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Implications of Malaysian Chinese Language Education for Chinese Character Education in Ethnic Areas of China

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Abstract

Chinese characters are a fundamental element of Chinese culture, and their education in China's ethnic regions forms the cornerstone for fostering national unity, strengthening the sense of community within the Chinese nation, and revitalizing Chinese culture. Based on extensive fieldwork, this study reveals that the development of Malaysian Chinese language education shares similarities with Chinese character education in China's ethnic regions. These parallels provide valuable insights into addressing multilingual challenges in these areas. Effective Chinese character education should integrate with daily life, draw on cultural support, prioritize balanced development, and emphasize the role of Chinese characters in enhancing cognitive development.

Keywords: *Malaysia, Chinese language education, Ethnic areas, Chinese character education*

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1. The History, Current Situation, and Uniqueness of Malaysian Language Education

The definition of Malaysian Chinese language education is mainly based on the definition provided by the United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (UCSCAM) (Zheng, 2007): it refers to the education offered by Chinese schools, which are schools that primarily use Chinese (except for English and Malay subjects) in both teaching and administration. After the restructuring of Chinese schools, Dong Jiao Zong defined Chinese schools as encompassing Chinese primary schools and independent high schools. This article reflects on cultural development and inheritance from the perspective of school education, categorizing all other schools offering Chinese language courses as part of Malaysian Chinese language education.

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1.1. The History of Malaysian Chinese Language Education

The peak of Chinese emigration occurred in the middle and late 19th century and continued until it gradually declined after World War II. The history of Malaysian Chinese language education can be roughly divided into four periods. The first period is defined as the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century: the period of the establishment of Malaysian Chinese language education. According to historical materials, Malaysian Chinese language education can be traced back to the establishment of the Wufu Academy in the early 19th century. However, by the end of the 18th century, there was already a considerable number of Chinese in Malaysia, and some “unnamed” educational institutions emerged. These educational institutions had no standardized regulations regarding the number of students, grades, or school systems, and the private teachers had not undergone professional training. The teaching environment was extremely rudimentary, and this situation persisted until the emergence of new schools in the early 20th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, influenced by China, Malaysian Chinese language education also underwent reforms, introducing new curricula and adopting new management methods. After the Revolution of 1911, Chinese schools entered a period of rapid expansion. According to statistics, the number of schools on the Malay Peninsula rose from just around 20 after the revolution to an increase of 30 to 40 schools every decade, with some decades even seeing an increase of over 60 schools. The main driving forces behind this surge in school establishments during this period were the dialect associations and other types of guilds and social organizations. The second period, from the 1920s to the 1940s, was a consolidation phase for Malaysian Chinese language education. The political affiliations of Chinese schools made the British colonial government eager to separate them from political activities. Especially after the May Fourth Movement, when the British colonial government was infuriated by Chinese school students participating in protests and marches. In response, the government enacted the 1920 Education Ordinance, which allowed the colonial authorities to almost completely control Chinese schools. In response to the crisis, the Penang Chinese School Association took the lead in organizing and drafting a petition to save the Chinese schools. The 20 years following the enactment of the ordinance were a period during which Chinese schools adjusted their pace and began anew. During this time, Chinese schools experienced ups and downs. It was not until 1934 that Chinese schools fully entered a phase of adjustment and consolidation. After that, Chinese schools developed rapidly, becoming more comprehensive and diverse. In addition to establishing secondary education, they also began to develop other types of education, including night schools, teacher training, compulsory education, and vocational education. According to survey data, by 1937, the number of Chinese school students had exceeded 86,000. In 1938, there were 1,015 Chinese schools in the Straits Settlements and the Malay Federation, with more than 91,000 students enrolled. The total number of Chinese schools in the various states amounted to 448. However, the boom turned out to be a flash in the pan. The war disrupted the normal educational order. The colonial government reduced the number of Chinese schools, diminished their cultural characteristics, and altered the school system and curriculum. They implemented a comprehensive shift towards learning Japanese. These measures severely suppressed and transformed the development of Chinese schools. The third phase, in the mid-19th century, was the critical phase of Malaysian Chinese language education. After the war, all education began to be “Malayanized” and indigenized, to cultivate citizens loyal to the nation. The Chinese community fully supported the policy of Malayanizing education. However, the colonial government believed that the realization of Malayanization in education required a unified language. From a political standpoint, the colonial government did not allow Chinese to become a medium of instruction in schools. In a situation where the survival of ethnic culture was at stake, the Chinese community united and launched the second wave of the school founding movement. This led to the establishment of Nanyang University, which helped form a complete educational system. In the face of significant changes in the situation, a series of irrational measures by the colonial government forced the Chinese community to find alternative ways and seek new paths for survival. The fourth phase, from the 1960s to the end of the 19th century, was a period of development for Malaysian Chinese language education. After the country's independence, the local government, through various reports, decrees, and other measures, attempted to centralize Chinese schools, posing a threat to the survival of Malaysian Chinese language education. The established educational policies made the future of Malaysian Chinese language education uncertain, and its development became even more challenging and arduous. Moreover, the failure of the reform of Chinese independent secondary schools undermined the complete educational system, forcing the Chinese community to embark on a path of preserving and safeguarding their educational heritage. In the mid to late 1960s, some educational salvation movements were successively set

off, including the official position of the Chinese language, the revival of Chinese independent secondary schools, and the establishment of higher education. After nearly half a century of effort, the Chinese community finally established a complete education system at the end of the 20th century.

