

一般论文
Research Articles

JAWI-KHAT INTRODUCTION IN VERNACULAR SCHOOLS: MALAYSIAN CHINESE NEWSPAPERS' COVERAGE

爪夷文书法教学政策：马来西亚中文报章报导之调查

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Abstract

The Malaysian government's move to introduce Jawi-Khat in the Malay Language curriculum in Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools has been met with much tension and controversy. Being the second largest ethnic group in the country, the Chinese Malaysians' response to this initiative, to some extent, has generated implications to the socio-political order of this country. In general, they have reacted negatively to the initiative, but their opposition to the move was quick to draw displeasure from members of the Malay community, who mostly supported it. *Sin Chew Daily* – the first newspaper to break the news – was also accused of stirring fears among the Chinese community. Such an accusation and the manner in which the whole Jawi-Khat move unfolded have raised questions over the roles of the Chinese newspapers, in reporting a

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policy that impacts on an area concerning the Chinese community the most – Chinese education. Thus, this study sets out to examine the ways in which three leading Chinese newspapers in Malaysia, namely, *Sin Chew Daily*, *China Press* and *See Hua Daily News*, reported on this racially-sensitive issue. The news sources, news frames and valence of the reports were analysed. The research findings reveal that the Chinese newspapers were merely performing their role as a platform for discourse on an issue considered to be vital to the Chinese community in the country. The Chinese newspapers were also law-abiding, created room for disagreement and attempted to de-escalate the Chinese community's dissatisfaction over the Jawi-Khat issue.

Keywords: Jawi-Khat, media framing, Chinese newspapers, newspaper roles, Chinese Malaysian, ethnic relations

摘要

马来西亚政府在推动爪夷文进入华文小学与淡米尔文小学课纲事件上，引起各造极大的争议，反对声浪此起彼落。普遍上华裔对此政策持反对的态度。作为马来西亚第二大的族群，马来西亚华裔对于此政策的反应某种程度上亦是大马社会政治现象的反映与折射。而中文报章亦被指责为以沙文主义者的报导姿态激发了种族情绪，点燃了大马华裔对政府的反感情绪。然而，这样的指责是否属实，尚有待进一步的考证。为此，本次研究将通过在大马三家中文报界的领头羊——星洲日报、中国报以及诗华日报针对相关课题的报导进行调查。而通过新闻材料来源、新闻架构以及报导内容进行分析以后，本研究发现中文报章在此事件上，纯粹扮演它们本身在极重大课题上向大马华人社会公众宣导的平台与角色。而中文报章也在此过程当中表现出遵循法例、为负面反对情绪提供宣泄的空间，以及试图减缓华裔族群对爪夷文课题上的不满。

关键词: 爪夷文、媒体框架、中文报章、报章角色、大马华裔、族群关系

Introduction

In July 2019, it was reported that Khat or Jawi calligraphy would be included as part of the Malay Language curriculum in vernacular schools (“Khat to be included in school curriculum” 2019). *Sin Chew Daily* became the first newspaper to break the news when even Chinese- and Indian-based political components in then-ruling

Alliance of Hope (PH, or Pakatan Harapan) coalition were unaware of it (Lai 2019a). The move by the Education Ministry to introduce the Malay-Arabic calligraphy in all primary schools – hereupon known as the “Jawi-Khat Move” – was met with strong opposition not only from the non-Malay grassroots, but also from vocal Chinese educationist and stakeholder groups like Dong Zong and Jiao Zong (“Chinese educationists oppose move” 2019), politicians (Hazlin 2019; Lai 2019b; “Plan to introduce Jawi” 2019), a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) from Sarawak (Tawie 2019) and others due to fear of creeping Islamisation in racially-diverse Malaysia. Following the opposition, the Education Ministry later announced that only Jawi script and not Khat calligraphy would be taught as a basic level and that the segment would only cover three pages of the Malay Language textbook instead of six as originally proposed (Babulal 2019). The announcement, however, did not pacify the non-Malay communities.

