

A **Case Study** of a **Chinese Independent School**

Associate Professor Grace Lee Hooi Yean
Associate Professor Gareth Leeves, Monash University Malaysia



Abstract

This paper presents the findings and observations of a case study conducted on a particular Chinese Independent School located in the Klang Valley. It elaborates on the efficacy of the school in conducting teacher trainings to ensure their students' needs are met and raising funds to ensure the sustainability of the school.

Furthermore, this case study looks at how the administration uses its autonomy to cater for its students needs, as well as parents' opinions on the choice they have made to send their children to various Chinese Independent Schools in general.

Introduction

The Education Act 1961 called for a change in the medium of instruction to English and later to Bahasa Malaysia in the 1970s. Chinese secondary schools that chose to continue with Chinese education became independent schools without any entitlement to financial allocation from the government.

Chinese Independent Schools (CIS) in Malaysia are private high schools which play a prominent role in providing a Chinese language secondary education. CIS have become an increasingly popular choice among the Chinese community - 60 CIS¹ nationwide have recruited more than 80,000 students in 2015.²

Currently facing a shortage of classrooms, the CIS have been turning away thousands of students every year. These schools are considered to be independent organisations and are not required to follow Ministry of Education (MOE) policies developed for publicly funded schools, instead they have to adhere to policies set by the Private Education Division under the MOE.

¹ While this paper was being written there was a new Chinese Independent School in the process of being certified to administer the UEC, bringing the total number of CIS to 61 in Malaysia.
² Record number of students at Chinese independent schools, AsiaOne News <http://news.asiaone.com/news/education/record-number-students-chinese-independent-schools>

Objective

The purpose of this study is to investigate how a Chinese independent school (CIS) operates without government funding and how they utilise the autonomy afforded to them as private schools. We conducted an exploratory case study of one school³ to discover and understand the perspectives of the school Principal, a member of the school's Board of Governors (BOG) and parents who sent their children to different CIS.

Methodology

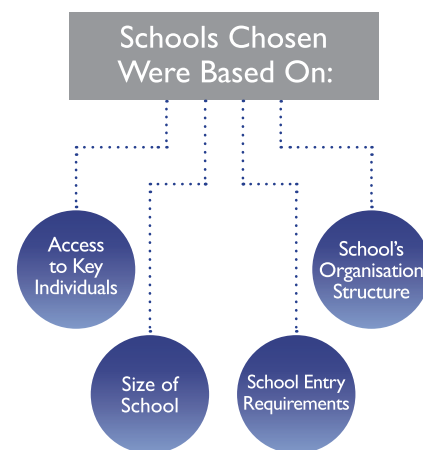
The Principal and one of the 25 members of the BOG, were interviewed from one school. The school was selected on the basis of the accessibility and availability of these key individuals within the school.

At the same time, basic facts about the school such as size, entry requirement, and organisation structure (BOG with Principal running daily affairs of school) were identified as indicators of typical CIS.

These interviews were independently conducted with the Principal, having served at the school for eight years and the member of the BOG having been on the

Board for nearly two decades besides being an alumnus of the school.

Five parents were interviewed, three females and two male. Their children attended different schools to that of the Principal and Board member. The schools were all located in the Klang Valley and their children were in Forms 1 to 5. The parents represented four schools, allowing us to make some deductions about CIS in greater Kuala Lumpur. Once again, the interviews were conducted separately with each parent. Where possible we also added our observations of other CIS.



Interview and Findings

A The School

School Administration: Board of Governors Play an Important Role

There are 25 Board members who determine the hiring of the Principal and overall policies for the school. Board members are mostly businessmen. They sometimes come to the school to discuss matters and to review operations. The Governor stated that "the Principal - BOG relationship in the school is similar to the CEO - Board of Directors relationship in a company, the only difference is that the school is a non-profit organisation".

From the interview with the Principal it seemed that in this particular school the Chairman of

the Board understood the challenges faced by the Principal and played a role in keeping the Board members from intervening in the daily running of the school and operational matters. However, major changes in operations and plans had to be submitted to the Board for approval.

The Principal consults the Chairman prior to any meeting. The Principal then also identifies members who may have opposing views on a particular issue and meets with them to discuss and resolve differences prior to the Board meeting.

According to the Principle, many chairmen in the past five years have come to realise that principals must be given the discretion to run schools and that the Board should not interfere too often for the school to run smoothly.

