



Hong Kong Unison Limited
香港融樂會有限公司

**Hong Kong Unison's Submission to Education Bureau
Use of Language Fund to enhance Chinese language proficiency of
EM people in HK
July 2010**

D) Foreword

Established in 2001, Hong Kong Unison (Unison) has been advocating for equal opportunities for EM people. We believe everyone is equal regardless of their race. We all should be given chance to realize our potential. Given that ethnic minority (EM) communities having been a part of Hong Kong since colonial era, we believe our society has obligations to help them enhancing their Chinese language proficiency, so that they could participate in the society fully.

To EM communities, the problem of language barrier has become more critical since the handover, mainly due to the increasing importance and extensive usage of Chinese language in different aspects of lives, such as education and employment. For instance, the Government has included Chinese language as one of the core requirements for application of civil service posts. As a result, almost none of our EM residents could enter the civil service since 1997.

We consider enhancing Chinese language proficiency for EM people not only beneficial to racial equality, but also a worthy social investment. On the one hand, the birth rate of EM people is much higher than that of ethnic Chinese. If quality education was provided to them, including Chinese language, they could constitute a valuable manpower force in future, helping to relieve our aging problem. On the other, a more inclusive environment would help our EM people to make better use of their unique advantages, for instances, linguistic and artistic talent, so as to have more contributions to our society.

Unison acknowledged that the Government, particularly the Education Bureau, has been putting lots of effort in helping EM people learning Chinese in recent years. We were especially delighted when the Financial Secretary made “enhancing Chinese language proficiency of EM people” as one of the core initiatives in this year’s budget.

According to your Bureau’s reply to a question raised by Honourable Legislative Councilor, Mr. Lee Cheuk Yan, the Government had earmarked HK\$80 million to help EM students in mainstream schools learning Chinese. Unison agrees this is a step in the right direction, given that mainstream schools now do not receive any financial aid for their admission of EM students. Yet we consider this is crucial for the Government to make good use of the money. On the other hand, the Government still needs to address other issues, for instances, development of assessment tools and teaching materials, as well as other support to teachers etc. In addition, we believe learning opportunities should also be provided to the communities, mainly targeting at EM youth and adults. Bear in mind that these people did not have chances to learn Chinese when they were at school; and they could hardly find any suitable courses in the market.



It is against this background that Unison submits this paper to your Bureau. We sincerely hope that your Bureau would take into account of our suggestions seriously, and make use of the new funding more widely and effectively. In addition, we are ready to discuss with your Bureau in further details, upon your availability.

II) Current situation

a) Chinese language education for EM students in elementary education

Despite repeated requests from a wide range of parties including education sector, concern groups, law makers¹ and even the international society², the Government has refused to adopt “*Learning Chinese as a second language policy*”. Your Bureau insists the current Chinese curriculum is suitable to EM students, so long as certain adaptations have been made by teachers. The reality is teachers in primary and secondary schools have been struggling in developing their own curriculum and teaching materials, without adequate references and support. A survey conducted by the Unison and the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union in July 2007 revealed that about 75 % of teachers considered the current central Chinese curriculum designed for local Chinese students was not suitable to NCS (non-Chinese speaking) students.

Clearly what the teachers genuinely need is a tailor-made curriculum for EM students, coupled with relevant teaching materials and assessment tools. This is something *the Supplementary Guide*³ could not provide. We understand that the Hong Kong University is currently working on assessment tools. Yet without a curriculum fitting in their needs and standard, it is still hard for EM students to learn and upgrade their Chinese effectively.

At present, there are 25 designated primary and secondary schools receiving an annual government grant from \$300,000 to \$600,000, for the propose of developing school based Chinese language education to their NCS students. The Government planned to increase the number of designated schools to 28 in the coming academic year. Unison acknowledges such provision would benefit the students. Yet we concern about the vagueness of the criteria to be a “designated school”. According to Government statistics, there are schools having EM students up to a ratio of as high as 56-83%, but have still not been categorized as designated schools. On the other hand, it is also not clear that how the amount of cash allowances is calculated. For instance, in 2008/09, two high schools took in 792 and 91 EM students respectively. Yet both of them received the same amount of allowance, i.e., \$600,000.

