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**THE USE OF FOLK LITERATURE  
IN MODERN EDUCATION:  
THE CASE OF CHINESE LANGUAGE  
TEXTBOOKS**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to explore how folk literature is used in modern education in three major areas, *vis.*, language education, value transmission and identity formation through a case study on Chinese language textbooks used by the SRJK (C) from the 1960s to the 2000s. In addition, this study explores how Chinese language teachers, textbook editors and writers play the role of active bearers of tradition; and also the interrelationship between language education, value transmission and identity formation. This study is significant in helping policy makers and educators to improve language and moral education, and dealing identity formation. It has been found that folk literature is a popular pedagogic material in Chinese language textbooks and they are employed in a number of ways. However, it has been shown that problems in dealing with folk literature often arise when teachers, textbook writers, editors are not equipped with adequate knowledge of folk literature. A wide range of values such as diligence, determination, harmony, unity, comity, courtesy, reciprocity, cooperation, courage, intelligence, self-sacrifice, patriotism, the value of learning, wisdom, justice, filial piety, modesty, loyalty, the danger of prejudice, kindness, honesty, love and the appropriateness of words are transmitted through folk narratives in the 1960s and 1970s textbooks. The quantum and the range of values transmitted through folk narratives have decreased since the 1980s, mainly due to the decline in the number of folk narratives. The development and changes in the treatment of folk literature in Chinese textbooks – from different eras in the development of Malaysian education system – also reveal the fluid Chinese identity in Malaysia that is a reaction to the current socio-politico-economic landscape in which the Chinese find themselves.

## ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الرسالة أساساً إلى استكشاف كيفية استخدام الأدب الشعبي في التعليم الحديث في ثلاثة ميادين هي تعليم اللغة، وانتقال القيم من جيل إلى آخر، وتكوين الشخصية وذلك من خلال حالة دراسية تركز على كتب تعليم اللغة الصينية في المدارس الصينية الابتدائية الوطنية (مرحلة الأساس) منذ ستينات القرن الماضي وحتى الألفية الثالثة. فضلاً عن ذلك، تدرس الرسالة دور حاملي التراث الذي قام به مدرسو اللغة الصينية وكتابو تلك الكتب ومحورها، والعلاقة المتدخلة بين تعليم اللغة والقيم والشخصية. وتكمن أهمية هذه الدراسة في إعانة صانعي القرار السياسي والمربين في تحسين تعليم اللغة والقيم وفي التعامل مع تكوين الشخصية. أوضحت الرسالة أن الأدب الشعبي مادة تعليمية يمكن توظيفها بعدة طرق، وبينت الصعاب التي يمكن أن يواجهها مدرسو هذه الكتب أو كاتبوها إذا كانوا غير مسلحين بالمعرفة العلمية لماهية الأدب الشعبي. كما عرضت ثلة من القيم التي انتقلت عن طريق القصص الشعبي في كتب ستينات وسبعينات القرن الماضي مثل الكد والاجتهاد، والتصميم، والانسجام والوحدة، والكياسة، والمجاملة، والتبادلية، والتعاون، والشجاعة، والذكاء، والتضحية بالنفس، والوطنية، ورد المجاملة بمثلها، والتعليم، والحكمة، والعدل، وطاعة الوالدين، والتواضع، والإخلاص، وخطر التحيز والتحامل، والرافة، والأمانة، والحب، والحديث بالكلمات الملائمة للمقام. لكن هذه القيم تناقصت كماً ونوعاً في كتب ثمانينات القرن الماضي، ويرجع ذلك أساساً إلى انخفاض عدد القصص الشعبي فيها. وإن تطور وتغيرات تناول الأدب الشعبي في الكتب الدراسية الصينية- في مختلف حقب تطور نظام التعليم الماليزي- يعكس مرونة الشخصية الصينية وذلك استجابةً إلى الواقع الاجتماعي والسياسي والاقتصادي السائد في ماليزيا.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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THE CASE OF CHINESE LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS**

