). In the end, 55 out of 71 existing Chinese secondary schools decided to switch to the national medium and became NTCSSs. The 16 Chinese secondary schools that opted not to comply with the educational policy became the first batch of the ICSSs. They were not only deprived of state funding but academic qualifications obtained from them were also not recognized by the government. Meanwhile, a large number of NTCSSs established ICSSs as private branches to cater for over-aged students who were debarred from further education in the NTCSSs following the imposition of schooling age limits by the Razak

Report promulgated in 1956 (see Federation of Malaya, 1956). They formed the second batch of the ICSSs. These ICSSs shared school compound (in some cases school buildings) with the NTCSSs and conducted their classes mainly in the afternoon (Tay and Gwee, 1981). Suffice it to say that the conversion of a large number of Chinese secondary schools to national-medium schools had halted the strong development of Chinese secondary education in Malaysia that began in the first half of the twentieth century (see Yen, 2002). The Chinese educationists, especially those affiliated to the UCSCA, were largely demoralized because of their failure to block the conversion. As noted by Tan Liok Ee, "demoralized by its failure to hold all the Chinese secondary schools together in resisting conversion in 1961, the UCSCA had been inactive for almost a decade" (1988, p. 66). Thus, the ICSSs were left in the doldrums without a clear future direction.

Subsequent developments showed that the ICSSs, especially those established as private branches to the NTCSSs, faced a drastic drop in enrolment (Tan, 2002), resulting in the closure of a substantial number of schools – there were originally 33 such ICSSs but only 21 survived (Dong Zong Chubanzu, 1987). As mentioned, these ICSSs were originally established for over-aged students. However, they later admitted Chinese students who failed to clear the Malaysian Secondary School Entrance Examination (MSSEE), a selection examination conducted by the government since the 1950s. Despite the lack of conducive learning and teaching environment as a result of the sharing of school facilities with the NTCSSs and conducting classes in the afternoon, these ICSSs remained an important alternative avenue of schooling among students who failed to make it to the government secondary schools.

The development of these ICSSs was dealt a severe blow when the government decided to phase out the MSSEE in 1965. This was because prior to this decision, only a small number of primary school students, i.e. about 30 per cent, managed to qualify for government secondary education (Ku, 2003a) and for those who failed to make the cut, many of them chose these ICSSs as an alternative venue of schooling. But with the decision to phase out the above examination, all Chinese primary school students were able to progress to the government secondary schools and consequently, these ICSSs were deprived of an important source of students, leading to a drastic drop in enrolment (Lim, 1998). Because of this drastic drop in enrolment, these ICSSs were short of operating funds as they relied heavily on school fees collected from students to cover their operating expenditures. Since an increase in school fees would discourage many students from joining them, they had instead opted to admit dropouts from the national-medium secondary schools to overcome their financial

predicament (Tay and Gwee, 1981). These dropouts were provided with tuition classes geared toward the preparation for public examinations. While such an option had helped to overcome the financial predicament of these ICSSs, it had unfortunately affected their reputation as they were regarded as schools for dropouts and consequently, rejected by better students. More importantly, they had deviated from their roles as providers of mother tongue education. Like these ICSSs, other ICSSs were also affected by the decision of the government to phase out the MSSEE. But their problems were less severe due to their better reputation and school facilities. Nevertheless, many of them were forced to offer national-medium education alongside Chinese mother tongue education as a two-pronged strategy to bolster their enrolment rates. This strategy proved to be effective and had helped to sustain their subsequent developments.

