

## Book Review: The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia

Chin Tek Yoong<sup>1\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Institut Kajian Etnik, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: P85983@siswa.ukm.edu.my

### CORRESPONDING

#### AUTHOR (\*):

Chin Tek Yoong

(P85983@siswa.ukm.edu.my)

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### ABSTRACT

The book “The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia”, authored by Tan Yao Sua, published in 2021 by Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Petaling Jaya. This book’s publication is considered relevant since it will help to provide an overview of how Chinese mother tongue education has evolved through time. Currently, the majority of scholarly works that discuss historical issues and the development of Chinese mother tongue education are published in Chinese language, making them inaccessible to readers who do not speak or comprehend the language. For readers who can understand Chinese, their exposure to reading materials that touch on historical issues and the development of Chinese mother tongue education in languages other than Chinese can certainly give them a more comprehensive picture. Indeed, the reader’s perception can certainly avoid the sense of punishment that is pushed outside of the narrow and assumed ethnic scope. It is also appropriate as scholarly reference material for researchers who specialize in Chinese mother tongue education as well as readers from all walks of life who are curious about the background of Malaysia’s Chinese mother tongue education system.

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## 1. Introduction

Mother tongue education researchers are drawn to Malaysia because of the long history of Chinese mother tongue education, which is rich in tradition and development. It can currently be argued that Malaysia has successfully maintained a full-fledged mother tongue Chinese educational system and has administrative autonomy over Chinese schools. Outside of China and Taiwan, Malaysia has a full and comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education system. The National-type Chinese Primary Schools system, the Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSS) system, and the university colleges fully developed by the Chinese ethnic community are all examples of the Chinese school systems that are currently available in Malaysia. The overwhelming immigration of Chinese immigrants to Malaya began when Chinese schools first appeared. These immigrants have spread widely across Malaya since their arrival.

Tan Yao Sua is the author of the book "The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia," published by Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Petaling Jaya, in 2021. 121 printed pages total, with a bibliography at the end, make up the book. Tan's efforts to publish this book are regarded as being timely because it can significantly improve the narrative of the history of the development of Chinese mother tongue education. It is also appropriate as scholarly reference material for researchers who specialise in Chinese mother tongue education as well as readers from all walks of life who are curious about the background of Malaysia's Chinese mother tongue education system.

The author's research interests include Chinese Studies in Malaysia, Educational Policy Analysis, Minority Education, and Educational Sociology. This can be seen in most of the previous academic publication series by Tan, which have been used as a source of reference by researchers who are trying to carry out an extensive study about Chinese mother tongue education and vernacular education in Malaysia. Armed with deep expertise and passion in this field, it is possible that Tan can open the minds of readers who are trying to read and understand the contents of this book. This is because nowadays most of the local book stores sell books related to the historical issue and development of Chinese mother tongue education written by the authors in Chinese, and readers who do not understand Chinese cannot benefit from the content of such reading material. For readers who can understand Chinese, their exposure to reading materials that touch on historical issues and the development of Chinese mother tongue education in languages other than Chinese can certainly give them a more comprehensive picture. Indeed, the reader's perception can certainly avoid the sense of punishment that is pushed outside of the narrow and assumed ethnic scope. The book "The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia" is written in an easy-to-understand language without using scientific terminologies that can only be understood by a few of the academic communities. This book is divided into specific chapters to make it easier for readers to understand the story of the author's presentation in this book. Readers do not necessarily have to read from the first chapter; they can choose any part of the chapter as the start of their reading. As intended by Tan (2021: VIII), "with the publication of this book, readers will have a better grasp of the development of Chinese education in Malaysia as well as the many problems and challenges confronting this system of Chinese mother tongue education".

## 2. Review

Tan starts Chapter 1 by explaining that the background of the Malayan Chinese originates from Mainland Chinese immigrants who arrived in Malaya in the 19th century. They spread over this land of British colonial territory upon their arrival and eventually contributed to Malaya's ethnic composition. Malaya's primary ethnic makeup was characterised by a plural society. The Chinese school system, which was founded by Chinese immigrants, was unstructured in its early years. The curriculum placed a strong emphasis on traditional Chinese classics and skills. As a result of the political turmoil in Mainland China, the number of modern school establishments has increased. The British colonial government's efforts to restructure the existing educational system by introducing the new system belonged to national schools that used the English language and *bahasa Melayu* as the medium of teaching. The activists saw a sustained threat to the position of the Chinese schools after WWII. Dong Zong and Jiao Zong, as the custodians of Chinese schools, have been on a mission to sustain Chinese mother tongue education since the 1950s, and they have engaged in negotiations with various parties before. The adoption of the Razak Report in 1956, which outlined specific rules for the national education system, undoubtedly had an impact on the Chinese secondary school's standing.