At a time when a number of events were being framed through racial and religious lenses, causing racial and religious tensions to be on the rise (Golingai 2019), the non-Malays’ objection to the introduction of Jawi-Khat in vernacular schools quickly drew displeasure from members of the Malay community, who mostly supported the policy. Detractors have accused those who objected to the policy as “racist” and “chauvinistic” (Syed Jaymal 2019; “Dong Zong racist” 2019; “Minister: Malays compromised too much” 2019). Amid heightened tension over the “Jawi-Khat Move” and other racial and religious issues plaguing the country, calls to boycott non-Muslim products steadily gained traction (Mohsin 2019a). These eventually evolved into a more politically-correct, nationwide “Buy Muslim First (#BMF)” movement. Meanwhile, Lim Guan Eng, the secretary general of the Democratic Action Party (DAP, or Parti Tindakan Demokratik), the latter of which is a component party in the PH coalition often labelled by opponents as a “Chinese chauvinist party” (Kaur 2017; Mohsin 2019b), has blamed *Sin Chew Daily* for stirring up the Chinese community over the introduction of Jawi-Khat writing in vernacular schools (Prakash 2019).

The manner in which the whole “Jawi-Khat Move” unfolded and Lim’s accusation have inadvertently raised questions over the roles of Chinese newspapers

in Malaysia in mobilising the Chinese community to oppose the policy. In reporting the controversy surrounding the “Jawi-Khat Move”, how did the Chinese newspapers carry their responsibility as a watchdog of the community’s interests? In a society where language, ethnic and religious issues are constantly being contested, where do the Chinese newspapers, being one of the three pillars of the Chinese community, draw a fine line between safeguarding the interests of the ethnic Chinese and not being perceived as promoting “ethnic chauvinism” in their coverage of issues of common interest like the “Jawi-Khat Move”?

It is widely understood that newspapers play an important role in framing public opinions. Entman (1993: 52) explains, “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” . It is also posited that “frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions” (Entman 1993: 55). Xie and Ding (2016) metaphorise the framing process as focusing on part of the scene within an existing frame in photography. In doing so, framing can help define and solve problems, as well as shape public opinions (Knight 1999). The media actively set frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events (Tuchman 1978), as well as limit or define the meaning of a story and hence shape people’s interpretation of it (Hallahan 1999).

As the Chinese newspapers were actively pursuing the development of the “Jawi-Khat Move”, was there any indication that they have framed the issue in order to mobilise the Chinese sentiments against the policy? Were they trying to present the “Jawi-Khat Move” as being detrimental to the Chinese community such that its members had better do something about it? Considering Chinese education is integral to the Chinese community, were they trying to magnify and attract attention to an issue that would affect the perseverance of the Chinese ethnic identity in Malaysia? Or, were the news articles merely reflecting the Chinese community’s perception of the issue?

To find those out, this paper sets out to examine the roles of the Chinese press in Malaysia, specifically by looking into the coverage of the “Jawi-Khat Move” and matters linked to it in three leading Chinese-language newspapers, namely *Sin Chew Daily*, *China Press*, and *See Hua Daily News*. The examination would involve an analysis into the news sources employed by the Chinese newspapers in their coverage of the “Jawi-Khat Move”; the news frames reported by the Chinese newspapers in their coverage of the “Jawi-Khat Move”, and the valence employed by the Chinese newspapers in their coverage of the “Jawi-Khat Move”.

Chinese-Language Newspapers in Malaysia

The Chinese-language newspapers are part of what is known as the “three pillars of the Chinese community”, with the other two pillars being the Chinese schools, as well as Chinese clans and associations (Tan 2007; Hariati 2012). The tradition of the Chinese vernacular newspapers is dated back to over two centuries ago with the establishment of Malaysia’s first Chinese newspaper, the *Chinese Monthly Magazine*, considered by scholars to be the first modern Chinese periodical in the world (Lent 1974). The Malacca-based publication existed alongside other prominent newspapers that were published as ethnicity-based mouthpieces in the colonial era, such as *Utusan Melayu*, *Jawi Peranakan* and *Bintang Timor* (Lent 1978). The years following that eventually saw the number of ethnic-based newspapers proliferating, which remains evident in post-independence Malaya/Malaysia and even today.

Presently, there are 19 Chinese newspapers in Malaysia, in comparison to 16 in English and 13 in Malay (Mohd Izzuddin 2019). Being largely concerned with the transfer of issues of salience, these vernacular-language newspapers not only serve to extend and preserve an ethnic’s culture, but also act as a symbol of communal identity of the ethnic group. A significant characteristic of such newspapers, as Mohd Izzuddin (2019) asserts, is their tendency to concentrate on discourses and happenings important to the ethnic community.

