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The Evolution of Singapore's Chinese School Education

Tai-Chee Wong

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Abstract

In colonial Singapore, all ethnic groups were allowed to use their mother tongue to teach their children in their self-run schools. After independence, however, the PAP-led government started to transform the multi-language school system into a single English-medium system. This article focuses on the evolution of Chinese school system in Singapore from its peak in 1960 to its disappearance in 1986. Three factors of different impact intensity have been identified which have led to such an outcome. These include the choice of the English-educated ruling elite backed by a unified education rationale, use of English as an economic survival instrument, and the defeat of pro-socialist left-wing Chinese-educated groups. The paper first traces the colonial *laissez faire* approach which gave way to a strong post-independent state using language as a form of power to exercise its political mandate. The choice of English has been supported by Singapore's successful export-led industrialisation and integration into the global chain of capitalist West, which has brought in high-paying jobs. Success has convinced pragmatic Chinese families that English schools offer better prospects than Chinese schools. Ultimately, Chinese language is forced to take the back seat as a mother tongue in Singapore's English medium schools.

Keywords: Singapore, colonial education policy, Chinese language school system, independence movement, government policy

Introduction

Chinese school education in Singapore began during the British colonial period in the 19th century. There are two reasons why the topic of this paper focuses on Chinese school education rather

than Chinese education in general. One is that Chinese language education is different in substance from Chinese school education. For example, Chinese schools in Singapore no longer exist today due to changes in government policies, but Chinese language education still exists. Under the current unified language of instruction in English in Singapore, Chinese education has not disappeared, but has become a second-tier language and evolved into a national cultural language, and the language standard of students is generally far lower than that of the former Chinese schools. The second is because of the need to differentiate formal school education from informal category in the analytical framework. In analysing the history of education in Singapore, it is necessary to exclude informal small class private teaching during the colonial period, which was basically free from government interference, and the private Chinese language tuition popular in Singapore over the last 50 years.

This paper first explores how Singapore's Chinese school education, as part of the island's officially accepted system of education, had thrived on self-reliance with the support of the Chinese community during the colonial era (1819–1959). With the increase of Chinese immigrants from the mid-19th century, Chinese schools began to blossom. After World War II, Nanyang University made its appearance in Singapore with Chinese being used for the first time as the medium of instruction in Southeast Asia. However, with the advancement of the post-colonial elite government's unified language policy, English schools were given privilege in a leading position whilst other language streams were eliminated.