The fact that Malaysian Chinese language education has taken root and flourished and drawn educational resources from Chinese culture can be attributed to the strong sense of identity that Malaysian Chinese have with Chinese culture. This sense of cultural identity has served as the driving force behind the growth of Malaysian Chinese language education, even in adversity, enabling it to thrive and prosper.

1.2. The Current Situation of Malaysian Chinese Language Education

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural country, with the Malaysian Chinese being one of its key ethnic groups. "Where there is a well, there are Chinese; where there are Chinese, there is Chinese language education" (Association of Chinese Ancient Characters Research, Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology and Zhonghua Book Company Editorial Department, 1986). Malaysian Chinese language education has a history of nearly 300 years. As of now, there are 1,293 Chinese primary schools with 564,510 students enrolled. The number of students has increased and then decreased over time, which may be related to the government's recent policy of introducing Chinese language courses in national (Malay-medium) schools to attract students. There are 60 Chinese independent high schools in Malaysia, with 75,923 students currently enrolled, and the number of students has been increasing year by year. As for higher education institutions, there are more than 30,000 students enrolled (as shown in Table 1). In the meantime, driven by the "Chinese fever", the Chinese language has gradually expanded to more ethnic groups in Malaysia (as shown in Table 1). However, in recent years, due to the government's insufficient attention to the schools under its administration, there has been a shortage of funding and teaching staff (Zhang, 2022). The United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia pointed out in its 2023 work report that the total number of teachers in Chinese independent high schools in

Table 1: Student Enrollment in Chinese Primary Schools and Chinese Independent High Schools from 2000 to 2023

School Year	Chinese Primary School (per 10,000 People)	Chinese Independent Secondary School (per 10,000 People)
2000	62.28	5.32
2010	60.46	6.37
2013	56.45	7.59
2014	55.92	7.93
2015	55.05	8.26
2016	54.24	8.46
2017	52.75	8.52
2018	51.85	8.45
2019	51.71	8.71
2020	51.29	8.53
2021	50.71	8.39
2022	51.08	7.96
2023	51.32	7.85

Note: *Table 1: Data for 2000-2018 is sourced from the Dong Zong 2018 Work Report and data for 2019-2023 is sourced from the 2023 National Chinese Independent Secondary School Student Basic Information Statistics.

2023 is 5,275, with a shortage of 89 teachers, including 12 Chinese language teachers. The average ratio of teachers to students in Chinese independent high schools nationwide was 1:18.24. Table 2 shows the government's financial allocations to national and Chinese primary schools in Malaysia from 1991 to 2018. As government schools, regardless of the period, the percentage of funding received by national schools has consistently been much higher than the proportion of students enrolled in national schools, and this gap has been increasing year by year. In contrast, the government funding allocated to Chinese primary schools has been significantly lower (Zou, 2018).

Looking at the development of Malaysian Chinese language education, the strong sense of identity for Chinese culture among the Malaysian Chinese has been the safeguard that allowed Malaysian Chinese language education to thrive even in adversity. In a multicultural environment, this sense of identity has

Table 2: Government Education Funding Allocation to National and Chinese Primary Schools from 1991 to 2018

Time	Category	State Primary School	Chinese Primary School
1991-1995	Appropriation (Ringgit)	1133076000 (89.72%)	102726000 (8.14%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	1845400 (72.89%)	583218 (23.07%)
1996-2000	Appropriation (Ringgit)	102716700 (96.54%)	25970000 (2.44%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	2128227 (75.03%)	295451 (21.07%)
2000-2005	Appropriation (Ringgit)	4708800000 (96.10%)	133600000 (2.73%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	22364428 (76.04%)	615688 (20.93%)
2005-2010	Appropriation (Ringgit)	4598120000 (95.06%)	174340000 (3.60%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	2298808 (75.74%)	636124 (20.96%)
2012	Appropriation (Ringgit)	500000000 (83.3%)	100000000 (16.7%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	210.66 (78.1%)	59.11 (21.9%)
2013	Appropriation (Ringgit)	400000000 (20%)	100000000 (20%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	206.91 (78.6%)	56.45 (21.4%)
2014	Appropriation (Ringgit)	100000000 (66.7%)	50000000 (33.3%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	204.46 (78.5%)	55.92 (21.5%)
2015	Appropriation (Ringgit)	450000000 (90%)	50000000 (10%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	203.48 (78.7%)	55.05 (21.3%)
2016	Appropriation (Ringgit)	Unannounced	Unannounced
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	203.92	54.24
2017	Appropriation (Ringgit)	250000000 (83.3%)	50000000 (16.7%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	204.42 (79.5%)	52.75 (20.5%)
2018	Appropriation (Ringgit)	250000000 (83.3%)	50000000 (16.7%)
	Number of students (per 10,000 people)	207.19 (80%)	51.85 (20%)

