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**CHINESE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT IN MALAYSIA, 1952-1967:
THE NEXUS OF LANGUAGE AND ETHNICITY IN A PLURAL
SOCIETY**

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ABSTRACT

CHINESE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT IN MALAYSIA, 1952-1967: THE NEXUS OF LANGUAGE AND ETHNICITY IN A PLURAL SOCIETY

Between 1952 and 1967, the Chinese educationists in Malaysia launched the Chinese language movement to demand for the recognition of the Chinese language as one of the official languages of the country in order to legitimize the status of Chinese education within the ambit of the national education system. However, this movement had aroused intense ethnic sentiments and heightened ethnic tensions between the Chinese and the Malays. This paper begins by tracing the genesis of the movement during the British colonial period. It then examines the reasons behind the willingness of the Chinese educationists to halt the movement prior to the first Federal Election held in 1955 to elect the first interim local government. It goes on to discuss the reasons leading to the revival of the movement after the 1955 Federal Election. It further discusses the collaboration between the Chinese educationists and major Chinese associations to advance the movement. Finally, it examines the reaction of the Malay nationalists towards the movement and its demise following the enactment of the National Language Act in 1967.

KEYWORDS: language policy, politics of language, plural societies

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language issue has always been a contentious issue in plural societies that attempt to use a common language as the crucible of the nation building process. This is even more so in plural societies that comprise competing ethnic groups who are determined to propagate their languages and cultures in order to maintain their identities as distinct ethnic groups. It is generally accepted that a common language may help to unify a population because it strengthens both sentimental and instrumental attachments to the system and moreover, contributes to the mutual reinforcement of the two (Kelman, 1971:47-48). At the sentimental level, a common language serves as a major object and symbol of attachment by bridging immediate loyalties with transcendent ones. At the instrumental level, a common language helps to integrate the system and to tie increasing numbers of individuals into it (Kelman, 1971:31-32). The use of a common language as the crucible of the nation building process is facilitated by the roles of the national language and the official language. A national language is the language of a political, cultural and social unit, while an official language is a language used for government business (Holmes, 2001:97). The national language and the official language play different roles in contributing to the nation building process by strengthening sentimental attachments (in the case of the national language) and instrumental attachments (in the case of the official language) to the nation state.

The nation building process in plural societies tends to be dictated by the majority group, more so if the majority group is also the indigenous group. In the context of language policy, the majority group often demands its language to be recognized as the national language and the official language. However, such a demand may not be well received by other ethnic groups, especially those who have a significant degree of "ethno-linguistic vitality" (Giles et al., 1977) to challenge the language of the majority group as the main thrust of the nation building process. The Chinese language movement in Malaysia is certainly a classic example whereby the Chinese, a minority group who has a significant degree of ethno-linguistic vitality in terms of numerical strength, have demanded their language to play a pivotal role in the nation building process through the provision of language and education policies. They demand Chinese to be recognized as an official language based on the basis of equality as well as other practical reasons. The aim is to ensure the continued development of Chinese education within the ambit of the national education system. However, this is seen by the indigenous majority group, the Malays, as an outright challenge to the rights of the indigenous language to play the pivotal role in the nation building process. As is always the case in plural societies, when two ethnic groups are locked in contrasting demands over the language issue, the issue becomes contentious and intertwines with intense ethnic sentiments. This paper looks at the Chinese language movement launched by the Chinese from 1952 to 1967 and illustrates the contrasting demands of the Chinese and the Malays over the official language issue within the context of the nation building process in Malaysia.

2. BACKGROUND

Malaysia is a plural society that comprises three main ethnic groups, i.e., Malays, Chinese and Indians. The Malays are the indigenous group, whereas the Chinese and Indians are originally migrants who came to Malaya (Malaysia after 1963) in large numbers during the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The influx of these migrants was largely drawn by economic opportunities created by the British colonial government in Malaya. The Chinese were mainly involved in tin mining activities, while the Indians were engaged in the opening up of land for large scale planting of rubber. Though transient at the beginning, these migrants later developed roots into settled communities resulting in the formation of a plural society in Malaya. In 1947, the ethnic composition of Malaya was 49.5 per cent Malays, 38.4 per cent Chinese, 10.8 per cent Indians and Pakistanis, and 1.3 per cent other ethnic groups. By the time of independence in 1957, the ethnic composition has not changed markedly, i.e., 49.8 per cent Malays, 37.2 per cent Chinese, 11.3 per cent Indians and Pakistanis, and 1.8 per cent other ethnic groups (Hirschman, 1974:9). While the Malays are certainly the majority group, the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, are not a marginal group. They are in fact a significant minority who has the numerical strength, which gives them the ethno-linguistic vitality to propagate their language and culture. Numerical strength is one of the demographic variables that influenced ethno-linguistic vitality of an ethnic group (Giles et al., 1977:313).

Driven by the policy of divide and rule, the British colonial government had allowed a segregated system of vernacular education to flourish in Malaya. The Chinese in particular had managed to establish a strong and vibrant system of Chinese schools to propagate their language and culture. It was not until the early 1950s when decolonization after the Second World War was inevitable that the British colonial government started to formulate education policies to reorganize the education system. Efforts by the British colonial government to establish national schools that used Malay and English as media of instruction to serve as the crucible of the nation building process were strongly contested by the Chinese educationists affiliated to two umbrella associations, the United Chinese School Teachers' Association (UCSTA or Jiao Zong) and the United Chinese School Committees' Association (UCSCA or Dong Zong). The UCSTA was formed in 1951, while the UCSCA was formed in 1954. The two associations assumed the role of a pressure group to safeguard the rights of the Chinese to propagate their language and culture through the provision of Chinese mother tongue education. Together, they are popularly known as Dong Jiao Zong (Tan, 1997).