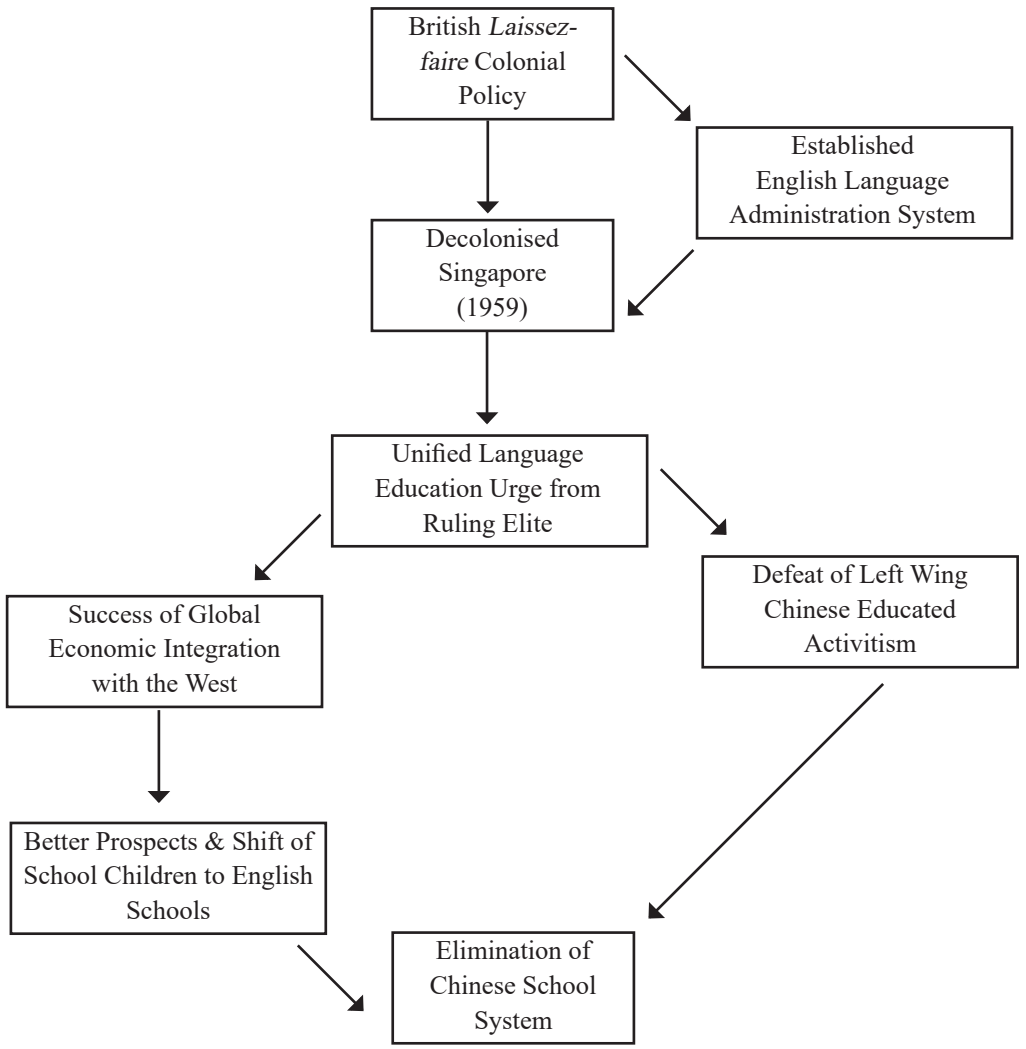
The process of elimination was rather unique via a pragmatic approach which is a consequence of a triple source of causation. The use of English as a unified education stream was taken by the English-educated ruling class as natural for a newly independent nation for its economic value in cosmopolitanism fit for a small city-state's survival. The popularly elected People's Action Party (PAP) did not opt as a ruling power to use the "one way imposition of force." Instead, PAP sought to consolidate its position by addressing the concerns of the ruled. In that particular historic juncture, it was the economic and job-related option which was deployed as a "conciliatory" means to bring about the consent, forcibly or willingly accepting, of the majority electorate. And this consequential power-population relation may be called "ruling hegemony" through which the consent was acquired with economic incentives and reward by adopting English as a sole medium of instruction in all schools (Wong, 2006).

Virtually hitherto no scholars investigating the rationale behind the elimination of Chinese school system in Singapore have dealt with it in this perspective. For this purpose, the author aims to fill such a gap to present an original study. Figure 1 shows the development process of Chinese language school education system in Singapore from the colonial era to the post-independence period which witnessed the downfall of the left-leaning Chinese school educated grassroots leaders and the masses in their power struggle against the right-leaning English-educated ruling elite. Leaders from Chinese schools, being losers, had to withdraw from the stage of history. The English-

educated winners succeeded in putting up English as the unified medium of teaching in all schools, while the Chinese language teaching was established as a compulsory second language for the Chinese community.

Figure 1

Forces Leading to the Elimination of Chinese Schools in Singapore



Source: Conceptualised by author

Chinese School Education During the Colonial Period

When Singapore was one of the three Straits Settlements, the British colonial government's official education policy followed two principles. The first was to have a small number of public-funded English schools to train the locals with sufficient English proficiency to support the colonial government's lower-level administration work. The other principle was the adoption of a *laissez faire* attitude towards the local communities which had to provide their own land and financial resources to build their own language schools. This arrangement helped to minimise public expenditure on education (Wilson, 1972; Tan, 1997).

Under this colonial policy and starting from the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese community leaders from clan associations, mutual aids and religious institutions in the Straits Settlements appealed to their supporters to donate land and money. Schools thus built usually gave admission priority to members of their own dialect groups, and instruction was also offered in the dialects.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the increasing number of Chinese immigrants and rising birth rates, the modern primary school stream teaching multiple subjects began to emerge, replacing gradually the old private tuition centres teaching only classics. During the 36 years from 1905 to 1941, before the Japanese occupation of Singapore, Chinese schools sprang up like mushrooms, with more than 200 schools established.[1] Besides these primary schools, the earliest middle school was the Chinese High School established in 1918 (Baidu, 2022).