With the implementation of the 1961 Education Act, the destiny of the Chinese secondary school system was finally divided into National-type Chinese Secondary Schools (NTCSS) and Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSS), increasing the concern of Chinese mother tongue education activists about the future of Chinese secondary schools.

Chinese mother tongue education experienced many stages of development in the early days. In Chapter 2 – Chapter 4, it shows Tan's efforts to describe the immigration of the Chinese to Malaya, the change in the form of private Chinese schools to modern Chinese schools, and Chinese schools under control and supervision by the British colonial power. There are many notes recorded about the origin of Chinese immigrants in Malaya; they originated from provinces in Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi. The maritime trading activities of Chinese merchants were a major factor in the arrival of large numbers of immigrants to Malaya. The number of Chinese immigrants (labourers) and Sinkhek (new guests) was increasing, and the local community's appearance had completely changed as a result of the existence of business communities dominated by powerful Chinese clan associations. Early Chinese immigrants worked as small business assistants, tin mining labourers in the Federated Malay States, and commercial farmers under the Kangcu system in Johor, southern Malaya. As a result, among Chinese immigrants, Chinese immigrant leaders had a strong representation of consulting power in negotiating with authorities. As explained by Tan, the oldest Chinese school located in Penang, Malaya, was Wufu Shuyuan, and the curriculum was more focused on memorising the Chinese Old Classics. The Hundred Days' Reform, which took place in Mainland China from 11 June to 21 September, 1898, inspired the establishment of modern Chinese schools in Malaya, which replaced traditional Chinese schools. The Chinese reformists had made modern Chinese schools a place to convey modern beliefs and promote the ideology of their struggle. The political climate in Mainland China increasingly influenced the establishment of modern Chinese schools in Malaya, particularly after the Wuchang Uprising and the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Tan in Chapter 4 tells of the British colonial government not mixing with Chinese school affairs until the 1920s, but the British government's stand changed and it began to take control and monitor Chinese schools as its students were found to be involved in demonstrations and Chinese schools were abused by Chinese nationalists for their hidden agendas. However, the British government's control and monitoring of Chinese schools had no long-term impact on the development of Chinese schools.

When Malaya became independent, it emerged from British colonial rule and became a sovereign state. The implementation of national education policies changed the image of Chinese schools. In Chapter 5 – Chapter 7, Tan describes how the British government initiated a restructuring of Chinese schools, especially at the primary school level, during the period of decolonization and used English and Malay to teach education in Malaya, emphasising speeding up the process of nation-building. The Holgate report recommended English as the language of instruction, but UMNO strongly objected to it. When it came time to defend their interests, the Barnes report and the Fenn-Wu report were not enough to satisfy both Malays and non-Malays. The 1954 White Paper was the British colonial government's most recent attempt to restructure the educational system, but racial divisions in the educational system remained. Later on, when Malaya gained independence from Britain in 1957, the Alliance government would choose its own destiny, freeing itself from foreign occupation. Before the independence of Malaya, Chinese mother tongue education activists saw the 1955 Federal Legislative Election as a golden opportunity for Chinese mother tongue education to be legally recognized. Equal and fair positions, free mother tongue education, and Chinese as one of the official languages were