The establishment of national schools was construed by the Chinese educationists as assimilative to all intents and purposes as the Chinese language was not given a rightful place in the national schools. This had gone against their stand that the nation building process in plural societies should follow a multilingual and multicultural approach that gave equal opportunities to all languages to flourish. It was at this point that the Chinese educationists realized the crux of the problem faced by the Chinese schools in Malaya was that the Chinese language had no legal basis to justify its usage as a medium of instruction in the ambit of the national

education system. This was because the Federation of Malaya Agreement, signed in 1948, had only recognized Malay and English as the two official languages of the Federation. The demand to recognize the Chinese language as an official language was first mooted by the Chinese educationists in 1952. Subsequently, it was adopted by the UCSTA as one of its main concerns. But the demand by the Chinese educationists was not well received by the Malay nationalists who construed this as an outright challenge to the Malay language. Since the 1940s, the Malay nationalists had called for the Malay language to be recognized as the national language and the sole official language befitting its status as the indigenous language, more so after the Malayan Union debacle which had spurred Malay nationalism to a new height. The Malayan Union proposal, inaugurated by the British on 1 April 1946, was seen by the Malays as an attempt to undermine the sovereignty of the Malay rulers as well as their special position and privileges as the indigenous community of Malaya. Their strong opposition forced the British to abort the Malayan Union proposal and replaced it with the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948, which restored the supreme status of the Malay rulers and the special position and privileges of the Malays (see Mohamed Noordin, 1976; Stockwell, 1979). The Malay nationalists were well aware of the lack of educational advancement among the Malays masses who were only allowed by the British to go through four years of rudimentary education. With the recognition of Malay as the national language and the sole official language, this would certainly enhance the instrumental value of the language and would thus provide the Malays the much needed educational mobility. More importantly, the Malay nationalists intended to Malay the crucible of the nation building process. But the Chinese educationists were not willing to submit to the demand of the Malay nationalists as their demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language had received the overwhelming support of the Chinese community as well as the Chinese associations and guilds to the extent that it had developed into a language movement. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese language movement had aroused intense ethnic tensions between the Chinese and the Malays. The demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language intensified prior to the enactment of the National Language Act in 1967.

3. THE GENESIS OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

In 1951, the British colonial government promulgated the Barnes Report. The report recommended the establishment of a single-type primary school or national school open to pupils of all races. This recommendation was underpinned by the objective to build a common Malayan nationality by re-organizing the existing segregated schools on a new inter-racial basis (Federation of Malaya, 1951:20). In essence, the national schools were bilingual schools that used Malay and English concurrently as the main media of instruction (Federation of Malaya, 1951:22). The Chinese educationists were alarmed by the establishment of national schools which had threatened the existence of the Chinese schools within the ambit of the national education system recommended by the Barnes Committee. But the re-organization of the education system was complicated by the release of another report, the Fenn-Wu Report, shortly after the release of the Barnes Report. The Fenn-Wu Report was sympathetic towards Chinese education and tried to show how Chinese schools could contribute effectively towards building up a Malayan citizenry and fostering national consciousness in a way which would be acceptable to the Chinese community (Wong and Ee, 1971:54). In the main, the Fenn-Wu Report advocated multilingualism as a viable option of nation building in the Federation.

The divergent views expressed by the two reports had put the British colonial government in a tight spot. The Central Advisory Committee on Education (CACE) was, therefore, asked to examine the two reports and came out with a report of its own. The CACE Report favored the establishment of national schools advocated by the Barnes Report. The report was then submitted to the Special Committee on Education headed by the Attorney General. The Special Committee on Education was assigned the task to recommend legislation to cover all aspects of education policy in the Federation. In the end, it endorsed the establishment of national schools. This prompted the Malacca Chinese School Teachers' Association (CSTA) to demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language. This was the first time that such a demand was made by the Chinese educationists. The demand was made through a statement released by the Malacca CSTA on 25 October 1952. The Malacca CSTA based its demand on the fact that Chinese is an official language of the United Nations. It also tried to justify its demand by arguing that Chinese had been widely used in the country. Finally, it stood for the co-existence and co-prosperity of all races in the country and as such all languages should be accorded equal status and no single language should be sidelined as the official language (Jiao Zong 33nian Bianjishi, 1987:315). However, the demand by the Chinese educationists did not change the decision of the British colonial government to establish national schools that used English and Malay as media of instruction. The establishment of national schools was subsequently incorporated into the Education Ordinance of 1952. Nonetheless, the bold move by the Malacca CSTA to demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language provided the impetus for the Chinese language movement, which had been pursued with great intensity by the Chinese educationists for over a decade. In the process, the language issue evolved into an ethnic issue that strained ethnic relations between the Chinese and the Malays.

