The Teaching of Chinese Language in Malaysian Chinese Primary Schools: Subtle Changes in Content and Objectives

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Abstract

The Chinese Primary Schools or the Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) (SRJK) are often regarded as the last fortress of Chinese education in Malaysia. If this is true, then the Chinese language subject taught in these schools can be seen as the bedrock of the fortress. However, over the years with numerous education policy changes, there have been many subtle changes to the nature and system of the Chinese primary schools and the Chinese language subject that may have gone uninspected. These changes can be for better or for worse for the development of Chinese language education in Malaysia. This paper will examine the subtle changes in the objectives, aims and teaching of Chinese language subject as a reflection on how policy shifts-in the independence period from the 1950s to 1970s; after the "3M system" implemented in 1983; and the education reforms in the 1990s-affect the nature and objective of the Chinese primary school education.

Key words: Chinese primary schools, Chinese language subject, "3M system", content (values, identity, culture)

Introduction

The Chinese are well-known for their efforts to set up schools wherever they have settled down (Tan, 1999: 57). In Malaysia, the Chinese community has established a comprehensive system of education with Chinese as a major medium of instruction that is not found anywhere else in the world outside the Greater China region. This system encompasses education from the primary to university levels.[1] Nationwide, there are 1,294 Chinese primary schools that comprise part of the national education system (Sia, 2005; 叶新田/Yap Sin Tian, 2012). However, since independence in 1957, the adoption of various official education policies has impacted upon Chinese education and has often aroused intense controversies and anxieties in the Chinese community.

Owing to their status as part of the national education system, the Chinese primary schools

are often regarded by the Chinese community as the last fortress of Chinese education in the country. The Chinese language that is taught as a subject in these schools is seen as the bedrock of this "fortress". Inevitably, numerous education policy shifts from time to time have led to subtle and not easily detected alterations in the functions of the primary schools and to the Chinese language subject.

Based on an analysis of the content of Chinese language textbooks prescribed in the period from the 1960s to 2000s, this study examines the subtle changes in the objectives and aims in the teaching of Chinese language arising from policy changes introduced between 1957 and the 1970s, the implementation of the "3M system" (*membaca, menulis, mengira* or reading, writing and arithmetic) in 1983, and education reforms introduced in the 1990s.

The paper is divided into two parts: part one summarizes aspects of official education policies that affect Chinese education, and part two discusses subtle changes brought about by the policy adjustments. The first part is intended to provide a brief background for readers who are not familiar with Malaysian education policy.

The Ministry of Education Malaysia (2006: 17-20) divides the development of the Malaysian national education system into five phases.[2] They coincide with the periods before independence in 1957; early independence to 1970; the New Economic Policy (NEP) years of 1970-1990; the National Development Policy years of 1991-2000; and the National Vision years of 2001-2010.

Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia

Chinese education in Malaysia has managed to sustain itself for almost two centuries without interruption. However, Chinese education has not always been able to follow a normal path of development. Rather, it has taken many twists and turns that have implications on its long-term growth and future prospects.

Pre-Independence Period

The Wu Fu Shuyuan (五福书院) established in Penang in 1819 is reputed to be the first Chinese school in Malaysia. However, William Milne reported that there were three other Chinese schools in Malacca in 1815. By 1884, there were 52 Chinese schools in Penang, 51 in Singapore and 12 in Malacca (Sia, 2005: 1-2).

These were traditional Chinese schools where children of different ages and background studied under teachers who had not received any professional training. The pupils learned to read and write using the Chinese classics and some arithmetic by means of the abacus. The purpose was to equip them with basic knowledge that would help them to start and run a business later on (Yew, 1982: 39). Equally significant was the imparting of Chinese values to the pupils.

The first modern Chinese school appeared in Penang in 1904 after reform in China in

1898. Initially, these schools provided "a curriculum combining traditional subjects such as the 'study of Confucian classics' and 'moral self-cultivation' with modern subjects like history, geography, and English". Later, in keeping with the new spirit of republicanism and modernity, the traditional subjects were replaced with modern ones (see Yen, 1999). Mandarin, adopted as the national language of China after the 1911 Revolution, was also introduced as a subject then as a common "language" of the Chinese community that was made up of various dialect groups. Since then, mother-tongue education for Malaysian Chinese has been synonymous with teaching in Mandarin (Tan, 1999: 56).