Curriculum and Examination: Double-Track Curriculum Allows Flexibility

Dong Zong⁴ coordinates the curriculum used in all CIS and organises the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) standardised test. The schools, however, are independent of each other and Dong Zong. They have the freedom to manage their own affairs including finance, human resource management, curriculum, teaching practices and pedagogy.

I. Government Recognition of UEC

While CIS are recognised by the government, the UEC is not recognised by the Malaysian government because it does not follow the national education system. However, this does not stop the UEC from being recognised overseas. Today, UEC is recognised as a qualification for entrance into more than 400 universities around the world including Australia, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, United Kingdom, and the United States.

II. The Double-Track System

Many CIS do provide the option for students to take national exams such as Lower Secondary Evaluation (PT3) and Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) exam alongside UEC examinations to provide students with a greater number of tertiary education options. For instance, it is compulsory for students of Chong Hwa Independent High School (Kuala Lumpur), Tsun Jin High School and Kuen Cheng High School to sit for PT3 and SPM, as well as the UEC exam. This is known as the double-track system, which allows the CIS students the option of tertiary education with public and private universities, both overseas and locally. The school that we looked at also had the double-track system in place which allowed students the flexibility to enter local and international institutions of higher learning.

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Around the world

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³ The identity of this school has been kept anonymous in exchange for access and interviews with the school leaders.

⁴ Dong Zong (United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia) was established in 1954 by a group of Chinese educationists in an effort to protect and preserve the right to mother tongue education. It is an organisation of 13 state-level Chinese education guilds.

School Finances: Lack of Government Funding is Not a Hindrance

The tuition fees are low and do not cover what is usually the largest budget item for any school - teacher salaries. The school we looked at had an average monthly fee below RM500, relatively low cost for a school in an urban area.

In order to keep the education affordable for middle-class parents the school we looked at employed multiple methods of funding, and they are as follows:

- (i) **Facilities** – the school provides a hostel service for 1,200 students. This generates a RM2-3 million surplus per annum. The hostel is also rented out for education and training camps outside of term time.
- (ii) **Fundraising** – an annual fundraising carnival encourages local companies and institutions to bring items to sell at no cost to the school. The carnival raises over RM500,000 in surplus.
- (iii) **Alumni** – alumni are an important source of funds. In 2015, the school received an endowment fund of RM30 million from the alumni with professional managers assigned to administer the fund. Another alumni in Singapore donated RM10 million towards teacher training. There

are also minor bequests from locals after children's graduation, weddings, or deaths - these come up to approximately RM200,000 per annum.

- (iv) **Overseas Visits** – the school hosts students from overseas, which are organised by the International Affairs Department. Study tours generate an income of circa US\$100 - US\$150 per head. The school usually hosts about thirty students per trip and holds several trips per year.
- (v) **Education Fair** – the school charges visiting tertiary institutions from RM500 to RM1,000 per booth and they receive approximately 60 institutes at each annual fair.

Funding operations are also seen as a 'teaching' exercise for students, as they allow students to appreciate the importance of community support and engagement. The Principal believes it reduces incidences of negative or rebellious behavior by students such as vandalism and general abuse of school property.



Teachers: Teacher Training is Prioritised

In addition to the professional training offered by Dong Zong, the school supplements teachers' training with workshops, research programmes and even post-graduate studies both locally and overseas. Following the completion of a Masters programme, teachers will get a salary increase but will be bonded to the school for three years.

The school is not restricted in training plans and initiatives to improve teaching standards. It will need to form a sub-group of Board of Directors from various schools that are in charge of teacher training.

For example, the Principal who we interviewed leads a committee of 10 schools from the Klang Valley that schedules teacher training and decides upon the content of the training. Each of the 10 schools then hosts a particular subject training and share the costs incurred. This is an entirely voluntary initiative between the schools and the trainings are either conducted by an employee from the 10 schools or outsourced the training is outsourced to an external party.

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B The Parents

Parent's Choice: What Do Parents Say?

We interviewed five parents who sent their children to four different CIS. The parents we interviewed (from middle to high income groups) considered the fees charged by the schools affordable. Some of them would not mind paying more provided that the rise in fees were gradual and reasonable. A board member from the school that we interviewed commented that “Chinese parents would usually sacrifice as much as possible to ensure that they give their children the best education”.