Shifting Roles of Malaysian Chinese Newspapers

In a Malay-majority Malaysia where the dominant group is categorised as *Bumiputeras* (literally “sons of the soil”) and accorded special rights as enshrined in the Federal Constitution, conflicts have always existed between the roles of the Chinese press and government policies. Historically, the Chinese press had emphasised on content from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Lent 1974). Then, the Chinese’s attachment to their motherland saw a need for the community to be informed of happenings from China (Lent 1974; Mohd Dhari 1992). As a result, Yang and Ahmad Ishak (2015) contend that the newspaper content naturally reflected the cultural, emotional and political attachments of the Chinese immigrants to their homeland. From the last quarter of the 19th century to early 20th century, a significant amount of news space was given to stories about China or carried articles from mainland Chinese newspapers (Mohd Dhari 1992). This came at a time when the hostility towards the Chinese as expressed by colonial officials and the Chinese’s lack of social integration prompted most Malays to think that they had no real attachment to the country (Hirschman 1986).

In post-independence Malaya, as ethnic immigrants realised they were going to call Malaya their home – much to the Malays’ fear, newspapers were also trying to strengthen their identification with the respective ethnic communities (Yang and Ahmad Ishak 2015). Lent (1974) observes that the Chinese community, meanwhile, looked to the newspapers to defend and uphold their ethnic interests. As far as news reporting was concerned, the Chinese newspapers had to fulfill their responsibility to inform the Chinese of what was happening overseas, as exemplified in their emphasis on international news; the government, on the other hand, not only wanted the press to de-emphasise on foreign news in the context of nationhood, but also envisaged that the Chinese would assimilate themselves into nation’s development (Lent 1974). This was despite the Chinese feeling their national setup being challenged with the Malays being accorded special rights over other ethnic groups under the Constitution and Second Malaysia Plan.

As with most other vernacular-language newspapers in the country, the Chinese newspapers in the post-independence era are thought to have gone through two distinct phases of adaptation so as to remain relevant. With various laws, guidelines and regulations in place, the first phase was for the papers to attune to the government's effort in nation-building by cutting down on foreign content and providing more coverage on national news and government's economic policy following Malaya's independence. With mounting government pressure, Lent (1974) notes that Chinese publications began carrying more works by Malaysian authors and featuring more news about other ethnic communities in the country.

The second phase was the newspapers' response to the government's increasing control over press and publications. Ong and Chibundu (2018) posit that the authorities have, over the years, sought to employ various laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Internal Security Act (abolished and replaced by Security Offences [Special Measures] Act 2012) and Sedition Act to censor content and limit critical voices. An example would be the infamous *Operasi Lalang* (Weeding Operation), which saw Chinese newspaper *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (now *Sin Chew Daily*) and two other publications being shut down for five months, as well as 106 dissents being detained without trial as a result of being vocal about a string of issues. These included ones over the Chinese schools and the use of the derogatory word *pendatang* to describe immigrants (Wong 2017; Jahabar 2016). Nadason (2017) describes the crackdown as "a dark chapter for Malaysian journalism".

In the aftermath, a legislation on press activities saw the amendment to the PPPA in 1988 that now required printers and publishers to apply for new licenses annually instead of renewing them yearly. In addition, if any license were revoked, the decision could not be challenged in court (Kenyon et al. 2014; Saravanamuttu 2018). Although the PPPA was relaxed in 2012 such that the license for printing presses and permit for publications no longer needed to be renewed annually, the license may still be revoked anytime (Nadason 2017).

Such legislation has kept the press under tighter control. Editorials of newspapers have since begun practicing self-censorship to a greater degree and become more

cautious about the stories they run. Companies that possess a print or publication license are unlikely to publish critical content, especially on issues pertaining to race and religion, for fear of consequences (Kenyon et al. 2014). Although two of the papers being hit with suspension during *Operasi Lalang* eventually resumed operation, Jahabar (2016) notes that they “were never the same again”. It has, therefore, been a tough balancing act especially on the part of the vernacular newspapers, for they have to juggle between fulfilling their responsibility as a voice for their respective communities and also ensuring what is being reported, will not be construed by the authorities as not in line with government policies or oppositionist in nature.

Despite the newspapers’ succumbence to government policies and legislative controls over the years, Shaari et al. (2006) argue that the ethnic direction of the vernacular newspapers has not changed much from the colonial days, where they set agenda and cater predominantly to members of the same ethnic group. Presently for instance, Ng and Lee (2018) find that Malaysia’s leading Chinese newspaper *Sin Chew Daily* remains focused on content pertaining to Chinese education issues, as well as cultural and religious rights, among others. *Nanyang Siang Pao* and *The Busy Weekly*, a sister publication of *Oriental Daily News*, all of which are Chinese-language publications, centre on business news targeting the Chinese business community (Liew 2015; Liew 2019).