Before 1921, dialect-based clan associations or their founders specified the use of their own dialects as the medium of instruction. About 15% of the schools were eligible for some subsidies from the colonial government. Influenced by the 1919 May Fourth Movement in China, Chinese schools in Singapore took a bold step after 1921, by switching unanimously to Chinese Mandarin as the medium of instruction. Mandarin was widely known as the national language at that time. From then on, Chinese schools expanded not only in scale, but also in the number of junior and senior high schools.[2] During the three and a half years (1942–1945) of Japanese Occupation, most schools in Singapore, including Chinese schools, were closed.

After World War Two, Chinese schools in Singapore entered a new era of development. Not only did they resume teaching, the Chinese community managed to raise funds to set up new schools throughout the island. During this early post-war period, new Chinese schools were given Singapore local names such as Changi, Fengshan and those associated with political ideology such as Xinmin and Guanghua (Chinese School Alumni Association, 2014).[3]

The post-World War Two period to the 1950s was an era characterised by nationalistic "awakening" by which colonised territories strived to fight for independence. Taking advantage of Britain's weakened military might as a result of the disastrous war, and the support of the rising socialist camp led by the former Soviet Union, colonies achieved independence either through armed struggle, such as in Indonesia and Vietnam, or through peaceful means as in the Philippines and Singapore (Saull, 2005).

In Singapore, the transfer of power from the British was not entirely peaceful or direct. For almost 20 years in the post-war era, there was a persistent demand for independence. Many of the leaders were educated in Chinese and were influenced by socialist labour movements in China. They formed the Labour Party or Socialist Front and organised strikes to confront the colonial government to demand better working conditions and reasonable treatment of Chinese schools. Chinese schools entered its heyday of development in the late 1950s. By then, the number of Chinese primary and high schools had increased to 349 in number, or much more than in the pre-World War Two period. With a total student population of about 68,000, accounting for 57.9% of student enrollment in the island, surpassing the combined number in English, Malay and Tamil language schools (Lianhe Wanbao, 2016).

It was significant that between 1956 and 1959 under Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock, four new Chinese high schools were established and funded by the government for the first time (Lianhe Wanbao, 2016).[4] This official support for Chinese schools was in response to the strong labour movement that was backed by supporters with Chinese school background. Despite this trend of development, the fate of Chinese schools took a downward turn following the victory of the People's Action Party in the parliamentary election in 1959 and the subsequent granting of self-government by the British.

Language Policy after 1959

Language often acts as powerful tool of political and socio-economic discrimination, and the choice of a dominant language often brings about prejudices against specific social or ethnic groups (Smirnova & Lliev, 2017). In many colonial territories, the colonial legacy has a strong influence on identity formation that is associated with the choice of an "official" language in the post-colonial era. This is especially so in territories with multi-ethnic societies. The ensuing identity issue may provoke political processes which may promote internal division or solidarity.

In Singapore, British colonial education policy was to safeguard its commercial interests in a pragmatic and cost-saving *laissez faire* policy by which the Chinese could organise and fund their own schools. The British began to withdraw from Asia after the end of World War Two. Post-war Malaya, including Singapore, was confronted by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) insurgency movement from 1948 in a struggle for independence. Britain was forced to execute a peaceful transfer of power to the local elite. This arrangement allowed Britain to maintain its vested interests in the ex-colonies as the elite acted as an important ally of Western capitalist interests and in countering the rising influence of the former Soviet-led socialist bloc after the start of the Cold War (Saull, 2005).

Immediately after the British declared a "state of emergency" in 1948 and mobilised a

Commonwealth army to fight the MCP guerrillas, the colonial government in Singapore, taking into account the sense of crisis that Chinese schools were infiltrated by leftist organisations, implemented English as the teaching medium for the entire island. This plan was strongly opposed by the Chinese community and had to be abandoned.

In 1953, the Governor of Singapore, John Fearns Nicoll, appointed a nine-member committee to re-examine the Singapore Constitution and prepare for Singapore's self-governance. The Committee chaired by George Rendel completed the "Rendel Commission Report" in 1954 which was passed in the Legislative Council, paving the way for localised legislative assembly elections in the following year. One of the key concerns mentioned explicitly by the Rendel Report was the lack of localised national consciousness and the risk of Communist influence (Xiyao Culture Lecture, 2019). National consciousness here refers to the need to remove the self-imposed identity and consciousness of the ethnic Chinese in Singapore as overseas Chinese after achieving self-government. This can be interpreted that they should build their own Singapore-based national identity, and should not continue to be influenced by Communist ideology from China.