Note: The data for 1991-2010 is sourced from Crossing a Jiazi: Moving Towards a New Chapter-Dong Zong 60th Anniversary Commemoration; the data for 2012-2018 is sourced from The Hua Education Newsletter Issue 107 and the Dong Zong 2018 Work Report.

fostered the formation of a unique characteristic for Malaysian Chinese language education, leading to the development of a Malaysian Chinese language education that has garnered global attention.

1.3. The Uniqueness of Malaysian Chinese Language Education in a Multilingual Environment

First, Chinese characters are unique. Chinese characters are the carriers of Chinese culture, and the inheritance of Chinese culture is inseparable from Chinese characters. As an ideographic character, the greatest characteristic of Chinese characters is their ideographic nature. In different areas or multilingual environments, the pronunciation of Chinese characters can vary greatly, sometimes to the point of being completely different. Due to these pronunciation differences, Chinese characters require a stronger ideographic nature and carry more information to ensure accurate communication, even when the pronunciation changes the shape remains the same. The phenomena of polysemy and interpreting characters without a real understanding are proof of the strong ideographic nature and rich informational content of Chinese characters. Second, Chinese characters are inclusive and indigenized in multilingual Malaysia's environment. Throughout the long course of historical development, to facilitate more accurate communication in a multilingual environment, Chinese characters have evolved to include many polyphones and polysemants.

In particular, the character shapes themselves have been modified or added to, either by altering the original characters or by incorporating additional elements, to maximize the information contained within the characters. It can be said that the multilingual environment enhances the ideographic nature of Chinese characters, while the ideographic nature of Chinese characters, in turn, gives them a strong inclusiveness. This is mainly reflected in the fact that, as cultures vary across areas, the language also needs to be indigenized to facilitate its development.

Research on the vocabulary in Malaysian Chinese language textbooks has found that the indigenization of terms related to ethnicity, legendary figures, titles, currency, languages, electronic products, fruits, and numerous place names is higher than that of traditional Chinese cultural vocabulary (有注释). This indicates the strong practicality of Malaysian Chinese language education, which is also a key reason why Chinese culture has been able to take root and flourish in the country. In a multilingual environment, coupled with the strong inclusiveness of Chinese characters and the ability to adapt to the local environment, Malaysian Chinese language education can quickly absorb many cultures with Malaysian characteristics and integrate smoothly into the local social life. Terms such as 24 Festive Drums, *huasu* (mouse), *ruanpan* (floppy disk), and others have enhanced the practicality of Chinese characters and reduced the difficulty of learning them. As a result, it has laid a solid foundation for further learning of Chinese culture. Finally, it is to appreciate the beauty of other ethnic cultures as do one's own and let the beauty of different cultures be shared under the framework of cultural identity. Learning from any ethnic culture serves the purpose of cultural inheritance. Specifically, in the process of learning and exchange, we have become more inclusive and have understood each other. And we have absorbed the essence of each other and created a splendid human civilization.

2. The Similarities Between Chinese Character Education in Ethnic Areas of China and Malaysian Chinese Language Education

Firstly, there is a similar multilingual environment between Chinese character education in ethnic areas of China and Malaysian Chinese language education. Among the 55 ethnic minorities in China, in addition to using Chinese characters, they also use their languages or newly created characters, such as the Tibetan, Yi, and Mongolian peoples. Many ethnic minorities also use multiple languages for communication in life. For example, Yi children in the Daliang Mountains of China need to learn Chinese characters, their ethnic language (Yi), and English, which is introduced in the third grade of elementary school. This is very similar to the multilingual learning environment in Malaysia. In ethnic areas in China, the primary issue in carrying out Chinese character education is how to coordinate the relationship between the Chinese language and the ethnic languages in such a multilingual environment. Malaysian Chinese language education is situated in a unique multilingual environment. Malaysia is composed mainly of Malays, Malaysian Chinese, and Indians. In Malaysia, English is the common language (Indo-European language family) (Zhang, 1992). Malay is the official language (Austronesian language family), and Malaysian Chinese primarily use Chinese for daily

communication (Sino-Tibetan language family). How have the Malaysian Chinese managed to coordinate Chinese language education with the local ethnic language education, and how have they developed in such a multilingual environment? Firstly, it is about maintaining the same cultural characteristics. The Chinese nation has long advocated the value of harmony, praised unity and friendliness, and emphasized the importance of ethnic kinship. Wherever and whenever every nation has a strong sense of identity with the Chinese nation and Chinese culture. This provides a solid spiritual foundation for the current promotion of Chinese character education in ethnic areas of China. After hundreds of years of endeavor, Malaysia has become the world's most successful country in carrying out Chinese language education except China. The strong sense of identity that the Malaysian Chinese have with the Chinese nation and Chinese culture is a key factor in the success of Malaysian Chinese language education.