Realizing the lack of a coherent direction in the development of the ICSSs, especially those established as private branches of the NTCSSs, a revival movement (fuxing yundong) was launched by the Perak Chinese School Committees' Association (CSCA) in Ipoh in early 1973. This revival movement was initiated by two prominent state Chinese educationists, namely Zeng Dunhua (the principal of the Poi Nam High School) and Shen Ting (an ICSS teacher). Their initiative was subsequently adopted by the Perak CSCA under the leadership of Hu Wanduo. The revival movement aimed at putting all the ICSSs in the state on the right track to arrest the problem of declining enrolment (Shen, 1987; Ong, 2014; Jiao Zong Jiaoyu Yanjiu Zhongxin, 1984; Tay, 2003). There were altogether 15 ICSSs in the state of Perak – the biggest number of ICSSs in a single state in the country. The development of these ICSSs was in a pathetic state as almost all of them began as private branches of the NTCSSs. In fact, five ICSSs in the state had subsequently been closed down due to the problem of declining enrolment. Meanwhile, the enrolment of some ICSSs had declined drastically. For instance, in 1963, the Yuk Choy High School had an enrolment of 1,254 students, but this enrolment dwindled to 200 students in 1970 (Zhen Gong, 1996). The same problem was also encountered by the Nam Hwa High School – this ICSS only managed to enroll 14 students in 1971 (Tay and Gwee, 1981). The immediate task of the revival movement was to raise funds to upgrade infrastructural facilities (in some cases to build new school buildings to avoid sharing with the NTCSSs) of the ICSSs to increase their competitiveness with the hope that this would help to boost their enrolment rates. Two ICCSs, namely the Poi Lam High School and the Pei Yuan High School, were the initial target (Lim, 1999). The revival efforts soon spread to other ICSSs in the state. Various fundraising campaigns were launched and support for these campaigns was overwhelming from all levels of the Chinese community. Barbers,

taxi-drivers, hawkers and shopkeepers, for instance, contributed a day's takings to the ICSSs. Charitable contributions collected from these fundraising campaigns amounted to more than RM10 million. The ICSSs in the state had benefited greatly from these fundraising campaigns. The Poi Lam High School, for instance, built a new building which housed a gymnasium and language laboratories on a spacious site. Meanwhile, the Yuk Choy High School was relocated to a new building on the outskirts of Ipoh (Tan, 1988; Liu, 1994).

As these fundraising campaigns were regularly reported in the Chinese press, they generated a lot of interest in other states as well. The success of the revival movement soon caught the eyes of the leadership of the UCSCA. By then, the UCSCA had been taken over by a new group of leaders comprising several young and highly educated professionals (Tan, 1988). This new leadership responded positively to the interest generated by the Perak ICSS revival movement by establishing the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School Working Committee (Duzhong Gongweihui) to oversee the long-term development of the ICSSs. The committee came out with an action plan, namely the ICSS Proposals (Duzhong Jianyishu), which laid down a set of guiding principles for the ICSSs. The acceptance of this action plan by the UCSCA in December 1973 marked an important turning point in the development of the ICSSs (Tan, 1988). The UCSCA vowed to implement this action plan within six years starting from 1975 (Jiao Zong Jiaoyu Yanjiu Zhongxin, 1984) and a special working committee was established to monitor its implementation (Tay, 2003). Among other things, the action plan required the ICSSs to revert to their traditional roles as providers of mother tongue education. Although the ICSSs could still conduct public examination classes, they could only do so through extra classes as their main priority was to cater for mother tongue education of the Chinese (Dong Zong Chuban Xiaozu, 1984). Subsequently, several sub-committees were set up to compile new textbooks in Chinese and to administer an internal examination conducted in Chinese called the Unified Examination (Tongkao). By 1983, most of the ICSSs had adhered to the action plan by teaching mainly in Chinese to prepare their students to sit for the Unified Examination (Dong Zong, 2004).

Since the launching of the ICSS revival movement and up until 1994, there was an increase of enrolment rate in the ICSSs, though a slight drop was recorded in 1987. In 1994, the total number of ICSS students stood at 59,773 (see Tan, 2000; Dong Zong, 2004). Despite this encouraging development, the number of ICSS students only constituted an average of about 10 per cent of the total enrolment of Chinese secondary school students in the country (Cheah, 2007; Hou, 2002; Jiao Zong 33nian Bianjishi, 1987). The main stumbling block for a more consistent development of the ICSSs has been the refusal by the government to

recognize the Unified Examination conducted by the UCSCA since 1975. This has significantly reduced the instrumental value of qualifications obtained from the ICSSs. It is for this reason that the overwhelming support of Chinese parents for mother tongue education at the primary level has not been extended to the ICSSs. Instead, most of them opt to send their children to the national-medium secondary schools which offer better instrumental value in terms of educational mobility. Such a contrasting choice of educational pathway is succinctly captured by Tan Chee Beng:

While many Chinese parents enroll their children in Chinese primary schools, most send their children to the Malay-medium secondary schools. Going to Chinese schools to ensure the learning of Mandarin and then entering government secondary schools with the aim of getting state-recognized certificates and thus access to better upward mobility is the present pattern of Chinese adjustment to the educational dilemma (2000, p. 57).

