

Impact of Language Policy and Nation-building in Ethnic Hegemonic State: Issues Challenging the Resilience of Malaysian Chinese Schools, 1995-2008

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Abstract

The implementation of language policy and nation-building process always emerges as a difficult task in a new state. Malaysia attained its independence in 1957 but due to its multi-racial and multi-cultural social outlook, the language policy and nation-building process becomes a topic of contestation and contention among its citizens of different ethnic origins. This paper aims to elucidate the impact of national language policy and nation-building against the maintenance of Chinese schools in Malaysia. The Chinese community in Malaysia is a distinct and special group of Chinese overseas as compare to other groups of Chinese overseas in the region of Southeast Asia. With the percentage of Chinese in the country diminishes to only 22.6%, the Chinese in Malaysia is now practically considered as a minority group in a state which is dominated by the Bumiputera (sons of the soil) Malay. As Chinese overseas, Malaysian Chinese community in Malaysia has undergone various adaptation and acculturation in the new nation. Nevertheless, due to the cultural diversity and the Malay dominated polity of the country, the Chinese have developed a distinct Malaysian Chinese culture and identity based on the traditional Chinese culture and its development in the new milieu.

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The UMNO-Malay dominated state which pursuit a Malay ethno-nationalistic course of nation building has proclaimed Malay education as national school of the country. Consequently, the Chinese schools have encountered various marginalizations by the state. However, the efforts of the state to undermine the development of Chinese schools failed to deliver the desired results. The struggles of Malaysian Chinese to maintain and protect their mother-tongue schools have been spectacular. The main impetus for this concerted effort of the Chinese community is due to the apprehension of erosion of their identity and cultural roots. This paper aims at studying issues impinged upon development of the Chinese schools in the period of 1995-2008. This author will elucidate the controversial Vision School program and the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (EteMS) and its impact on Chinese schools. The discussions in this paper will focus on the endeavours and strategies employed by the leaders and activists of *Dongjiaozong* to safeguard the characteristic and identity of Chinese schools in Malaysia.

Keywords: language policy, ethnic hegemonic state, Chinese schools, Vision School, Teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (EteMS)

Introduction

The Chinese community in Malaysia is a distinct and special group of Chinese overseas as compare to other groups of Chinese overseas in the region of Southeast Asia. With the percentage of Chinese in the country diminishes to only 22.6%, the Chinese in Malaysia is now practically considered as a minority group in a state which is dominated by the *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) Malay.

The political power of the Chinese in Malaysia has been eroded after the episode of racial riot in 1969. As a result the community has encountered continuous political marginalization and encroachment of its interests due to the ascendancy and supremacy of UMNO Malay political clout. Although the community faces various predicament in its educational development, but the perseverance and the struggle of Malaysian Chinese to maintain and sustain the Chinese schools has transformed into a social movement that has impacted upon the polity of Malaysia and its educational policy. In essence, only Malaysian Chinese schools in the region of Southeast Asia survived to this day, retaining their identity as a salient mother tongue education because they continue to teach essentially in Mandarin and to cater predominantly to ethnic Chinese children. Consequently, Chinese schools in Malaysia have been noted and revered for providing a comprehensive Chinese education and it only trails behind mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Chinese schools have a long history of existence in Malaysia and is now marks its 192 years of existence. First Chinese school in Malaysia can be traced back to the year 1819, where the *Wufu Shuyuan* (五福书院) was found operated in the state of Penang. Its establishment was closely related with the formation of Chinese immigrant settlement in the state. Hence, Chinese schools were set up by the early Chinese immigrants long before Malaya attained its independence. Its existence is to cater for the needs of the immigrants' children. These early group of immigrants came mainly from the southern province of China. Although they were from the lower stratum of Chinese society, but due to the influence of Confucian tradition, they realized the importance of education to their children. Hence they tried all means to provide mother-tongue education to their children, albeit their miserable conditions as they have strived a living in milieu alien to their homeland. Chinese schools which were a component of the vernacular education during the colonial period were neglected by the British government. Consequently, Chinese schools and education have to rely solely on their endeavours to sustain and

develop. Since then, the Chinese community has developed a sense of responsibility and urgency to develop the Chinese schools. Chinese schools have gained tremendous supports of Chinese community in Malaysia, as the statistic in year 2005 showed that 94.7% of the Chinese parents send their children to Chinese primary schools for education (Lee, 2012, p.174).

However the development of Chinese schools and Chinese education in Malaysia has underwent a thorny pathway. After racial riot of 1969, the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) coalition which rules Malaysia is dominated by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), a Malay political party. The national leaders of the ruling regime placed great importance on the task of nation-building so as to create a nation which is acceptable to all and to ensure its survival. The UMNO-dominated Malaysian state has pursued a process of nation-building which emphasized *Bumiputera*-defined identities centred on Malay culture (Loh, 2002). This policy was considered as the most important vehicle for nation-building and to achieve national unity. However the Chinese community, especially the Chinese Guilds and Associations (CGAs) and *Dongjiaozong* (董教总),² the non-governmental Chinese organization which is responsible for championing the continual existence of Chinese schools since the early fifties has persuasively articulated an alternative vision of a democratic multi-ethnic nation in which there could be space for minority languages and cultures. From this alternative vision, its leaders have challenged the legitimacy of state policies on language, education and cultures (Tan, 1992). Consequently, their concerted endeavours in this respect have encountered various restrictions and oppressions by the state. The struggles of Malaysian Chinese to maintain and protect their mother-tongue schools have been spectacular. The main impetus for this concerted effort of the Chinese community is due to the apprehension of erosion of their identity and cultural roots. The cultural resilience, mass mobilization and perseverance manifested in preserving Chinese schools or which is generally known as Chinese education movement is extraordinary in features.