Therefore, driven by the same sense of identity, the successful experience of Malaysian Chinese language education may provide valuable references for the promotion of Chinese character education in ethnic areas in China, especially under the current context of strengthening the sense of the Chinese national community, which carries profound significance. Secondly, cultural indigenization is also an important factor. Through indigenization, the practicality and significance of Chinese characters are enhanced, making them more relevant to the local reality. The learning of Chinese characters should align with and conform to the cultural environment and characteristics of thinking of ethnic areas. In the meanwhile, the spoken and written languages of a nation can best reflect the general spirit of that nation. The inheritance of an ethnic language must be based on a process of contact, acceptance, and identification with the nation and its culture.

3. Lessons from Malaysian Chinese Language Education

3.1. Chinese Character Education should Return to the World of Everyday Life

Education and culture support each other. A nation without its own culture will face the fate of being assimilated or disappearing. Cultural inheritance is an educational activity. "Education is a social activity that cultivates people. Its social function is to transmit production experience and social life experience, and to promote the growth of the new generation" (Cao and Tang, 2023). Culture originates from social production and life, and is the main content of education. To achieve the goal of 'cultivating people through culture,' education must return to the world of everyday life to seek cultural support.

From the development history of Malaysian Chinese language education, Malaysia Chinese strong tradition of valuing education, along with their sense of belonging and identification with Chinese culture, has driven them to uphold the inheritance of Chinese culture and promote Chinese language education. Generation after generation, the Malaysian Chinese have gradually developed a strong sense of belonging to Chinese culture and a sense of mission for its cultural inheritance through Malaysian Chinese language education from initial contact and understanding to acceptance and identification. Without Malaysian Chinese language education, it is very difficult for the Malaysian Chinese to continue their cultural traditions. Malaysia is a multicultural country, therefore, Chinese language education has a special dual nature. Firstly, as the first language in teaching, the Chinese language enables Malaysian Chinese to possess a strong sense of identity and belonging to Chinese culture. Malaysian Chinese predominantly communicate in Chinese language and use Chinese characters, and Chinese language education is closely connected to daily life. Over time, a complete educational system has been established, consisting of Chinese primary schools, Chinese independent high schools, and higher education institutions such as Southern University College, New Era University College, and Hanjiang International College. Secondly, Malaysian Chinese language education is deeply infused with both local and Chinese cultural characteristics, permeating various aspects of life and work, such as Nyonya culture and The 24 Festive Drums. It not only showcases the unique brilliance of Chinese culture but also reflects how the Chinese in Malaysia pass down and promote Chinese culture in their daily lives. Malaysian Chinese language education is inseparable from daily life, drawing educational resources from Chinese culture and forming its distinct cultural features. Other ethnic groups, such as the Malays and Indians, have begun to engage with Malaysian Chinese language education, which has given the Chinese language the characteristics of a second language teaching. The Malaysian Ministry of Education has also increasingly emphasized Chinese language education. Initially, this was reflected in the implementation of Chinese language teaching plans in national-