The Rendel Commission was to mark a new touchstone for education in Singapore. Building Singapore's own national awareness meant China-sourced textbooks of Chinese schools in Singapore would have to be gradually replaced by materials with emphasis on local awareness. In view of the high birth rate and rapid population growth after World War Two, the demand for schools had naturally increased. In line with this feature and with a more welfare-oriented Labour Government that came in power, British post-war colonial policy underwent another change by introducing free education for all primary schools, including those of Chinese, Tamil and Malay streams (Tan, 1997).

While the post-war left-wing Chinese-educated leaders and students intended to overthrow British colonial rule, in reality they posed little threat to the colonisers. This was because the British maintained a large military presence in Singapore and was in control of the police. The handover of power was eventually to the pro-Western local elite (Wong, 2020).

In 1955, the Labour Front won the first Singapore Legislative Assembly election with 10 out of the 25 seats and became part of a coalition government. Later in the year, on the eve of preparing for Singapore's autonomy, the British asked the Legislative Assembly to prepare a nine-member committee to discuss the future direction of Chinese school education (Chua, 2010).

Among the nine appointed committee members were Education Minister Chow Swee Kee of the Labour Front, Labour Minister Lim Yew Hock, and the People's Action Party Secretary-General Lee Kuan Yew. The Committee consulted the opinions of Chinese associations on the issue of Chinese language education and received a total of 87 submissions. Chinese school teachers and educators were also interviewed and public opinions from all walks of life were sought. Based on these, the nine-member committee drafted a report entitled "Report of the All-Party Committee

on Chinese Education" to the Singapore Legislative Assembly, which was published on February 7, 1956. Several recommendations were made by the Report, including the equal treatment of all four streams of schools, the "Malayanisation" of textbooks with an input of civics, bilingual or trilingual teaching, the prohibition of students from participating in party politics and involvement in industrial disputes, and the provision of financial aids to all streams of schools (Singapore Government Agency, 1956)

It is noteworthy that the All-Party Committee reached a compromise to allow Chinese schools to continue to survive after the British handover of self-governance. The purpose of a common curriculum syllabus with localised character was to cut off the direct link between Singapore Chinese schools from that of China in teaching content (Gwee, 1978). Student involvement in party politics was blamed on the fact that many Chinese school teachers and students were inspired by the international socialist movement. Hence if anti-British sentiment was unchecked, it would be detrimental to the British colonial government's roadmap for a peaceful handover to local elite. Shortly after the above-mentioned report was passed by the Legislative Assembly in 1959, the PAP, which had won the trust of the British colonial government, emerged with a left-wing stance and won an overwhelming victory in the election. The PAP victory was to lead to an education policy which would recognise English as the unified language of instruction in the schools. The process leading to the demise of Chinese schools was gradual and lasted for 27 years until the last Chinese school disappeared in 1986.

For decades, there have been numerous interpretations discussing the demise of Chinese schools from Singapore. The most subjective and severe criticisms came from the teachers and students of the former Nanyang University and their supporters. There were many emotional and spiteful accusations. For the sake of objectivity, this study relies largely on academic and analytical materials as its main source of reference. Discussion is centred on three key factors.

Transfer of Power to Pro-British Elite

It is understandable that the colonial government would prefer a pro-British faction for the peaceful transfer of power instead of to a left-leaning anti-colonial force. This force was associated largely with the Chinese schools. In the PAP team that came to power in 1959, there were a few Chinese-educated leaders recruited from the Labour Front and labour union organisations. The rest was largely educated in English schools and highly proficient in the English language. The newly-formed PAP government inherited an administrative system fully operational in English language. English was already the language of public administration, the judiciary and education, the professions and international trade.

More importantly, the English-educated elite had a strong sense of mission. Besides committed to developing Singapore's modern economy, especially through industrialisation to create

employment and to relieve general poverty, they believed that education was crucial in winning votes. The use of the political power of the state to control and manage education was hence considered essential (Cai, 2014; Lee, 2000). To embark on nation building, the PAP government believed that it was important to promote a common language in a diverse society of different cultures (Li, 2015).