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This dissertation is dedicated to  
my wife Keat Ching and my son Zechary See Teng Yu.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Abstract in Arabic .....	iii
Approval Page.....	iv
Declaration Page .....	v
Copyright Page.....	vi
Dedication .....	vii
Acknowledgement .....	viii
List of Tables .....	xii
List of Pictures .....	xiii
<b>CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND OF STUDY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction.....	1
Objectives .....	3
Scope of Study .....	4
Significance of Study.....	5
Methodology .....	7
Limitation of Study .....	11
Studies of Folk Literature and Education in Malaysia: A Review .....	12
Folk Literature and Value Transmission.....	13
Folk Literature and Language Education.....	16
Folk Literature and Mass Education .....	22
<b>CHAPTER 2: DEFINITIONS AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE.....</b>	<b>25</b>
Introduction.....	25
Definitions and Genres of Folk Literature .....	25
Folk Literature and Moral Education/Value Transmission .....	33
Folk Literature and Cultural/Identity Education.....	40
Folk Literature and Language Education.....	45
Synthesis .....	49
<b>CHAPTER 3: THE CHINESE PRIMARY SCHOOL: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>50</b>
Introduction.....	50
The Development of the Chinese Education in the Pre-Merdeka Era .....	51
Education Development in the Post-Merdeka Era.....	58
Education Development in the New Economic Policy Era .....	60
Education Development in the National Development and Vision Era.....	66
Summary .....	70

<b>CHAPTER 4: FOLK LITERATURE AS PEDAGOGIC MATERIAL FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION .....</b>	<b>72</b>
Introduction .....	72
The Chinese Language .....	72
The Chinese Language Textbook .....	74
Objectives of the Textbooks .....	76
Structure of the Textbooks .....	80
Distribution and Functions of the Folk Literature .....	83
1960s Textbooks .....	84
1970s Textbooks .....	87
1980s Textbooks .....	89
1990s Textbooks .....	92
2000s Textbooks .....	95
Synthesise Discussion .....	98
Conclusion .....	104

<b>CHAPTER 5: VALUE TRANSMITTED THROUGH FOLK NARRATIVES .....</b>	<b>105</b>
Introduction .....	105
Outline of the Content of the Textbooks .....	105
Values Transmitted in the 1960s and 1970s Textbooks .....	108
Diligence and Determination .....	110
Harmony, Unity, Comity, Courtesy, Reciprocity and Cooperation .....	113
Courage, Intelligence, Self-Sacrifice and Patriotism .....	117
Intelligence and Learning .....	121
Wisdom and Justice .....	126
Filial Piety .....	128
Modesty .....	129
Loyalty .....	131
Danger of Prejudice .....	133
Kindness .....	134
Honesty .....	136
Words .....	137
Love .....	137
Values Transmitted in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s Textbooks .....	138
1980s Textbooks .....	138
Diligence .....	139
Reciprocity .....	140
Comity .....	140
Danger of Prejudice .....	141
Kindness .....	141
Greediness .....	142
1990s Textbooks .....	142
Diligence and Determination .....	143
Modesty .....	144
Intelligence and Wisdom .....	146
Comity .....	147
Courage and Self-sacrifice .....	147

Honesty .....	148
Greediness.....	148
2000s Textbooks .....	148
Diligence and Modesty .....	149
Self-Sacrifice.....	150
Filial Piety .....	151
Reciprocity and Forgiveness.....	151
Unity and Cooperation .....	151
Honesty .....	152
Loyalty and Justice .....	152
Summary and Conclusion .....	153

## **CHAPTER 6: GENRE, STRUCTURE AND REWRITING: VALUE**

<b>TRANSMISSION.....</b>	<b>155</b>
Introduction.....	155
Genres and Structure of Folk Narratives .....	156
Selection of Tales.....	164
Rewriting.....	165
Changing Motif.....	165
Changing Characters.....	167
Simplification.....	168
Omission .....	169
Modernising .....	171
Adding Scenes or Content .....	172
Joining Tales.....	173
Rewriting into Different Genre .....	174
Pictorial Presentation .....	174
Conclusion .....	177

