Impacts of the Evolution of Malaysia’s Ethnic Policies on Local Popularization of Chinese Language

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Abstract. The orientation of Malaysia’s ethnic policies centering on the idea of “Malay Dominance” has evolved from separation, balanced assimilation, then into integration and finally pluralistic coexistence. Each phase has posed sustained impacts on local popularization of Chinese language in terms of ethnic education, sociocultural environment and the development of local Chinese communities. This paper aims to unveil the current plight of Chinese promotion in Malaysia and offer corresponding solutions in four dimensions from subject, channel, content to method.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and culturally-diverse nation, the major ethnic groups being Malays, Chinese and Indians. According to Department of Statistics Malaysia, the total population, 32.0497 million, comprises 61.7% of Malays (19.7768 million), 20.8% of Chinese Malaysians (6.6642 million), 6.23% of Indian Malaysians (1.9976 million), 0.89% of other ethnic groups (284.4 thousand) and 10.37% of non-Malaysian citizens (3.3267 million)[1]. Various factors, such as colonial history, ethnic issue and partisan contest, collectively subjected Malaysia to an ethnic policy known as “Ketuanan Melayu” (literally “Malay dominance”), which has fundamental impacts on its related policies on economy, culture and education.

The Evolution of Malaysia’s Ethnic Policies

Malaysian development directly determines its ethnic policy orientation which have been shifted from separation, balanced assimilation, then to integration and finally pluralistic coexistence [2].

Ethnic Policy in the Colonial Period

Malay Peninsula was once colonized by Portugal, Holland and Britain, and occupied by Japan during World War II. When it was ruled by the British, the multi-ethnic characteristic began to emerge. For better profits, British colonial government imported a large number of workers from India and China, and imposed colonial policies called “Divide and Rule” and “Ketuanan Melayu” to consolidate its rule: Politically, only Malays were allowed to serve as administrative officials. Economically, Malaysian land was exclusive for the Malays and forbidden to transfer to any non-Malays in any forms like mortgaging or renting. In terms of culture and education, much attention was paid to English and Malay while Chinese and other languages were overlooked [3]. During the Japanese rule, the government continued to offer political privileges to the Malay people while imposed strict policies on the Chinese. Consequently, these practices resulted in ethnic estrangement and laid a foreshadow for ethnic conflicts later on.

Ethnic Polices after the Independence

After the independence, the Malays maintained their political dominance while the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rah-man implemented laissez-faire policies in economy which enabled the Chinese to enhance their economic strength freely. Therefore, economic disparities grew even wider between the Chinese and the Malays who were not
financially gifted, adding more complexity to the pre-existing ethnic malaise and eventually leading to an ethnic clash, “13 May incident” in 1969.

Later on, the Razak government and the Hussein Onn government introduced “Rukunegara” (Malay for “National Principles”) and “New Economic Policy” to alleviate domestic ethnic conflicts. They advocated redistribution and readjustment in an attempt to completely change Malays’ disadvantaged economic situation through government intervention. In 1981, Mahathir, then Prime Minister, continued the “New Economic Policy” and pursued “Ketuanan Melayu” in economy. However, in the mid-1980s, these polices were not so strict, and thus the Chinese began to improve their situation in the Malaysia.

In the early 1990s, domestic and international changes required the Mahathir government to make a further adjustment to its ethnic policy. “National Development Policy” was thus introduced with more emphasises on the common development of all ethnic groups, less focus on the economic privileges of the Malays and less hatred against non-Malays. Mahathir appealed to rule the country with talents rather than focus on the ratio of Malays in the government agencies. He also allowed the existence of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity [4]. The “National Development Policy” reduced the government's intervention, eliminated some restrictions on the Chinese and reflected the trend of the integration of all ethnic groups.

Ethnic Policies in the 21st Century

Entering the 21st century, further adjustments were made to ethnic policies, advocating harmonious development among different ethnic groups and religions.

In 2001, Prime Minister Mahathir proposed the "Vision 2020", calling on all people to break barriers and push for progress in unity. The commitment of realizing sustainable development marks the beginning of Malaysia’s journey of harmonious development among different ethnic groups and religions.

In 2003, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took the office and preserved the essence of Mahathir's new development policy. He committed to promoting communication among different ethnic groups and tried to create a sense of “Malaysian Nationality”, gradually easing several policies on the Chinese and adopting more liberal economic and education regulations for non-Malays.