From a study of the Chinese language (Mandarin) textbooks, one may find that the traditional subjects were not dropped altogether but were partially incorporated into the Chinese language (Mandarin) subject. In this context, therefore, the teaching of the Chinese language has always formed an element of the pupils' moral self-cultivation.

The British colonial government practised a *laissez faire* policy towards Chinese education and it was allowed to develop spontaneously and independently. Consequently, Chinese education in Malaya in the pre-independence period was strongly influenced by developments in China. In the 1920s, the colonial authorities realized that this was no longer desirable as both the Chinese school teachers and students were strongly influenced by anti-colonial sentiments and the rise of communism in China. Initial measures of official control through the Registration of Schools Ordinance 1920 and later the Amendment to School Registration Act 1925 were met with strong objections from the Chinese community (see Kua, 1990). Since then, Chinese education has become a sensitive political issue that has persisted until today.

Chinese education was severely interrupted by the Japanese Occupation. The post-war years saw the colonial government making attempts to forge a unified system of education in Malaya (Kua, 1990: 53). In 1950, the Barnes Committee was set up to enquire into the problem of Malay education and to make recommendations to uphold the importance of the Malay language in the education system. The *Barnes Report* that was produced was based on extensive interviews of the Malays (Puteh, 2006: 73).

Strong objections to the *Barnes Report* by the Chinese community and their demand to consider the problems of Chinese education resulted in another study by Dr. W.P. Fenn, an American educator from China, and Dr. Wu Teh-yao, a United Nations official. The outcome was the *Fenn-Wu Report* of 1951 that takes into account the views of the Chinese. The *Fenn-Wu Report* was critical of the *Barnes Report* and stressed strongly the principle that a child's education should begin in its own mother tongue.

Nevertheless, the two reports were in agreement on the need for an education policy that emphasized nation building, and that the Chinese education system then lacked the understanding to satisfy local needs (Puteh, 2006: 76). Both the reports were further studied by a special committee, following which the Education Ordinance 1952 was passed.

In 1952, two committees, with representatives from Chinese school teachers, were set up to draw up new syllabuses with a Malayan outlook and detailed guidelines for textbooks for

various subjects taught in Chinese primary schools. By 1954 new textbooks with a Malayan outlook were adopted for use in Chinese schools. In this manner, too, Chinese primary schools finally severed dependence on China for textbooks and teachers (Tan, 1997: 65).

Since the 1920s there has been much discussion among Malayan Chinese literary circles on whether to produce literature to reflect the local environment and culture. The issue of whether to infuse Malayan Chinese literature with the local perspective similarly engaged the concern of Chinese educationists. Lim Lian Geok, an ardent advocate of Chinese language education in Malaya, and who was posthumously recognized by the local Chinese community to symbolize "the soul of the Chinese" (族魂), was supportive of the idea of localizing the content of Chinese school textbooks. It was he who headed the committee that drew up the new textbooks in 1954 (何国忠/Hou Kok Chong, 2002: 38). This marked the gradual shift of identity of the Malayan Chinese with China to Malaya in a process that reflected their desire to putting down roots in this country.

The Post-Independence Period

In 1955 the government led by the Alliance, a coalition of the main political parties of the Malays, Chinese and Indians, announced its intention to introduce a national education system. A 15-member committee headed by the Minister of Education, Abdul Razak, was set up to make recommendations. The *Report of the Education Committee*, popularly known as the *Razak Report* was released in May 1956. It was to form the basis of Education Ordinance in 1957 that became the education policy of the newly independent Federation of Malaya. Among its primary recommendations was the declaration that "the ultimate objective" of the national educational policy was to bring the children of all ethnic groups under a national education system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction. It was envisaged that the national system of education would be acceptable to the people and would allow them to promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, and to enable Malay to become the national language and the non-Malay communities to preserve and sustain the growth of their languages and cultures (quoted by Kua, 1990: 75).