4. LANGUAGE ISSUE AND THE 1955 FEDERAL ELECTION

The demand to recognize Chinese as an official language was officially adopted by the UCSTA when Lim Lian Geok was appointed its President on 19 December 1953. Lim was noted for his “unwavering stand and fearless struggle” (Yen, 2008:252) to safeguard the cause of Chinese education on the grounds of equality and justice throughout his tenure as the President of the UCSTA. He strongly believed that the only way to legitimize the position of the Chinese schools in the national education system was through the recognition of Chinese as an official language. This conviction was the result of a meeting with Sir Donald Charles MacGillivray, the Deputy High Commissioner, on 8 November 1952. The meeting was called by the Deputy High Commissioner to assure the Chinese educationists that the government had no intention to eliminate the Chinese schools. Lim was more interested to find out as to why the Chinese could be accepted as the citizens of the country, but their schools could not be accepted into the national education system. He was referring to the proposal of the British to establish national schools which excluded Chinese as a medium of instruction. MacGillivray’s answer to the question was that national schools could not use Chinese as a medium of instruction as it was not an official language. This was an awakening call for Lim. Lim came to realize that efforts to legitimize the position of Chinese schools within the ambit of the national education system must invariably include the recognition of Chinese as an official language (Tan, 1997:101).

The recognition of Chinese as an official language became Lim Lian Geok’s maiden task as the President of the UCSTA. On 8 August 1954, the UCSTA under his leadership demanded the recognition of Chinese as an official language. It maintained that the recognition of a language as an official language of a country should be based solely on its practical usage and no country in the world had ever sidelined a language that had been widely used by its people. It further argued that apart from its widespread usage, the Chinese language had also evolved into a language that had its own academic and cultural values. When the demand of the UCSTA to recognize Chinese as an official language was reported in the Chinese media, it had received the spontaneous support of the Chinese community at large (Jiao Zong 33nian Bianjishi, 1987:515).

On 14 August 1954, the UCSTA took the opportunity of a visit by the President of the United Nations General Assembly, Mrs Vijayalakshmi Pandit, to the country to submit a memorandum to her. Among other things, the memorandum demanded that Chinese be recognized as an official language of the Federation. Again, the demand was made on the basis that Chinese had been widely used in the Federation and there was no reason that it should not be recognized as an official language (Lim, 1988:24). Apparently, the UCSTA was trying to lobby for external support to force the British colonial government to submit to its demand.

The UCSTA had also urged the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) to include the recognition of Chinese as an official language in its political agenda. The MCA, a Chinese-based political party formed in 1949, is one of the component parties of the Alliance, a tripartite coalition that represents the interests of the three

main ethnic groups in the Federation. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), both formed in 1946, are the other two component parties. The MCA, headed by Tan Cheng Lock, had earlier worked closely with the Chinese educationists through the MCA Chinese Education Central Committee (MCACECC) in rejecting the move by the British to establish a national school system in place of the vernacular school system. But Tan had adopted a cautious stand over the demand of the Chinese educationists to recognize Chinese as an official language. In a meeting of the MCACECC held on 21 August 1954, he cautioned the Chinese educationists that their efforts to safeguard Chinese education should not jeopardize the overall interests of the nation and the interests of other ethnic groups. Based on such a conciliatory stand, it is then not surprising that the MCA could not support the demand of the Chinese educationists to recognize Chinese as an official language (Tay, 2001:254-255).

The demand by the Chinese educationists to recognize Chinese as an official language was temporarily halted prior to the first Federal Legislative Election scheduled to be held on 27 July 1955. This election was an acid test for the Alliance on its strength and legitimacy to eventually form the first post-colonial government. The Alliance was favored by the British to form the interim government that would work towards the independence of the Federation of Malaya. Sensing the danger posed by the demand of the Chinese educationists, which might affect its chances of winning the election, the Alliance, mediated by the MCA under the leadership of Tan Cheng Lock, held a roundtable meeting with the Chinese educationists in Malacca on 12 January 1955. The Alliance managed to convince the Chinese educationists to temporarily drop their demands and promised to amend the Education Ordinance of 1952 and to formulate a new education policy that was fair to all ethnic groups. More specifically, the Alliance's Manifesto proclaimed that the Alliance would allow vernacular schools their normal expansion and would encourage rather than destroy the schools, languages or any culture of any race living in the country (Heng, 1988:203).

In the run up to the 1955 Federal Legislative Election, the Alliance faced stiff competition from the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP or PAS) and the Party Negara. While the Alliance was a tripartite coalition that served the interests of the three main ethnic groups, both the PMIP and the Party Negara were Malay-based political parties that championed the cause of the Malays. The Alliance was particularly worried about the strength of the Party Negara, led by Dato' Onn Ja'afar, a Malay nationalist and the founding President of UMNO, who had earlier left the party due to irreconcilable differences with other leaders over his intention to broaden the base of UMNO to non-Malays so that UMNO could adopt a non-communal front (Heng, 1988:156-137; Mauzy, 1983:14-15). Dato' Onn had since the early 1930s defended the use of Malay for official purposes. On 3 March 1930, he wrote an editorial for *Warta Malaya*, a Malay newspaper, in which he condemned the Johore state government for favoring English over Malay as the language of administration as well as in the issuing of official directives (Ramlah, 1998:232).