In 2009, Prime Minister Najib Razak put forward a new concept of "One Malaysia". Mutual respect and trust among different groups were encouraged to progressively alter the ethnic-political pattern of "Ketuanan Melayu". All people are invited to participate in national politics. He also claimed that Chinese politicians could get more involved in government affairs. These policy adjustments have created a more relaxed political and cultural atmosphere and provide opportunities for the present Chinese language promotion.

Impacts of Malaysia’s Ethnic Policies on the Popularization of Chinese Language

Impacts on Chinese Education

Conflicts between Chinese Education and National Education System Remain to This Day. The “Ketuanan Melayu” ethnic policy induced racial disparity in Malaysia’s education system. In 1956, The Razak Report, one of landmarks in Malaysia’s history of education, was issued. It stated that the ultimate goal was to involve children of all ethnic backgrounds in a unified national education system where national language (Malay) was used as the medium of instruction. Since then, other education acts were published, including the Education Ordinance 1957, the Rahman Talib Report, Education Act 1961, National Language Act 1967, Education Act 1996, Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, Dual Language Program 2016. Many restrictions were imposed on Chinese education and other ethnic languages from the aspects of appropriation for education, school construction, curriculum, length of schooling, national evaluation system, class hours to teacher training. Against this backdrop, Malaysian Chinese primary schools were incorporated into the national education system under the control of government with no right in training their own teachers. Chinese secondary schools were classified into 3 types, National Secondary Schools,
National-Type Secondary Schools, and Chinese Independent High Schools. The Chinese Independent High Schools were completely excluded from the national education system with no government subsidies, their diploma was not recognized by the government, and their graduates could not attend colleges in Malaysia. Various conflicts between Chinese education and Malaysian national education system have continued to date.

**The Source of Chinese Teachers was Blocked, but Instead Promoted Local Training of Mandarin Teachers.** Before World War II, Malaysian Chinese education was mainly influenced by the education system in China. Most teachers came from China. After World War II, the British colonial government refused to issue entry permits for Chinese immigrants for political reasons. As a result, the source of Chinese teachers was blocked. Consequently, the Chinese Malaysian progressively got rid of the dependence of “Homeland China”, and started to train local Chinese teachers. However, after the independence, the government imposed strict control over Chinese teachers to implement national assimilation policy. In 1969, the government stipulated that those were qualified as primary school teachers had to be professionally trained as well as pass English and Malay examinations with a Cambridge or Malaysian Diploma. Undoubtedly, it was hard for Chinese teachers to gain the qualification and thus caused a shortage of Chinese teachers. As a result, the Chinese schools had to employ a large number of temporary teachers. These teachers were prone to quit job due to short term of contract, low salary and lack of necessary training, which massively restricted the development of Chinese education. Statistics in 2015 showed that 57.44% of teachers in Chinese Independent High Schools nationwide did not have teachers’ certificates [5].

**Impacts on the Social and Cultural Environment of the Popularization of Chinese Language**

**Dominant Malay Culture was Created while Chinese Literature was Excluded from the Mainstream.** The Malay nationalist claim of “Ketuanan Melayu” was eventually enshrined in the Constitution of Federation of Malaya 1957. On August 16, 1971, the National Culture Conference held in University of Malaya established National Culture Policy which prioritized indigenous culture and Islam [6]. This is in line with their philosophy on education: "one language, one culture, one nation". Although it was replaced by the "Malaysian National Strategy" advanced by then-Prime Minister Tun Mahathir, it continued to impact the subsequent development of Malaysian national culture. In 1981, the government established National Laureate, the most prestigious literary award in Malaysia. But only works written in Malay have the chance to get the honor. Non-Malay cultures, Malaysian Chinese culture in particular, were excluded from the mainstream due to increasingly passive situation and lack of space for development.

