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CHINESE SCHOOLS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

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CHINESE SCHOOLS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

The Struggle for Survival

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Cover photo (bottom): The New Era College established by Dong Jiao Zong (UCSCA and UCSTA) and Merdeka University Ltd. Co. in 1998.

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*Lee Ting Hui
Singapore
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ABBREVIATIONS

DAP	Democratic Action Party
FMC	Federal Malayan Certificate
Gerakan	Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia
HSC	Higher School Certificate
LCE	Lower Certificate of Education
MCA	Malayan Chinese Association
MCACECC	Malayan Chinese Association Chinese Education Central Committee
MCE	Malaysia Certificate of Education
MIC	Malayan Indian Congress
MNP	Malayan National Party
PAS	Parti Islamic SeMalaysia (<i>Islamic Party of Malaysia</i>)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (<i>People's Justice Party</i>)
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah (<i>Junior Secondary Assessment</i>)
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PR	Pakatan Rakyat (<i>People's Alliance</i>)
SC	School Certificate
SJK (C)	Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) (<i>National-Type Chinese Primary School</i>)
SJK (T)	Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil) (<i>National-Type Tamil Primary School</i>)
SK	Sekolah Kebangsaan (<i>National Primary School</i>)
SMJK	Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan (<i>National-Type Secondary School</i>)
SMK	Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (<i>National Secondary School</i>)

SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (<i>Malaysian Certificate of Education</i>)
SRJK (C)	Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) (<i>National-Type Chinese Primary School</i>)
SRJK (T)	Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil) (<i>National-Type Tamil Primary School</i>)
SRK	Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan (<i>National Primary School</i>)
SRP	Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (<i>Lower Certificate of Educaiton</i>)
STPM	Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (<i>Malaysian Higher School Certificate</i>)
Three-M	Membaca, Menulis, Mengira (<i>Reading, Writing, Counting</i>)
UCSCA	United Chinese School Committees' Association
UCSTA	United Chinese School Teachers' Association
UDP	United Democratic Party
UMNO	United Malay National Organisation
UPSR	Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (<i>Primary School Assessment</i>)

NOTES ON COVERAGE AND NAMES

Our account is mainly about events in Peninsular Malaysia, which was commonly referred to as the Malay Peninsula or Malaya before 1963 when it formed Malaysia with Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah. However, the narrative also covers developments in Singapore before 1965 when the island broke off from Malaysia and became an independent country.

Chinese names, whether of persons, schools, or organizations, are retained in their original spellings. Names with spellings which cannot be ascertained are transliterated with *hanyu pinyin*. All these, in addition to appearing in the text, are tabulated in the Glossaries, together with their Chinese characters.

All translations into English from Chinese or Malay sources are the authors' work, unless otherwise stipulated.

All currency references are to the Malayan dollar before the formation of Malaysia in 1963, and to the Malaysian ringgit afterwards.

INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to give an account of how Chinese schools in Peninsular Malaysia struggled to survive and develop between 1786 and 2003, a period spanning more than two hundred years. The overriding consideration is to see how the various governments of the country over these years posed challenges to them and how they responded to these challenges.

In the years before the Pacific War, the British colonial government left the Chinese schools alone. However, when they caused harm to the country's economy by their political activities, the colonial government adopted legislation to control them.

During the years of the Pacific War, when the Japanese who ruled the country closed all the Chinese schools, they had no means of responding.

After the Pacific War, the British were back in the country. Because of the China orientation of the Chinese schools, they sought to transform them into English schools between 1945 and 1955. The Chinese schools responded by reorientating themselves to Malaya and escaped transformation.

From 1955, the country came under the rule — at first partially, but then fully from 1957 — of a Malay government. The new government sought to achieve their “ultimate objective” in education, which was to have all schools use the Malay language as their main medium of instruction. From then until now, this was the challenge posed to Chinese schools, which put in their best effort to meet this challenge.

Our story is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 covers the years from 1786 to 1941, from the first arrival of the British in Malaya to when the British lost it to the Japanese in the Pacific War. The focus of this chapter will be on the founding of modern Chinese schools in Malaya in the twentieth century. Like those in China, these schools were instruments for the modernization of China. As such, they were highly politicized. Soon their political activities became injurious to the economy of the country. As a consequence, the British colonial government adopted legislation to curb

their activities. The challenge of the British action, however, did not affect their growth.

Chapter 2 spans the years from 1942 to 1955. The year 1942 was when the country fell completely to the Japanese, and 1955 was when the British returned partial control of the country to the Malays. The Japanese ruled the country until 1945 when they surrendered it back to the British. While the Japanese were here, they promoted only education through the Japanese language. As a result, all Chinese schools were closed down as they failed to meet the Japanese challenge.

The Chinese schools were revived after 1945. The second part of Chapter 2 narrates how between 1946 and 1955 the British took steps to try to transform the Chinese schools into English schools. The British did this because the Chinese schools placed their loyalty with China instead of Malaya. Eventually, the Chinese schools reorientated themselves and were not forced to change as they met the British challenge successfully. This period also saw the founding of Chinese educational organizations which became defenders of Chinese education.

Chapter 3 covers the period from 1956 to 1969. The year 1956 was when the “ultimate objective” in education was first enunciated, and 1969 was when racial riots broke out between the Malays and the Chinese. The highlight of this period of development was the enunciation of this “ultimate objective” through the Razak Report. Another highlight was the release of the Talib Report in 1960, and the passing of an Education Act based on that report the following year. While the Razak Report did not seek the immediate realization of the “ultimate objective”, the Talib Report and the consequent Education Act did take the first step towards that goal. Under the latter, Chinese primary schools were allowed to continue and receive government aid, but Chinese secondary schools were forced to change to using English instead of Chinese as their main medium of instruction. Or they could choose to remain as they were, but would receive no government assistance. They would thus become independent schools. The chapter also accounts for other but lesser challenges posed by the government to Chinese schools during this period. On the whole, Chinese schools managed to survive.

Developments in the 1970s are covered in Chapter 4. The most significant event during these years was that the government took further steps to bring about the realization of the “ultimate objective”. First, English educational institutions in the country had to change to Malay. Next were those Chinese secondary schools which had earlier changed to using English instead of Chinese as their main medium of instruction to change again,

this time to using Malay as their main medium of instruction. During that time, the government also came out with a Cabinet Report, 1979, to seek the improvement of the whole educational system in the country, but the report paid scant attention to Chinese schools. Other lesser challenges to Chinese schools are also covered in the chapter. Both Chinese primary schools and independent Chinese secondary schools faced serious problems during this period, but a campaign to revive Chinese education proved successful.

Chapter 5 chronicles the events of the 1980s. The push towards the “ultimate objective” on the part of the government persisted. Eventually, a series of events catapulted the government’s drive to a climax in 1987. This was followed by the government launching “Operation Lalang” in which elements opposed to the government, especially prominent Chinese educationists, were arrested and sent to jail. Disputes such as the 3-M Issue are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 6 covers the period from the 1990s until 2003, which was when the then prime minister resigned. The period was dominated by what was called Vision 2020. This vision brought both joy and disappointment to the Chinese schools. For instance, the transformation of existing schools into “Smart Schools” was a development welcomed by them, but the conversion of existing schools into “Vision Schools” upset them.

Chapter 7, which concludes the book, summarizes the highlights of events discussed in all the foregoing chapters, examines problems faced by Chinese schools in recent years from 2004 to early 2009, and tries to anticipate what is in store for them in the immediate future.