Research Methodology

Content Analysis

The study is aimed at investigating the news coverage of the controversial move to introduce Jawi-Khat in vernacular schools in Malaysia through a content analysis. The main focus would be to determine the dominant news sources, news frames and valence of articles that reported on the “Jawi-Khat Move”. Content analysis is defined as “... the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (Neuendorf 2017: 1). A fast-growing technique in the world of quantitative research

(Neuendorf 2017), content analysis has been used in framing studies of reporting in newspapers (e.g., An and Gower 2009; Yang and Ahmad Ishak 2015; Yang and Rycker 2017; Ong and Chibundu 2018). Tankard (2008) remarks that framing provides quantitative researchers with a way to approach ideology which critical theorists mostly deal with.

Selected Newspapers

In this research, all news articles related to the “Jawi-Khat Move” covered by three mainstream Chinese dailies in Malaysia, namely *Sin Chew Daily*, *China Press*, and *See Hua Daily News*, were analysed. These newspapers have a substantial influence on the Chinese Malaysian community and are the top newspapers in both Peninsular and East Malaysia. *Sin Chew* and *China Press* are the country’s leading newspapers, both of which originated from Peninsular Malaysia but are controlled by Sibu-born media and timber tycoon Tiong Hiew King and family.¹ *Sin Chew* commanded an average daily print circulation of 293,804 copies between January and June 2018 as per the Audit Bureau of Circulation Malaysia (Media Chinese 2019). While no data of the same period is available for *China Press*, it was the second widely-read Chinese-language newspapers in the country with an average daily print and digital circulation of 177,825 copies between January and June 2017 (Media Chinese 2018). Meanwhile, *See Hua* is East Malaysia’s most popular Chinese newspaper with a daily circulation of 94,497 copies (Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia 2018). All of these newspapers have their online portals where the content is almost identical to their print edition.

Sampling and Coding Procedures

This study employed the census sample, considered to be the most informative for studies that examine a particular event or series of events (Neuendorf 2017). The sampling period ran from July 25 to September 25, 2019, the peak period during

which the “Jawi-Khat Move” took over the nation by storm. Individual stories consisting of straight news, editorials, and commentaries, among others, published in all sections of three mainstream newspapers were analysed. Only articles that touched on the implementation of Jawi-Khat writing and related issues were included for analysis. Articles were identified through several comprehensive rounds of database searches, which involved extracting them from the newspapers’ respective online services. Several keywords used in the search included “Khat”, “Jawi” and “爪夷”. This search yielded a total of 670 news articles.

Coding was done based on the following dimensions, consistent with the three RQ’s: 1) news sources; 2) news frames; and 3) valence of articles. The inductive and emergent coding approaches were employed for analysing news sources and news frames. After examining all articles, the dominant news sources cited by the newspapers were pigeonholed into the following categories:

- 1) Policy makers, including party leaders from then-ruling Alliance of Hope (PH, or Pakatan Harapan) government, as well as state- and federal-level education authority;
- 2) Opposition leaders, including party leaders from then opposition bloc such as United Malays National Organisation (UMNO, or Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA, or Persatuan Cina Malaysia) and Malaysian People’s Movement Party (Gerakan, or Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia);
- 3) Non-partisan individuals, including activists, experts, academics, prominent or influential figures, etc;
- 4) Stakeholder groups, including various unions, associations and non-profit organisations such as educationist groups, parent-teacher associations, as well as parent and resident groups;
- 5) Police;
- 6) Opinions – writers who contributed to commentaries, columns, letters to the editors, etc.;
- 7) Editorials – articles written by the senior editorial staff or publisher of a

newspaper representing its views, and

8) Others.

The topics covered in all 670 articles in this study were categorised into the following news frames, with their respective operational definitions provided:

- 1) Responsibility – suggests that some level of the government attempts or has the ability to solve or address any issue that stems from the implementation of Jawi-Khat writing; suggests that some level of the government, an individual or a group is responsible for the issue; suggests the issue requires urgent action by the government.
- 2) Opposition and criticism – presents people's opposition, criticism, disappointment and skepticism towards the "Jawi-Khat Move".
- 3) Recommendations – provides suggestions on how the "Jawi-Khat Move" should or could be handled more efficiently.
- 4) Conflicts and politics – reflects clashes between or among groups, parties or individuals as a result of the Jawi move; one party, individual or group reproaches another; when the Jawi move has been politicised by any one party, yet it does not offer to address the policy in a constructive manner; when any one party takes advantage of the Jawi issue for political gains.
- 5) Moral and understanding – goes beyond the "Jawi-Khat Move" per se to focus on the moral responsibility to call for better a understanding of and tolerance towards Jawi-Khat, including its origin, history and heritage, with the aim of de-escalating conflicts and misunderstandings; puts any event or issue pertaining to the "Jawi-Khat Move" in the context of moral prescriptions or religious principles.
- 6) Court and police – covers court cases linked to the "Jawi-Khat Move"; police arrests, police reports, surveillance and investigations; statements made to the police.
- 7) Others – any other topics that do not fit into the frames above.