**Ethnic Estrangement Occurred which Instead Provided More Space for the Development of Chinese Language and Culture.** The estrangement triggered by ethnic polices directly led to relatively clear boundaries among various ethnic groups in Malaysia. The large population and strong consciousness of inheritance enabled the Chinese, the second largest ethnic group, to retain most of its original ethnic culture and customs. They also had little interaction with the Malays or other minority groups because they had nothing in common regarding language or culture. Moreover, there was little intermarriage between Islamist Malays and Chinese due to religious doctrines. Such inter-ethnic gaps, however, left relatively independent space for the growth of language and culture. Therefore, the dominant Malay culture had few influences on the Chinese group in terms of customs, ideas, language and values, and the Chinese language and culture were still well conserved in Malaysia. After many years’ efforts, the Chinese community has developed complete educational and media systems on their own and grown to be an economically dominant group.

**Impacts on the Chinese Community**

**Raise the Consciousness of the Chinese to Fight for Their Rights.** The Chinese, first lived in Malaysia as aliens, gradually realized the importance of seeking civil rights and more involvement in politics when they struggled for independence and development with local people.
awakening formed a sense of cohesion in the Chinese community and grew ever stronger when they protested against the Malays who held obvious discrimination against other ethnic groups. As a result, the Chinese figured out two ways to get involved in politics, i.e., political parties and related organizations. The Chinese parties directly participated in government affairs. Currently, the most important Chinese parties are Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Democratic Action Party (DAP). The Chinese organizations are not directly involved in politics, but they can influence government decisions in other ways to safeguard their own interests. The most influential one, "Dongjiaozong", was a coalition combining the United Chinese Schools Teachers' Association (Jiaozong in Chinese) founded on December 25, 1951, and the United Chinese Schools Committees Association (Dongzong) founded on August 22, 1954. It has made great contribution in the promotion of Chinese language.

**Propel a Well-developed Chinese Education System.** Because of unfair ethnic polices, the Chinese, politically and economically constrained, were more sensitive to their ethnic identity. They realized the importance of cultural inheritance through education, and therefore worked tirelessly for the development of Chinese education. By sustained efforts, they have established the most complete and well-developed Chinese education in Southeast Asia and beyond (except China), including Chinese primary school, independent Chinese secondary school, Chinese junior colleges and universities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary School</th>
<th>Chinese Primary Schools</th>
<th>1297 schools with 542406 students, of which the number of non-Chinese is about 70000 (2016)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National-Type Primary Schools</td>
<td>A total of 449 primary schools offer Chinese courses with 11281 students (2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSS)</td>
<td>60 schools with 84604 students (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National-Type Chinese Classes</td>
<td>78 schools with 124916 students (2009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National-Type High Schools</td>
<td>A total of 803 schools offer 8276 Chinese courses with about 230000 students (2004). Every year over 1000 Chinese classes will be opened</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College and University</td>
<td>Private Chinese Colleges and Universities</td>
<td>4 universities with over 5000 students including Southern University College, New Era University College, Han Chiang College and Tunku Abdul Rahman University. They all have Chinese Department and regard Chinese as a compulsory subject. New Era University College provides a diploma course for teaching Chinese as a secondary language, and Southern University College and Tunku Abdul Rahman University offer Master’s degree on Chinese.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Classes in National-Type Colleges and Universities</td>
<td>Over 20 schools have Chinese courses with 15532 students (2010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Institution</td>
<td>Private Chinese Language Centers</td>
<td>Representative centers include the “Chinese Road”, the “Excellent Mandarin Language Center” and “The Silk Road”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Promote the Development of Local Chinese Media.** Local Chinese News media provide another platform for the popularization of Chinese. According to statistics released by the Malaysian Audited Bureau of Circulations on April 19, 2012, altogether 19 types of Chinese newspapers were published from July 1, 2005 to December 31, 2011, including daily, evening papers and weekend editions. Among all publications, *Sin Chew Daily*, *China Press* and *Oriental Daily News* rank the top three in circulation. *Sin Chew Daily*, has an average daily circulation of 387,000, only secondary to Metro Ahad (written in Malay) which has an average daily circulation of 422,000. Meanwhile, a local survey shows that among 6 million Chinese Malaysians, about 2.3 to 2.6 million read Chinese newspaper every day [7]. In addition to traditional forms, Malaysian Chinese media have begun to attach importance to internationalization, globalization and digitization in recent years, providing significant platforms for the information dissemination.
Suggestions on Future Promotion of Chinese Language in Malaysia

Close to the Strait of Malacca, Malaysia enjoys the geographical advantage in the Southeast Asia. It is also one of the founding members of ASEAN, and plays an important role in the “Belt and Road” initiative. In order to follow the multi-ethnic and multicultural mainstream in the international community, the Malaysian government began to make corresponding adjustments to police in areas such as politics, economy, culture and education for more opening up. However, ethnocentrism and cultural xenophobia are still prevalent in all fields, especially in Chinese education. In an era where opportunities and risks coexist, the popularization of Chinese is still confronted with various political obstacles. Therefore, it is a win-win progress for both China and Malaysia to seize opportunities to explore new ways that suit local conditions to promote Chinese education so as to fit both parties’ common needs and long-term interests as well as boosts further cooperation.