## **CHAPTER 7: CULTURAL IDENTITY .....**

<b>178</b>	
Introduction.....	178
The Sources of Folk Narratives .....	180
The Active Bearers of Tradition .....	189
Chinese Language Teachers.....	190
Folk Literature in the Classroom .....	194
Concluding Remarks.....	197

## **CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION.....**

<b>199</b>	
Summary of Findings.....	199
Summation and Analysis .....	199
Policy Implications .....	204
Suggestions for Further Research .....	205

<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>208</b>
APPENDIX I: Questionnaire for Teachers .....	217
APPENDIX II: Map of Malaysia.....	224
APPENDIX III: List of Tale-types and list of motifs .....	225

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table No.</u>		<u>Page No.</u>
1	Availability of the Textbooks	76
2	Number of Chapters in the Textbooks	84
3	Number of Independent Exercises	84
4	Distribution of Folk Literature in the 1960s Textbooks	86
5	Distribution of Folk Literature in the 1970s Textbooks	89
6	Distribution of Folk Literature in the 1980s Textbooks	92
7	Distribution of Folk Literature in the 1990s Textbooks	95
8	Distribution of Folk Literature in the 2000s Textbooks	98
9	Values Transmitted Through Folk Narratives According to Eras	159
10	Origins of Folk Narrative According to Eras	188
11	Teachers' Age (Respondents)	198
12	Year Being Teacher and Teach Chinese Language	199
13	Why Students Learn the Chinese Language?	200
14	Why Students Feel bored, noisy or uninterested?	201
15	How Often Teachers Tell Stories?	202
16	Other Genres used in Lessons	203

## LIST OF PICTURES

<u>Picture No.</u>		<u>Page No.</u>
1	The Fool Cutting Tree	182
2	The Fight between the Clam and the Pelican	182
3	Ten Suns	183
4	Playing Music to Cow	183

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Folklore, in particular folk literature, plays a number of functions in non-literate societies – e.g., entertainment, validation of culture, transmission of values, etc. However, the functions of folklore may depend on the social context (Bascom, 1965). One of the major functions of folklore in non-literate societies is education. This has been well researched and documented in many parts of the world. However, it should also be realised that the relationship between functions and any one particular item of folklore also varies according to social context, and that these functions may be interrelated. According to Dundes, 1965: 279):

Different types of folklore can share similar, if not identical, functions...The function is the same; the form is different. It is equally important to realize that any one item of folklore may have several different functions...The form is the same; the function is different. One cannot always tell from form alone what the associated contextual function is. Functional data must, therefore, be recorded when the item is collected. An item once removed from its social context and published in this way deprives the scientific folklorist of an opportunity to understand why the particular item was used in a particular situation to meet a particular need.

While the educational function of folklore in non-literate societies is very well documented, the value of folklore to a modern education system in a literate society is very much unexplored. In fact, Penjore's (2005:64) comment on the Bhutan situation is relevant for many communities:

We have desperately failed to use the strength and wisdom of the urban populace and promote them in schools through curriculum and to the larger population through mass media like TV, radio, press and film. This failure can be largely attributed to the government and public failure to recognize and appreciate values and wisdom represented by the people.

Shah and Joshi (1992: 75) have pointed out that “many arguments can be presented in favour of making use of folk-dramas for non-formal education”. Munsegvith (1982) also shows how folktales can be used as a supplement to a developmental reading programme for non-Thai-speaking children in Thailand’s primary grades. This study hopes to show that, as a very rich source of pedagogic material, folklore can be used in formal education and that its proper use may remedy some of the weaknesses in the modern education system.

Interestingly, folklore was a common pedagogic material in Chinese language textbooks used in Malaysian Chinese National Type Primary Schools (SRJK (C); *Sekolah Rendah Jernis Kebangsaan Cina*)<sup>1</sup> since the 1960s. The curriculum guidelines for the SRJK (C) Chinese language subject state that teachers should use storytelling, role play and drama as some of their teaching methodologies; and the stories used can be fables, myths, folktales, etc (Ministry of Education, 2003).