Lastly, the valence is also known as the tone or slant of an article. Baumgartner and Wirth (2012) attribute the valence as one of the components responsible for

eliciting mood states in the readers through media messages. As mood states have an impact on how readers think and behave, the former may also affect how readers process the information contained in such messages. This study replicated one of the methods of tonality assessment suggested by Michaelson and Griffin (2005), by classifying the tones of news articles into supportive, mixed or neutral, and critical for the analysis of the stance expressed towards the implementation of the Jawi-Khat writing.

Inter-Coder Reliability

This study underwent an inter-coder reliability test, which is "... the amount of agreement or correspondence among two or more coders" (Neuendorf 2017: 141). Neuendorf (2017) notes that the reliability sub-sample should be at least 10% of the full one. While the first author and researcher was the first coder, an undergraduate student with a background in communication was chosen as the second coder after several rounds of training, with coding instructions provided. The inter-coder reliability for this study was done independently by randomly selecting 10%, or 67 articles of the total sample. The inter-coder reliability of all three dimensions in this study was respectively over 0.7, which is generally considered acceptable (e.g., in Baxter et al. 2015).

Findings

This section presents some key information based on the three dimensions (i.e., news sources, news frames and valence of articles) linked to the news coverage of the "Jawi-Khat Move" in *Sin Chew*, *China Press* and *See Hua*.

General Overview of "Jawi-Khat Move" Coverage

As shown in Table 1, out of a total of 670 news articles identified in this study, all three Chinese newspapers devoted as much as 90.3% of the overall coverage on

“Jawi-Khat Move” to straight news. Opinion pieces were the second most-featured content, representing 9.1% of the total coverage. These pieces were published largely in the forms of commentaries and columns by regular writers. Besides, letters to the editors expressing readers’ sentiments on the “Jawi-Khat Move” also played a minor role. Editorials – articles written by the senior editorial staff or publisher of a newspaper oftentimes expressing its view towards an issue – contributed to merely 0.3% of the total news articles. The only two editorials found in this study, however, only provided an account of what various parties thought about the issue and came without an official stance on the part of the newspaper involved. Lastly, feature articles on the “Jawi-Khat Move” shared the same percentage as editorials and all such articles were in the form of an interview with experts.

Table 1. “Jawi-Khat Move” coverage and news types

News Type	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n=282)		<i>China Press</i> (n=255)		<i>See Hua Daily News</i> (n=133)		All 3 Newspapers (n=670)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Straight news	244	86.5	238	93.3	123	92.5	605	90.3
Opinions	35	12.4	17	6.7	9	6.8	61	9.1
Editorials	2	0.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.3
Features	1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.8	2	0.3

News Sources Employed in “Jawi-Khat Move” Coverage

Overall, the coverage of the “Jawi-Khat Move” has been rather pluralistic in a way, such that the news sources consisted of various parties. The Chinese newspapers strongly relied on policy makers from then-ruling PH coalition as the news sources (30.3%). Within this category, both state- and federal-level leaders from PH component party DAP, as well as the Education Ministry which rolled out the policy, became the most employed sources across all three newspapers. Not far behind were the stakeholder groups (27.8%), who were mostly critical of the “Jawi-Khat

Move”. This was with the exception that *Sin Chew* in particular cited the stakeholder groups the most (34.4%), followed by the policy makers (27.3%). Otherwise, the newspapers in general also dedicated a substantial amount of coverage to leaders from then-opposition parties, where they represented 20.3% of the total articles.

While all three newspapers reasonably allocated some space for individual writers or commentators who contributed to opinion pieces (9.1%), non-partisan individuals such as activists, experts, academics, as well as prominent and influential figures, too, were given considerable attention (7.2%). The police was among the least cited sources, forming less than 1%, but that was also because very few incidents related to the policy involved the force.