Although the UCSCA has managed to secure recognition of the Unified Examination by some tertiary institutions of learning in Singapore, Taiwan, China, Australia, New Zealand and the United States (Yap, 1992), this effort has not brought about the desired outcome as far as the ICSS enrolment rates are concerned. In fact, there was a general decline in the ICSS enrolment rates from 1995 to 2004. By 2004, the total number of ICSS students had dropped to 53,005 (see Dong Zong, 2004). This is most alarming in view of several developments that should have spurred the ICSS enrolment rates. It appears that the phenomenal growth of private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia beginning in 1996 (see subsequent discussion) has not helped to improve the ICSS enrolment rates despite the fact that most of these institutions accept the Unified Examination as an entry qualification. Also, the emergence of China as an economic power on the global stage since the 1990s has not provided the extra impetus to more students joining the ICSSs contrary to the general belief that the Chinese language has gained instrumental value in international trade and commerce. The proposal by the Chinese educationists to establish a higher institution of learning, i.e. the New Era College (see subsequent discussion), in the 1990s too has not helped to bolster the ICSS enrolment rates.

To be fair, there are positive developments in favor of the ICSSs as well. In 2002, for instance, the Foon Yew High School in Johor Bahru successfully built a branch school in Kulai (Malaixiya Dong Jiao Zong Quanguo Duzhong Gongweihui Ziliao yu Yanjiuju, 2007). The Foon Yew High School is a prestigious ICSS that has the capacity to outbid the national-medium secondary schools including the NTCSSs in the enrolment of Chinese secondary school students. In 1991, for instance, it managed to enroll a total of 5,457 students (Dong

Jiao Zong Quangguo Huawen Duzhong Gongweihui Zixunju, 1991), indicating the popular support of the Chinese community for the school. Given this popular support, there is thus a need for a branch school to avoid overcrowding of classrooms. Meanwhile, the UCSCA launched a new action plan in 2005 to upgrade the quality of education provided by the ICSSs (Lin, 2006). On 26 July 2012, the Chung Hwa High School in Kuantan, Pahang, which was closed down in the early 1960s, was given the approval by the Ministry of Education to be re-established as a branch school of the Chung Hwa High School in Kuala Lumpur. The school (popularly known as the Kuantan High School) became operational in early 2014 with the first intake of 150 Secondary Year One students (Chen, 2014). This was the result of a long-term effort by the Chinese educationists since the earlier 1990s. But there was dispute between the management committee of the school and the President of the UCSCA, Yap Sin Tian, over the condition imposed by the government, which stipulated the mandatory requirement for students to sit for the public examinations. Yap was worried that this imposed condition might compromise the historical raison d'être that underpinned the establishment of the ICSSs, i.e. to provide mother tongue education to the Chinese in Malaysia, and refused to recognize the school as an authentic ICSS (Yap, 2013). Yap even went a step further to debar the school from taking the Unified Examination (Nanyang Siang Pau, 13 August 2014). Such a strong stand against the school was driven by the fact that while most ICSSs prepared their students to sit for the public examinations, this was not a mandatory requirement. Instead, the Unified Examination was their main target in accordance with the guiding principles laid down by the ICSS Proposals. However, given that the government is reluctant to establish new ICSSs in the country, this compromise has favored the Chinese educationists as far as the development of the ICSSs in the country is concerned and as such, the UCSCA should adopt a more pragmatic stand with regard to the establishment of the Kuantan High School.