The national education policy divided primary schools into two categories, namely, Standard Primary Schools, subsequently called National Schools, with the national language as the medium of instruction, and Standard-Type Primary Schools, later known as National Type Schools, in which the language of instruction may be English, Mandarin or Tamil (Kua, 1990: 75).

An implication of the education policy is the inclusion of Chinese primary education in the national education system. Important aspects of the *Razak Report* were affirmation of the status of the Malay language as the medium of instruction and the introduction of common content syllabi with a pan-Malayan outlook (Puteh, 2006: 82). The policy of recognizing the separate existence of vernacular schools at the primary level and the adoption of common subject content in all schools to nurture a Malayan outlook has remained until today (Puteh,

2006: 83).

Soon after the General Elections of 1959, a committee headed by the Minister of Education, Abdul Rahman Talib, was set up to review the implementation of the education policy. The report, also known as the *Rahman Talib Report*, put forward a number of proposals which were incorporated into the Education Act 1961 that remained in force until 1996. Government primary schools teaching in the Malay medium became known as National Schools, while those teaching in Chinese and Tamil were called National-Type Schools (Kua, 1990: 91; Puteh, 2006: 88).

The Period of the New Economic Policy

During the early independence years of the 1960s, ethnic tension had not only remained uneasy but had been fuelled by communal issues of which Chinese education commonly featured as a major item of contention. This tension culminated in serious racial clashes in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May 1969 just days after the general election in which the opposition had eroded the power base of Alliance Party.

The riots provoked thoughts on the need to address the issue of national integration (see Comber, 1983; Kua, 2007). The relatively inferior economic status of the Malays was identified as one of the root causes of ethnic disparity that was also regarded as a barrier to social harmony. The strategy adopted to counter the economic imbalance was the New Economic Policy (NEP) that was put into effect in the Second Malaysian Plan from 1971 to 1975 (Malaysia, 1971). This was a deliberate attempt at positive discrimination or affirmative action in favour of the Malay majority (see Mehmet, 1986; Shamsul Amri, 1997).

Within the primary objectives of the NEP in the re-structuring of society and eradication of poverty, one of the more important policy measures was the introduction of a quota system of student admission to institutions of higher learning. A related policy option was the acceleration of the process of Malaysianization under which one of the measures was to replace English with Malay as the medium of instruction in the schools 1970 until it was completely phased out by 1983.

The NEP is purportedly to promote national unity and nation building, but some have argued that it has also become a major cause of racial tension since its inception (see Kua, 1987; Gomez, 2004). Among the Chinese, there has been a substantial increase in the enrolment of students in the Chinese schools since the 1970s. This is widely regarded as a reaction to the switch from emphasizing English to the Malay language (Kua, 1990: 115).

Another important objective of the education policy of the 1970s was to improve the education system in both qualitative and quantitative terms so that it may make greater contributions to the economic, social, cultural, and political development of the country (Puteh, 2006: 99). This emphasis on making education relevant to practical concerns reached its apogee in the 1980s when the "3M" system was introduced.

As Malaysia embarked on its industrialization in the 1980s, the Ministry of Education

announced the plan to implement the 3M system in all primary schools. Prior to its full-scale implementation in 1983, a pilot project was carried out in 1982 in 305 selected schools in different parts of the country. An integral part of the 3M system was the introduction of the New Curriculum for Primary Schools or *Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah* (KBSR), and the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools or *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah* (KBSM).

The KBSR is a "back to basics movement" that was intended to reduce the heavy content-oriented curriculum of the past. This was done by concentrating on reading, writing and arithmetic. The approach to teaching too was revamped for greater effect. Recommended were new teaching strategies that focused on the students' specific needs and their active participation in the learning process and activities both inside and outside the classroom. The aim was a holistic approach to the development of the students (Rahimah, 1998: 464).