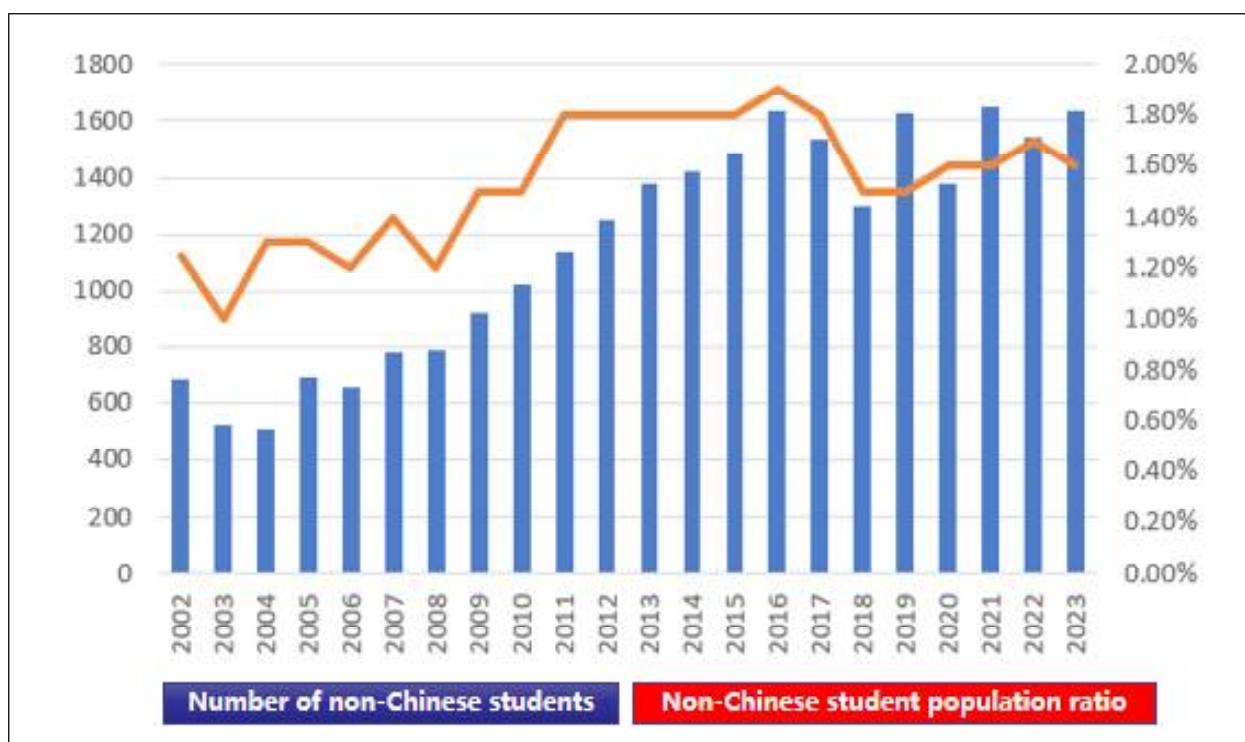


Figure 1 Statistics on the number of non-Chinese students in Chinese independent high schools from 2002 to 2023

Note: *Figure 1 data is sourced from the Dong Zong '2018 Annual Report.' Data for 2019-2023 is sourced from the '2023 National Statistics on Chinese Independent School Students' Basic Information'.

type primary schools and gradually developed into the formal incorporation of Chinese language courses into the official curriculum of national-type primary schools. Additionally, many higher education institutions have introduced the Chinese language as an elective course. With the support of policies, an increasing number of non-Chinese students are entering Chinese schools, and their numbers have been rising year by year. Figure 1 shows the number of non-Chinese students in Chinese independent high schools from 2002 to 2018.

The purpose of promoting Chinese character education in ethnic areas in China is the same as that of the Malaysian Chinese—it is to inherit and develop Chinese culture. Therefore, when implementing Chinese character education in ethnic areas, Chinese culture should serve as an educational resource. These resources are deeply embedded in everyday life, so education must be based on the world of daily life, drawing from it to achieve cultural indigenization. Ultimately, this will form a development relationship in which education and culture mutually promote each other, and culture aligns with the local reality. We need to realize the exchange and inheritance of Chinese culture in education and to clarify the relationship between Chinese culture and ethnic cultures as having the same roots and origins. This can promote understanding, thereby enhancing national unity.

3.2. Fulfilling the Unique Cognitive Functions of Chinese Characters

Characters are the carriers of language. Promoting Chinese character education in ethnic areas not only facilitates communication and cultural inheritance, but also has a profound impact on the development of cognition, such as memory, imagination, and thinking. Implementing Chinese character education nationwide is an inevitable trend.

3.2.1. The Impact of Pronunciation, Shape, and Meaning of Characters on Memory

Memory is the psychological process of accumulating and storing individual experiences in the mind. Using the terminology of information processing, it refers to the process of encoding, storing, and retrieving information from the external world in the mind (Chen, 2021). In the process of Chinese character acquisition, pronunciation recognition and repetition are based on the correct identification of character shapes. The learning of character

shapes can guide the learning of character meanings, while the learning of character meanings can reinforce and establish connections between pronunciation and shape, ultimately completing the learning of the shape, pronunciation, and meaning of Chinese characters.

3.2.1.1. The Impact of Pronunciation on Memory

The impact of Chinese character pronunciation on memory is primarily reflected in phonogram characters. The 'wen' character in 'pictographs' uses a shape-based encoding method to represent meaning. However, from pictorial characters to ideograms, this method still could not meet the needs of recording the Chinese language. Therefore, an alternative approach was sought. This approach was the implementation of a combination of shape and pronunciation encoding, leading to the creation of more complex phonetic-ideographic characters (Chen, 2010). Although Chinese characters are ideographic, the proportion of phonogram characters has increased significantly during their evolution. The *Jiaguwen Bian* (The Oracle Bone Inscription Collection) contains 941 characters as seen in the *Shuowen Jiezi*, of which 216 are phonograms, accounting for 23% of the total (Chen, 2016).