The most impressive development of the ICSSs is perhaps the significant surge in enrolment in some ICSSs in the past few years to the extent that these ICSSs had to limit the number of students joining them through a selection examination to prevent the overcrowding of classrooms. This significant surge in enrolment had resulted in the number of students in the ICSSs exceeding the threshold of 60,000 students in 2009 (Yap, 2013). This had boosted the confidence of the Chinese educationists who linked this significant surge in enrolment to improved quality of teaching in the ICSSs as well as strict discipline codes imposed by the ICSSs. More importantly, they hailed this new development as an indication of increasing support from the Chinese community for mother tongue education at

the secondary level. Driven by this renewed confidence, the Chinese educationists vowed to build branch schools as well as expand existing schools to cope with the surge in enrolment (Nanyang Siang Pau, 3 September 2011). However, it should be noted here that this significant surge in enrolment was also spurred by a general drop in the quality of educational delivery in the national-medium secondary schools that forced many concerned Chinese parents to seek alternative pathway of education for their children. But this significant surge in enrolment was only restricted to the well-established ICSSs. It remains to be seen whether the Chinese educationists could lead other ICSSs to new heights, more so when there is an emerging threat that stems from the recent impressive development of international schools in the country. While international schools catering for the expatriate population have long existed in Malaysia, it was only in recent times that they had attracted the interests of the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, arising from the lifting of enrolment quota (initially 10 per cent and subsequently 40 per cent) on local students as well as the scaling up of these schools by the government in 2010 to capitalize on the immense economic gains generated by these schools. All this resulted in the phenomenal growth of international schools in the country. There are currently 103 international schools in the country with a total number of about 30,300 students (Tan, 2014), a marked improvement from 2008 when there were only 40 international schools in the country with a total number of 13,811 students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2008). The threat posed by these schools on the ICSSs should be seen along with efforts by the government to strengthen the proficiency of English among Malaysian students in the recently released Malaysia Education Blueprint. There is a high possibility that these efforts will lead to more Chinese parents seeking an alternative pathway of secondary education to opt for the international schools at the expense of the ICSSs. The only way for the ICSSs to offset this possibility is to further enhance their quality of educational delivery.

New Era College

Since the 1960s, the Chinese educationists have attempted to establish a Chinese-medium university, namely the Merdeka University, to serve as the pinnacle of Chinese education to realize their grand vision of establishing a complete system of Chinese education in the country. The Chinese were deprived of a complete system of Chinese education when Singapore was separated from Malaya in 1965 due to irreversible political differences (see 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). But this attempt was blocked by the government for the simple reason that it had gone against the educational language policy of the country, despite the willingness of the Chinese educationists to adopt a compromise stand on the establishment of the university. Renewed attempt by the Chinese educationists to establish the Merdeka University in the 1970s was also rejected by the government (see Yap, 1992). The grand vision of the Chinese educationists to establish a complete system of Chinese education 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 languages other than the Malay language 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 higher education to take root in Malaysia (see 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 March 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, 2003b). It took the Chinese educationists three years to finally obtain the approval by the government to establish the New Era College (Lee, 2011). This approval was obtained through the political intervention of the MCA as well as the adoption of a trilingual policy that involved the use of Malay, English, and Chinese as the media of instruction (Ku, 2003b). The college started with four departments, namely the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, the Department of Business, the Department of Information Technology and the Department Social Studies (Lee, 2011). The Department of Chinese Language and Literature used Chinese as the medium of instruction, while the other three departments used English and Malay as the media of instruction. Malay was made a compulsory subject of the college

(Tsao, 2010). The first intake of 180 diploma students started their courses on 1 March 1998 (Kua, 2005). The then President of the UCSCA, Quek Suan Hiang, regarded the establishment of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature as a promising start to the college and hoped that Chinese would eventually become the main medium of instruction of the college (Malaixiya Dong Jiao Zong Quanguo Duzhong Gongweihui Ziliao yu Yanjiuju, 2007). Meanwhile, the Chinese educationists vowed to upgrade the college to a full-fledged private university within 10 years (Ku, 2003b). Such was the determination of the Chinese educationists to uphold the cause of Chinese education in the country.