Prior to the 1955 Federal Legislative Election, the Party Negara intensified its demand to recognize Malay as the national language. This would automatically

legitimize its position as the sole official language of the country (Mohd Salleh Abas, 1992:19). As early as March 1955, its representatives made the question of national language a major topic of discussion at the Legislative Council (Ratnam, 1965:192). One member, Mohammed Raschid, was engulfed by Malay cultural nationalism when he spoke on the purpose of making Malay the national language:

By adopting Malay as the national language of this country, the future of Malaya as an independent nation and country will profit by her kinship with Indonesia and other islands of the Eastern Archipelago, and not pass into uneasy history as an island of foreign reaction in a sea of Malay culture enriched by Malay tradition and enlivened by the Malay language (Ratnam, 1965:133).

Such a notion of Malay cultural nationalism bears a strong resemblance to the nation-of-intent or the Greater Malaya concept postulated by the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) or the Young Malay Union – an influential Malay radical leftist party in the 1930s (see Rustam, 2008). Dato' Onn's personal view on the issue of national language was also largely influenced by Malay cultural nationalism. One of the reasons he demanded Malay to be recognized as the national language was that the cultural environment of Malaya was part of the culture of the Malay Archipelago – the centre of Malay culture (Ramlah, 2005:331). In contrast to the Party Negara, the UMNO adopted a conciliatory stand over the official language issue. While it supported Malay to become the official language upon independence, it, nevertheless, allowed the use of English as an official language for a grace period of ten years after independence. This was a move to accommodate the non-Malays who were not proficient in Malay (Wan Mohd. Mahyddin and Nik Mustaffa Yusof, 1997:246-247). Apart from that, the UMNO had also promised the non-Malays a constitution that would provide adequate room for the development of other languages (Ramlah, 2005:331).

The Party Negara was strongly against the demand of the Chinese educationists to recognize Chinese as an official language, despite the fact that the Chinese educationists had temporarily dropped the demand in January 1955. This demand became a prime target of the party's election campaign. In a speech delivered in July 1955 at Alor Setar, Dato' Onn warned the Malays that the non-Malays would never accept the Malay language if their languages were accorded legal status as the official language (Ramlah, 2005:331-332). In another speech broadcast through Radio Malaya on 5 July 1955, he stressed that the Party Negara was strongly against a 'Babel of languages' and Malay had to be the only national language, with English as a second official language (Ratnam, 1965:192). The Party Negara accused the UMNO of betraying the interests of the Malays by collaborating with the MCA. This was because under the leadership of Tan Cheng Lock, the MCA had worked closely with the Chinese educationists in defense of Chinese education, especially in repelling the establishment of national schools, though it had not fully committed itself to support the demand of the Chinese educationists to recognize Chinese as an official language. In spite of the strong challenge from the Party Negara, the Alliance managed to secure the mandate of the people to form the first elected interim government. It had won a landslide victory,

gaining 51 out of a total of 52 contested seats, and pulling in 80 per cent of the popular votes (Heng, 1988:201). Tunku Abdul Rahman, the President of UMNO, was subsequently appointed the Chief Minister. A cabinet that comprised members of the Alliance was also formed.

5. THE REVIVAL OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

Since winning the 1955 Federal Legislative Election, the Alliance was under mounting pressure from the Chinese educationists to deliver its pre-election promises. The MCA had by then become a member of the ruling coalition and it could not support the demand of the Chinese educationists without taking into consideration the demands of other races. This was in line with the political system of the Alliance, which was based on “an elite accommodation system” (Means, 1991:2), whereby political leaders of the Alliance had to come to a consensus on a “give and take” basis regarding issues that had serious ethnic implications. In a meeting between the Chinese educationists and the MCA held on 15 October 1956, the Chinese educationists re-affirmed their demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language. However, the MCA was not prepared to commit itself to the cause of the Chinese educationists (Jiao Zong 33nian Bianjishi, 1987:516).

The change of stand by the MCA did not stop the Chinese educationists from pursuing the official language issue. Meanwhile, with the promulgation of the Razak Report in May 1956, the Chinese educationists were confronted with the issue of the conversion of Chinese secondary schools into national medium secondary schools arising from the implementation of two public examinations, i.e., the Lower Certificate of Education (LCE) (for Secondary Year Three students) and the Federation of Malaya Certificate of Education (FMCE) (for Secondary Year Five students). Although the Razak Report did not stipulate the medium of instruction through which these examinations should be conducted, it is reasonable that these examinations should be conducted in the two official languages of the Federation, i.e., Malay and English. Barely a week after the promulgation of the Razak Report, the Education Department informed all Chinese secondary schools through a directive that the LCE examination scheduled in November 1956 would be conducted in English. The Chinese educationists were caught by this untimely decision. They accused the government of attempting to convert the Chinese secondary schools through the provision of public examinations that were conducted in the official languages of the Federation. The accusation of the Chinese educationists was not entirely unfounded. This was because in order to allow Chinese secondary school students to sit for the LCE examination, the Chinese secondary schools had no choice but to change their medium of instruction into English. This would certainly bring about the demise of the Chinese secondary schools.