¹ On November 2009, the Legislative Council unanimously passed a motion calling for the strengthening of Chinese language education to EM students, including development of tailor-made textbook and assessment tools, as well as introduction of a Chinese benchmark test for EM people in Hong Kong. During the debate, legislators from different parties spoke for the introduction of “*Learning Chinese as a second language policy*”.

² In its concluding observations and recommendations to China report 2009, The CERD Committee of the United Nations urged the HKSAR Government to develop a “*Learning Chinese as a second language policy*” for EM and other non-Chinese speaking people in Hong Kong.

³ The Government published *the Supplementary Guideline to the Chinese Language Curriculum for non-Chinese Speaking students* in November 2008.



In case of mainstream schools, it would certainly be helpful if after-school tutorial support could be provided to assist EM students learning Chinese. Yet we also found it important to build a racially inclusive environment, which is lacking in many of these schools. If schools and teachers continued adopting an indifferent attitude to EM students, their situation could hardly be improved.

To sum, lack of a suitable curriculum and a racially inclusive environment, together with inadequate support to schools and teachers; attributed to ineffectiveness of Chinese language education to EM students in Hong Kong. Up until now, most of students could only end up at GCSE Chinese level, which might not be good enough to compete for further studies⁴ and labour market⁵. A recent report from South China Morning Post revealed that a Pakistani young man, who got an A* in GCSE Chinese Examination, was considered not good enough in Chinese language proficiency, in his application to police post. (See 24 May, South China Morning Post)

b) **Chinese language education for EM youth and adults**

It should be noted that systematic Chinese language education has only been provided to EM students in Hong Kong since 2004. As a result, many of our EM residents, including those studying at post-secondary institutions and joining the labour market, did not have chances in learning Chinese when they were at primary and secondary schools. Their low Chinese language standard would certainly limit their choices for jobs and further studies. For example, the Government has recognized GCSE Chinese qualifications in civil service recruitment. Yet given lack of such learning opportunities in the private market, these people could hardly be benefited from the new measure.

In the past few years, the Government has allocated resources, enabling the Employment Retraining Board and social welfare agencies to provide Chinese language enhancement classes for EM residents in Hong Kong. Yet almost all of these classes, including those conducted by four language support centres in Hong Kong, are focused on spoken Chinese, i.e., Cantonese. We consider these classes beneficial to those EM new arrivals in Hong Kong. Yet for those who have born or settled in Hong Kong for a considerable period, what they need are some formal or award bearing Chinese classes, which also include reading and writing skills, and enable them to enhance their Chinese level on gradual basis. After all, what they learn must be connected to their career or study needs, i.e., a formal Chinese language qualification widely recognized by employers and teaching institutions.

To achieve the above purpose, Unison has organized the first GCSE Chinese Examination preparation course for EM youth and work adults last year. Without much publicity, we have enrolled 25 students from different ethnic origins, including Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalese and

⁴ Since 2008, the University Grants Committee has recognized a pass in GCSE Chinese Exam as an alternative Chinese language requirement for admission to university programs under JUPAS. Yet many departments in universities still set a higher admission requirement in Chinese language proficiency, thus limited EM students' study choices.

⁵ Since late 2008, the Government has recognized a grade D in GCSE Chinese Exam as an alternative Chinese language requirement for application to non-degree civil service posts. Yet individual departments, such as the Hong Kong Police Force could still added additional requirement in Chinese language proficiency, which has in effect shut the door for EM applicants.



Thais. We have a number of full-time post-secondary students, while others are working in civil service, education, social service, information technology and hotel sectors etc.

