

# *A Historical Review of the Pre-War Chinese Curriculum and Textbooks Used in Singapore:*

## Pages from a Community in Transition

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### INTRODUCTION

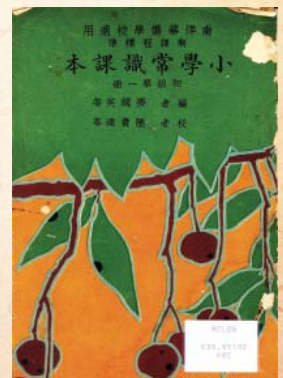
The Chinese society of Singapore in the 19th century was by and large, a transient community, comprising mostly Chinese immigrants from China. The majority of Chinese immigrants were males who had come to “Nanyang” in search of employment or to trade. Many of them left their families in China or eventually returned to China when they earned enough. With the lifting of the ban on general emigration by the Qing government in 1893, the number of Chinese immigrants increased significantly. Some of them brought their families along. In the year 1901 alone, 8,060 female immigrants arrived in Singapore. It was also towards this time that local Chinese births doubled from 1,076 to 2,203 between 1887 and 1900.<sup>1</sup> This was not merely a quantitative change within the Chinese community. With the increase in the number of females and children in the community, there were also fundamental changes in the nature of the community. The newly formed family units brought about an increasing need for social institutions, including schools for their children.

The early 20th century was a time of uncertainty and great changes for China. The Qing Dynasty, in its attempt to sustain the imperial regime, instituted a series of changes, including the modernisation of China’s education system. It was during this period that China started to transform its schools. Many scholars have elucidated on how education reforms in China had shaped similar initiatives of the Chinese overseas. The matter may be more complex and one can examine the reality of the matter by taking a closer look at

the actual situation in Singapore, in particular, through the curriculum and school textbooks used by the local modern vernacular schools.

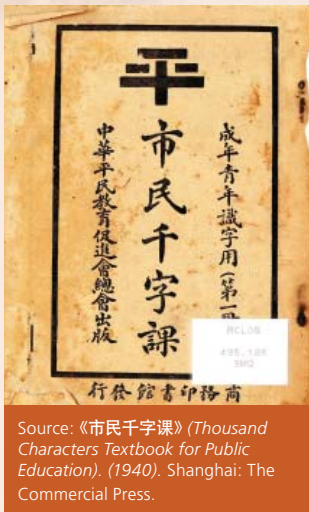
### AT THE DAWN OF MODERN VERNACULAR CHINESE EDUCATION

Up till the time when modern Chinese vernacular schools were founded in the first decade of the 20th century, Chinese classical texts like the Trimetrical Classics (*Sanzijing* 三字经), the Hundred Families Surnames (*Baijiaxing* 百家姓) and the Millenary Classics (*Qianziwen* 千字文) were known to have been used in the local Chinese schools.<sup>2</sup> This was first noticed by Khoo Soek Wan (1874-1941), “a man of enlightened views”, according to Song Ong Siang.<sup>3</sup> Khoo was born in China and came to Singapore with his father when he was just seven years old.<sup>4</sup> In 1888, he returned to China to prepare for the Imperial Examinations. Six years later, he took part in the Imperial Examinations and was awarded the title of *Ju Ren* (举人). Though educated in the Chinese classics, Song Ong Siang also described Khoo as “a man ... strongly in sympathy with the revolutionary movement in China”.<sup>5</sup>



Source: 《南洋华侨学校适用小学常识课本：初级》(Elementary General Knowledge Suit for Nanyang Chinese Schools). (1935). Shanghai: Chung Hwa Book Co.





Source: 《市民千字课》(Thousand Characters Textbook for Public Education). (1940). Shanghai: The Commercial Press.