2 *Dongjiaozong* is the collective name for two national bodies of the Chinese School organizations, namely, the United Chinese School Committees Associations of Malaysia, popularly known as *Dongzong* and the United Chinese School Teachers Associations of Malaysia, also known as *Jiaozong*.

The articulation of an alternative vision of nation-building by the Chinese community implies that the Malaysian state is still grappling with the problem of arriving at a notion of nation-building which is acceptable to all ethnic groups. As admitted by Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the then Prime Minister when enunciating “Vision 2020” in 1991, there is a need to create a *Bangsa Malaysia* or “United Malaysian Nation”. Thus, the envisaged notion of the nation-state is yet to be born. Consequently, continued contestations arise from various ethnic and social groups to push forward their notion of nation-of-intent after decades of independence. Shamsul, Amri Baharuddin (1992) has vividly described this phenomenon as “one state with several nations”, meaning that in the broad economic sense it is a coherent variant of a capitalist entity, but in the political and ideological sense it is still searching for a parallel coherence because there exist strong competing nations-of-intent which may be defined as:

The concept of a nation-of-intent may imply a radical transformation of a given state and the exclusion or inclusion of certain groups of people. It may also imply the creation of a new state, but it does not necessarily imply an aspiration for political self-rule on the part of the group of people who are advancing their nation-of-intent. It may be an inclusive construct, open to others and which is employed as the basis for a political platform voicing dissent or a challenge to the established notion of nation. In any case, the concept of nation-of-intent depicts an idea of a nation that still needs to be constructed or reconstructed. It promises the citizens or some of them an opportunity to take part in a ‘grand project’ which they can claim as theirs. (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, 1996, p. 328)

Evolution and Formation of Ethnic Hegemonic State in Malaysia

Malaysia achieved independence through the efforts of the political elites of the Malays, Chinese and Indians and this also entrenched the communal nature of the Malaysian polity. The racial bargains between different ethnic groups that took place before independence paved the way for the emergence of coalition politics which has lasted until today. After independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957 and that of Malaysia in 1963, the leaders of the ruling regime have to address the difficult process of nation-building. The new state comprises a plural society of diverse ethnic groups each with different interests and expectations. Its communal politics was marked by

contestations and contentions in almost every aspect of social and economic life.

The racial riots of 1969 marked a watershed in Malaysian polity. The consequence was that the political configurations of the country underwent palpable changes in favour of the UMNO Malay political elites. These changes bear heavily on the development of the politics of ethnicity and citizenship in the post-independence period. In the new political order, the UMNO elites have fully controlled the state and its apparatus. The entrenchment of UMNO-Malay political supremacy since the racial riot of 1969 then is unable and never challenge by the non-Malay communities in the country. The elites in UMNO have taken full advantage of their political clout to implement various state policies that cater to Malay interests. This has been made possible by the shift in political and economic resources to the state and the UMNO-Malay elites.

In elucidating this new political order, Vasil (1980, p. 222) concludes, "the politic of accommodation was given up once and for all". Mauzy (1993, p. 111) depicts the new power sharing as "accommodation on essentially Malay terms". It has led to the institutionalization of UMNO-Malay political supremacy on the one hand and to the erosion of the Chinese political and cultural rights on the other. Hence the domination of UMNO's elites over the Malaysian polity has reached an unprecedented scale and many scholars espouse "hegemony" as the best terminology that best describes this supremacy. In depicting the emergence of this new political structure of Malaysian polity after 1969, Weiner (1987, pp. 35-36) coined the term Ethnic Hegemonic State. He further elaborated that the process of nation-building that employs the ethnic hegemony approach normally will lead to the negation of power and influence of certain ethnic groups:

Ethnic hegemony has been exercised in a variety of ways from the repression of ethnic and religious minorities to the more benign use of state power to give preferences in education and employment to the dominant ethnic group. (Weiner, 1987, p. 36).

In essence, the manifestations of ethnic hegemony which started to surface as soon as Tun Abdul Razak took over the reign of the government in 1970. In his swearing-in statement as Prime Minister of Malaysia, he made it beyond doubt that "this government is based on UMNO... the government must follow the wishes and desires of UMNO

and it must implement policies which are determined by UMNO” (Funston, 1980, p. 225). Under the fourth premiership of Dr. Mahathir, it was a strategic imperative that the interventionist state uplifts the economic status of the Malay community. His Malay nationalist credential prompted Mahathir to carry out various pro-Malay policies laid down by Tun Razak. Hence, new policies relating to the economy, culture and education were given the utmost priority in his first decade of tenure as Prime Minister. The outcome of these policies was that Malaysia was heading along an assimilationist path towards the formation of a Malay nation.³ In the UMNO Malay-dominated Malaysian state, the government practices various state policies that place priorities on Malay *Bumiputera* interests. In the state-sanctioned notion of nation-building, it is a Malay *Bumiputera*-defined identity that has privileged many aspects of Malay culture as the core of the Malaysian national identity while recognizing peripherally, the cultural symbols of other ethnic groups.