Build Diverse Sources of Participants in the Popularization of Chinese Language, Encourage the Involvement of Chinese-funded Enterprises, and Create Learning Needs through Economic Value

Today in Malaysia, the economic and practical value of Chinese language will inevitably be enhanced due to further economic and trade cooperation pushed by the “Belt and Road” initiative. Therefore, we should seize the opportunity to enrich the source of participants, injecting new energy into the Chinese-community-led promotion of Chinese language. The involvement of local Chinese-funded enterprises is highly recommended, which can offer jobs that fit local Chinese graduates. By signing contracts, schools can recruit students for their sister companies. These students will be directly hired as soon as they graduate. It also helps to avoid the misunderstanding of intentions caused by direct financial aid, raise the company’s brand awareness and encourage better integration in local communities, effectively reduce the cost of importing high-paid Chinese talents from China, and thus achieve a win-win situation for local Chinese education and enterprises.

Make Full Use of Confucius Institutes to Broaden Channels for the Promotion of Chinese Language in Malaysia

At present, there are two Confucius institutes in Malaysia, namely Kong Zi Institute University of Malaya jointly built by Beijing Foreign Studies University and the University of Malaya, and Confucius Institute at SEGi University by HaiNan Normal University and SEGi University. They are committed to providing professional faculty, better Chinese educational resources and more opportunities for international exchanges. Courses offered by Confucius Institutes are relatively flexible in terms of time, content, form and enrollment requirement. Therefore, we can combine Confucius Institutes with local Chinese education institutions to attract more students by developing Chinese as a second foreign language. Confucius Institutes can also work with Dongjiaozong to jointly develop localized Chinese teaching materials and provide online Chinese courses. They can also establish themselves as information hubs for Malaysian culture to enter China, and provide local Malaysian companies with information and translation service in culture, economy, education and law.

Develop Localized Chinese Teaching Materials

Today, Malaysia has a wide range of Chinese learners including different ethnic students from primary schools to universities and employees in companies. Researchers on Chinese teaching should set up corresponding curricula according to learners’ backgrounds and needs to ensure a smooth transition during different stages of studying. At the same time, more diversified teaching materials should be developed to meet the needs of different learners. Malaysian and Chinese researchers can cooperate to compile up-to-date, practical and interesting teaching materials following the Malaysian polices, catering to the psychology and different levels of muti-cultural learners. Specialized Chinese teaching materials should be developed in areas such as economy and trade, tourism, education, law, science and technology and transportation.
Broaden Channels for Chinese Language Promotion via Information Technology

Now in Malaysia, many Chinese media have embarked on the path of digitization and internationalization through diversified channels such as websites, e-platforms, and Wechat official accounts. Therefore, new media can be an effective way to promote Chinese language. Possible measures include establishing related networks and language centers for virtual interaction on Facebook to unveil Chinese culture and modern China to local communities in a more interesting and easier way. Such online platforms can also avoid constraints from policies in terms of class hours and forms of curriculum. At the same time, some game Apps can be developed to help students to improve their pronunciation, tone, writing and memorizing of Chinese characters, delivering Chinese in a more lively, interesting and relaxing way.

Summary

In conclusion, the promotion of Chinese language in Malaysia is not an easy task. To some extent, it is in conflict with local politics and culture, but has a positive effect on the development of local economy and culture. The popularization of Chinese language in Malaysia shows that the promotion of Chinese against the backdrop of diversification should follow the law of language acquisition and adapt to local polices and education acts. It should also integrate domestic and international resources to encourage diverse participants to achieve orderly promotion of Chinese language so as to meet the development needs of the host country and global economy.

Acknowledgement

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