The parents were well informed on the governance structure in their childrens

schools and knew about the academic affairs office, disciplinary office, extracurricular affairs office and counselling office.

Parents may also raise concerns or complaints about any aspect of a school's operations which will be handled by the respective office, depending on the nature of the complaint. The parents concluded that they are satisfied with how the school handled their concerns.

“Chinese parents would usually sacrifice as much as possible to ensure that they give their children the best education.”

Additionally, we asked parents why they chose to send their children to CIS. They are as follows:

i) Lack of confidence in public schools

ii) Keeping cultural roots and character building

iii) Extracurricular and community engagement activities

i) Lack of Confidence in Public Schools

The parents who were interviewed did not have confidence in government schools because policies frequently changed. One such example is the recent reversal of the teaching of math and science in English (PPSMI) policy. Malaysia reverted from English to Bahasa Malaysia in science and math subjects in 2012.⁵

Whereas in CIS, mid-level UEC questions ranging from accounting and commerce, bookkeeping, mathematics and science remain consistently in English and Chinese.⁶

Furthermore, parents stated high academic standards and better education programs as some reasons for sending their children to CIS.

“Whereas in CIS, mid-level UEC questions ranging from accounting and commerce, bookkeeping, mathematics and science remain consistently in English and Chinese.”

⁵ As this paper was being written further changes were made to move this policy in a new direction with new initiatives introduced to improve English proficiency known as Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) and Dual Language Program (DLP).

⁶ The school has six school years, Junior Middle (year 1 to year 3) and Senior Middle (year 4 to 6). Students sit for the UEC examination at Junior Middle 3 (year 3) and Senior Middle 3 (year 6).

ii) Keeping Cultural Roots and Character Building

"It is important that our children retain our cultural roots and be fluent in our mother tongue," said one of the parents. These parents wanted not only conventional education but also the inculcation of Confucian values of respect towards elders and character building. Parents wanted their children to undergo a school system that nurtures values of filial

piety, integrity and good manners. Apart from teaching knowledge, they felt that schools are also a place to learn good etiquette. There were concerns over the deterioration of discipline in public schools. They believe the CIS system offered a more disciplined learning environment.

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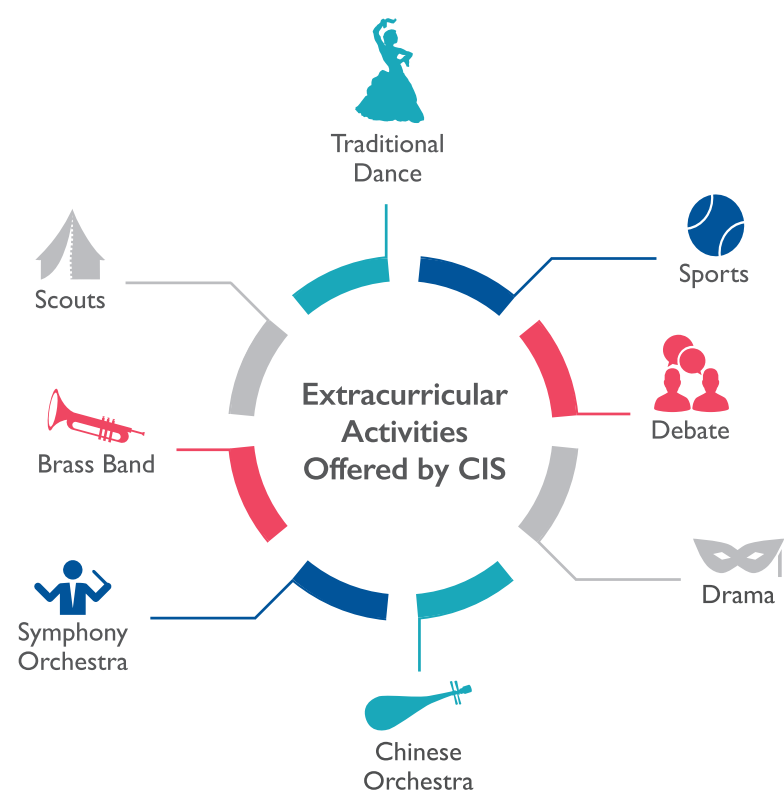
iii) Extracurricular and Community Engagement Activities

Parents wanted their children to have a well-rounded education which included participation in extracurricular activities. The schools usually offered a plethora of extracurricular activities which allowed students the opportunities to improve leadership and interpersonal skills while also increasing self-confidence. These include sports, debate, drama, Chinese orchestra, brass band, symphony orchestra, scouts, Leo club, traditional dance and so on.