Evidence of this “strong sympathy” was his involvement in the founding of the Singapore Chinese Girls’ Schools in 1899. He donated \$3,000 towards the establishment of this school of the Straits Chinese, an act which Song felt was “worthy [of] more than [just] a passing mention, for at that time”,<sup>6</sup> the leading Straits Chinese were “apathetic, if not inimical, to the cause of

female education and refused to contribute anything”.<sup>7</sup> Khoo did not just contribute financially to such education efforts. He spearheaded early syllabus reforms too. Khoo had noticed that classical texts, such as the Millenary Classics (Qianziwen 千字文), used in many old-style private teaching (si shu 私塾) at that time, were too difficult for young students. He found that too many obscure words were used in the Millenary Classics and students who studied it for many years ended up still not being able to write their own names, compose simple letters or grasp the rudiments of the Chinese language. Hence, he concluded that if the teachers clung on to tradition and persisted in using these textbooks, it would ultimately be detrimental to the students.<sup>8</sup>

In 1902, Khoo selected 479 characters from the original text and added another 521 more commonly used words to form a new Millenary Classics (Xin Chu Qizhiwen 新出千字文). As Khoo was a talented poet, he put this poetic flair to good use when he put these 1,000 characters into 52 sentences, each with four characters. The sentences were grouped into eight chapters. The topics in these chapters ranged from teaching students how to recognise items from every day life and at the same time, instilling values in them.<sup>9</sup> This new Millenary Classics is the earliest known existing textbook produced locally for elementary education in Singapore.<sup>10</sup>

As the winds of modernisation garnered greater momentum at the turn of the 20th century, the major Chinese dialectal communities founded several modern Chinese schools in Singapore. The Cantonese founded the Yeung Ching School (Yangzheng Xuetang 养正学堂) in 1905. The next year, the Hakkas set up Yingxin School and Khee Fatt School (Qifa Xuetang 启发学堂).<sup>11</sup> In 1906, the Toh Lam School (Daonan Xuetang 道南学堂) and the Tuan Mong

School (Duan Meng Xuetang 端蒙学堂) were founded by the Hokkiens and the Teochews respectively.<sup>12</sup> As for the Hainanese, they too started a modern school, Yoke Eng School (Yu Ying Xuetang 育英学堂), for their children in 1910.<sup>13</sup>

Although the syllabi and teaching styles of these schools have not been thoroughly documented, it is certain that they were not old-style schools (si shu 私塾). It was during this time that the 1911 Revolution in China also resulted in fundamental change in the socio-political culture for China. This new phrase of China’s journey towards modernity affected all Chinese, including those abroad. For the Chinese overseas, it was through their institutions like schools that the trappings of modernity first took root. The Hokkien merchants of Singapore were among the first to push for change. They advocated revising and bringing up-to-date the teaching at Toh Lam School and other old-style schools, according to the “new rules and regulations of the Chinese Ministry of Education”<sup>14</sup>. This is one of the first examples of how the Chinese in Singapore attempted to follow China’s education model. Eventually, the resultant form of vernacular Chinese education in Singapore also included the considerations of socio-political and economic realities of early 20th century Singapore. Even when they acquired textbooks from China, the China printers normally had a “Nanyang” edition of their publications that incorporated local “needs” and “conditions”.<sup>15</sup> China also recognised this difference and even set up special colleges such as the Jinan Da Xue (Chi-Nan University) to train teachers specifically for Chinese schools in Nanyang.<sup>16</sup>

## THE COLONIAL GOVERNMENT AND TEXTBOOKS FOR LOCAL NEEDS

After 1911, most of the colonial governments in Southeast Asia grew apprehensive of the political influences from China. In the Straits Settlements, the Colonial authorities passed the School Registration Ordinance of 1920. It heralded British direct involvement with the education of all children in Singapore. They were concerned no longer just with the English-stream schools and Malay vernacular schools.

With this Ordinance, the local government sought to “gain control over all schools in the Colony”. The government officially declared three points:

Firstly, that the schools shall be properly conducted as schools; secondly, that the teachers in them have efficient training for teaching, and thirdly, that the teaching shall



not be of such a kind that is against the interest of the Government of the Colony.<sup>17</sup>



Source: 《新撰國文教科書》  
(*New Chinese Language  
Textbook*). (1927). Shanghai:  
The Commercial Press.