Apparently, the Razak Report had only wanted a uniform system of secondary education in the Federation. The status of the Chinese secondary schools was not clearly stipulated by the Razak Report. Although the promulgation of the Razak Report was in fulfillment of the Alliance’s pledge to reformulate the education

policy after the 1955 Federal Legislative Election, it could not fully satisfy the Chinese educationists. In formulating this new education policy, the Razak Committee “had to balance a very complex set of factors in reformulating education policy” (Tan, 1997:166). It had to work out a compromise solution on a “give and take” basis. As a compromise to the Chinese, the Razak Committee recognized Chinese primary schools as an integral part of the national education system with the condition that they were subjected to a common content curriculum like all other primary schools to facilitate the process of enculturation. The aim to have a single-type primary school espoused by the Education Ordinance of 1952 was therefore dropped by the Razak Committee. However, the status of the Chinese secondary schools was shrouded with ambiguity. It appeared that there was a long-term plan to convert the Chinese secondary schools to national medium secondary schools. This was clearly stipulated by paragraph 70 of the Razak Report, which states that “the aim [of secondary education] should be to establish one type of National Secondary School where the pupils work towards a common final examination” (Federation of Malaya, 1956:12). Thus, the move by the Education Department to conduct the LCE examination in English was in line with this aim.

In fact, prior to the promulgation of the Razak Report, the British colonial government had attempted to use public examinations conducted in English as a means to convert the Chinese secondary schools into national medium secondary schools. This policy had been successful in converting several Chinese secondary schools into English medium schools, among which was the Chung Ling High school, a reputed Chinese secondary school in the state of Penang. These schools were granted additional grants-in-aid by the British colonial government on the condition that they had to prepare their students to sit for the LCE and the Senior Cambridge (SC) (for Secondary Year Five students) examinations conducted in English. The conversion of these schools into English schools sparked protest and demonstration among students and teachers who saw this as detrimental to the development of Chinese education. It also drew vehement opposition from the Chinese educationists who had earlier appealed to these schools to be self-reliance and not to apply for additional grants-in-aid from the British colonial government (see Jiao Zong Jiaoyu Yanjiu Zhongxin, 1986; Tan, 1989). It is then not surprising that when the Education Department decided to conduct the LCE examination in English following the promulgation of the Razak Report, the Chinese educationists were against such a move and demanded that if public examinations were to be conducted in the official languages of the Federation, then Chinese must be recognized as an official language. But the Alliance government was not willing to concede to this demand. It argued that public examinations were part of the education policy and therefore it must be conducted in the official languages of the Federation (Tan, 1984:297).

Attempt by the Alliance government to convert the Chinese secondary schools into national medium secondary schools was essentially underpinned by the recommendation of the Razak Committee to gradually elevate Malay as the main medium of instruction in the national education system. This recommendation was declared by the Razak Committee as the ultimate objective of the education policy (Federation of Malaya, 1956:3). The elevation of Malay as the main medium of

instruction was certainly underpinned by the intention of the Razak Committee to make Malay the language of national integration as far as the conversion of Chinese secondary school schools into English medium secondary schools was concerned. The conversion of Chinese secondary schools into English medium secondary was only meant to be a temporary measure. As previously mentioned, the Alliance would only allow the use of English as an official language for a grace period of ten years after independence and thereafter, Malay would be the sole official language. This implies that schools that used English as a medium of instruction would have to switch to Malay medium of instruction. On the other hand, the elevation of Malay as the main medium of instruction was also meant to address the lack of educational mobility among the Malays through the establishment of Malay medium secondary schools. But the Razak Committee's decision not to opt for an immediate implementation of Malay as the main medium of instruction had not been well received by Malay school teachers who had voiced their discontents over the lack of educational mobility among the Malays at the secondary level (Ramanathan, 1985; Roff, 1967). Apart from trying to placate the non-Malays (Tan, 1997:179), the gradual implementation of Malay as the main medium of instruction was also due to the acute shortage of teachers competent in Malay (Roff, 1967). Furthermore, the immediate implementation of Malay as the main medium of instruction would go against the Alliance's promise to allow for the usage of English as an official language for a grace period of ten years after independence. However, to the Malay nationalists, the Alliance government was trying to delay the implementation of Malay as the main medium of instruction. They accused the government for the lack of firm resolve in the language issue.

The drafting of the Constitution for an independent Malaya by the Reid Commission was a critical moment for the Chinese educationists to present their case relating to the recognition of Chinese as an official language of the country. The Reid Commission was appointed by the British government to make recommendations on the future constitution of an independent Malaya. It began its work by visiting the Federation in May 1956 (Oong, 2000:224). On 29 August 1956, the Chinese educationists met the Reid Commission to voice their demand over the official language issue. They urged the Reid Commission to include the three main languages of the country, i.e., Malay, Chinese and Tamil, as the official languages of independent Malaya. They tried to convince the Reid Commission that it would not be possible for the Chinese and Indians to work with the Malays for the purpose of nation building if their languages and cultures were not guaranteed a place in the Constitution. This would also lead to other related problems that might complicate the nation building process. They demanded that the official language of the Federation should be picked from languages widely used by its people (Jiao Zong 33nian Bianjishi, 1987:516). But much to the despair of the Chinese educationists, the Reid Commission did not heed their demand. Article 152 of the Federal Constitution had accepted Malay as the national language and stipulated that all official purposes should be conducted in Malay, though it had also allowed the continued use of English for official purposes for a period of ten years after independence. Thus, the Chinese educationists had failed in their attempt to push for the recognition of Chinese as an official language. Nonetheless, the Federation Constitution did not prohibit the learning or teaching of Chinese.