Table 2. News sources employed in “Jawi-Khat Move” coverage

News Source	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n=282)		<i>China Press</i> (n=255)		<i>See Hua Daily News</i> (n=133)		All 3 Newspapers (n=670)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Policy makers	77	27.3	76	29.8	50	37.6	203	30.3
Stakeholder groups	97	34.4	61	23.9	28	21.1	186	27.8
Opposition leaders	51	18.1	53	20.8	32	24.1	136	20.3
Opinions	35	12.4	17	6.7	9	6.8	61	9.1
Non-partisan individuals	13	4.6	24	9.4	11	8.3	48	7.2
Police	3	1.1	3	1.2	0	0.0	6	0.9
Editorials	2	0.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.3
Others	4	1.4	21	8.2	3	2.3	28	4.2

News Topics Linked to “Jawi-Khat Move” Coverage

The reportage on the “Jawi-Khat Move” involved various topics known as “news frames”. Among them, responsibility linked the “Jawi-Khat Move” was the most salient news frame, representing 32.5% of the total coverage (see Table 3). Some examples are given in “Khat lessons optional” (2019) and “Guan Eng to raise Khat issue” (2019), where the articles involved express an attempt on the part of the

government to address and improve on the policy. Opposition and criticism towards the policy was also prominently reported and took up 30.1% of the pie chart. It is interesting to note that although the “opposition and criticism” frame is ranked second overall, it was the most salient one in *Sin Chew*'s reportage on the “Jawi-Khat Move”, as reflected through 39% of the paper's coverage. The leading Chinese daily actively pursued the opposition, criticism, disappointment and skepticism towards the “Jawi-Khat Move” as expressed by various groups and individuals, including those from the government and opposition parties.

News sources are said to be the “frame sponsors” for news articles (Tankard 2008). Given that policy makers, stakeholder groups and opposition leaders were the dominant news sources in this study, it only makes sense that “responsibility” and “opposition and criticism” made the top two frames. Otherwise, the frames of “moral and understanding” (e.g., “A bit of Jawi would not hurt” 2019; “PAS: Khat lessons can forge unity” 2019) and “conflicts and politics” (e.g., “Penang Gerakan secretary calls for boycott” 2019; “Man throws eggs at DAP office” 2019) respectively represented 15.1% and 11.6% of the total coverage. Court and police, recommendations, as well as other topics that could not be included in any of the previously-mentioned frames, were respectively under 5%.

Table 3. News frames employed in “Jawi-Khat Move” articles

News Frame	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n=282)		<i>China Press</i> (n=255)		<i>See Hua Daily News</i> (n=133)		All 3 Newspapers (n=670)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Responsibility	78	27.7	84	32.9	56	42.1	218	32.5
Opposition and criticism	110	39.0	67	26.3	25	18.8	202	30.1
Moral and understanding	49	17.4	34	13.3	18	13.5	101	15.1
Conflicts and politics	20	7.1	38	14.9	20	15.0	78	11.6
Court and police	11	3.9	8	3.1	3	2.3	22	3.3
Recommendations	6	2.1	9	3.5	3	2.3	18	2.7
Others	8	2.8	15	5.9	8	6.0	31	4.6

Valence of “Jawi-Khat Move” Articles

The valence or slant of an article was measured based on the stance the dominant news source in the said article expressed towards the “Jawi-Khat Move”. Table 4 shows that in general, the “Jawi-Khat Move” has not been too well-received. Out of the 670 news articles, more than half of them (56.6%) reported a critical stance towards the policy. Only 21.3% of them demonstrated a supportive tone, whereas the rest showed either a neutral stance or mixed reactions towards the controversy.

Table 4. Valence of news articles on “Jawi-Khat Move”

Valence of Articles	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n=282)		<i>China Press</i> (n=255)		<i>See Hua Daily News</i> (n=133)		All 3 Newspapers (n=670)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Critical	165	58.5	149	58.4	65	48.9	379	56.6
Neutral/Mixed	58	20.6	52	20.4	38	28.6	148	22.1
Supportive	59	20.9	54	21.2	30	22.6	143	21.3

Discussion

The aforementioned findings reveal how the “Jawi-Khat Move” and related issues have been reported across the three mainstream Chinese newspapers in Malaysia. Based on the findings, it is apparent that news articles on the “Jawi-Khat Move” carried by the Chinese newspapers have largely reflected the sentiments of the Chinese community. However, the newspapers were not without their agenda when they reported extensively on an issue deemed to be sensitive to the Chinese community and made it salient in the news for months. They have, nevertheless, framed the issue as an urgent matter that required due attention from the Chinese community while serving as a platform to allow for discourse on this issue to occur. The following are some facts to support this observation:

Law-Abiding Newspapers

In presenting the issue, it is clear that fact-based news reporting took a strong lead over opinion journalism. Straight news, otherwise known as “spot” or “hard” news (Birkbeck 2013) and usually taking on a factual approach, effortlessly accounted for 90% of the coverage. This stands in stark contrast to the more opinionated content, which would include commentaries, columns, letters to the editor and editorials in this study. Nevertheless, such a composition in the news coverage is expected of Malaysian newspapers, as similar studies into other political issues in the country also pointed to a similar pattern (e.g., Ahmad Ishak and Yang 2013; Yang and Rycker 2017; Ong and Chibundu 2018). Although Malaysia’s media freedom has improved since the PH government took over (“Better media freedom” 2019), the mainstream media landscape remains a heavily-controlled and -censored one. Where the media is mostly private but subject to various legislative mechanisms and ownership structures through which compliance is ensured (Abbott 2011), perhaps sticking to fact-based reporting rather than opinion pieces not only serves as a safe way of ensuring the bottom line of the media laws and regulations is not compromised, but also helps reinforce traditional journalistic norms and authoritativeness in an era where citizens call themselves “journalists”.

Community-Serving Newspapers

Given that vernacular newspapers have typically demonstrated the tendency to focus on events important to their respective communities (Shaari et al. 2006), it is not unusual for the Chinese newspapers in the country to serve as a “voice” for the Chinese community. In the Jawi-Khat incident, the three newspapers have been noticeably vigorous in reporting the sentiments of various stakeholder groups, including guilds, unions, associations, and non-governmental organisations – majority of which were Chinese-based, towards a policy that impacts on an area concerning the Chinese Malaysians the most – Chinese education. Although close to 80% of the articles citing these stakeholder groups were critical of the policy

(see Table 5 on the breakdown of the stance towards the “Jawi-Khat Move” based on news sources), the representation of such groups have been diverse and wide-ranging in the three newspapers, representing various segments of the huge Chinese Malaysian community: from the prominent Chinese educationist groups under the collective name of “Dong Jiao Zong” to The Federation of Hokkien Associations of Malaysia to Malaysian Chinese Language Council and to The Association Of Graduate Universities And Colleges In China, Malaysia, just to name a few.

Of course, it is important to note that coverage of these stakeholder groups was not only confined to Chinese-based ones, or it would have made these newspapers seem rather chauvinistic. It too included Indian- and Malay-based groups, although these in general might not have been as vocal in the Jawi-Khat issue as the Chinese ones. Also, it must be acknowledged that Chinese organisations or *Hua Zong* in Malaysia are rather strong, with some 7,000 registered clans, guilds and business groups currently in existence according to Tan (2007). Besides the stakeholder groups, the representation of the Chinese voice also included leaders from both the policy-maker and opposition groups, who were concerned about the whole direction of the “Jawi-Khat Move”. From the indications above, it is apparent that the three newspapers have not changed much from the colonial days; they still very much remain ethnic, community-serving newspapers some six decades into Malaya’s independence.

Table 5. Stance towards "Jawi-Khat Move" based on news sources

News Source	Valence of Articles						All 3 Newspapers (n=670)	
	Critical		Neutral		Supportive			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Policy makers	37	18.2	67	33.0	99	48.8	203	30.3
Stakeholder groups	148	79.6	24	12.9	14	7.5	186	27.8
Opposition leaders	107	78.7	17	12.5	12	8.8	136	20.3
Opinions	44	72.1	12	19.7	5	8.2	61	9.1
Non-partisan individuals	22	45.8	13	27.1	13	27.1	48	7.2
Police	0	0.0	6	100.0	0	0.0	6	0.9
Editorials	0	0.0	2	100.0	0	0.0	2	0.3
Others	21	75.0	7	25.0	0	0.0	28	4.2

Providing a Platform for Discourse

After *Sin Chew* broke the news of the "Jawi-Khat Move", it caused a chain of reactions, thereupon exemplifying the power of the mass media. All other newspapers immediately followed suit and pursued the issue, made it salient in the news, subsequently caused stakeholders to push their voice of opposition out, and eventually forced the policy makers to come out to clarify and address the controversy. Over the span of two months during the peak of the issue, the Chinese newspapers' active following up on and monitoring of the issue served as a good example of the media performing the surveillance (or information) function of mass communication as put forth by theorists Harold D. Lasswell and Charles R. Wright in 1948 and 1960 respectively.