PAP's Monolingual Policy

National identity in Singapore is a relatively new political construct after its birth as a city-state after separation from Malaysia in 1965. Nationalism in Singapore was then a vague concept and there was hardly any pre-existing cultural or social cohesion as the basis of a nation-state. Language choice can be seen as an "artificial nationalism" rooted in the exercise of power, education policy and shared linguistic culture. A common language identity notably in the education system, has also the capacity to disseminate a nationalistic sentiment and thinking (Hajjaj, 2022; Gellner, 2006).

There are multiple views in support of Singapore's use of English as an identity of power in terms of the main medium of school instruction. For example, Wong Ting-Hong (2005) used the "small country logic" argument to explain the rationale of Singapore's choice of English language. As a small country with a majority of ethnic Chinese, he felt that it was wise to choose English because it is geopolitically surrounded by Pan-Malay sentiments in an environment where racial hostility could surface from time to time. Using a foreign language would reduce the exposure to external threat of a small and vulnerable country.

Gopinathan (1979) argued in favour of a unified language education policy, and the use of English would allow pupils of all races to enroll under one roof and to minimise misunderstanding arising from ethnic and religious differences. This was part of PAP's initiative in undoing the effects of hostility and segregation seen as a consequence of the legitimised use of different media of instruction in the four streams of schools. Gopinathan also cited Lee Kuan Yew's view that having the mother tongue as second language for ethnic Chinese in the unified school would help to impart social unity and cohesion as well as to transmit essential traditional values. The advantage of a policy of bilingualism is the enhancement of national integration through better interethnic communication. Above all, this would provide the whole community with a more balanced view of the world, and yet retain a sense of identity of each ethnic group. Gopinathan placed emphasis equally on the utilitarian value of English, which provided employment opportunities and facilitated the learning of science and technology from the West.

From the government's standpoint, a common language has the capacity to promote similar attitudes and values which can serve as unifying forces to forge the formation of a nation-state (Leibowitz, 1974). PAP leaders such as Goh Keng Swee, advocated the importance of building of a sense of common destiny. In 1967, as then Minister of Home Affairs and Defense, he saw the need

to introduce a common view of history in Singapore's complex multi-racial society (Chew, 1991). The introduction of the mandatory national service in the same year was the beginning of this intention to create a sense of national loyalty and responsibility in a new nation in which citizens share the same destiny.

For the ruling party in the post-colonial era, establishing a new mandate with an object of allegiance is a necessary means to safeguard the national interests and party survival. This brewing of post-colonial consciousness of a new nation out of an ethnic Chinese community who had a strong awareness of Chineseness and felt subconsciously proud of their allegiance to China even after independence, was seen by PAP leaders as indispensable. Through the implementation of a two-year national service, the PAP ruling party stipulated that English was the common language for training young people of all ethnic groups which would thus serve to consolidate the social-political status of the English language.

In his doctoral dissertation submitted to the Chinese Department of the National University of Singapore, Li Shufei (2015) made an incisive analysis of the PAP government's strategy of "unifying the education system". During the early days of its rule before consolidating its political power, the PAP government did not place direct emphasis on changing Chinese schools' medium of instruction to avoid suspicion and backlash from the Chinese-educated community. Vis-à-vis Nanyang University, the highest institution using Chinese in teaching, its approach was extremely careful because most of the party's votes had still to rely on ethnic Chinese grassroots.

Similarly, Li (2015) also noticed that Tan Lark Sye who proposed the founding of Nanyang University, was aware of the sensitivity of the political and linguistic environment of Malaysia and Singapore. Tan initially called Nanyang University "China University" and "Mahua University" (literally Malaysian Chinese university), and "Mandarin Chinese" as *Guoyu* or national language. His tone changed in 1953 on the occasion of "Declaration of the Founding of Nanyang University" where he talked about the importance of Chinese, English and Malay languages, and the need to study the cultures of various ethnic groups and absorb the essence of them. By diluting the Chineseness of Nanyang University, Tan hoped to win over the British, non-Chinese ethnic groups as well as the sympathy of the English-educated Chinese groups.

However, Nanyang University, which symbolised the highest institution of Chinese education in Singapore, was vulnerable to critical attacks by hostile opponents. In addition to being accused of containing student agents from the MCP, Nanyang University's academic curriculum was subjected to criticism. It must be noted that the educational programme brought in by Lin Yutang (林语堂), the first president, belonged to a 4-year system similar to that of the United States or Taiwan. Its undergraduate programme was basically a general education system with no honours degree, and the passing mark was 60%. Students were admitted through an entrance examination, and they had no major problem to graduate as long as they studied hard enough. This academic system was very

different from that of Singapore's University of Malaya, which adopted the British elitist system with a relatively high elimination rate.