In 2000, the New Era College embarked on a project to build three new building blocks, costing about RM35 million, to provide extra infrastructural facilities to cope with increased enrolment. A fundraising campaign was launched by the college to source the required building funds via the formation of the New Era College Construction Fund Committee in various states. This fundraising campaign was strongly supported by the Chinese community from all walks of life (Kua, 2005). But further efforts to develop the college, especially for the upgrading to a full-fledged private university, were hampered by political interference. In 2001, when the Hong Leong (a corporate conglomerate) management and the Chinese educationists were about to launch the New Era College Sepang campus on a piece of land in Pantai Sepang donated by Hong Leong, it was alleged that the Hong Leong management received an order from the government to cancel the event. Interestingly, two weeks later, the government approved the establishment of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) – a private university sponsored by the MCA (Kua, 2005). Although UTAR serves the interests of the Chinese community, it is not intended to be a Chinese-medium university. But the offering of Chinese Studies courses by UTAR did pose a threat to the New Era College primarily because the former has better teaching staff (Liao, 2008). Clearly, there has been a certain degree of reluctance on the part of the government to support the aspirations of the Chinese educationists to establish a private university. Despite this setback, the New Era College managed to enroll a total of 1,000 students in 2002 and for the first time, had a surplus of nearly RM500,000 in its operating budget (Kua, 2005). In 2003, the total number of students further increased to 1,400 students (Kua, 2005). It is important to note here that about 60 per cent of the students enrolled with the college come from the ICSSs, indicating a strong feeder role of the ICSSs.

In 2004, there was a proposal to merge the New Era College with two other Chinese community-based private colleges, namely the Southern College and the Han Chiang College. The former was established in 1990 in the state of Johor, while the latter was

established in 1996 in the state of Penang. Both use Chinese as the main medium of instruction. The merger was not only meant to allow the three colleges to share faculty members and facilities but also to benefit from the economies of scale. But the idea was not well-received by the New Era College headed by Kua Kia Soong who was of the view that the sharing of faculty members and facilities was not possible due to the distance between the three colleges as well as their different niche areas (Kua, 2005). Nevertheless, the proposed merger merits the attention of the Chinese educationists to ensure a more consolidated effort in developing Chinese education at the tertiary level.

The New Era College's ultimate objective is to become a full-fledged private university. Along with efforts to meet the stringent requirements of the National Accreditation Board (Lembaga Akreditasi Negara, LAN) [reorganized as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) in 2007], the New Era College offered 2+1 or 2+2 twinning programs with foreign universities beginning in 2005 (Tsao, 2010). Some of these foreign universities included the University of Gloucestershire (United Kingdom), the University of West England (United Kingdom), the Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand), the National Taiwan Normal University and the University of Ming Chuan (Taiwan) (Nanyang Siang Pau, 20 August 2009, 29 April 2010). Meanwhile, the original four departments established by the college were transformed and expanded into six schools to allow for the offering of more courses. The six schools are: the School of Business, the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, the School of Media and Creative Arts, the School of Science and the School of Vocational and Lifelong Education (Lee, 2011). The development of the college was disrupted in mid-2008 when the contract of its principal, Kua Kia Soong, was not extended by the Board of Directors due to disagreement over the development of the college as well as alleged financial mismanagement, resulting in strong protests among students and college staff who wanted Kua, a social activist and a staunch supporter of the Chinese education movement in Malaysia, to stay on as the principal (Kua, 2009). However, this disruption was only temporary and soon the college was back to normal with the appointment of a new principal to spearhead the development of the college. One subsequent development that could help the college to move toward using more Chinese as a medium of instruction was the approval by the Ministry of Higher Education to allow its media courses to be conducted in Chinese in 2009 (Nanyang Siang Pau, 22 April 2009). Following this approval, the Chinese educationists aimed to have more courses conducted in Chinese to turn the college into a Chinese-medium private college catering for mother tongue education of the Chinese.