Under this Ordinance, both the managers and teachers of all schools were required to register with the Education Department within three months, for existing schools, and one month for new schools. In addition, any changes in the teaching staff or committee of management of the registered schools had to be reported to the Education Department within one month. Every registered school was also to be opened to inspections by the Director of Education and he was empowered to declare schools unlawful if the schools, the teachers or the managers were found to be involved in political propaganda detrimental (or prejudicial) to the interests of the Colony.<sup>18</sup>

To ensure that the objectives of the Ordinance were met, the Ordinance and the General Regulations were repeatedly amended to make them more effective. The first amendment to the Ordinance was made in 1925 and it was amended again in the following year to make it even more stringent. The General Regulations were also revised for the same purpose.<sup>19</sup> In addition to legislation, the Straits Settlements Education Department also started writing textbooks for use in the Chinese schools in the 1920s.

In 1923, the British Education Department explored the possibility of compiling textbooks locally, which would be suited to local needs.<sup>20</sup> The preparation of the books was slightly delayed, but by 1925, it was reported that “primary school readers and text-books on hygiene and geography with appropriate reference to local conditions” were in the course of preparation.<sup>21</sup> This task was continued for another two years until 1927, when “a series of readers for Chinese Schools was nearly completed and arrangements to have them printed were under discussion at the close of the year.” When the compilation of a geography reader was nearing completion, there were plans to compile other manuals on arithmetic and hygiene.<sup>22</sup> Approval was soon given for the publication of a trial edition of these locally written Readers by a local firm in 1928.<sup>23</sup> However, it appears that these textbooks were hardly used in the Chinese vernacular schools. From 1929 onwards, the *Straits Settlements Annual Reports* reported, “practically all

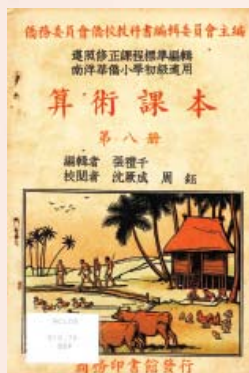
the text-books used in Chinese schools are published and printed in Shanghai”.<sup>24</sup>

## SURVEY OF MODERN CHINESE TEXTBOOKS USED IN LOCAL SCHOOLS

The Chinese textbooks that were used in these modern schools in Singapore covered a wide range of subjects. Students were taught Chinese (Guo Wen 国文、Guo Yu 国语), English (Ying Yu 英语), Letter-writing (Chi Du 尺牍), Mathematics (Suan Shu 算术), Abacus (Zhu Suan 珠算), Geography (Di Li 地理), History (Li Shi 历史), Science (Ke Xue 科学), General Knowledge (Chang Shi 常识), Nature Study (Zi Ran 自然), Hygiene (Wei Sheng 卫生), Moral Education (Gong Min 公民), Arts (Mei Shu 美术), Music (Yin Yue 音乐) and Sports Education (Ti Yu 体育). The range of subjects instructed in each school varied, depending on the resources of individual schools. Nevertheless, from the textbooks that survived till today, we could see that the schools of that period provided their students with a modern education, one that differed greatly from the old-style

private teaching where the students recited the lines of the Confucian classics after their teachers and committed these texts to memory.

An examination of the textbooks on these subjects showed that they broke away from the traditional curricula (ie. the Confucian classics) and were similar to the Western tradition of education. Learning took place on a progressive path. In the case of languages, students were introduced to basic words when they first enrolled in schools and were exposed to a larger corpus of words as they advanced. We could see this in both the Chinese and English language textbooks. Students at the elementary levels were first taught individual words or phrases and as they moved up, their language lessons comprised sentences and paragraphs.<sup>25</sup> Likewise for subjects like Mathematics, simple concepts such as counting, addition and subtraction were taught before the students learned about multiplication and division. For the students in higher levels, they were introduced to specialised branches of mathematics such as Algebra, Geometry and Trigonometry.<sup>26</sup> A similar approach was also applied to subjects like History and Geography.<sup>27</sup>



Source: 《南洋華僑小學初級適用算術課本》第八冊  
(*Arithmetic Textbook  
for Nanyang Chinese  
Primary Schools*). (1941),  
vol.8. Distributed by: The  
Commercial Press (Singapore).