From the Western Zhou Dynasty to the end of the Western Zhou Dynasty, phonograms accounted for about 50% of the total characters at the time. However, by the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, a significant change occurred. In the textual materials from the Spring Autumn and Warring States periods, phonograms made up about 75% to 80% of the total number of characters, and a stable system of semantic and phonetic components had essentially formed (Chen, 2021).

The relationship between character pronunciation and memory in the process of Chinese character acquisition is mainly analyzed from the phonetic component of characters, which has the following effects on memory:

In the subsequent evolution of Chinese characters, phonograms have consistently accounted for around 80%. According to statistics, among the 7,000 commonly used characters in modern Chinese, 5,631 are of the pictophonetic structure, making up 80.5%. In the process of acquiring Chinese characters, the relationship between pronunciation and memory is primarily analyzed from the phonetic components of phonograms. The phonetic component of phonograms has the following effects on memory:

First, it accelerates recognition and consolidates existing memory information. For phonograms with the same pronunciation as the phonetic component: although the probability of the phonetic component of characters representing the pronunciation of the characters is very low, there are still many characters whose pronunciation matches the phonetic component, such as '湘' (Xiang), '厢' (Xiang), and '箱' (Xiang). This is one of the situations where recognizing half of the character can help with identification. The process of learning new characters is essentially a repetitive process of retrieving existing memory information of Chinese characters, which helps consolidate memory and lighten the cognitive load.

Second, it improves the speed of memory retrieval. In cases where the phonetic component shares the same pronunciation, the process of recognizing a new character is also the process of consolidating the memory of its pronunciation. As a result, mastering the pronunciation of new characters with the same phonetic component becomes faster.

In cases where the phonetic component has a different pronunciation, there are three situations:

1. The phonogram and the phonetic component have the same initial but different finals, such as '嫂' (sao) and '搜' (sou).
2. The phonogram and the phonetic component have different initials but the same final, such as '殊' (shu) and '诛' (zhu); '抱' (bao), and '泡' (pao).
3. The phonogram and the phonetic component have different initials and finals, such as '草' (cao) and '章' (zhang).

Regardless of the situation, the pronunciation of characters with the same phonetic component is, in most cases, relatively similar or close. This resonates with the basic principle of recall—the laws of association and proximity, which enhance the process of memory retrieval. Due to the identical phonetic components, the pronunciation of one character often helps in remembering or recalling the pronunciation of another character

with the same phonetic component. This is the second case of recognizing half of the character. The acquisition of these characters helps consolidate learned characters, improves the speed of retrieving memory information about Chinese characters, and promotes the development of associative ability.

3.2.1.2. The Impact of Shape on Memory

In the process of acquiring Chinese characters, the primary requirement for character shapes is the ability to correctly recognize them, which forms the foundation for correct writing. The impact of character shapes on memory is mainly reflected in the following points: First, the semantic component of phonograms improves the speed of recognition and the accuracy of memory. According to statistics, among the 5,631 commonly used p phonograms, those where the semantic component exactly matches the meaning of the character are very few, such as '爸' (father) and '船' (boat), accounting for only about 0.83%. However, this still determines the ideographic nature of Chinese characters. Saussure believed that ideographic writing is a system in which a word is represented by a single symbol, and this symbol is unrelated to the sound on which the word is based. This symbol is related to the whole word, and thus indirectly related to the concept it represents (参考7). In the process of memorizing new characters, such as '糖' (sugar), '塘' (pond), '澆' (a type of watercourse), and '糖' (sugar), although the semantic component is not perfectly equivalent to the meaning, it still proves that there exist such ideal semantic components. These components help in the processing and classification of Chinese character information, improving the speed and accuracy of character recognition and recall.

Second, the structure of Chinese characters themselves aids in memory. The complexity, variability, and balanced symmetry of Chinese characters improve the recognition of new characters and facilitate memory. For example, the characters '撮' (cuo) and '薄' (bo), which have slightly more complex forms, are unlikely to be confused when writing, and once their meanings are known, they are almost impossible to mix up. In comparison to English, such as 'quiet' and 'quiet,' which can still be easily confused even when their meanings are understood, Chinese characters like these are much less likely to be mixed up, not to mention more complex words. For example, in the case of the character '蝮' (guo), if you recognize the component '虫' (insect), even without knowing the meaning of '蝮,' you can generally guess that the character is related to insects. In this process, you may unconsciously consolidate and retrieve the memory information of the '虫' character, which helps to develop associative abilities.