As such, Nanyang University having a high graduation rate and high examination scores, a normal feature in Taiwan and the United States, appeared in the eyes of the British trained PAP leaders to be of lower standard unworthy of being recognised. In 1960, Action Weekly (1960), the official publication of the PAP, commented in the article "Nantah University's Graduation Examination" that out of 470 final year students at Nanyang University, only 31 failed. This meant that almost all students would graduate with a degree. Apart from accusing Nanyang University's low standards, the PAP government hinted that they could not accept the "one country, two systems" principle.

In order to justify the restructuring of Nanyang University and eventually closing it, a series of reports were prepared. These included the *Barnes Report*, *Gwee Ah Ling Report* and later the *Wang Gungwu Report.* The *Nanyang University Review Committee Report* submitted by Gwee Ah Ling began to highlight the importance of using English text and reference books for teaching staff and students in teaching and learning. As a matter of fact, these reports were designed to pave the way for a unified curriculum system for schools in Singapore, including universities, in line with an objective to establish a multi-ethnic national community with a strong local awareness. On August 8, 1980, five years after Nanyang University changed its teaching medium from Chinese to English, it was merged officially with Singapore University to become the National University of Singapore. Eight days later, Nanyang University held its last convocation ceremony, and then slipped into history.

Economic Survival: Integration into the Western Capitalist Supply Chain

The PAP came to power in 1959 and opted for English as the main medium of instruction in schools. Instead of implementing a coercive remodeling of Chinese schools, it relied instead on publicising the economic value of the English language as an incentive to persuade Chinese parents to enroll their children in English schools and in which Chinese would be taught as a compulsory mother tongue (Kwok, 2001). This decision was a move to adopt Western capitalist ideas to enhance the effectiveness of economic growth. It was also a pragmatic strategy for economic survival. Singapore had no natural resources and still lacked a well-educated population and an industrial base. Its economy was mainly supported by its entrepot trade. In the early 1960s, the Singapore economy was in bad shape and lacking job opportunities, a population that was illiterate and semi-literate, and an unemployment rate of up to 14%. At the same time, the population was growing at a rate of 4.4%. In charge of economic strategy was Dr Goh Keng Swee, an expert in neoclassical economics who believed that the key to economic growth was free market capitalism to foster the entrepreneurial spirit. He found the "militant" unions then as an obstacle to attracting local and foreign investments (Chen, 2010).

Before the PAP assumed power, it had to work with the left-leaning unions to win over the support of the grassroots in the general election. At a time of widespread poverty and job shortages, the grassroots were willing to accept political parties that could improve their living standards. Whether a ruling party was leaning towards the left or right, the key consideration was that it must be able to serve the people and to improve their basic living conditions. In less than 10 years after the PAP came to power, the government had cracked down sternly on corruption and successfully purged the secret societies (Lee, 2000). Since then, Singapore has embarked on a path of development to become a developed economy.

The Singapore Developmental Model

The Singapore developmental model is based on the establishment of a strong, market-cum-profit-oriented strategy using internationally competitive government-linked enterprises to lead and to work with large multinational corporations. The model places strong emphasis on high efficiency and productivity, and managed by a competent elite of professionals and technocrats working independently and free of political influence. Rewards are directly linked to job performance and overall saving of production costs (Vollgyi, 2019; Wong & Liu, 2017; Lee, 1993). This is seen as an effective incentive by which those carrying heavy burdens of leadership and responsibilities are fully compensated. This economic stimulus mechanism which was set up in the late 1960s is now seen as a key factor of Singapore's rapid economic development.

Singapore's meritocracy system enables school children, irrespective of their background, to climb up the executive ladder in their career. Parents encourage their children to work hard and comply with the government's elite standards that focus on English proficiency, examination grades and work attitude (Wong, 2021). This developmental model in which English plays a dominant role has brought about the success of export-oriented industrialisation, accelerated economic development, and the influx of foreign capital. The spread of English schools has also gained momentum as Singapore initiated its modernisation process from the 1960s when public housing became popular throughout the island. In the process, the urbanisation of rural areas forced many small Chinese schools originally run by associations to close down. After residents moved into a public housing apartment, most of their children would be enrolled in English schools newly built by the government. In 1981, the PAP government believed that the closure of Nanyang University was ripe and it was merged with the University of Singapore to become the National University of Singapore.