Despite all this, the Chinese educationists had not given up hope. Meanwhile, with the change in the central leadership of the MCA, there was a renewed interest on the part of the MCA to work with the Chinese educationists. In 1958, backed by radical young turks, Dr Lim Chong Eu managed to wrest the control of the MCA from Tan Cheng Lock. As the new leader of the MCA who was determined to win the support of the Chinese community to strengthen his political position, he had decided to establish rapport with the Chinese educationists. His position in the MCA was not as strong as he would like it to be. This was because he only managed to control the central leadership but not the MCA branches, which were in the hands of the old guards (Cheah, 1988:92). On 20 November 1958, he attended a conference organized by the Chinese educationists in Ipoh, Perak. In the conference, he spoke on the need to have an education system that could allow mother tongue education of all races to flourish. The Chinese educationists took this occasion to test the new MCA leadership with a resolution that Chinese should be recognized as an official language. Lim knew that it would be unwise to pursue an issue that was against the Federal Constitution. Instead, he deftly amended the resolution from being an imperative to a conditional demand, which reads: If the government persisted that only official languages could be used as medium for public examinations, then the government should forthwith recognize Chinese as an official language. He felt that the medium through which public examinations should be conducted was more easily backed by educational argument than the official language issue (Tan, 1997:256-257). Furthermore, Lim was merely raising an issue that had earlier being pursued with great intensity by the Chinese educationists. Lim's conditional demand for Chinese to be recognized as an official language was finally accepted by the Ipoh Conference. However, the Malay press and UMNO leaders were unhappy with Lim's collusion with the Chinese educationists. An editorial in the Malay press, *Utusan Melayu*, expressed deep regret that the official language issue was still being raised after the *Merdeka* Constitution had been agreed upon. The editorial accused the Chinese educationists of using the MCA to exert pressure on the government (Tan, 1997:258).

The collusion between the MCA and the Chinese educationists was one of the reasons that strained the MCA's relationship with UMNO. The UMNO accused the MCA of making public demand over issues pertaining to Chinese education instead of resolving the issues by the usual means of internal negotiation within the ambit of the Alliance. The relationship between the MCA and the UMNO deteriorated further when Lim demanded more seats to be allotted to the MCA in the coming 1959 General Election. The demand was directed to the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in a personal letter written by Lim. However, before Tunku could act on the demand, the content of the letter was purportedly leaked to the press in order to pressure Tunku into conceding to the MCA's demand. Tunku and the UMNO were agitated by such a move and accused the MCA of betraying the Alliance. Tunku had even threatened the MCA that the UMNO would go along with the election without the participation of the MCA. Given the deadlock between the MCA and the UMNO, Lim had no choice but to resign from the MCA. The leadership of the MCA was subsequently taken over by Tan Siew Sin who distanced himself from the Chinese educationists. The Chinese language movement was dealt a severe blow when the

government took action against the President of the UCSTA, Lim Lian Geok, for his strong stand against the education policy. His teaching permit and citizenship were revoked by the government in 1961. He then stepped down as the President of UCSTA.

6. THE HEIGHT OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

Prior to the enactment of the National Language Act in 1967, the Chinese educationists took the opportunity to resurrect the demand for Chinese to be recognized as an official language, though the enactment of the National Language Act was meant to review the status of English as an official language after ten years' of independence. On 7 July 1965, the Chinese educationists, headed by Sim Mow Yu, who took over the helm of the UCSTA from Lim Lian Geok, managed to garner the support of the Chinese associations and guilds to organize a convention to demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language (Jiao Zong 33nian Bianjishi, 1987:517-518). The action taken by Sim alarmed the MCA as Sim was also the Vice-Chairman of the MCA Youth Section. The MCA Youth Section had openly supported Sim's action. On 3 August 1965, the Central Working Committee (CWC) of the MCA held an emergency meeting to discuss Sim's intention to resurrect the official language issue. The CWC arrived at the conclusion that any public demand that had ethnic overtones would be detrimental to the interests of a plural society. It proposed the establishment of a special committee by the Alliance to look into the official language issue instead (Cheah, 1984:130).

Meanwhile, the government was also worried that the convention, which Sim had intended to organize, would fuelled unnecessary ethnic tensions. This was because the Malay nationalists affiliated to the National Language Action Front (NLAF), were extremely unhappy with the implementation of the language policy and had stepped up their demand for Malay to be made the sole official language of the country prior to the enactment of the National Language Act. Sim was subsequently summoned by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Home Affairs who advised him to cancel the convention. However, Sim was determined to go ahead and assured the ministers that the convention would be peaceful and would not jeopardize the interests of the Malays (Jiao Zong 33nian Bianjishi, 1987:515).

On 7 August 1965, the organizing committee of the convention met for the first time. A Protem Working Committee of Representatives of Chinese Associations and Guilds was established to organize the convention. In the meeting, Sim gave his assurance to the Alliance government that the convention would not make unwarranted demand that would undermine the supreme status of Malay as the national language. The convention would only demand the government to allow for the wider use of Chinese in official matters in order to help in the disseminating of official directives to Chinese who were not fluent in Malay (Loot, 1996:44-45).