among the activists' demands for Chinese mother tongue education in Chinese schools. As a result of this allegation, the Alliance came under political pressure. During that time, the demands of Chinese mother tongue education activists will have an impact on the outcome of elections. MCA leaders, Chinese mother tongue education activists, and UMNO representatives gathered at Tan Cheng Lok's residence in Malacca. According to the decisions of the meeting, the Chinese mother tongue education activists had chosen not to make their demands publicly, but the Alliance promised to fulfil their demands after winning the election. After the Federal Legislative Election, inevitably, the Alliance's elite were forced to make concessions in order to meet the demands of Malays and Chinese mother tongue education activists. The Alliance's efforts to modify Malaya's educational policy were marked by the 1956 Razak Report, which pursued strategies to accommodate all ethnic groups through vernacular education. Chinese mother tongue education activists were concerned about the Razak Report's ultimate goal of jeopardising Chinese primary schools, but they failed to understand the language policy in a broader context. In Chapter 7, Tan describes the 1961 Education Act that changed the status of Chinese secondary schools. Chinese secondary schools had to decide whether they would face financial hardships if they used Chinese as their primary teaching language or if it was removed entirely from the national education system for secondary education. Other Chinese secondary schools defended the "original" Chinese school and opposed government subsidies, which remained as an Independent Chinese Secondary School (ICSS). In the meantime, Penang Chung Ling High School was the first in the country to be designated as a National-type Chinese Secondary School (NTCSS).

According to Tan, the perseverance and determination of the Chinese mother tongue education activists who have never given up and successfully established a comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education in Malaysia is a legacy. Description Tan, in Chapter 8 – Chapter 11, tells the history and the development of Chinese vernacular education in Malaysia. Most Chinese primary schools were founded in the 20s and 30s of the early 20th century. However, the position of Chinese primary schools was unstable, according to the Chinese language education activists, as there were acts that threatened the position of Chinese primary schools. Although the Malaysian government had made the National School System a major choice among Chinese parents in the early years, the Chinese ethnic community was more interested in enrolling their children in Chinese primary schools. Until today, despite the full support received by the Chinese primary school, this type of school still faces many problems, particularly in terms of the significant differences in student enrollment between Chinese schools located in urban and rural areas. There are also Chinese primary schools in rural areas dominated by non-Chinese students. Although the government is implementing a number of programmes aimed at integrating National School students with Chinese primary school students, Chinese mother tongue education activists remain wary of the government's suspected attempts to change the Chinese primary school's original identity. At the secondary level of Chinese education, ICSS, a school system that does not adhere to the National Education Policy, is separated from the national education system, is not subsidised by the Ministry of Education, and its academic qualifications are not recognised by the government. Some of the NTSS also established ICSS after absorbing over-aged students who are ineligible for the NTSS due to age limit factors. Following the implementation of the MSSEE (Malaysian Secondary School Entrance Examination), about 30% of students qualified for government secondary schools, while the rest continued their secondary education at ICSS. However, the abolition of the MSSEE caused many primary school students to continue their studies in government secondary schools, and of course, ICSS had not received a response. The number of unsatisfactory entries and the lack of school equipment have led to a prolonged

ICSS crisis. Chinese mother tongue education activists were aware of the problems facing ICSS due to its lack of attractiveness. They were determined to find a way out, and collaborating with the Perak Chinese School Committees' Association (CSCA), they launched the 1973 Perak ICSS Revival Movement. The objectives of the movement were to rebrand the ICSS, by raising donations from the public, enhancing equipment at the Perak ICSS, designing the ICSS' own curriculum, and introducing the ICSS Unified Examination. Chinese mother tongue education activists support the development of the Chinese mother tongue education system. After Singapore was separated from Malaysia, Singapore Nanyang University was not recognised as a university owned by the Chinese ethnic community in Malaysia. The idea of establishing Merdeka University had received objections and criticisms from MCA and UMNO top leaders. Chinese mother tongue education activists have completely made up for their disappointment to this day. The Chinese mother tongue education system in Malaysia today is said to have achieved its goal with the establishment of three university college institutions, located in Penang, Selangor, and Johor, respectively, that are fully developed by the Chinese ethnic community, as well as the ICSS schooling systems that are growing. In the final section, Tan concluded that the challenges of the ICSS remained following the establishment of international schools that were able to match the ICSS in terms of quality of education. However, the history and development of Chinese mother tongue education in Malaysia have left a legacy since the arrival of Chinese immigrants from Mainland China, and in the interests of Chinese mother tongue education activists, Chinese mother tongue education has been developed on the basis of the British Laissez-Faire Policy, marking their continuous perseverance in defence of Chinese mother tongue education.

### 3. Conclusion

Overall, the content in this book is conveyed in simple language, making it ideal for targeted readers. It is suggested that the book be translated into Malay and Chinese so that Chinese mother tongue education activists can read the translated version and gain a better understanding of the evolution and development of Chinese mother tongue education from various perspectives.

### Reference

Tan, Y. S. (2021). *The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Center.