State-sanctioned Language and Educational Policy in Malaysia

Malaysian society is a distinct plural society with the portrayal of its multi-racial and multi-cultural outlook. These diverse societal diversifications have rendered the task of nation building an arduous one, where contestations and contentions among different ethnic groups are inevitable. Under Malay political supremacy, the slogan of “one nation, one language and one culture” once espoused by the UMNO-Malay dominated state is the clear indication of the pathway pursued by this new state. Despite present UMNO political leaders have discarded using this phrase, nevertheless its ingredients are very much intact in various public policy implementation, especially in its educational policy.

After Malaysia achieving its independence, the first utmost task need to tackle by the new leaders is the national unity problem. UMNO-Malay dominated state has embarked on a national or common language policy to unite its citizens of different race and develop a sense of national identity. By assimilating the people through a

3 In an interview with Johan Jaafar in 1996, then Chief Editor of *Utusan Malaysia*, Mahathir admitted that the state policy in nation-building before 1990s was pursued along the “assimilationist” pathway, see *Utusan Malaysia*, 7 August 1996.

single language, Malaysia believes that unity will be brought about with a common understanding and a common language. The spoken language of the Malays, *Bahasa Melayu* was renamed as *Bahasa Malaysia* (literally means language of Malaysia) was chosen as the national language of Malaysia which manifests a symbol of national sovereignty. This important episode was dictated since Malaysia proclaimed its independence in 1957. However, due to English language was widely used as an official language during the colonial period, the Malaysian government decided to give a grace period of 10 years for the language to be used for official purposes, alongside with *Bahasa Malaysia*. In 1967, the National Language Act was enacted in Malaysian parliamentary house and since then it became the sole national language of Malaysia.

With the implementation of National Language Policy, the gradual conversion of English schools to Malay medium or national school began in 1970. By 1983, all English schools and the colleges and universities turned to using *Bahasa Malaysia* as the main medium of instruction. In the 1996 Education Act, the position of the Malay language as the main medium of instruction is reinforced through making it a compulsory subject in all schools, including private schools and colleges. Other than National Language Policy, the leaders of UMNO-Malay dominated state have adopted the system of national school to achieve its desired objective of nation building. The concept of national school was first introduced into Malaya by Barnes Report in 1951.⁴ This educational report had recommended national school could play an utmost importance role in enhancing unity among pupils of different races. As a result, the report proclaimed that national school could function as “Nation-building school” and “School for Citizenship” (Tan, 1997, p. 58). Since its conception in 1951, the idea of national school gained much attention from UMNO political leaders. The Razak

4 The Barnes Educational Committee which was commissioned by the British colonial government on 25.7.1950 to study the plight of Malay education had suggested the abolishment of vernacular education in Malaya as they provide the seeds of disunity among pupils of different races. In order to enhance unity, it espoused the model of national school which consists of only English and Malay schools. The release of this report had caused furor and protests in Chinese community which developed into advocacy for the continual existence of the Chinese school that finally transformed into an enduring Chinese education movement in Malaysia.

Report of 1956 which became the blueprint of Malaysia National Education Policy had incorporated this national school concept. Later, the Rahman Talib Report of 1960 too applied the model of national school to achieve an unified educational system in Malaysia.

Prior to independence of Malaya, the Razak Education Committee was commissioned to set an educational policy that would acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole and cater for their needs. Its guiding principle was "... to make Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the languages and cultures of non-Malays peoples living in the country". The Razak Report has acknowledged the existence of vernacular education and suggested for its continual functioning in the country. However, this report too proclaimed an "ultimate objective" of the Malayan educational system that has instilled much apprehension of the non-Malays, especially the Chinese community:

the ultimate objective of educational policy in this country must be to bring together the children of all races under a national educational system in which the national language is the major medium of instruction, though we recognize that progress towards this goal cannot be rushed and must be gradual. (Razak Report, Article 12 in Federation of Malaya, 1956)

The proclamation of "ultimate objective" in this report later becomes an issue of contention among different ethnic groups in the country as many of the government educational act and program have incorporated this objective in the framing of the act or program. For example, the Education Act of 1996 and Vision School which enunciated in 1995 had acknowledged "ultimate objective" in the preamble of their document.

Chinese Schools and Chinese Education, 1995-2008: Problems and Responses

The promulgation of Vision 2020 by Dr. Mahathir in February 1991 signified a change in his administration's development strategy towards "cultural liberalization". In particular, the Mahathir-led UMNO began to demonstrate more flexibility towards the non-Malay communities, especially the Chinese, in respect of their language, education, religion, and cultural heritage. One explanation of the government's growing willingness

to accommodate the Chinese is that it wished to recoup a loss in Chinese votes at the 1990 general election (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 96).

Under the cultural liberalization conception, there was less politicization of sensitive issues such as national culture and national language by UMNO leaders. The heated debates on National Cultural Policy between the Chinese and Malay elites which occurred in the previous decade had become a part of history. The increased flexibility towards Chinese cultural activities in 1990s was a noticeable sign of greater communal tolerance than was the case in the 1970s and 1980s. The decade-long restriction on Chinese lion dance was not only lifted but was often witnessed by Mahathir and other UMNO leaders.⁵ Loh Kok Wah (2002, p. 28) interpreted this new policy as a shift from a more exclusive to a more inclusive notion of nationhood.