Obviously, there is a loophole in the provision of Chinese language education to EM people in Hong Kong, i.e., EM youth and adults are neglected. As a NGO focusing on policy advocacy and public education, we do not have manpower and resources to continue running such course. It is necessary for the Government to take in, for instance, they could assign teaching bodies such as universities or Vocational Training Council to conduct such training.

c) Going beyond GCSE level

Up until now, it seems that GCSE Chinese is the highest level our EM Chinese learners could attain, albeit students or adults. Yet GCSE Chinese might not be enough when we talk about competitiveness in the labour market. It could only serve as a starting point for our EM people learning Chinese. At the end of the day, the Government still needs to formulate a **“Learning Chinese as a second language policy”**, i.e., to provide tailor-made and systematic curriculum, so that they could enhance their Chinese gradually.

In the long run, we consider it is necessary to introduce **a benchmark test**, as endorsed by the Legislative Council during a motion debate held last November, so that all the non-Chinese people could sit in the test and gain a Chinese qualification widely recognized by employers, as well as the community as a whole.

Given the increasing importance of Chinese economy and its close connections to the outside world, we consider the formulation of a **“Learning Chinese as a second language policy”** not only beneficial to South Asians and South-east Asians in Hong Kong, but also other non-Chinese speaking people who are living or doing business here. In the long run, we saw a good potential for Hong Kong to become a regional learning centre of Chinese language in South China.

III) Our suggestions

a) Chinese language education for EM students in elementary education

- To formulate **“a policy of learning Chinese as a Second Language”** with a systematic Chinese curriculum that runs through whole study period, i.e., from kindergarten to Form Six. Learning objectives (i.e. the Chinese level that could be attained) should be set in each learning stage (such as P.1, P.6, and F.3) as accord to levels of students, so as correspondent assessment tools;
- To provide suitable teaching materials and effective pedagogies to teachers so as to facilitate effective learning;
- To organize “outreaching tutorial services to schools” for EM students with language tutorials in Chinese, so that they will not lose their drive for learning because their



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Chinese proficiency continuously lags behind that

of others. We consider retired

teachers as a valuable manpower force. In addition, we prefer teaching institutions, but not welfare NGOs, to run these services, given their expertise, as well as the high staff and administrative cost involved in the latter's case;

- To enhance school teachers' understanding of cultural diversity and to recognize the specialty in teaching Chinese as second language in multi-cultural context;
- To explicitly inform about the criteria for defining a “designated school”. In addition, such schools should be required to have adequate qualified teachers and other facilities in order to teach and support EM students;
- To explicitly inform that what guidelines are adopted for the calculation of the amount of special allowance granted to designated schools, in which should include the setting of the amount of allowance in accordance to number of students so as to ensure needs of schools are met;
- In order to have a genuine understanding of the learning situation of EM students in mainstream schools, we propose your Bureau or the SCOLAR to commission academicians or experts to conduct a large-scale study on difficulties and needs of EM students in learning Chinese;

b) **Chinese language education for EM youth and adults**

- To promote GCSE Chinese, or equivalent qualifications⁶ among EM communities. The best way is to strictly implement the policy of accepting GCSE Chinese or equivalent as an alternative Chinese qualification in civil service recruitment. Additional Chinese language requirement should not be applied unless with genuine occupational needs;
- To promote GCSE Chinese, or equivalent qualifications among employers and business sector. Measures could be taken to urge employers to recognize such qualification;
- To provide resources to teaching and training bodies, so that they could strengthen teacher training and organize GCSE Chinese Examination preparation courses to EM youth and adults, as well as other non-Chinese speaking people, in the communities. One of the ways is to set up community language learning centres in those districts where more EM people live and gather. Again we prefer teaching and training bodies, instead of welfare NGOs, to run such training;

⁶ It refers to Chinese language qualification obtained through IGSCE or GCE “O” Level.



c) **Overall policy**

- To formulate a “*Chinese language benchmark test*” suitable for all non-Chinese speaking people, so that schools and other teaching institutions can use it as teaching goal and various sectors can also assess their proficiency in Chinese accordingly;
- To explore the possibility of developing Hong Kong as a regional Chinese language learning centre in South China.