Defeat of the Left-leaning Chinese-Educated

There is another element that contributed to the disappearance of Chinese schools. This was the divergence between the left-leaning ideology of Chinese school students after World War Two

and the thinking of the ruling elite with British school backgrounds. Although leftist trade union leader Lim Chin Siong publicly declared that he was not a communist, his policy line would be a socialist approach similar to that adopted by newly independent countries such as India, Burma, and Indonesia. His policy would most likely lead to a less open economy and more resistant to open investment from Western capitalist states. In the 1950s to 1960s, Western investment tended to be seen as a source of exploitative "neocolonialism." Singapore would have established more ties with the socialist camp led by the former Soviet Union and China, and tended towards a "self-reliant" form of economic development.

Singapore's left-leaning ideology of Chinese school students originated from the 1920s when China was in political chaos. China's May 4th Movement, anti-warlords and anti-imperialist movements all left a deep imprint on Chinese students in Singapore who were concerned about the development of the motherland. During the confrontation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, the corruption and incompetence of the Kuomintang led Chinese school students to sympathise with the Chinese Communist Party, given that the latter advocated social justice and preached to construct an egalitarian new society, even though this ideal society appeared "utopic" when we look back today. Young students in Singapore had largely ignored human weaknesses of egoism and whether Singapore could survive economically as an island state without natural resources and an industrial base.

Singapore's Chinese school students' anti-colonial movement was not only influenced by the leftist thought from China, but also due to the discriminatory policies of the British colonial administration against Chinese schools. As early as the 1930s, the Governor of Singapore, Cecil Clementi, claimed that Chinese schools were a breeding ground for fostering loyalty to China and against the colonial rule. When a peaceful transfer of power was made by the British to the PAP government in 1959, many Chinese school students continued to resist Lee Kuan Yew with the same passion as they did to the British. Their shouts with pro-Chinese education slogans were supported and made use of by the Malayan Communist elements (Wong, 2004). Both Chinese school students and the MCP were seen by their political opponents as two in one. In the 1963 general election, 13 Nanyang University alumni became opposition candidates to stand against PAP representatives (Wong, 2005). They had strong appeals in the eyes of the Chinese grassroots in campaigns using Chinese Mandarin or dialects, and fought against most of the PAP candidates who spoke English or poor Chinese.

An incident that occurred in Nanyang University was the appointment Chuang Chu-Lin as President after Lin Yutang's departure. Chuang was seen as a "pro-Communist" figure and the appointment had incurred the displeasure of the PAP leadership. This act was seen as a "contempt of the government" and a signal of MCP's infiltration into the university to oppose the PAP government. The repercussion was a serious one as it not only exacerbated the mutual distrust between Nanyang

University and the government, but also led to the suspension of the citizenship of Tan Lark Sze, Chairman of the university's Board of Directors, in 1964 for "supporting the Communists" (Li, 2015).

As the highest institution of Chinese schools in Singapore, Nanyang University's political and language stance had stood against the policy of the ruling authorities. The differences deepened to the point of no compromise. The only solution seemed to be its abolition by merging with the University of Singapore. Almost at the same time in the early 1980s, Chinese schools in Singapore had virtually disappeared.

Conclusion

Chinese school education in Singapore has gone through a long period of development under the policy of "independence and self-care" in the colonial era, and from the initial period of freedom to the peak period on the eve of self-government. With self-government in 1959, the survival and development of Chinese schools in Singapore became a political issue among party politics. Without political backing, Chinese school education with its support from the disadvantaged Chinese community lost the battle under the joint attack of the British colonial government and the local English-educated elite who had inherited political power. The factors contributing to the abolition process can be attributable to the ambition of PAP leaders to build an independent state by merging the multi-lingual school system into a single stream.

The uniqueness of Singapore's linguistic conflict in schools is not about dispute between different ethnic groups, but one that occurs among the Chinese community. The factors leading to the elimination of Chinese schools of the largest ethnic group are attributable primarily to the strong political will of the PAP leaders to build a strong multi-cultural society under one unified system. In theory, a single-stream education system dominated by English seems to have the cohesive force to unify various ethnic groups, and to foster a society that facilitates easy inter-communal communications. However, this unified education system goes against the Chinese community's desire to retain their strong cultural tradition. Without their language schools, the community's sense of "racial unity and consciousness" with their ancestral roots is weakened. This sentimental attachment was largely rejected by the English-educated especially among those who were seen as anglophile during the colonial and immediate post-colonial era (see Pendley, 1983). A few decades after independence, this ethnic-cultural sentiment of attachment has sharply declined with the younger generations who hardly know much about present-day China.