The shift in policy of Mahathir administration towards cultural liberalization has elevated the credential of Dr. Mahathir as a national leader. This development has made him more appealing to the Chinese community and garnered their support.⁶ Nevertheless, there are some segments of the Chinese populace, especially the Chinese educationists group and the more critical CGAs are doubtful of Dr. Mahathir's liberalization efforts. Furthermore, the release of *Suqiu*, an election appeal by some leading CGAs just prior to the general election in 1999 clearly manifests the Chinese community is divided in endorsing the efforts of the Mahathir administration. The Chinese educationists group too issued a document of demand entitled *Declaration on Mother Tongue Education – Dong Jiao Zong 1999* on 1 August 1999, at a critical juncture as Dr. Mahathir was struggling to tackle the problems engendered by the *Reformasi* movement after the sacking of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim.

The decade of nineties has witnessed Chinese community in Malaysia faced with the acute shortage of Chinese primary schools in urban areas. Migration of Chinese family to urban towns has caused this problem to deteriorate and brought about the

5 Lion dance on poles was officially listed as a Malaysian cultural heritage in 2007.

6 The policy shift of Mahathir administration towards cultural liberalization has brought about fragmentation in the once united movement of CGAs/NGOs in Chinese community. Chinese NGOs since then became divided into government-friendly or compromise groups and pressure groups. For a detailed explanation of this development, refer Thock (2007, pp. 95-99).

over crowding of Chinese primary schools.⁷ Although urbanization process is always cited as the reason for contributing to this problem, but nevertheless it is the policy of government of not to built new vernacular schools that has incurring it. For instance, Najib Tun Razak, then the Minister of Education has publicly stated in 1999 that it is not the policy of government to build new Chinese primary schools (*Sin Chew Daily*, 13.2.1999).⁸

Given the fact that it is not the state policy to develop vernacular education, hence the building of new Chinese primary schools in Malaysia is essentially always based on political consideration. In this regard, promises of building new Chinese primary schools normally were announced during campaigns in general elections or by-elections. In the general election of 1999, the BN coalition government announced that Education Ministry has approved the building 6 new Chinese primary schools or popularly known as SJK(C) and the relocation of 13 such schools to urban towns in Malaysia. This announcement was seen by many political analysts as a strategy to woo Chinese votes as the BN was faced with possibility of losing Malay supports due to the sacking of

7 The problem of shortage of Chinese primary schools has incurred anxiety among Chinese parents who want to send their children to SJK(C) for education because they faced difficulties in getting their children to enroll. As a result it was reported that the Chinese parents in Johore Bahru areas have to queue up overnight in front of the Chinese primary school in order to get a place for their children. The problem of overcrowding in Chinese primary school is best represented by the most populated SJK(C) in the country, SJK(C) Kwok Kuang in Johore Bahru which has an enrollment of over 5,000 pupils.

8 According to a Malaysian historian, Zainal Abidin Wahid (2001, p. 14) there existed a pact and understanding between UMNO and MCA since the era of Tunku Abdul Rahman that not even a single new Chinese primary schools should be built. This might be the reason why the Chinese community in Malaysia is facing great difficulties in getting the approval of new Chinese primary schools. This also probably explains why MCA only keen in seeking from government the relocation of Chinese primary schools which face the problem of pupil shortage in rural areas to urban towns. The possibility of existence of such pact was further strengthened by the statement of Najib Tun Razak (then the Education Minister) that “the status and number of Chinese primary schools in the country were already agreed upon, hence no consideration is given to the issue of building new Chinese primary school” when his ministry was drafting the 1996 Education Act.

Anwar Ibrahim as the Deputy Premier in 1998. When the BN coalition was comfortable with support of the electorates, as in the general election of 2004, there was no such concession given to Chinese schools. But, the general election of 2008 again witnessed the government's announcement of building of 6 new Chinese primary schools and relocation of 13 such schools in order to garner the votes of the Chinese community in the wake of BN coalition facing serious challenges posed by the opposition front lead by Anwar Ibrahim.

The Vision School Controversy

The Vision School program is a concept that will see a cluster of two or three schools (Malay, Chinese, or/and Tamil) sharing common premises and facilities in a compound known as *Vision School Complexes* but maintaining their separate administration and medium of instruction. The students would have co-curricular activities jointly. The education ministry has proclaimed that the aim of this special program was to enhance national unity and bring about a truly united nation. The introduction of Vision School has emerged as the main focus of the ministry and it is to be implemented under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000).

The Education Ministry has identified 14 sites in various states for implementation of Vision School under the Seventh Malaysia Plan. This involved the development 12 new complexes of Vision School and two existed sites. However only seven Vision School had been successfully built during the Seventh Malaysia Plan period. Three of the schools were located in the state of Perak. The others four Vision Schools were built in Kedah, Penang, Negeri Sembilan and Johor. The ministry had allocated RM 20.74 billion for this pilot project. Only five Chinese primary schools were short-listed for participation in this program (Shum, 2004). The specific SJK(C) identified and their location is shown in the table below:

Table 1

The Nomination of SJK(C) and SJK(T) for Participation in Vision School Program

Location	Name of Vision School	Involvement of SJK(C)/ SJK(T)
Taman Aman, Anak Bukit, Alor Setar, Kedah	Kompleks Sekolah Wawasan Taman Aman	SJK(C) Soon Jian SJK(T) Thiruvalluvar
Taman Puteri Gunung, Tasek, Simpang Empat, Seberang Perai Selatan, Penang	Kompleks Sekolah Wawasan Seri Tasek	SJK(T) Ladang Simpang Empat
Pekan Baru, Parit Buntar, Perak	Kompleks Sekolah Wawasan Pekan Baru	SJK(C) Wai Sin SJK(T) St. Mary
Matang, Taiping, Perak	Kompleks Sekolah Wawasan Matang	SJK(T) Ladang Matang
Pundut, Lumut, Perak	Kompleks Sekolah Wawasan Pundut	SJK(C) Eng Ling SJK(T) Mukim Pundut
Seri Kenangan, Segamat Johor	Kompleks Sekolah Wawasan Seri Kenangan	SJK(C) Centre Site SJK(T) Ladang Gomali
Seremban 2/Bukit Kepayang, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan	Kompleks Sekolah Wawasan Seremban 2	SJK(C) Ladang Hillside SJK(T) Convent, Seremban