The existence of Chinese language education in Malaysia is a product of a complex interplay of many factors. Therefore when the folkloristic materials found in the Chinese language textbook are analysed against this complex background, they may reveal the complex patterns alluded above by Dundes. This study of the use of folklore in the Chinese language curriculum in the SRJK (C) proposes to explore the function of folklore in modern education in three broad areas, i.e., moral education (transmission of values), language education, and cultural and identity formation.

The Chinese language curriculum in the SRJK (C) is chosen as the case study for a number of reasons. First, the Chinese community in Malaysia is unique in three

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few types of primary schools in Malaysia, namely the National Schools (SRK, *Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan*), Vision schools, Islamic Religious Schools (SRA, *Sekolah Rendah Agama*), Private Schools, International Schools, and the SRJKs. There are two types of SRJK, i.e., the SRJK (C) and the SRJK (T or Tamil). Mandarin and Tamil are used as medium of instruction in the respective type of SRJK. All the other types of school use the Malay language as medium of instruction (except for International Schools).

ways. Some have claimed that the Malaysian Chinese community is the only Chinese minority community that have preserved their Chinese culture well. One of the strongest reasons for this is their eager preservation of the Chinese language education. Second, the Chinese community in Malaysia is also taken as a model minority community for the following reasons: after about four generations since they first migrated in big numbers to Malaya, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese in Malaysia have not only preserved their identity well, but they have also managed to adopt a Malaysian outlook in many ways. That they are able to do so is again attributed to a well balanced education. Third, the Malaysian Chinese community is also a successful minority community that has achievements in many areas, in particular, in commerce. Their success is often associated with their possession of strong work ethics and moderate attitude. Hence, it is interesting to identify those values that are transmitted in the Chinese schools to the Chinese from a young age.

As folklore's relevance to the modern Chinese education system and how it functions in the SRJK (C) is explored, the following points will be explained, so that no confusion will arise thereof. Firstly folklore will be defined and explained. Secondly, we need to differentiate between different genres of folklore. Thirdly, we need to know how folklore is used in non-literate societies in education. Fourthly, we need to distinguish between the form and content of the various genres of folklore. Fifthly, we need to differentiate between teaching folklore and teaching through folklore.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objective of this study is to explore how folk literature is used in modern education through exploring the following issues:

1. How folk literature is used as pedagogic material in the Chinese language curriculum of the SRJK (C).
2. How folk literature is used to transmit values and form culture and identity in the Chinese language curriculum.
3. How Chinese language teachers play the role of active bearers of tradition.
4. The interrelationship between language education and value and identity education<sup>2</sup>.

### **SCOPE OF STUDY**

This study on the Chinese language curriculum of the SRJK (C), is rather comprehensive because it explores the curriculum across different eras, i.e., the years after the independence of Malaysia, after the implementation of the new curriculum in the 1980s, and after the educational reforms of the 1990s. The study will posit the changes that have taken place across these testing periods.

In addition, this study explores how Chinese language teachers, textbook editors and writers play the role of active bearers of tradition; and also the interrelationship between language education, value transmission and identity formation.

The special features of the various genres and the structure of the narratives will be analysed in relation to their use. How tales are selected and the issue of rewriting the tales will be examined in depth. The pros and cons of various rewriting strategies will be discussed.

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<sup>2</sup> The curriculum outline of the Chinese language for the SRJK (C) states that the curriculum reflects the socio-cultural circumstances of Malaysia; strengthens the students' cultural and value system; at the same time prepares them to be global citizens. The objective of the curriculum is to ensure students' balanced intellectual, emotional and moral development (Ministry of Education, 2003:2).

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

To date there are few comprehensive studies of folklore in Malaysia, especially studies that explore the function that folklore, or folk literature, can play in modern education. Therefore, this study is significant for five reasons.

Firstly, this study explores how the Chinese language curriculum of the SRJK (C) makes use of folk literature. Since it is a known fact that children love folktales and other genres of folk literature, the findings of this study can help us improve the language education system to make it more interesting for children.