The lack of physical space is undoubtedly a major problem that hampers the upgrading of the New Era College to a full-fledged private university. With increased enrolment, the Kajang campus located in Selangor has become overcrowded. Meanwhile, the development of the Sepang campus is shrouded with uncertainty. Although there was a renewed effort in 2008 to develop the Sepang campus through a memorandum of understanding signed between the New Era College and the Vintage Heights Berhad – a Hong Leong subsidiary, the development of the campus did not take place. This was because the Chinese educationists were unhappy that the Vintage Heights Berhad had set a deadline of 15 years for the completion of the campus, failing which the New Era College would have to transfer the ownership of the land back to the Vintage Heights Berhad. They were not too sure whether they could fully develop the campus within this stipulated deadline given the huge capital outlay involved. But to the Vintage Heights Berhad, the imposition of such a deadline was deemed necessary to safeguard its economic interests as it hoped that a fully operational Sepang campus would provide the much needed catalyst to develop its lands surrounding the campus. Thus, the development of the Sepang campus had ended in a deadlock. Since then, some Chinese corporate figures have come in to offer their lands to the New Era College. But the college has not accepted any offers yet (Nanyang Siang Pau, 25 February 2010, 29 April 2010). Apart from the lack of physical space, the failure of the New Era College to get more of its courses accredited by the MQA is also a main reason that hampers the upgrading of the college to a full-fledged private university, though there is a strong suspicion that the MQA has imposed more stringent course requirements on the college (Tsao, 2010), indicating a deliberate attempt to block the upgrading of the college.

Conclusion

The development of Chinese education in Malaysia is confronted by a host of problems and challenges. The Chinese primary schools are clearly not given a fair and equitable treatment by the government as indicated by the under-allocation of development funds and the acute shortage of trained teachers. As far as development funds are concerned, the Chinese primary schools have to rely heavily on charitable contributions from the Chinese community. Meanwhile, the acute shortage of trained teachers is resolved through the recruitment of untrained temporary teachers. However, this measure has worked against the quality of educational delivery in the Chinese primary schools. It is in the upholding of the character of the Chinese primary schools that the Chinese educationists have played a key role as the

vanguards of the Chinese primary schools. 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. In the case of the ICSSs, it is the refusal by the government to recognize the Unified Examination conducted by the Chinese educationists since 1975 that has prevented a more rigorous development of the ICSSs. Thus, despite the strong support of the Chinese for mother tongue education at the primary level, this strong support has not been extended to the ICSSs as indicated by the lack of breakthrough in enrolment rates. However, there is a marked improvement in the ICSS enrolment of late, though restricted to the well-established ICSSs. There are also other positive developments, especially the establishment of branch schools. But the Chinese educationists have to further improve the quality of educational delivery in the ICSSs to offset the emerging threat posed by the international schools. Meanwhile, the development of the New Era College is on the right track as far as efforts to ensure a wider usage of Chinese as a medium of instruction are concerned. However, the lack of physical space and the failure to get more courses accredited by the MQA are two current problems that the college needs to resolve in earnest to boost its chances of upgrading to a fill-fledged private university. All in all, the development of Chinese education in Malaysia clearly illustrates the strong resilience and commitment of the Chinese educationists to uphold the mother tongue education of the Chinese in Malaysia, though they have to address a host of problems and challenges that confront the development of Chinese education in Malaysia. It is perhaps worthy of note here that the development of Chinese education has, in some ways, benefited from the changing political landscape in Malaysia since the 2008 General Election. This changing political landscape is manifested by the emergence of a largely urban-based multiethnic oppositional front capable of challenging the ethnic-based ruling coalition government. In fact, this oppositional front has managed to control several state governments through the 2008 and 2013 General Elections (see, for example, Ooi et al., 2008; Kee, 2008; Wu and Pan, 2013). As a result of this, there are now two competing political forces in the country. This new political development has allowed the Chinese to play a more pivotal role in the electoral process arising from their increased political leverage. The Chinese educationists have capitalized on this new political development by stepping up their demands on some issues affecting the development of Chinese education. Meanwhile, as a tactical move to garner the support of the Chinese electorate, the ruling coalition has provided more financial assistance to the Chinese primary schools. The oppositional front has also put in place a mechanism to

disburse financial assistance to the Chinese primary schools in the states under its control. More importantly, this financial assistance is also extended to the ICSSs.

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