The curriculum was to be put into effect in two phases. The first phase covered Standards 1 to 3 and the second from Standards 4 to 6. Students learned basic communication skills in reading, writing and arithmetic during the first phase of study. The next phase reinforced and built upon the basic skills acquired earlier. This latter phase stressed the imparting of skills for thinking and communication, especially logical reasoning, and understanding social and current issues (Sargunan, 1990: 2). Students were to learn the communicative and functional aspects of language rather than through rote learning. The teacher's role was simply to guide the students and to facilitate their learning (Sargunan, 1990: 2).

Initially, textbooks were purportedly forbidden in the classroom and the teachers were to create their own teaching and learning materials that would cater for the needs of the class. In practice, however, various considerations and difficulties frustrated the good intention. Instead, a proliferation of workbooks began to appear in the market to satisfy the demand for hard copies of texts for various subjects. A genuine change resulting from the switch to KBSR was the attention lavished on local and Malaysian orientation in the teaching materials (Rahimah, 1998: 464).

The 1990s and After

Malaysia rode on the economic success of East Asia in the 1980s and charted impressive annual growth rates of 8-9 per cent between 1988 and 1995. This growth was subsequently interrupted by the Asian economic crisis of 1997 and the economy has since recovered to grow at 4-5 per cent per annum.

In 1990, the NEP was substituted by the National Development Plan 1990-2000 (see Malaysia, 1991). In 1991, the then Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, announced "Vision 2020" (Mahathir, 1991). The vision was to turn Malaysia into a developed nation by 2020. One of the core requirements was the development of the Information Communication Technology Industry to enable the country to take a quantum leap towards developed nation status. One of the biggest projects in Vision 2020 is to launch the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) under which are seven flagship projects: E-Government, Smart School, E-Medicine,

Smart Card, Research and Development, borderless marketing and world manufacturing network (赖昭光/Lai Teo Kuan and 周忠信/Chew Chong Sin, 2002: 82-105). These projects need knowledge workers, especially those who are trained in information communication technology. Consequently, and also under the pressure of economic globalization, the Malaysian market, migration policies, and the education sector, among others, were liberalized. This is an ambitious piece of social engineering and a deliberate policy choice to transform the Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy.

Following upon the footsteps of liberalization of education, particularly the higher education sector, efforts were made to turn Malaysia into a centre of excellence in the region and to supply the industry with the relevant human resources. To facilitate its development, the Malaysian government passed the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996, The National Accreditation Board Act 1996, The National Council of Higher Education Act 1996, and the Amendment to the Education Act 1960 and the Universities and University Colleges Act 1965 (Tan, 2002: 81).

The overall impact on the school system was the recognition of the role of the computer and information technology (Rahimah, 1998: 470). The Ministry of Education formulated three policies to introduce information communication technology (ICT) in education (see Chan, 2002: 2). The first policy was the use of ICT as an enabler to reduce the digital gap in the schools especially between urban and rural areas. The second was the emphasis of the role and function of ICT as a teaching and learning tool and as a subject by itself. The last was the use of ICT to improve productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of the management system.

One of the key MSC projects was the Smart School. It was conceptualized in 1997 to achieve four objectives. Under this project, technology-aided teaching and learning was to be implemented in primary and secondary schools. This pedagogic innovation was to tie-up with a change in the curriculum as well. The smart school initiative was to experiment with new teaching-learning materials, and the assessment and management systems (Kamogawa, 2003: 547). The Smart School project was tested in 90 schools in the country and eventually to cover all schools in 2003 (Malaysia, 1996). Concerns over its possible impact on Chinese primary schools were voiced. However, the project was over-ambitious in its concept and coverage and its implementation has since been down-played by the authorities.

The relentless drive of globalization has, indirectly at least, forced a change in education policy to switch the medium of instruction for science and mathematics subjects in schools from Malay back to English. The idea was put into effect in 2002 for Year One primary school pupils (Kamogawa, 2003: 547). Notwithstanding the importance of English to meet the challenges of producing human resources to meet IT market needs the change has been highly controversial as it encroached on the national language and mother tongues on the Malay as well as non-Malay communities (Puteh, 2006: 131-134; Lim *et al.*, 2007). Under pressure from different quarters, this policy was rescinded in 2011 with a return to the *status quo*.