In addition, the schools that we looked at had a tradition of students selling coupons to the public for the school's annual carnival to raise funds for the school. One of the parents, who is also an alumnus and former President of the Parents-Teachers Association (PTA), stated that "the carnivals have always been organised and led by the students. The community engagement gives students the chance to engage, learn, and lead".

As an example, a carnival organised in the past raised around RM500,000 in just five hours. The parent stressed that fundraising activities involving the community helped students build a sense of connection with their communities. This opinion was also shared by the Board member who stated, "while we embrace our heritage and longstanding traditions, we also believe in inculcating a

strong sense of solidarity, concern, and compassion for the community at large as it will have a lifelong impact on students". He added that "we connect our students with meaningful volunteer opportunities to strengthen their understanding of diversity and social responsibility, and develop skills to become ethical leaders with integrity who contribute to the society".



Besides asking parents why they sent their children to CIS, we also asked them about concerns they had over the CIS system. Concerns expressed were mainly on opportunities for their children to communicate in English as well as the academic demands of CIS.

i) The Lack of Opportunity to Communicate in English

An interesting finding in our study was that English language skills are rated highly by the school. For example, one of the CIS that we studied had an English Language Centre which used the Cambridge English syllabus and was compulsory for all students from Year One. Annually, most students (approximately 90 percent) at the particular school we looked at chose to sit their UEC exams in English.

Most parents recognised the importance of English as an international language. Given a choice, they would want their children to be taught in both English and Mandarin. Additionally, parents admitted that students from CIS lack the opportunity to communicate in English as the population of students at CIS is mainly Chinese students who received their primary education from Chinese vernacular schools.

ii) The Demanding Syllabus at CIS is Not for Everyone

Parents viewed the double-track system very positively and did not think that it was a heavy burden for their children. At the outset, students need good results to enroll into CIS which gave parents the confidence in their children's ability to handle the syllabi at school. Moreover, parents believed that the double-track system trained their children to face high pressure situations making them more independent and emotionally resilient.

However, one parent stated that the demanding syllabus and strict disciplines may not be suitable for everyone. Although her older son is currently studying in a CIS and adjusting well to the academic environment, she preferred to send her younger son to an international school as she worried that "he will not survive under such heavy workloads in the CIS system".

Moreover, parents believed that the double-track system trained their children to face high pressure situations making them more independent and emotionally resilient.

Conclusion

CIS are private schools that are not funded or administered by the government. The schools retain a high level of autonomy and all of their students sit for the UEC examination in either Chinese or English.

Some of these schools have adopted a double-track system which requires students to sit for PT3 and SPM, which gives students the option to further their studies in public universities.

Over the years, UEC qualifications have become widely accepted by universities abroad as well as private and local universities. In order to keep Chinese education affordable, the school fees are substantially lower compared to other private schools in the country.⁷

This paper explained how one Chinese Independent School operates without government funding. We concluded that this particular school was able to become financially sustainable given that the funding model is flexible enough to allow for new sources of income. Nevertheless, sustainable funding may become problematic to other CIS that have fewer resources and less access to wealthy communities.

Furthermore, we found that the principle we interviewed was able to leverage on the autonomy afforded to the school. The principal understood how to operate well with the CIS system and aptly harnessed the diverse experiences of the Board to support his administration. This includes the flexibility to decide on trainings he may find appropriate for his teachers.

This study also explored the reasons parents send their children to CIS instead of government schools. Several themes emerged from interviews with the parents:

- (1) Lack of confidence in public schools
- (2) Keeping cultural roots and character building
- (3) Extracurricular and community engagement activities

Parents interviewed believed that CIS provided better education and character building for their children. Mother tongue education is seen to be important as it represents cultural roots. In addition, it is noteworthy to mention that parents consider more than academic achievement when choosing the CIS. They believe that CIS have advantages over public schools that enhance character development.

⁷ The tuition fees for the school that we interviewed are RM3200 (junior middle level) and RM3600 (senior middle level) per annum.

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