

## Book Review

A new window of opportunity for research: [Review of the book *Chinese education in Malaysia: Sustainability and development* (in Chinese), by Ruixin Wang and Shwu-Huey Wong]. Kajang, Malaysia: New Era University College, 2023, 291pp. ISBN: 978983-3527-88-5

**Phin-Keong Voon\***

**To cite this book review:** Phin-Keong Voon (2023). A new window of opportunity for research: [Review of the book *Chinese education in Malaysia: Sustainability and development* (in Chinese), by Ruixin Wang and Shwu-Huey Wong]. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 12(2): 99-102. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202312\\_12\(2\).0006](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202312_12(2).0006)

**To link to this book review:** [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202312\\_12\(2\).0006](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202312_12(2).0006)

Modern education in Malaysia began with British colonial rule. The emphasis then was to train junior administrative personnel in English. Education in other languages received little attention. With independence, education in Malaysia assumes the role once occupied by English. Education in other languages remains as a sub-stream and given little or no official support.

Despite the absence of official concern, Chinese education (CE) has survived for 200 years in the Malay Peninsula. In the early nineteenth century, it was found that while “Eastern students” accepted English, they had also insisted on the study of their own languages and traditions. To the Chinese, learning their own language has always been a manifestation of the cultural importance of education. This is made possible by a process of self-help that is internally inspired and funded by the Chinese community.

The history of CE in Malaysia is a crisis-ridden saga of struggles to develop and to survive amidst the interplay of forces driven by conflicting interests. Some of these forces are inherent in CE while others are of external origins. Some are favourable to the existence of CE while others impede or obstruct. The Chinese community labours endlessly to optimise favourable circumstances and to respond in a united stand to deal with external pressures.

Having been in existence continuously for two centuries, CE is uniquely distinctive among Chinese communities overseas in being a complete system in which Chinese (Mandarin) is the

medium of instruction for selected non-language subjects from the kindergarten up to the university level. In contrast, all other countries outside China/Taiwan/Hong Kong/Macao manage only to teach Chinese largely as a language subject.

The efforts of the community to sustain Chinese education deserve to be put on permanent record. What the community has undergone is an unparalleled historical experience unseen and unlikely to be repeated among Chinese communities overseas.

The importance of CE to the Chinese is built upon the driving forces of the family and culture. To the average Chinese family, the need for education is of supreme importance. It is the only avenue by which the majority of families hope to improve their fate and future. Education is more than the pursuit of knowledge, it is the path to the self-cultivation of the “gentleman.” It is the gentleman who possesses the moral qualities necessary to become a true human being who is imbued with the mission to serve the family, community, and country as well as to foster harmony among all. CE in Malaysia is regarded as “mother-tongue” education and is a cultural imperative to the Chinese. It is the channel of transmission of traditional culture and a window on ancient teachings and wisdom. It is an essential ingredient in safeguarding the cultural integrity and ethnic identity of the community.

The current literature on CE is largely preoccupied with two traditional areas of concern, namely, its history and development and the vicissitudes of decline and expansion, and political contestations between official policies and the Chinese community. Other areas of concern, especially the issue of “sustainability”, are largely overlooked in the research on CE.

The question of sustainability of CE in Malaysia is concerned with the existence of an education system whose continuity is not always assured, whose operation is sometimes shaky, whose survival is precarious, and the support for which may wax and wane. In short, its very existence is always under threat.

The issue of sustainability may be seen from the short- and long-term perspectives. The former is concerned with issues of operation and development in the present and short term. The latter impacts the very existence and future of CE as a viable education system. The needs and strategies of each are rather distinct and of different import. Short-term needs are concerned with, among others, issues of funding and financial solvency, enrolment, and teaching staff. Long-term needs are more complex and include such considerations as official policies and the vision and mission of CE as a whole.

This book by Ruixin Wang and Shwu-Huey Wong of New Era University College is a timely publication that addresses the crucial issue of sustainability. It is characterised by several distinctive features:

- By focusing on the concept of sustainability of CE, the publication opens up a new subject of investigation on CE in Malaysia. More importantly, it adopts a macro-view perspective and a

new approach to focus attention on a hitherto rarely conceived research methodology in the study of CE.

- It is ground-breaking by moving away from the conventional themes of history and political contest but instead adopts a new approach in the study of CE from the perspective of “sustainable development.”
- It makes use of a multi-pronged research method comprising conceptual, empirical, and consultative elements and featuring hitherto unavailable data and consultation with a broad selection of personnel with intimate connections with Chinese education. Broadly, the book begins by dealing with the problems confronting CE, followed by strategies in transmission and development, and rounding up with a discussion on the challenges and opportunities of the future.
- Of much credit to the authors are their efforts to interview a panel of practitioners and advocates of CE to gain a better understanding of and deeper insights into CE at the ground level. This panel consists of persons representing the diverse views and opinions on CE and having different relations with CE including school principals, administrators, members of the Board of Directors of schools, and others. This special feature is a testimony of a thorough and serious research that adds fresh perspectives and new dimensions to the study of CE of Malaysia.
- The inclusion of an index of keywords to add a special feature that is rarely seen in Chinese publications.

CE represents the collective endeavours especially of the Chinese. Despite the identification with this community, CE has contributed significantly to the nurturing of talents and manpower to help fuel the process of modern development. In this regard, it has indeed featured as an essential part of the Malaysian nation-building process.

This is an excellent product of scholarship on a subject that has always attracted the attention of researchers. It is the outcome of an academic project of a Huaqiao University (China) grant awarded to the authors on a competitive basis. It is the final fruits of an intense research effort conducted over a two-year period in 2021 and 2022. That the project was successfully completed in the midst of a raging Covid-19 pandemic is proof of the professionalism and commitment of the authors.

The authors are Associate Professors in the Department of Education of New Era University College. Dr. Wang is a domiciled resident with an educational background in Philosophy from China and has developed the only undergraduate programme on the Teaching of Chinese as a Second Language in Malaysian universities. Dr. Wong has an education background rooted in a Malaysian Chinese high school background and tertiary education in Taipei and universities in Nanjing and Wuhan. She has prior experience as a senior teacher in a Chinese secondary school. The authors are actively engaged in research on Chinese education in general and on the Malaysian

situation in particular. Both are busily involved in curricular planning and teaching including the supervision of local and foreign post-graduate students as well as presenting papers in conferences both at home and abroad.

\* Dr. Phin-Keong Voon [文平强] is Professor and Academic Director, New Era University College, Kajang, Malaysia. Email: [phinkeong.voon@newera.edu.my](mailto:phinkeong.voon@newera.edu.my)