Subtle Changes in the Chinese Language Curriculum

As Chinese primary schools are a component of the national education system, they are subject to national policies on education and are sensitive to alterations to the syllabus and to many other minor changes. Constant shifts in the education policy of the country during the last 60 years have been accompanied by subtle changes in the Chinese language curriculum and teaching. Over the years, such changes have accumulated in extent to affect the direction of specific long-term objectives. This section will examine some of the changes to gauge their effects on the nature of the Chinese primary schools.

Content and Objectives

The content of Chinese language textbooks of the 1960s and 1970s was based on materials to reflect the social situation of the period and much of it were related to the debates on and struggles for Chinese education of the 1950s. Although these textbooks attempted to infuse elements of the local culture and events, the influence of the textbooks from China was evident. Yao Tuo (姚拓), who moved to Malaya in 1958 as an editorial staff of the popular *Jiaofeng Monthly Magazine* (蕉风), was one of the key persons in compiling and editing Chinese primary and high school textbooks (see Wan, 2012: 122). As an ex-Kuomintang soldier who was familiar with many parts of China and who had moved to Hong Kong in 1952 and then to Singapore in 1957 to work in publishing houses, he was able to fall back on his own education and experiences when compiling textbooks for Malayan Chinese primary schools (personal communication, 22 November 2008).

The objectives of the Chinese textbooks of the 1960s were clearly stated in the general preface of these texts. The first was to nurture a strong sense of moral uprightness, to arouse patriotism, to foster peace and harmony, and to promote co-operation among the different ethnic communities. Another was aimed at teaching the children to write and speak standard Mandarin, and develop fluency in the language. One of the tasks was to allow children to acquire a basic vocabulary, to develop the reading habit by increasing their interest in children's literature, and to improve their comprehension and memorizing ability. Another aim was to teach the children how to use the language, and to develop the ability to express their thoughts and emotions. Finally, the children were to develop the habit to write correctly with reasonable speed and neatness.

The textbooks published in the 1970s advocated these same objectives. Among these, the transmitting of moral values was a basic role of the Chinese language curriculum. Traditionally, education and moral development were two sides of a coin; being educated meant being morally upright. As for the emphasis on Mandarin, the idea behind it was obvious as the Chinese were composed of diverse dialect communities. The early Chinese schools had taught in the dialects as they were set up to meet the needs of the children of the Cantonese, Hokkiens or Hakkas. It was only in 1920s that Mandarin was adopted as the common medium of instruction in Chinese schools (see Tan, 1999).

The learning of Chinese required a great deal of efforts in acquiring a sufficient vocabulary and skills in reading. Unlike that of English, the learning of the Chinese language was not so much the concern with grammatical rules but rather in understanding characters and phrases that were expressive and full of nuances of meanings (see Ku, 1998). The nature of the Chinese language is such that different characters are capable of a variety of creative combinations to derive tens of thousands of expressive phrases and sayings. As a general rule of thumb, one only needs to master about three thousands commonly used characters to be able to speak, read and write fluently for most occasions. Reading and vocabulary go hand in hand, the more one reads, the wider one's vocabulary.

In 1981, Malaysia switched from the use of the traditional character to the simplified Chinese character. The former is used in Taiwan and Hong Kong while the latter is adopted in China. At the same time, the *Hanyu Pinyin* (汉语拼音) system or the Romanized Chinese language phonetic system was introduced to make it easier to learn the language. This applies to both the Chinese who are familiar with the alphabet and all foreigners who wish to learn the Chinese language.

In the 1990s, exaltations on moral ideas, patriotism, social peace and harmony, and co-operation among the ethnic groups were not longer stated explicitly as an objective of the curriculum. However, the curriculum guideline issued by the Ministry of Education in 2003 did reaffirm them as important objectives of the curriculum. Learning to speak, read, write as well as to listen are some of the stated objectives of Chinese textbooks.

Since the 1990s, the Chinese linguistic knowledge, which includes grammar, is introduced into the curriculum. Whereas it was only a small part of the curriculum, it has now become an important component of the curriculum and is made examinable. In the upper primary level, the curriculum is to foster thinking and self-learning abilities among the students. Translated into lessons, the students' daily experience forms the basis of learning concerning school activities and daily life, the natural environment, cultural events, the achievements of well-known people, tourist spots, energy sources, current events, stories, literature, and moral values. The content is purportedly related to that in other subjects to form an integrated curriculum.