Secondly, learning a language is not just learning a technique (to speak, to write, to communicate, etc.), rather, it is also to acquire a culture. This notion is succinctly captured in the Malay proverb, “*Bahasa jiwa bangsa*”, that is, a language is the soul of a race. One way of achieving this objective of acquiring a culture through learning a language is by using folk literature as pedagogic material. This study hopes to ascertain how this is done.

Thirdly, how the Chinese community in Malaysia have constructed a dual identity, i.e. being Malaysian and Chinese at the same time, is very worthwhile to explore. Some writers have pointed out that the Chinese in Malaysia are actually a heterogeneous group (see Phua & Soo, 2004: 63-65). Carsterns (2005:199-232) has also shown that the issue of Chinese identity in Malaysia is a very complex one. However, at a general level, the Chinese have, since setting foot on the “Malay land” (Tanah Melayu)<sup>3</sup>, struggled to maintain a clear Chinese identity, while at the same time adopting a Malaysian identity. This is visible in many daily encounters with the Chinese. Examples of exchanges between the two cultures can be seen in terms of clothing, food, language, etc. How they manage to balance the two identities is a very

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<sup>3</sup> This was how the Malays referred to Malaya or Malaysia, Land of the Malays.

important issue to explore. Chinese education, as we will see, is a product of the struggle of the Chinese as they balance these two identities (Tan, 1999: 37-70). Tan (1999: 56) explains that: "...the different levels of acculturation lead to various models of Chinese Malaysian identities, while making Chinese Malaysians as a whole distinct in contrast to the Chinese in other countries, the common experience of being Malaysian as well as the regional socio-cultural experiences cultivate the Malaysian identity".

While issues relating to other aspects of Chinese education have been well explored, the content (i.e., curriculum) of Chinese education which shows the struggle of the Chinese more vividly has been neglected. This study tries to fill some of the gaps by revealing how folk literature has been used in the curriculum to transmit this dual identity.

Fourth, moral education and civic education are now regarded as very important aspects of children's education. Yet, primary school students also need to learn many other subjects as well. In the process of making them learn so many subjects in school, issues such as heavy school bags, heavy loads of home work and too many examinations are often discussed in the media. It is now timely to find a creative way to reduce the load of the curriculum without sacrificing the important needs of an all rounded education. This may be done by combining some of the subjects; for example, combining moral or civic education with language education. By including folk literature in the language curriculum, it may be possible to kill many birds with one stone, i.e., providing moral education and language education at the same time. This is an important issue that is relatively unexplored.

Finally, this will be the first comprehensive study of Chinese language textbooks in Chinese primary schools. To date, there have only been some piecemeal

studies on the content of the Chinese language subject textbooks to this date. These studies are reviewed later in this chapter.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study tries to achieve its main objective and answer the main questions by reviewing the Chinese language textbook that have been used in the SRJK (C), which have made substantial use of folk literature. What these textbooks contain, may be instructive to other language curriculum and modern education in general too.

The study reviews the textbooks commonly used in the schools and also studies what the teachers have done in their classrooms with these materials. Thus the study relies on data from two main sources, i.e. the Chinese language textbooks used in the SRJK (C)s and the data collected through questionnaires and interviews with the Chinese language teachers, writers and editors of these textbooks.

Before the 1950s the Malayan Chinese schools relied heavily on textbooks from China. Tan (1997: 65) points out that:

By April 1952 two committees, with representatives from the Chinese school teachers, had begun work on drawing up new syllabuses (*sic*) with a Malayan outlook for the various subjects taught in the primary schools. Throughout 1952 and 1953, smaller subcommittees were set up to draw up detailed guidelines for textbooks for each subject. These were then handed to the publishing firms. By the beginning of 1954, the first of the new Malayan textbooks for Chinese primary schools were in use. Finally, the Chinese primary schools were no longer totally dependent on China for textbooks and teachers.

In the 1980s these textbooks were revised and in 1982 to 1983 the New Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools (Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah, KBSR) was implemented in all primary schools. The objective of KBSR was to unify the content of the curriculum of all types of schools. The KBSR is still in force at present, but the textbooks have been substantially revised again in the 1990s. Thus, the textbooks that

will be analysed in this study include those that were commonly used before the 1980s, in the 1980s and in the 1990s till present.