Besides the subjects above, practical subjects that helped the students secure jobs after they graduated were also taught. There were textbooks on Abacus and Letter-writing. Equipped with the knowledge of how to use the abacus, students could work as book keeping clerks in shops and even within English establishments. Letter-writing lessons showed the students how to draft simple correspondences should their future work require so.<sup>28</sup>

Students were also inculcated with general knowledge about the world they lived in. General Knowledge, Nature Study and Hygiene textbooks explained the changes in housing as human beings evolved (from the caves to the trees and eventually houses), parts of a plant and how they pollinate, organs of a modern government (parliament, constitutions, courts, etc), various types of transportation, personal hygiene to prevent the spreading of germs and many other issues.<sup>29</sup>

Besides the textbooks above, there were also textbooks that instilled values to mould and shape one's character. Moral Education, Art and Music were taught in schools too.<sup>30</sup> In Moral Education, values that were perpetuated in the Confucian texts such as respect to the elders, good behaviour, cherish public property, care for another person and other similar subject matters were taught. Art and music lessons were held to teach students how to appreciate fine arts and music. Students also learned teamwork and keeping good health through sports.

While it appears that the modern Chinese education before 1941 had retained certain cultural and moral values of the old tradition, by and large, from the curriculum and textbooks used in the schools, we can deduce that Chinese education in Singapore had evolved into a modern form. Besides the influences from the changes and practices in China and in the English schools, some Chinese in Singapore had also taken the lead themselves, just as Khoo had shown the way.



Source: 《新课程标准南洋教科书高级小学用珠算》(全四册). (Abacus for Upper-primary Schools). (1938), vols. 1- 4. Distributed by: The World Book Co., Singapore.

## CONCLUSION: SOURCES AND LOCATION

Studies on the education of the Chinese communities overseas have often been carried out within the framework of examining education policies and politics of China and that of the local governments. By examining other local events and factors, a more exact picture of the Chinese modern education in Singapore could be mapped out.

Firstly, from the efforts of Khoo, we can see that Chinese education in Singapore did not

entirely follow China's lead. Besides Khoo, there were many like-minded individuals who played an active role in setting up schools for the Chinese community in Singapore. These school founders were propelled by the need to educate their youngsters and it was this need that drove them to chart out an education that was best suited to the environment here. They had to ensure that the curriculum taught were not just propagation of tradition values but included practical skills and modern values, which would equip the students adequately to face the challenges of the "modern world".

Currently in Singapore, besides private individuals, several institutions are known to have collections of these textbooks used before 1941. These institutions include: the National University of Singapore Chinese Library, Singapore History Museum, Chinese Heritage Centre, Singapore Federation of Chinese Clans Associations and the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library of the National Library, Singapore.

Due to the antiquarian nature of these books, they are generally not available to the public. Nevertheless, these institutions have opened their collection to the public in other ways. For example, in 2003, when the Chinese Heritage Centre received a donation of Chinese-school textbooks,



Source: 《尺牘: 南洋教科书小学高级用》(Letter-writing for Upper Primary Nanyang Schools). (1941), vol. 1. Distributed by: The World Book Co., Singapore.



Source: 《自然: 高级小学用》(Nature Study for Upper Primary Schools). (1939), vol. 2. Distributed by: The World Book Co., Singapore.



periodicals, school magazines and school publications published between 1912 and 1960s, from an Indonesian-Chinese, Professor Eddy Hermawan,<sup>31</sup> the Centre organised an exhibition titled “Grooming Future Generations Through Education: Chinese-School Textbooks in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia before 1965”, in 2003. Items from the National Library’s collection and private individuals were also showcased at the exhibition.

Since the opening of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at Victoria Street in 2005, the Library has received numerous donations, including several hundreds volumes of textbooks. A selection of these textbooks will be displayed at the National Library’s newly created Donors Gallery in appreciation of the generous donations from the



Source: 《最新南洋华侨小学公民课本》(The Latest Moral Education Textbook for the Nanyang Chinese Primary Schools). (1941). Distributed by Chung Hwa Book Co. (Singapore).

various individuals. Opening in November 2007, the Gallery is located at Level 10 of the National Library. These donated materials are available for consultation upon request at the Information Counter located at Level 11. Library patrons may search the textbook collection through the Library’s online catalogue at <http://vistaweb.nlb.gov.sg> using keywords, such as title or subject.