The Chinese are also highly pragmatic and the choice in using English as the sole medium of instruction has also the capacity to help preserve social control by incorporating a set of values that fits well with the people's concern with achieving a higher standard of living than before. English is an essential tool to open the doors to advanced technology, international trade, professional

knowledge, and has an advantage in engaging in global competition and absorption of foreign capital to enhance economic success. This success means higher income, higher productivity and greater opportunity to achieve personal improvement in careers and professional standing. Increasing integration with the most advanced economies have increasingly driven parents to choose English schools for their children.

The elimination of Chinese schools has changed family language use. According to surveys, only 10.2% of Primary 1 ethnic Chinese pupils in 1980 came from English-speaking families. This proportion has since risen rapidly, and by 2009, it rose to 60%, and the trend is expected to go up further (Nanyang University Alumni, 2012). English is not only essential in the government, it is also used in international trade, high value-added enterprises and applied research institutions such as biotechnology, medicine and health medicine, banking finance and accounting or actuarial science, on which Singapore's economy depends for growth. In effect, English's usage and practical value have changed the status of Chinese into a language of ethnic culture, traditions and the lower income groups.

Nonetheless, to the older Nanyang University graduates who might have a hard feeling towards the closure of their university, many of them might have to be thankful to Singapore's success in its integration into the fiercely competitive global economy for the benefits they have acquired. Having a good knowledge and proficiency in Chinese language, they also found jobs as executives or professionals of large enterprises, especially in China (Wong, 2022). Following China's reform and opening up after the 1980s, they have become the first-choice talent demanded by investors having business in China. In their hearts, the closure of Nanyang University and their resentment towards the past tend to fade as their emotional sentiments and practical values are intertwined.

What is more confusing is that those who were champions in fighting for traditional Chinese culture and Chinese school education had sent their children to English schools for utilitarian reasons. Over the past 40 years, in the rapidly changing social development of Singapore, Mandarin Chinese as a locally spoken language has merely a higher social status than the disappearing dialects but is much subordinated to the English language. The older generation of Singapore's Chinese-educated might have been marginalised for being "left-leaning" and less proficient in English, yet they are compensated by their general success in business undertakings coupled with hard work. Many have moved comfortably into Singapore's cosmopolitanised and globalised business world (Kwok, 2001; Wong, 2022).

It may be argued that, given China's rapidly rising status in global trade, scientific innovations and political-cum-military influence, the practical value of the Chinese language will become apparent. It is in this context that the use and teaching of the Chinese language in Singapore in schools and many professions have also expanded to provide more job opportunities to those equipped with the language skills. It is too early to say how far the status and practical value of

Chinese will change or improve in Singapore. Only time will tell.

* Dr. Tai-Chee Wong [黄大志] was a former Associate Professor, Nanyang Technology University of Singapore; Visiting Professor at Guizhou University of China; and Acting Vice-Chancellor of Berjaya University, Malaysia. Email: taicheewong@gmail.com

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Notes

1 The schools built during this period included were primary schools such as Chongzheng (崇正), Yangzheng (养正), Yingxin (应新), Qifa (启发), Duanmeng (端蒙), Daonan (道南), Yuying (育英), Aitong (爱同), Xingya (兴亚), Nanhua (南华), Chongfu (崇福), Chongben (崇本), Yucai (育才), Guangfu (广福), Zhenqun (振群), Peiqing (培青). Among the middle schools, most were only junior high of which the earliest established was the Chinese High School (华侨中学)in 1918 (Baidu, 2022).

2 Nanhua, Yangzheng, Jingfang (静芳), Catholic High (公教), Huaying (华英) and Zhongzheng, and Nan Chiau (南侨)all established their high school divisions.

3 Examples of local names include Changi (樟宜), Fengshan (凤山) and those based on political ideology following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 include Xinmin (新民 literally new people) and Guanghua (光华 literally revival of China).

4 These new schools were Lihua (立化),Deming (德明),Huayi (华义),and Anglican High School (圣公会).