Source: Compilation of the author from sources in Nanyang Siang Pau (8.11.2000) and Dongzong

After the announcement of the Minister of Education, the ministry had geared toward the successful realization of Vision School. In order to mark the launching of this grand program, it picked *Sekolah Integrasi Telok Sengat*, Kota Tinggi, Johor, an unique school which combines the national school/Sekolah Kebangsaan, SJK(C) and SJK(T) as a model for Vision School.⁹ The ceremony was officiated by Najib Tun Razak on 16 June 1997 and the school was then renamed *Telok Sengat Vision School Complexes*. Another school which is always quoted as a successful model of Vision School is *Kompleks Sekolah Lurah Bilut*¹⁰ in Bentong, Pahang (Sia, 2005).

The original proposal of Vision School which entitled *Vision School: Concept and Implementation* prepared by Education Planning and Research Division of the Education Ministry has reproduced the “ultimate objective” of the Razak Report of 1956. The Chinese community is extremely apprehensive of the attainment of “ultimate objective” through various educational means. Clause 4.2 of the Vision School’s proposal has reinstated the above recommendation of the Razak Report. This guideline for the implementation of Vision School had created anxieties and apprehensions among the Chinese educationists and leaders of CGAs. It has been interpreted as a strategy to realize an ethnic Malay nation by slowly replacing and eliminating Chinese primary schools (Ng, 2005, p. 187). That explains why such a notion of the Vision School has been vehemently opposed by the leading group of the Chinese education movement, *Dongjiaozong*. Its leaders and activists have accused Vision Schools as the vehicle for achieving the “ultimate objective” of using *Bahasa Malaysia* as the main medium of instruction of all primary schools, thereby doing away with those primary schools providing mother-tongue education by way of using Chinese or Tamil as the main medium of instruction (Dongzong, 2000, p. 4). *Dongjiaozong* has seen this pilot program

9 *Sekolah Integrasi Telok Sengat* in Johor had been operated since 11 August 1985.

10 The implementation of FELDA Scheme after independence has led to the establishment of a primary school in Lurah Bilut, Bentong in 1961. The schools in operation then were *Sekolah Kebangsaan Lurah Bilut* and SJK(C) Lurah Bilut. SJK(T) Lurah Bilut was built later. In 1963, new buildings of SJK(C) Lurah Bilut and SJK(T) Lurah Bilut were built in the compound of *Sekolah Kebangsaan Lurah Bilut*. Consequently, this development leads to the sharing of school canteen, field and assembly site among these 3 schools (Sia, 2005, p. 208, footnote 12).

as the tool for the ministry to achieve the aim of National Education Policy, which it interpreted as the negation of medium of instruction in school based on multilingualism.

In a press statement released by *Dongjiaozong* on 3 March 1997, it reiterated that the organization does not oppose of grouping pupils to study and to inter-react in a common school compound, but it would repudiate and not compromise if the “ultimate objective” of the Razak Report became basis for the implementation of this Vision School program (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 4.3.1997). The stance of *Dongjiaozong* has gained staunch support from most of the CGAs throughout the country as the Chinese populace perceived the successful implementation of Vision School would finally lead to changing character and identity of Chinese school. Consequently, it is worth noting that due to the strong objection from the Chinese community, the implementation of this pilot program came to an impasse and hence its controversy ceased temporarily.

The controversy of Vision School cropped up again when BN Council’s meeting under the strong influence of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad announced on 25 July 2000 that government would implement the Vision School program. In the meeting, leaders of the BN component parties were reported agreed upon building more Vision Schools in order to instill goodwill feelings among younger generation of all races. Given the fact that *Dongjiaozong* and other CGAs is adamant in opposing Vision School, the government took the initiative on 9 August 2000 to abandon the original Vision School guideline of 1995 (Sia, 2005, p. 197).

By 22 September 2000, the new guideline prepared by Education Ministry was presented to *Dongjiazong* and other CGAs. However, the initiative of the ministry failed short of the expectation of the Chinese educationists and leaders of Chinese organizations. Amidst the rising contentions, Education Ministry has arranged a dialogue of 5 concerned parties that included the ministry, MCA, Gerakan (a Chinese-based political party), *Dongjiaozong* and *Huazong* or FCAM (The Federation of Chinese Associations Malaysia) on 19 October 2000 in order to clear the apprehensions of the Chinese community. Nevertheless, these five stakeholders were again failed to reach a consensus on the issue of Vision School. MCA supported the concept of enhancing unity in Vision School but its implementation must not alter the characters of Chinese school and the party suggested that more time should be given to various stakeholders for them to study and scrutinize the effects of its implementation. Whereas, *Gerakan* put forward the idea of implementing Vision School on a trial basis. *Huazong* was suggesting a

In light of these amendments, the Education Ministry harboured hopes that the Chinese educationists group, CGAs and the Chinese community as a whole would accept the Vision School program. However, responses of the 5 Chinese primary schools that had been short-listed for participation sent waves of disappointment to the ministry. The SJK(C) Eng Lim in Lumut, Perak which was initially agreed upon accepting the offer to join *Vision School Complexes* in Pundut, Perak finally turned down the offer after the briefing efforts by *Dongjiaozong*. Moreover, SJK(C) Wai Sin in Parit Buntar, Perak which initially adopted the stance of wait and see also refused to participate in this program. Whereas SJK(C) Ladang Hillside in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan and SJK(C) Centre Site, in Segamat, Johor have turned down the ministry's offer right from beginning (Thock, 2011, p. 274).