3.2.1.3. The Impact of Meanings on Memory

First, the meaning of a character helps in memorizing more complex Chinese characters. The revised edition of "The Great Chinese Dictionary" includes a character comprising four traditional Chinese characters of '龙' (Loong), totaling 64 strokes, making it the character with the most strokes in the Chinese language. Due to the complex and varied forms of Chinese characters, many characters with a large number of strokes are not conducive to memory in terms of recognition or writing. From this perspective, the meaning of Chinese characters seems to be an obstacle to memory. However, this is not the case. Take '魔' (demon) and '磨' (mill) as examples. Without knowing their meanings, they could likely be confused during the memorization process. However, if the meaning of one character is understood, such as '魔' representing an evil spirit or demon, the presence of the '鬼' (ghost) radical in the character offers a clear explanation. When learning '磨,' attention is drawn to the '石' (stone) radical, indicating that the character involves something made of stone. Therefore, the likelihood of confusing '魔' and '磨' is very low. Second, the meaning of a character helps in remembering visually similar characters. For example, '人' (person) and '入' (to enter); '角' (corner) and '角' (corner); '己' (self), '己' (already), and '巳' (sixth); '锋' (edge) and '峰' (peak); '治' (to govern) and '冶' (to smelt). Classifying and memorizing Chinese characters based on their meanings can improve both the speed and accuracy of character memorization. At the same time, the similarities or opposites in their shapes align with the principle of contrast in associative memory: 'Contrasting features between objects can also easily form associations. People can associate white with black, tall with short, and so on' (Feng, 2017). Through comparative memory, seeing the character '人' (person) reminds one of '入' (to enter), thereby consolidating the memory and improving memory accuracy. Thirdly, the meaning of characters helps in accurately extracting information from Chinese characters. Chinese characters have a wide range of meanings, and polysemous characters are common. The correct interpretation of the meanings of polysemous characters needs to be based on a solid understanding of the character meanings.

3.2.2. *The Impact of Shapes and Meanings on Imagination*

The complex structure and variable meanings of Chinese characters pose certain difficulties for teaching and learning, which is one of the main reasons why Chinese characters are considered difficult to learn and teach. However, it is precisely because of their complex structures that the recognition of Chinese characters is heightened, and the variability in their meanings also helps to increase their distinguishability.

3.2.2.1. **The Impact of Shapes on Imagination**

Chinese characters, with their nature of representing meaning through shape, can promote the development of imagination. For example, characters like '人' (person), '山' (mountain), '日' (sun), and '月' (moon) evolved from pictographs. These characters gradually transitioned from images to written forms. By linking these concrete images with the objects they represent, the purpose of making people understand the meaning just by looking at the picture is achieved. This requires strong pictorial representation and is deeply connected to imagination. Although the pictorial nature of Chinese characters has decreased over time in their evolution, in terms of absolute numbers, many Chinese characters still retain a high degree of pictoriality. The characteristic of Chinese characters representing meaning through shape allows people to associate the shape of the character with the object it represents, thereby understanding the meaning through the shape. This, in turn, promotes the development of imagination.

3.2.2.2. **The Impact of the Meaning of Characters on Imagination**

Learning the meaning of Chinese characters can promote the development of imagination. In the process of the evolution of Chinese characters, the proportion of pictographs gradually decreased, while the proportion of phonogram characters increased. The main reason for this shift is that pictographs gradually could no longer meet the growing needs of language development. Many characters no longer had tangible objects to represent, such as '想' (to think). The use of phonogram characters improves the accuracy of written language expression. For example, characters like '铜' (copper), '桐' (paulownia tree), '筒' (tube), and '洞' (cave) use different semantic components to clarify their meanings, making their symbolic direction more precise. For instance, the radical '木' (wood) in '桐' allows one to easily associate the character with something related to wood. Phonogram characters account for a very high proportion of Chinese characters, so learning Chinese characters often relies on the phonetic and semantic components to aid in understanding their meanings. This is the third type of recognizing half of the character, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the process of learning the meaning of characters also promotes the development of imagination.

3.2.3. *The Impact of Shapes and Meanings on Thinking*

As early as 400 BCE, Socrates believed that: 'The thinker is talking to himself' (Gao, 2020). There has been much debate in the academic community about the relationship between thinking and language. Chadrin has demonstrated that the learning of Chinese characters has contributed to the intelligence of the Chinese people. Research shows that Chinese characters are 'both-hemisphere characters' that engage both the left and right hemispheres of the brain, stimulating the simultaneous development of both sides. As the carrier of the Chinese language, Chinese characters are undoubtedly inseparable from language and thinking.

3.2.3.1. **The Impact of Shapes on Thinking**

First, promoting the transformation of thought: The construction of Chinese characters is a process that moves from describing the shapes of all things to abstracting the meanings. Therefore, it can 'reflect the universe's virtues and express the feelings of all things' (Huang, 2016). Confucius said, 'The sages set up images to completely express their idea, set up trigrams to completely reflect their emotions, and gave their remarks to completely show their expression' (Li and Ren, 1986). The nature of Chinese characters, where shape represents meaning, embodies the ability to express meanings directly and visually, achieving the purpose of 'seeing the shape and knowing the meaning.' The process of learning Chinese characters is a transformation of thought from the concrete to the abstract and then to the imagery (Xiu, 2021).