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5. Song, p. 101.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
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9. Ibid., p. 58.
10. Ibid., p. 56. Khoo has another earlier work: “Qian Zi Wen” (浅字文), purportedly published in 1899, has not been sighted.
11. 《应新学校特刊》 (Yingxin School Souvenir Magazine) .(1938). pp. 5-8.
12. “天福宫大会决议布告” (Issues Discussed at the Meeting held at Thian Hock Temple), Lat Pau (LP), 17 Dec 1906, pp. 3 and 10 《端蒙学校二十五》 (Tuan Mong School’s 25th Anniversary), “School History”, p. 1.
13. 《育英学校校刊》 (Yoke Eng School’s Souvenir Magazine), pp. 43-44.
14. “闽商要议” (An Important Meeting of the Hokkien Merchants), in LP, 17 Dec 1906, pp. 3 and 10; “天福宫大会决议布告” (Announcement of the Decisions Made at the Meeting Held at Thian Hock Temple), in LP, 26 Dec 1906, p. 3 and Song, pp. 407-09.
15. LKCR collection: 《南洋华侨学校适用小学常识课本: 初级》 (Elementary General Knowledge Suitable for Nanyang Chinese Schools), 1935. 《最新南洋华侨小学公民课本》 (The Latest Moral Education Textbook for the Nanyang Chinese Primary Schools), 1941.
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20. SSAR, 1923, p. 121.
21. SSAR, 1925, p. 225.
22. SSAR, 1927, p.176.
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26. LKCR collection: 《南洋华侨小学初级适用算术课本》 (Arithmetic Textbook for Nanyang Chinese Primary Schools) (1930), vol. 1 and 《南洋华侨小学初级适用算术课本》 (Arithmetic Textbook for Nanyang Chinese Primary Schools) (1941), vol. 8.
27. Examples of History textbooks are: 《高级小学南洋历史教科书》 (History Textbooks for Nanyang Upper Primary Schools) (1941), vol. 1 & 4. Examples of Geography textbooks are: 《高级小学南洋地理教科书》 (Geography Textbooks for Nanyang Upper Primary Schools) (1941), vol. 1 & 4. Note: The last two Geography textbooks are from the Singapore History Museum.
28. Some examples of Abacus and Letter-writing textbooks in the LKCR collections are: 《新课程标准南洋教科书高级小学用珠算》 (Abacus for Upper-primary Schools) (1938), vols. 1-4 and 《注释中华普通学生尺牍》 (Annotated Letter-writing for Students) (1919), Part 1; 《尺牍: 南洋教科书小学初级用》 (Letter-writing for Lower-primary Nanyang Schools) (1941), vol. 7 & 8 《尺牍: 南洋教科书小学高级用》 (Letter-writing for Upper -primary Nanyang Schools) (1941), vol. 1 & 2.
29. LKCR collection: 《南洋华侨学校适用小学常识课本初级》 (General Knowledge Textbook for Nanyang Chinese Primary Schools) (1935), vol. 5; 《自然: 高级小学用》 (Nature Study for Upper-primary Schools) (1939), vol. 2 and 《卫生: 幼稚园课本》 (Hygiene Textbook for Kindergarten) (1900) and 《小学校高级用复兴教科书卫生》 (Hygiene Textbook for Upper-primary Schools) (1937).
30. LKCR collection: 《马来亚华侨小学课程标准适用华侨小学公民课本: 初级公民》 (Standard Moral Education Textbook for Malayan Chinese Primary Schools) (19--), vol. 2 and 《美的歌曲》 (Beautiful Songs) (1935), vols. 1-6. Private collection: 《课外运动: 田径》 (Extra-curricular Sports: Track and Field) (1936).
31. Chinese Heritage Centre Bulletin, No. 2, Sept 2003, p. 44-43.