In view of the continuing apprehensions and refusal of the Chinese educationist group and other CGAs to accept the Vision School program, the government took another initiative to realize its vision of uniting pupils through socializing process in school. The cabinet decided to build two totally new Vision Schools in Subang Jaya, Selangor and Johore Jaya, Johor (*Utusan Malaysia*, 4.12.2000). The Vision School in Subang Jaya which is called *Subang Jaya Vision School Complexes* had successfully operated on 5 June 2002. It became the first Vision School in the country that comprises 3 types of primary schools. The participating schools are *Sekolah Kebangsaan Dato' Onn Jaafar*, SJK(C) Tun Tan Cheng Lock and SJK(T) Tun Sambanthan.

Nevertheless, the fate of Vision School in Johore Jaya was totally different as this school under the instruction of cabinet on 25 April 2001 was converted to a Chinese School (Shum, 2004, p. 547). This conversion took place because there were a few national schools already in operation in the area of Johore Jaya and the building of national school for this Vision School program which had been built and left idle for a few years. Furthermore there was a pressing need for a Chinese school in that area due to the fast increasing population of Chinese. The second Vision School that was in operation in year 2002 was *Vision School Complexes* in Pundut, Perak and this school only comprises the national and Tamil school.

From this discussion, we may conclude that the initiative by Education Ministry to implement the Vision School program had encountered failure. The BN coalition government is compelling to accept the opposition and refusal of Chinese community towards this program. The Chinese-based political party, MCA then publicly proclaimed

it would not promote the idea of Vision School, instead its former president Ling Liong Sik has announced MCA would resubmit the Integration Plan of Pupils for Unity or RIMUP to Education Ministry for implementation (*Sin Chew Daily*, 9.12.2000). This specific plan for uniting pupil of different races only accepted by the administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in 2005. The adamant stance of *Dongjiaozong* had instilled furor to the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohamd. As a result, the premier slashed out at the organization: "What *Dongjiaozong* wants is education as in China, everything must in Chinese..." (*Utusan Malaysia*, 7.11.2000). Prior to this, he had labeled this Chinese educationist group and CGAs that presented the appeal document of *Suqiu* as extremist in his *Merdeka Day* speech on 30 August 2000.¹²

The Controversy on English Teaching of Mathematics and Science (EteMS)

Another controversy involving Chinese schools arose following a move by the government to introduce English to teach mathematics and science beginning from the first year of primary and secondary schools from year 2003. The rationale behind this sudden switch of policy was to improve the standard of English in the schools. It was found that the lack of proficiency in English had caused the unemployment of a large number of graduates of whom 94 per cent were Malays (*Utusan Malaysia*, 5.5.2002). Mahathir first floated the idea of reintroducing English-medium schools in an attempt to arrest the decline in English proficiency (*New Straits Times*, 5.5.2002). The UMNO Supreme Council which met on 10 May 2002 ruled out the idea of returning to English-medium schools as it would be contrary to the National Education Policy. Instead, a compromise was reached and this was to teach mathematics and science in English rather than in the mother tongue of the pupils (*Sin Chew Daily*, 11.5.2002). From these rapid developments, it is pertinent and rather sad to note that a policy of such importance

12 The severe criticism of the premier toward *Dongjiaozong* and CGAs has brought about dissatisfactions among the Chinese populace. Its repercussions were to be seen in a by-election held shortly after that incident. Due to the disappointment, many Chinese voters in the Lunas by-election in Kedah that was held on 29 November 2000 voted against the BN candidate. As a result, this state constituency was won by Parti Keadilan Nasional's candidate, Saifuddin Nasution.

to the national development of Malaysia was dictated within 5 days.

The issue of EteMS has brought about contentions and contestations among various segments of Malaysian society. Its implementation has caused cleavages in Malay community as the move would undermine the achievement of National Education Policy and the efforts to make Malay a truly language for teaching at all levels and subjects. Responses of those Malay nationalist organizations and NGOs were against the implementation of this policy. As the government would definitely proceed with this newly promulgated policy, nine Malay influential NGOs took a drastic move to hold meeting with *Dongjiaozong* and CGAs on 2 July 2002. This was a rare moment as both parties are ethno-nationalistic and contradicting organizations. Interestingly, they have reached a consensus and sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister stating their opposition to the policy of EteMS (*Sin Chew Daily*, 3.8.2002).

On the other hand, the implementation of this new policy too caused a divide among the Indian community. To many supporters of MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress, an Indian political party) and some well-educated Indians, they requested the Tamil schools to adopt EteMS as they saw this policy would enhance the quality of Indian pupils. However most of the lower income groups of the Indian community were vigorously opposing this policy.