Structure of Textbooks and Organization of Lessons

Changes in education policies affect the structure of textbooks and the manner in which the Chinese language is being taught. Textbooks generally comprise the main text and exercises. In the 2000s, the textbooks for Years One and Two do not feature any main text at all. Textbooks in the 1960s and 1970s were structured into the main text and exercises on comprehension and vocabulary. This was dispensed with in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s during which textbooks featured four to eight different types of exercises, including comprehension. An independent exercise that was not related to the main text was inserted after every few chapters. The independent exercises in the 1960s and 1970s textbooks were mainly focused on the classical phonetic system, difficult vocabularies such as homonyms and selected special characters,

reading and genres of writing and writing skills. The independent exercises in the textbooks of the 1980s were largely concerned with *Hanyu Pinyin*. However, by the 1990s, *Hanyu Pinyin* was no longer specifically taught. Other forms of exercises featured picture compositions, filling in the blanks, identifying parts of pictures, proverbs and idioms or, in particular cases, general themes such as a motor vehicle. Textbooks in the 2000s followed a similar pattern but *Hanyu Pinyin* was taught in some of the exercises. From Year Four onwards, the independent exercises were divided into revision questions and sample questions of the Primary Education Assessment Test or *Ujian Pendidikan Sekolah Rendah* popularly known as UPSR.

The structure of the earlier textbooks was simple but from the 1980s a more "sophisticated" format was adopted. This was the result of the education reform introduced in the 1980s and the implementation of KBSR which, as originally conceived, was to free teaching from reliance on textbooks. This was to allow interaction between teachers and pupils to promote rapport as well as to encourage the design of teaching/learning materials to suit the needs of the learners (Sargunan, 1990). This ideal was killed by the large class sizes and a teacher workload that taxed available time and resources of the teachers and the system itself. Teachers resorted to easy solutions by relying heavily on new materials such as the workbooks, readers and other teaching kits that soon became available in the market.

The problems of the system persist until today. Textbooks have been quickly re-introduced but the workbooks have become indispensable. However, to make the lessons more interesting, and in line with the objectives of the KBSR, various types of exercises were inserted into the 1980s textbooks. These textbooks were subsequently revised to simplify the lessons and exercises. This was mainly done by doing away with some exercises for the purpose of reducing the escalating printing cost (Yao Tuo, personal communication, 22 November 2008). The 1980s textbooks were substantially thicker than before, and this was in fact against the spirit of the KBSR. The textbooks of the 1990s and 2000s were structured on a scale of gradual progression in the difficulty and complexity of the text. In general, the textbooks of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s were much richer in their content than those of the 1960s and 1970s.

Illustrations in the textbooks were selected to reflect the state of the economic and social development of the country. In the 1960s and 1970s, the illustrations depicted typical agrarian and village life, but in the 1980s examples tended to highlight the new town of Petaling Jaya which also became the major industrial centre of the country. By the 1990s and 2000s, textbooks took pride in portraying the achievements of modern Malaysia, with pictures of the Petronas Twin Towers, the Kuala Lumpur Communication Tower, the Light Rail Transit system (LRT) and Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA).

Over the years, linguistic knowledge and language skills received more emphasis in the curriculum. This is seen from the variety of exercises in the textbooks of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s that were designed to train children on the usage of the language in different situations and the greater focus on grammatical rules and linguistic knowledge that were overlooked

in earlier textbooks. A similar emphasis was placed on the teaching of proverbs, idioms or maxims in these textbooks. The earlier textbooks presented proverbs and idioms together with the related legends and tales. In the later textbooks, proverbs were taught in their own right and students were required to commit their meaning and usage to memory and to employ them as a linguistic device. This process reached its height in the textbooks of the 2000s. Students are now taught literal techniques such as analogy and rhetoric from as early as Year Four.