The MCA was under increasing pressure as the convention to demand for Chinese to be recognized as an official language had been overwhelming supported by the Chinese community. Fearing continued opposition to the Chinese language

movement would lead to the loss of political support among the Chinese community, the MCA promised to push for the use of Chinese for official purposes. Although far from demanding Chinese to be recognized as an official language, Sim was particularly happy with this decision as it denoted a significant change in the stand of the MCA over the official language issue. But subsequently development shows that the MCA had not stuck to its earlier promise. On 24 September 1965, the meeting of the special committee established by the Alliance to address the official language issue had come to the conclusion that Malay would be the sole official language and other languages could continue to be used as stipulated by the Federal Constitution (Cheah, 1984:130). The stand adopted by the Alliance was later justified by the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in a speech he delivered before the Ipoh Chinese Amateur Dramatic Association, which had just contributed M\$10,000 to the National Patriotic Fund. In the speech, he says that “we must agree that we must have one language as the official language, otherwise this nation will always be divided”. He adds that “there was no attempt at any time to reduce the opportunities of anybody to pursue their language and cultural interests because in diversity we look for unity” (Enloe, 1970:95).

Given the firm stand adopted by the Alliance government over the official language issue, the Protem Working Committee of Representatives of Chinese Associations and Guilds decided not to go ahead with the convention as it felt that it was unwise to pursue the issue in public. It had instead opted to submit a memorandum to the Prime Minister to demand for a rightful place for the Chinese language. The memorandum was endorsed by 1,021 representatives of Chinese associations and guilds in Malaysia. The submission of this memorandum on 11 April 1965 marked the height of the Chinese language movement. The memorandum covered a host of issues relating to the demand of the Chinese educationists to recognize the Chinese language as an official language, among which it maintains that:

... the request for Chinese as an official language has been made constitutionally and by peaceful means, and this will never lead to racial conflicts. No doubt the language issue is a sensitive problem, but it will not lead to racial disaster as some politicians maliciously put it. We just need a bit of patience, sincerity and open-heartedness and think of our country before anything else, then everything can be solved amicably (Protem Working Committee of Representatives of Chinese Associations and Guilds of Malaysia, 1965).

But the Alliance did not response to the memorandum despite efforts by Sim to seek a meeting with Tunku (Tay, 2003:134). It is clear that the Alliance government had rejected the memorandum. The rejection of the memorandum forced Sim to adopt a more compromise stand on the official language issue. He was willing to accept the recognition of Chinese as a second or supplementary official language if the original demand for the recognition of Chinese as an official language did not work out. He was even willing to concede further to accept Chinese as a language for official usage if the demand for the recognition of Chinese as a second or supplementary official language did not materialize (Loot, 1996:15). But much to

the despair of Sim, his efforts did not brought about the desired impact on the eventual enactment of the National Language Act. Chinese was not recognized as an official language. Meanwhile, Sim paid a price for his active involvement in the Chinese language movement. He was expelled from the MCA on 18 October 1966 as the MCA did not want to be implicated by his lead role in the Chinese language movement (Tan, 1997:288).

7. THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE ACTION FRONT

The formation of the NLAFF in July 1964 by the Malay nationalists was a response to the Chinese language movement, which was seen by them as a challenge to the supreme status of Malay as the national language. It was also a response to the government's apparent lack of firm resolve on the language issue (Funston, 1980:65). The NLAFF included members of UMNO, and it worked closely with PAS and Malay student activists (Mauzy, 1983:34). The NLAFF was the main driving force of Malay linguistic nationalism throughout the 1960s. It was led by Syed Nasir Syed Ismail who was the Director of the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP) or the National Institute of Language and Literature from Jun 1957 to December 1968. DBP was established in 1956 to oversee language corpus planning as well as to promote the wider use of Malay and the development of Malay literature. In 1960, Syed Nasir launched the *Bulan Bahasa Kebangsaan* or the National Language Month to promote the wider use of the national language. The success of the National Language Month prompted the Alliance government to announce that Malay could become the sole official language earlier than expected (Funston, 1980:64).

Syed Nasir was strongly against the Chinese language movement. He construed the movement as a purported challenge to the NLAFF's effort to recognize Malay as the sole official language. On 12 November 1964, he took exception of the Chinese educationists for demanding their language to be accorded equal status as the Malay language (Jiao Zong Jiaoyu Yanjiu Zhongxin, 1984:57). In a speech he delivered in Pontian, Johore on 12 September 1966, he accused the Chinese educationists of making racial demand to recognize Chinese as an official language. He maintained that the Malays would never accept such a demand. He further pointed out that the official language issue was a matter of national importance and should not be politicized by any quarters (Loot, 1996:51-52). In December 1965, the NLAFF passed several resolutions at its National Assembly, among which was to request the government to stipulate clearly in the Constitution that the sole national language and official language is Malay. But the resolutions of the NLAFF were not well received by Tunku Abdul Rahman who had earlier supported the NLAFF, but had by then distanced himself from the NLAFF. He even labeled the NLAFF leaders as extremists who might be using the language issue as an attempt to seize national power. Tunku was well aware that the NLAFF was collaborating with PAS, UMNO's main political rival, and this was detrimental to the political interests of UMNO (Funston, 1980:65). Also, Syed Nasir was seen as someone who had political ambitions and was constantly engaged in building his own power base in the UMNO by exploiting the language issue (von Vorys, 1975:201). Meanwhile, Tunku's decision not to support the NLAFF was also due the fact that the official language issue had

become contentious as the Chinese educationists, led by Sim Mow Yu, had resurrected the Chinese language movement. Apparently, Tunku did not want himself to embroil in the official language issue in order to maintain his status as a supra-communal leader who had the interests of all ethnic groups in mind.