Contrary to mixed reactions of the Malay and Indian community, the Chinese were found to act in unison in this important issue concerning the community. The decision of government to implement EteMS policy in 2003 has again struck the nerve of the Chinese educationist group and CGAs. The strong voice of oppositions was led by *Dongjiaozong* and it denotes an ongoing effort that lasted until the year 2009. Its leaders and activists vehemently opposed this policy because its implementation was against the principles of learning as the enquiring of knowledge in Mathematics and Science is best through the usage of mother tongue. Most importantly, its implementation will amount to the erosion of the character and identity of Chinese primary school. *Dongjiaozong* has acted swiftly against this new policy as its press statement on 15 May 2002, (that is 5 days after the announcement of EteMS by Dr. Mahathir in UMNO supreme council meeting) manifested its readiness to response to an issue that is of utmost importance to Chinese community. The president of *Dongzong*, Quek Suan Hiang has stated publicly that if the Chinese community does not oppose the implementation of EteMS, the Chinese primary schools and Chinese Private Secondary Schools (*Duzhong*) would cease to exist in the country (*Sin Chew Daily*, 6.8.2002). Such apprehensions among

the Chinese educationist groups stemmed from the fact that if teaching of Mathematics and Science is to be conducted in English, which means in UPSR (Primary Schools Evaluation Test) examination of the Chinese primary schools, its pupils only left with a single subject of Chinese language using Mandarin.¹³ Under this circumstances, the identity of Chinese primary school of using Mandarin as medium of instruction has been intruded.

Under the leadership and strong influence of *Dongjiaozong*, CGAs of Chinese community by and large voiced their strong oppositions to the policy. Government-friendly CGAs that were against this drastic change include FCAM, Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry Malaysia (ACCCIM), the Seven Major Clans Association of Malaysia, and the National Federation of Chinese School Headmasters. As the opposition to the proposal in the Chinese community gained momentum, the MCA Central Committee also decided against the government initiative (*New Straits Times*, 20.10.2002). Earlier at the MCA Annual General Meeting on 27 July 2002, the party had made a stand to defend the character of Chinese schools. Other three Chinese-based component party of BN, namely *Gerakan*, SUPP (Sarawak United Peoples Party), and SAPP (Sabah Progressive Party) too were not in favour of the implementation of EteMS (Thock, 2011, p. 277).

It was rather unusual that a component party of the BN was opposed to a policy proposal of the ruling coalition. That Chinese politicians, educationists and the general community were acting in unison was due to their common mission to sustain the continued existence of Chinese primary schools as the last fortress in the preservation of education in their mother tongue. These schools are a vehicle for the maintenance of community identity and culture in the country. Following this development, it is significant noting that Chinese-based political parties in the BN coalition would act in defiant to protect the character and identity of Chinese schools. With the concerted efforts in opposing EteMS by Chinese educationists, leaders of CGAs and Chinese based political parties in BN as well as DAP (Democratic Action Party), the government was compelling to accept the refusal of Chinese community in its implementation.

13 In the UPSR examination, Chinese primary schools' pupils have to register Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, English, Mathematics and Science as subjects for examination.

In order to seek a way out of this impasse and justified the implementation of EteMS in national and Tamil schools, the BN supreme council held a meeting on 22 October 2002 to sort out a compromise. The various parties in the BN coalition finally accepted the formula of 2-4-3 for the implementation EteMS in Chinese primary schools on 31 October 2002.¹⁴ However this compromised formula still failed short of the expectation of Chinese educationist groups and CGAs but they have left with no other alternative. Consequently, all the standard one pupils in various primary schools and form one as well as form six students through out the nation have to undergo the experimentation of EteMS in January 2003. Due to untiring efforts of *Dongjiaozong*, controversy of EteMS has become an issue of public prominence. The table below summarizes various events and negotiations that led to the formulation of EteMS and its modification for Chinese primary schools:

Table 2

Chronology of Events Leading to Implementation of EteMS in 2003

No.	Date	Event
1	4.5.2002	Suggestion of Mahathir to reintroduce English medium schools.
2	10.5.2002	UMNO Supreme Council rejects reintroducing English medium schools instead announces the implementation of EteMS.
3	15.5.2002	<i>Dongjiaozong</i> issues press statement to oppose EteMS.
4	2.7.2002	Historic meeting between nine leading Malay NGOs and <i>Dongjiaozong</i> to oppose EteMS.

¹⁴ In the formula of 2-4-3, the usage of Mandarin and English is allowed for EteMS in SJK(C). This formula means the usage of two periods for teaching of English, four periods for teaching of Mathematics in English (six periods still conduct in Mandarin) and three periods for teaching Science in English (three periods still in Mandarin).

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|---|------------|---|
| 5 | 19.10.2002 | MCA Central Working Committee rejects EteMS. |
| 6 | 22.10.2002 | BN Supreme Council meeting to sort out a compromise for Chinese schools. |
| 7 | 31.10.2002 | BN Supreme Council announces a compromise formula of 2-4-3 for Chinese schools. |
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Source: Compilation by author from various press reports.

The implementation EteMS caught the national limelight again in 2005 as the first batch of Chinese primary schools' pupil has completed the first phase of its experimentation. They have to proceed to phase two of primary education in which another new special formula have to work out for the implementation of EteMS. At this critical juncture, many groups in the Chinese community again appeal for a repeal of this policy. The deputy president of party *Gerakan* Koh Tsu Koon at that time had publicly stated its party stance of using mother tongue in issue of EteMS and now it is the appropriate time for government to scrutinize the effects after 3 years of implementation (*Utusan Malaysia*, 7.11.2005). Nevertheless, Koh Tsu Koon has been criticized and attacked by many UMNO leaders for his statement.

