Abstract

Mandarin is the common spoken language among the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaysia. Ethnic Chinese is the majority in Singapore, and a sizable and influential minority in Malaysia. However, unlike China and Taiwan where Chinese is being taught as their first language, Chinese is taught as a second language in Singapore and Malaysia. Hence, Chinese education policy has always been an issue of concern in both countries.

The Chinese language uses Chinese characters for its writing system. The Chinese written language is a logographic system, in which each character represents a morpheme (a meaningful unit of language). A Chinese character has to be memorized not solely based on its written form, but also together with its phonetic. This therefore increases the difficulty of teaching Chinese characters which is a very important component in Chinese education.
This paper explores the teaching of Chinese characters in Singapore and Malaysia through a quantitative study on Chinese characters taught in both primary and secondary school’s syllabus. In addition, the paper also relates the issues of teaching Chinese characters in both countries to their distinctive trajectories of nation-building over recent decades.

There are three sections in the paper. The first section provides an overview of the education systems in Singapore and Malaysia. A detailed analysis in the next section focuses on the difference between Singapore and Malaysia’s list of Chinese characters from the primary and secondary level. Following this analysis, the third section compares and contrast key determinants that drive the difference in the choices of characters used in the textbooks.

In the concluding session, the thesis aims to elucidate the shortcomings of either version of the textbooks and offer suggestions for reorganization of the proposed word list in the textbook to enhance the learning of Chinese characters in Chinese education.