The setback faced by the NLA did not stop Syed Nasir from taking further actions to ensure that Malay was made the sole official language. In October 1966, he launched an attack on the MCA – the MCA had earlier demanded the wider use of Chinese for official purposes, though it had later dropped this demand. He made a public issue of a signboard with Chinese characters outside the office of Bernard Lu, Political Secretary to the MCA President, Tan Siew Sin. He was fed up with the usual argument that signboards in other languages were mere translations of the national language as guidance to those who were not literate in the national language. Within a fortnight of his blatant attack on the MCA, Syed Nasir made a bold move by dispatching a confidential memorandum to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, all Cabinet Members, all State Chief Ministers and all members of the UMNO Executive Council reminding them of the constitutional commitment on the national language and the dire consequences of allowing the liberal use of Chinese for official purposes (von Vorys, 1975:203). He maintained that the question of compromise did not arise as far as the official language was concerned. He argued that Malay becoming the national language and the official language was a logical fact and a right of the language. He alleged the Chinese for making excessive demand on the official language issue and queried their intention for making such a demand. He launched a personal attack on the Chinese for the lack of contentment despite their comfortable position in the country:

The position of the Chinese in this country is very comfortable. They are allowed to do business freely; they are allowed to collect property extensively; they are rich, they hold the country's economy without any disturbance. They had a heavenly life in this country compared to the Chinese in other places. What else do they want from the Malays? (von Vorys, 1975:204).

Syed Nasir's memorandum received the overwhelming support of radical young turks in the UMNO such as Dr Mahathir Mohamed, Dato Harun Haji Idris and Abdul Rahman Ya'kub. Most UMNO members supported the main thrust of his memorandum, i.e., Malay must become the sole national language with no further concessions to other communities as it was constitutional and fair. But they questioned the wisdom of the timing and the selflessness of Syed Nasir's motive in dispatching the memorandum and left it to the UMNO central leadership to decide on the official language issue (von Vorys, 1975:205).

In addressing the official language issue, Tunku Abdul Rahman was particularly concerned with the vulnerable position of the MCA – the MCA had struggled to deal with the Chinese language movement. Thus, Tunku did not want the recognition of Malay as the sole official language to be seen by the Chinese as a Malay communal victory, as this would lead to their accusation that the MCA had sold out to the Malays (von Vorys, 1975:205). Subsequently, Tunku tried to appeal to

the Chinese to be rational in dealing with the official language issue. In October 1966, while delivering a speech at the Penang Free School, he promised that if non-Malays adopted a reasonable stand on the official language issue, the government might even allow for the liberal use of other languages in official matters. Apparently, Tunku was referring to the liberal use of English and not Chinese or Tamil. He sees the continued use of English as essential for ensuring high educational standards and administrative efficiency (Funston, 1980:66). This had become the guiding principle upon which the National Language Act was enacted despite the disapproval of the Malay nationalists. Meanwhile, without the support of the MCA, the Chinese language movement had failed to make any breakthrough. The National Language Act, which was passed by the Parliament on 3 March 1967, had made Malay the sole official language but allowed the continued use of English for official purposes. Clause 4 of the Act stipulates that the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (His Majesty the King) may permit the continued use of the English language for such official purposes as may be deemed fit. It also stuck by Article 152 of the Federal Constitution with regard to the use of other languages (see Haris, 1983:298-300). It is clear that the enactment of the National Language Act could not satisfy both the Malay nationalists and the Chinese educationists. The Malays nationalists were particularly bitter that the Act had not fulfilled the constitutional promises with regard to the use of English for official purposes. Led by the NLAFF, several demonstrations were held in Kuala Lumpur, the state capital, to denounce the Act (Haris, 1983:185). As for the Chinese educationists, they were utterly disappointed that the Chinese language was not recognized as an official language of the country despite their incessant efforts for over a decade.

8. CONCLUSION

The Chinese language movement launched by the Chinese educationist from 1952 to 1967 was an attempt to safeguard the interest of Chinese education through the recognition of Chinese as an official language. During this period, Chinese education was under two serious threats, i.e., the establishment of national schools that used English and Malay as media of instruction and the enforcement of the official language as the medium for public examinations. Underlying the Chinese language movement was the demand of the Chinese educationists for a rightful place for the Chinese language based on their basic rights as well as other practical reasons. However, such a demand was seen by the Malays as an outright challenge to the Malay language. They strongly felt that the Malay language as the indigenous language had its own rights to be recognized as the national language and the sole official language. The Alliance government in general and the UMNO and the MCA in particular were under tremendous pressure to deal with the contrasting demands of the Chinese educationists and the Malay nationalists over the official language issue, which had become contentious and imbued with ethnic sentiments. At the end, the enactment of the National Language Act had clearly sidelined the demand of the Chinese educationists. The government felt that the Federal Constitution had provided enough guarantee to the Chinese language. On the other hand, though the Malay nationalists had achieved their aim to make Malay the sole official language of the country, they were largely disappointed by the government's decision to retain the usage of English for official purposes. While this decision was based on some practical reasons, it had nevertheless gone against the aspirations of the Malay nationalists.

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