Teachers have expressed their concern over this trend of making the Chinese language curriculum for Chinese primary schools overly "technical" to the point of taxing the interest of students (陈玉芬/Chen Yu Feng, 2008). Many students were made to struggle to follow the lessons on aspects of linguistic knowledge that speakers of Mandarin do not ordinarily use in daily life. Examples included words meant to be spoken with a softer tone (轻声词 or *Qing Sheng Ci*) and those that retain the velars by placing the back of the tongue against the back part of the mouth (*Er Hua Yin* or 儿化音), both oral styles common only among residents in the Beijing area. It is not the idea of teaching linguistic knowledge that is objected to but the way in which it is taught. Furthermore, instead of keeping faith with the core objectives of the 3Rs, examination seems to have taken over as the central purpose of education. The education system has been turned into a heavily examination-oriented exercise in which the pupils, teachers, and schools receive high credits and wide publicity for "outstanding" performance.

Identity Change

Chinese school textbooks, especially language textbooks, are sources that reveal the evolution of Malaysian Chinese identity. Early Chinese residents saw themselves as sojourners who planned to return to China to retire. With the passage of time, the descendants of the Chinese pioneers began to identify themselves with their place of birth and developed a local and separate identity from that of their forefathers. Just prior to independence in 1957, the Malaysian Chinese community embarked on producing local textbooks for the Chinese schools. In the process, the textbook writers had to constantly negotiate the complex twists and turns thrown up by official education policies that were subject to alterations to adapt to the changing needs of nation building.

The several changes that Chinese language textbooks underwent over the years were revealing on the formation of Chinese identity. The first were the subtle changes in Chinese textbooks that were brought about by the educational and cultural policies. The next were revelations on how the issue of identity was being treated at the micro level which macro-level analyses tended to overlook. The third was how textbook writers and the teachers dealt with the problem of identity. Lastly, Chinese language textbooks contribute to the issue of dealing with minority identity and cultural harmony.

The content of textbooks is an important factor that influences the identity of students. Chinese textbooks in the 1960s and 1970s made use of local and foreign situations in their

content. This was apparently to open up the vistas of students on cultural understanding and exchange. It was felt that Malaysian Chinese students should know their roots by being taught Chinese folktales and classical narratives some of which were extracted from the textbooks used in China. The folktales, legends and myths of the Malays and other indigenous groups were also incorporated into the lessons to promote cultural exchange among local communities. At the same time, the worldview of students was broadened by learning from selected foreign folk narratives and passages on significant world events and achievements.

However, since the 1960s and 1970s, materials on Chinese political leaders in China and Taiwan had been progressively phased out while those on cultural figures such as Confucius, Mencius or Lu Ban (鲁班) the master craftsman more frequently featured in the textbooks. This was an indication of the subtle shift in the political identity of the Chinese towards Malaysia. Furthermore, the Chinese no longer refer to themselves as Overseas Chinese or *Huaqiao* (华侨) but rather as *Huayi* (华裔) or descendants of the Chinese.

From the 1980s, many of the international and local folk materials have been replaced by specially rewritten texts to reflect modern Malaysia. One of the demands on textbook writers was to work on materials about students' daily life rather than on classical tales. This was in keeping with the concern to paint a "true Malaysian identity". Consequently, many of the selected legends were related to specific entities such as places, sceneries, artefacts, or simply the origins of place names (万建中/Wan Jian Zhong, 2006: 184-186).

It is obvious that changes in the use of folktales in the textbooks could affect ideas on identity and inter-ethnic relations. The inclusion of Chinese, Western and local (mostly Malay) folk narratives in the textbooks of the 1960s and 1970s was to familiarize students on the importance of cultural exchange as they learned elements of their own culture as well as those of other peoples. Textbooks of the post-1980s period were short on cultural content. One may doubt whether the stress on portraying a "modern Malaysian identity" and the avoidance of sensitive cultural issues was conducive to creating a genuine Malaysian identity. Identity cannot obviously be formed without reference to cultural tradition. Promoting dialogue and cultural exchanges, rather than avoiding issues or forcing assimilation are now recognized to be a better way of dealing with the issue of identity in a multi-cultural setting.