Second, to enhance the understanding of the relationship between oneself and the world: The structure of Chinese characters reflects a type of thinking towards one's inward world, which refers to a thinking mode based purely on individual subjective feelings and needs, without being constrained by objective external realities (Lin, 2019). This type of thinking builds relationships between oneself and all things. For example, the

character '休' (rest) combines '人' (person) and '木' (tree), symbolizing a person resting against a tree. By illustrating the relationship between a person and a tree, it clarifies the meaning of 'rest.' Deconstructing the relationship between oneself and the world embedded in the structure of Chinese characters and linking it with the meanings of the characters can support memory and have a certain impact on the learner's thinking.

Third, to promote the development of categorization and reasoning abilities. In Chinese character instruction, characters with the same radical are often grouped for easier memorization. This method not only helps with character recognition but also gradually influences our behavior. At the same time, the structure of Chinese characters can promote the development of reasoning abilities. This is primarily reflected in the characteristic of Chinese characters representing meaning through shape. For example, with the characters '林' (woods) and '森' (forest), learners can infer that these two characters are related to wood due to their common component '木' (wood). After understanding the meanings of the two characters, one can deepen their understanding of the meanings based on their structure. In Chinese culture, the number three represents abundance or plurality, so the character '森' (forest), formed by three '木' (wood) components, truly embodies both form and meaning.

3.2.3.2. The Impact of Meanings on the Way of Thinking

First, to promote the development of comparative thinking: In Chinese character instruction, characters are often categorized, either by their shape, meaning, or pronunciation. For example, if we categorize the characters '哭' (cry), '笑' (laugh), '跳' (jump), '拿' (take), '树' (tree), '怒' (anger), and '水' (water), it would be difficult to categorize them based on their shape or pronunciation alone. However, once we understand their meanings, categorizing them becomes easy: '哭', '笑' and '怒' fall into one category—emotions; '树' and '水' into another—natural objects; '跳' and '拿' into another—actions. Explaining the basis for classification based on meaning is an abstraction of the characters' meanings, which improves abstract thinking and promotes the development of comparative thinking.

Second, to promote the development of imaginative thinking: The ideographic nature of Chinese characters allows for a free transition between the concrete, the abstract, and the symbolic. This is reflected in expressions like 'emotions evoked by scenes', 'seeing things evokes thoughts of people', and 'pun'. For example, the line '东边日出西边雨, 道是无晴却有晴' (The sun rises in the east, the rain falls in the west, it seems to be cloudy but there's still sunshine) and the couplets '橘子洲, 洲旁舟, 舟行洲不行' (Orange Isle, boat by the isle, the boat moves but the isle doesn't) or '天心阁, 阁中鸽, 鸽飞阁不飞' (Tianxin Pavilion, pigeons in the pavilion, the pigeons fly but the pavilion doesn't)—these are all expressions of this symbolic nature, transitioning from the concrete to the symbolic. This type of imagery requires an understanding of the characters, and while promoting imaginative thinking, it also allows us to enjoy beauty and ambiance.

In the Malaysian Chinese education system, the pass rate for the Chinese language in both the annual Entrance Examination for Secondary School and the National College Entrance Examination is over 90%. The HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) exam, which tests listening and reading comprehension, examines the precise mastery of pronunciation, character recognition, and meaning. Emphasizing the cognitive benefits of Chinese characters, their value in cultural transmission is crucial. In ethnic areas where Chinese language education is essential, Chinese character teaching plays a vital role. The complexity of Chinese characters presents both a challenge and an opportunity for learners. By focusing on the uniqueness of Chinese characters in teaching, aligning language education with real-life situations, and reducing learning difficulty, students' interest in Chinese characters is increased, and their cognitive development is fostered. In addition, it is important to highlight the cultural function of Chinese characters, not only to showcase the practical value of Chinese culture in promoting societal and personal development but also to fully explore Chinese culture and embody the essence of education 'to cultivate through culture.'

4. Conclusion

Malaysia is the most successful country in the world in carrying out Chinese language education except China. The sense of identity and belonging among the Malaysian Chinese is the fundamental reason why Chinese culture has taken root and flourished in a multi-ethnic and multicultural country. As a carrier of Chinese culture, Chinese characters' uniqueness and the realization of an appropriate degree of indigenization can enhance their vitality and adaptability, thereby promoting the robust growth of Chinese culture in a multilingual environment. With a similar development environment, Malaysian Chinese language education offers valuable experience in

promoting Chinese character education in ethnic areas of China. At the same time, under the background of "Internet Plus", there are greater possibilities for promoting Chinese character education in ethnic regions, providing multiple avenues to foster a sense of national identity among the Chinese people. This approach not only protects the language and cultural heritage in ethnic regions but also lays a solid technical foundation for the successful implementation of Chinese character education in these areas. Through cultural exchange, it enhances national unity and social harmony, promotes individual development, and ultimately achieves a vision where the cultures of all ethnic groups can flourish uniquely and harmoniously.

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