The textbooks in this collection are from five different eras, i.e., those used in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s till present. Those commonly used in the 1960s and 1980s were published by the Malaya Press Ltd. Those used in the 1970s were published by the Singapore Press (Pte) Ltd., which was the same company as the Malaya Press (Singapore had separated from Malaysia and the company had not reorganised its operation in Malaysia). The textbooks used from the 1990s onward were published by Pelangi Sdn. Bhd. One can easily notice the differences between the content of the textbooks published by Malaya Press and Pelangi. The Moral Studies Textbooks in the collection were also published by the Malaya Press.

The textbooks are reviewed because it is assumed that textbooks are the most widely used source of instruction which most teachers depend upon. However, this may not be the case – as from the present writer's experience as a school administrator, in Malaysia's exam oriented educational climate, workbooks may have replaced textbooks as the main source of instruction which most teachers depend upon. This will have to be substantiated by feedback from the questionnaires to the teachers.

The review is done through content analysis of the textbooks. Firstly, the folk literature in the textbooks will be identified through the use of tools such as tale-type indexes, motif indexes and collected works by other scholars. At this stage, the genres of the folk literature identified will be determined.

Secondly, the distribution of the folk literature according to genres across the textbooks from different eras and also across the standard of study will be plotted out. These will allow us to determine the era in which the folk literature was a popular

pedagogic material for the Chinese language curriculum; and also to identify the use of different genres at the different stages of learning.

Thirdly, the function of the folk literature within the context of the textbooks will be identified, e.g., whether they are used as reading material or used in the exercises will be determined. This part seeks to answer the question of how they are used as pedagogic tools for Chinese language teaching and learning.

Fourthly, the morals of the various folk literature or the values transmitted by the folk literature will be determined and examined. To determine their compatibility, these values will also be compared with the values that are supposed to be transmitted in the moral studies subject. The Moral Studies textbooks used at present will also be reviewed. The content will be compared to the content of Chinese language textbooks to find out which is more effective in transmitting the desired values to children. Two important questions for which answers are sought would be, “would it be better for the textbooks to make use of folk literature rather than the written stories?” and, can we do away with the Moral Studies subject and make use of language subjects as a form of moral education?”

Fifthly, besides the values, the sources of the folk literature will also be traced. This can be done by referring to indexes and works of other scholars. The source of the folk literature and the way they are presented reveal the kind of cultural identity the textbook producers are trying to form in the children. Folk literature from a particular culture is reflective of that culture. Therefore, teaching the folk literature is partly teaching the culture. Accepting a culture in turn means accepting the identity.

Finally, in the process of making use of the folk literature in the textbooks, some of them may need to be rewritten and presented in various forms such as pictures. In this process of rewriting and re-presentation, problems may have occurred

and made it less effective as a pedagogic tool in language education, value transmission and identity forming. Changes to a particular item of folk literature in the textbooks through the various eras are also explored to show how folk literature can change in the process of transmission due to interaction with the context.

The above analysis will be supported by data collected through questionnaire and interview. The objective of the questionnaires is to find out whether folk literatures in the textbooks are actually taught in schools, whether they are used as pedagogic materials, what the teachers think about them, etc. and other issues about Chinese language teaching. The answers to these questions will enable us to know in practice, how, why and what types of folk literature are used in the curriculum. Knowing the attitude of the Chinese language teachers toward their job will enable us to relate the use of folk literature in the classroom to the wider issues of culture and identity preservation.

The questionnaires are designed in such a way that they contain open ended and close ended questions. The open ended questions are intended for the teachers to answer them “freely” and honestly to enable a richer response to the issues. The open ended questions also increase the depth and breadth of the answers.

The questionnaires will be distributed to the teachers in various ways and the teachers will be allowed to answer them in their own time. This method is thought appropriate because the Chinese language teachers are regarded as a group of motivated respondents. As it will be explained later, the Chinese language teachers play an important role in preserving Chinese culture in Malaysia. Therefore, they enjoy a high respect in the Chinese community. As such they will be eager to share their thoughts and experiences.