An excellent example of using folktales to increase cultural understanding and thus to promote a multi-cultural identity is incorporation of the *Si Tenggang* Malay legend in the 1960s textbook. The moral of the story is that one must be filial and love one's parents, or else one would be severely punished. *Si Tenggang* had refused to recognize his old mother after he had become rich. As a result of his mother's curse, he was turned into a stone. Using a Malay story to transmit one of the core Chinese values is most telling in stressing the existence of shared cultural values. This approach was indeed more appropriate to the formation of a Malaysian identity that is capable of tracing its roots to elements of Chinese and Malay cultures.

Another issue is the treatment of selected materials in textbooks. There were indeed commendable cases in which folk literature was rendered in a way that remained faithful to

the original version and yet able to create images of a new identity. The popular Chinese folksong entitled *Rowing to Grandmother's Bridge* was adapted to a Malaysian setting featuring tropical fruits such as mangosteen and bananas and depicting a typical countryside scenery. In the blind men and the elephant, the moral of the story was to remind students the danger of prejudice. That the blind men were of diverse ethnicity drove home the point that all ethnic groups were capable of racial prejudice and it was necessary to guard against it. In fact, changing the motif seems to be the easiest way to rewrite a narrative to reflect a new identity and yet preserve the original spirit of the tale. The infusion of local elements into folktales in textbooks was to replace the unfamiliar with the familiar. In *The Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf is replaced by the tiger that Malaysian students were familiar with. Thus, when the adaptation of non-Malaysian folktales was done deftly, the story would drive home common values that were pertinent to the Malaysian situations yet without prejudice to its original message.

Conclusion

The objective of the Chinese primary school system is to preserve its "Chineseness" as symbolized by an emphasis on traditional Chinese culture. Several decades of change and development in the education policy have clearly eroded the "Chineseness" of the system, though this identity is not to be interpreted as replicating the schools in China. Chinese primary education has undergone subtle changes as a result of education policy shifts since the 1950s, especially after the 3M system was introduced in 1983.

The content is increasingly local-oriented. Localization is not confined to the use of local materials as ideas about local identity, especially political identity, are receiving increasing attention. At the same time, the identification with China or Chinese culture in Chinese language subjects which is the key subject to inculcate Chinese culture has been carefully subdued. It is pointed out that the content of all other subjects has been unified in the entire school system, except only the medium of instruction. Materials referring to China have been deleted except for those that are representative of the Malaysian Chinese identity, such as the origin of Chinese festivals that are celebrated in Malaysia and selected Chinese cultural heroes. As for political leaders, only local ones such as the Prime Ministers and other outstanding Ministers are featured in the latest textbooks, in place of reformers and ancient political figures of China as was the practice in earlier textbooks. This is a deliberate attempt to project a Malaysian Chinese identity that is different from that in China.

Localization of content and identity is also accompanied by the switch in orientation in the teaching of the Chinese language. The current trend is towards emphasis on technical aspects of the language rather than the transmission of Chinese culture. This is especially obvious since the 1990s' switch to an education policy that emphasise technology. This is in line with the principles of teaching a second language rather than the mother tongue. This is also to enhance

the vocational value of education to cater for future employment of students.

The shift in identity is an important and complex issue that warrant further studies. However, the change in the political identity of Chinese Malaysian is inevitable, but this is not necessarily at the expense of sacrificing too much of their traditional culture. In the teaching and learning of the Chinese language, creative methods may be formulated to meet intended national objectives and yet to preserve the essence of traditional Chinese culture. The infusion of elements of local culture and folklore has been experimented with to blend with the traditional Chinese values to foster a local Chinese culture as discussed above.

Notes

1   There are currently three Chinese community-funded colleges and a university in which instruction in Chinese in selected disciplines is conducted. These are New Era College, Southern College, Han Jiang College and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. The first two colleges have recently been upgraded as University Colleges. Among public universities, Universiti Malaya has a Department of Chinese Studies and, with Universiti Putra Malaysia, also offer undergraduate courses on Chinese Language.
2   Others such as Puteh (2006: 63-110) may adopt a slightly deferrent division.

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