

Book Review

Chinese education in Malaysia. A review of *Resistance and compromise: The influence of Malaysian ethnic Chinese community on the policy setting of mother language education among ethnic Chinese* [抗争与妥协——马来西亚华社对华族母语教育政策制定的影响] by Chun-Yan Hu [胡春艳]. Jinan University Press, 2012, 236 pp.

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Chinese education has been in uninterrupted existence in Malaysia for 200 years. It has evolved into a system that uses the Chinese language as a medium of instruction from early childhood to tertiary levels. This social phenomenon is clearly a unique achievement among Chinese communities overseas. It is a combination of social, cultural and political circumstances that has provided the necessary conditions for the existence of this state of affairs.

There is a considerable volume of literature in Chinese and English on Chinese education in Malaysia. Most deal with the history, official education policies and related issues but all tell a tale of the tortuous journey of Chinese education. Among the numerous publications that have appeared in recent years include Tan Liok Ee's *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaya, 1945-61* (1997), Kua Kia Soong's *The Chinese Schools of Malaysia: A Protean Saga* (2008), Tay Lian Soo's four-volume study on the history of Chinese education (1996-2001) and a similar study by Mok Soon Sang (2000). The last two are in Chinese. This general emphasis has continued, as shown by the publication of Hu's *Resistance and Compromise* in 2012.

Unlike most researchers on Malaysian Chinese education who are local academics, Hu is among a select group of Mainland Chinese scholars with interest in this subject. *Resistance and Compromise* is adapted from her doctoral thesis and represents the outcome of an intense and rigorous process of research on a theme centred on the contest between official policies and Chinese grass roots responses in a continual play of education politics from the immediate post-war years to the first decade of the present century.

Resistance and Compromise argues that mother tongue education is a necessary means to maintain ethnic and cultural identity and that the development of Chinese education in Malaysia

has a demonstration effect for Chinese communities in other ASEAN countries and various minority groups in their efforts to uphold mother-tongue education. Hu believes that attempts to improve inter-ethnic relations and understanding will provide the right path in efforts to revive mother-tongue education (pp. 1-4). Chinese education is treated as more than an education issue but involves politics, culture and other factors. These are treated from the perspectives of the need to undertake a comprehensive research on Chinese education, the relationships between education and nation building, Chinese political parties and organisations, and Malaysian politics (pp.5-13). A key concern of the author is to understand why Malaysia is unique in the development of Chinese education, the influence and evolution of official policies on education, how Chinese political parties and organisations contest official policies and the resolution of their internal differences, the implications of the Chinese education movement, and its lessons and demonstration effects on minority groups in their struggles to safeguard their interests.

The book begins with a historical overview of the evolution of Chinese education and its current situation including the “predicament of success” of Chinese primary and private high schools. It traces the origins of the national education system of Malaysia and examines various policies that were meant to contain the growth of Chinese education or threaten its survival. The discussion is juxtaposed with that on the influence of left wing ideology and the role of Chinese organisations in relation to mother-tongue education. The three chapters that follow present a chronological treatment of policies on Chinese education between the end of the Japanese Occupation and 1969, the years from 1971 to 1990, and those from 1991 to 2010. The first period saw the introduction of several education reports on plans to establish a national education policy based on the use of Malay, but with certain provisions that encroached on the interests of Chinese education. The 1971-1990 period was defined by the New Economic Policy which was introduced after the racial conflicts of 1969. This Policy marked a watershed in Malaysian politics with the beginning of preferential, ethnically-biased policies. The last period was one of changing international scenarios but when domestic education-related policies continued to be contested.

The book has contributed much to the understanding of the rocky path of existence of Chinese education and has yielded valuable insights into the spirit of the community in safeguarding the interest of Chinese education. However, the tireless labours of the community were taking place in a general official environment that had permitted the existence of Chinese education.

The history of Chinese education is marked by the constant contest between Chinese “resistance” and official policies. This is a theme that runs through the literature. The author detects signs of a new influence in the form of improved relations with China, which has become more evident with the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative a year after the publication of the book. The future is seen to be a continuation of the current interplay of opportunities and difficulties to present what the author terms as “success dilemma” in the form

of staff shortages, curricular issues, the occasional adverse official directives, and frequent internal community disagreements.

Considering the combination of factors, the author is cautiously optimistic about the future of Chinese education. However, questions on its sustainability have not received serious attention. Insufficient attention to the issue of funding that is so crucial to the survival of Chinese education is an omission rather than a weakness of the book. This issue too does not fall within the scope of the study, much it is also overlooked or ignored in general academic discourse. Few have looked into the motivating forces that drive and sustain the Chinese community's determination to raise funds to meet the shortfall of funding. This is clearly a major issue that awaits serious attention.

A salient feature of Chinese education is that, having survived for 200 years and having developed into its present form as a complete system from primary to tertiary levels, it has perhaps proven its viability and durability. But it would be a mistake to believe that this is entirely the result of counter-strategies in response to official policies. It would be unfortunate to take for granted the equally vital factor of financial support to ensure routine work and future planning. Over the years, the Chinese community has evolved a workable mechanism by which funding for Chinese schools is raised. This mechanism is made possible by the combined efforts of Chinese clan organisations, chambers of commerce, guilds, the business community, benefactors, ordinary workers and many others.

There are currently about 6,000 primary national schools in Malaysia. In the 2006-2010 period, the 1,280 or so Chinese schools which accounted for 21% of total enrollment in primary schools, received only 3.6% of the total development budget. The 60 privately-run Chinese secondary schools received a paltry allocation of RM1.56-1.73 million from their respective states each year (p. 42). Chinese education comes at a high cost. The average monthly tuition fee in a Chinese independent high school in Kuala Lumpur runs into several hundred ringgit compared with almost free education in national schools. Funds provided by the Chinese community to make up for the shortfall to pay for facilities and development in primary and secondary Chinese schools have been dubbed the "second income tax" of the community.

Other omissions in the books are technical in nature. The 3 diagrams, 15 tables, and 6 appendices are not listed in the Contents page. Another glaring absence is the list of index that facilitates easy cross-referencing. This is a general weakness of books published in Chinese and one that should warrant attention by authors and publishers. The last is the lack of a systematic arrangement of the English reference materials which should be listed according to the last names of the authors.

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