Dongjiaozong took another move to renew its opposition of EteMS at this crucial period. Its leaders organized a huge multi-ethnic convention of protesting EteMS on 10 December 2005 in Kajang, Selangor. This convention was attended by more than 3000 peoples of different ethnic groups (*Oriental Daily News*, 11.12.2005). In spite of these opposing voices, the government proceeded with EteMS in phase two of the primary education in 2006. In order for its smooth implementation in Chinese primary schools, a new formula popularly known as 4-2-2 formula has to work out for standard four Chinese primary schools' pupils.¹⁵ Another initiative of protest was taken by *Dongjiaozong* and its affiliated bodies in 2007. They launched another campaign known

15 The 4-2-2 formula means in a week, year four pupils of SJK(C) have to undergo four periods of English lessons, two periods of learning Mathematics in English (six periods still conduct in Mandarin) and two periods of learning Science in English (three periods still in Mandarin).

as *Campaign of Reverting the Teaching of Mathematics and Science to Mother Tongue in Primary Schools* on 8 July 2007 through the usage of postcards. Again this effort is multiracial, in this event they successfully collected 101,000 postcards nation-wide which stated their opposition of EteMS and presented them to the Prime Minister on 27 November 2007.

The issue of EteMS again emerged to public prominence in 2008. This was the case because the first batch of pupils under the program of EteMS had taken their UPSR examination in September 2008 and Education Ministry has promised to review this policy at the end of 2008. The voices of opposition and protest have been louder and it involves peoples and organizations of different ethnic groups. In the Malay community, a group of 40 NGOs which participated in Roundtable Convention of Malay NGOs convened on 13 September has demanded the resignation of Hishammuddin Tun Hussein as Education Minister if he fails to revert the teaching of Mathematics and Science to *Bahasa Malaysia* (*Utusan Malaysia*, 14.9.2008). The momentum of protest in the Malay community increased drastically in the year 2009 as more segment of the community realized that EteMS implementation would be detrimental to the standard of education of rural Malay children and the status of the national language. GAPENA (Malay Writer Alliance) made a police report against EteMS implementation on 15 February 2009 that its implementation had violated Article 152(1) and 152(6) of the Malaysian constitution as well as the Education Act of 1996. This vocal organization and other Malay NGOs later organized a mammoth demonstration of 100,000 peoples of different races in Kuala Lumpur on 7 March 2009. The series of protests by different ethnic groups finally forced the government to repeal this controversial educational policy as the Malaysian cabinet decided on 9 July 2009 to revert to use mother tongue in the teaching of Mathematics and Science in all primary schools in year 2012.

Conclusion

Chinese education in Malaysia is unique in the region of Southeast Asia as it possesses a high degree of cultural resilience. The endeavours of Chinese community in preserving and protecting the Chinese schools and education are enduring as shown in the case of opposing the Vision School program and the implementation of EteMS. The impetus that motivates the Chinese in Malaysia for resorting to such an effort is the apprehension of the survival of Chinese schools in the country. The anxieties

and apprehensions of the Chinese educationists, its activists as well as the leaders of CGAs stem from the fact that Chinese schools and education in Malaysia face many predicament and restrictions in its long course of existence and development. The thorny paths that they have encountered are due to the fact that their notion of nation-of-intent is not compatible with the UMNO dominated state's notion. They have pursued a nation-of-intent based on multiculturalism and civic nationalism. However, Malaysian state is pushing for a nation-of-intent that is premised on Malay ethno-nationalism. As shown in the discussion above, the Chinese community has contested the state-defined notion of nation-of-intent and hence their role in shaping the course of nation-building which merits some attention. On integration and nation-building, the Malaysian Chinese place great hope for a more inclusive nation-building process, whereby the languages, schools and cultures of all ethnic groups have a legitimate status.

The activism of Chinese education groups and CGAs has exerted some impacts on the educational policy of Malaysia. From the above discussions, we may conclude that the leaders of Chinese educationist groups and CGAs are very cautious with any new rulings in the education policy as they may affect the continuity of Chinese schools and education. Introduction of any new program or project by the Education Ministry will be studied thoroughly by working teams in *Dongjiaozong* in order to safeguard the character and identity of Chinese primary schools. Although their initiatives in this aspect always in contradiction with the ministry but they will eventually obtain some modifications or concessions from new rulings that impinge on Chinese primary schools. At the same time, since Chinese schools have been accepted as an integral part of Malaysian educational system, its existence with its unique character and identity is safeguarded by education acts in the country. Consequently, this provides the rationale for the Chinese community to seek for its continuous existence but unfortunately this situation has resulted in the occurrence of contestations and contentions in the country. On top of this, those Chinese educationist groups and CGAs who vigorously championing the existence of Chinese schools always encounter various oppressions and marginalization from the strong UMNO dominated state.

However, Chinese school and its educational issues in Malaysia should be addressed in a wider perspective and scope. From its long history and capability in meeting the demands of Chinese community as well as other ethnic groups for education of their younger generations, their existence merits more recognition. This is

because Chinese schools also functions alongside with the national and Tamil schools in providing the human capital training for Malaysia. With the rise of China and elevation of commercial value of Chinese language, Chinese schools and education in Malaysia today is capable in providing extra assets to students of all races. Hence, if the problems and controversies pertaining Chinese schools and education can be tackled in this perspective, then all the contestations and contentions arising from it could be resolved with much lesser and easier efforts.

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