In this controversy, not only were the ethnic newspapers keeping the Chinese community informed of the 5W's and 1H of the issue, they also helped them analyse what was to be expected of the issue, and a portion of such analysis was provided through opinion pieces. *Sin Chew*, considered to be the most influential newspaper among the Chinese Malaysians, was leading in the pursuit of opinion-driven and

oftentimes interpretive pieces comprising largely of commentaries and letters compared to its counterparts in this study. As *Sin Chew* remains devoted to issues pertaining to Chinese education and culture (Ng and Lee 2018) and is the country's highest-circulated Chinese newspaper, it is not surprising the leading Chinese daily ran twice the amount of opinion pieces compared to *China Press* and *See Hua*, on top of two editorials throughout the two-month peak period of the controversy. Having said that, it must also be acknowledged that *Sin Chew* has many more pages and news space compared to the other two newspapers.

While a majority of the opinion pieces and editorials in the three papers expressed a stance towards the initiative to introduce of Jawi-Khat in vernacular schools, many of them also provided interpretations on and meanings (or the lack thereof) to the issue. Through the timely transfer of interpretive cues linked to the policy, the press attempted to mobilise members of the Chinese community it caters to, to understand and respond to the issue in a certain manner, as given in the Framing Theory. The interpretations that came with these opinion pieces served to fulfill what is known as the “correlation function” closely linked to the aforementioned surveillance or information function. This function deals with how the Chinese newspapers selected and interpreted information on the “Jawi-Khat Move”, thereby providing an avenue of discourse on the issue.

Room for Disagreement

Just because the Chinese newspapers are generally law-abiding ones that conform to the legislation and government policy, does not mean they do not attempt to push the boundary by creating room for disagreement. In relation to the discussion under the subhead above, the three newspapers were bold to have featured voices critical of the “Jawi-Khat Move” by fellow columnists, readers and other individuals. This was despite the risk of being seen as oppositionist. Also, besides providing the most coverage to the policy makers who came out with the Jawi-Khat policy, the newspapers were, too, actively pursuing the voice of disagreement from within the

same group, as not all from the policy-maker group was supportive of the policy. For instance, while the Education Ministry was evidently supportive of the move, DAP was divided over it (e.g., “DAP Youth against Khat lessons” 2019). Besides, a few leaders from the People’s Justice Party (PKR), also a component party in then-ruling PH coalition, also spoke up against the move (e.g., “How do Khat lessons improve Malay language proficiency” 2019). This was reflected through 18.2% of the articles with a critical stance as expressed by a number of unhappy leaders from the policy-maker group towards the policy (see Table 5).

De-escalating Conflicts and Misunderstanding

With politicians left divided over the “Jawi-Khat Move” and the grassroots groups mostly opposing it, thereby resulting in close to 60% of the articles with a critical valence (see Table 4), it is perhaps encouraging to see that all three newspapers have devoted a reasonable 15.1% of the total coverage to the “moral and understanding” frame (see Table 3). Under this frame, by quoting or interviewing various groups, parties or individuals, the articles tried to promote an informed understanding of and tolerance towards Jawi-Khat through the sharing of its history, as well as through the assurance of how learning the Jawi script would not make one Malay or Muslim. In this frame, the relevant articles did not focus on the issue of the “Jawi-Khat Move” per se, but instead went beyond it to educate readers on the origin, history and heritage of the Jawi script with the aim of de-escalating conflicts and misunderstandings. In that regard, Junne (2013) asserts that while the media plays a crucial role in conflict escalation, it also has the potential to tame conflicts by offering options for resolution. Such an approach, known as “peace journalism”, has the potential to transform conflicts to resolution where it allows journalists “... to view, interpret, source and narrate conflicts in ways that seek non-violent responses in society...” (Aslam 2014: 2). Similar to agenda setting and framing, such journalism is when the media chooses what to report and how to report it, except that it creates opportunities for the public to consider and value peaceful responses to conflicts.

Conclusion

As the Chinese press is traditionally known to play an imperative role in informing the Chinese community of happenings vital to its members, it is understandable for the newspapers to have rather conspicuously featured the voices of an array of the stakeholder groups, where close to 80% of them were critical of the “Jawi-Khat Move”. Their active pursuance of these groups also coincided with the fact that the Chinese community takes to heart matters pertaining to Chinese education. Many from the stakeholder groups feared that the introduction of Jawi-Khat lessons in vernacular schools would further erode Chinese education in the context of multicultural Malaysia. Post-independence Malaysia saw Chinese educational rights and interests, among others, being increasingly eroded in the government’s pursuit of nation-building that emphasises on a Bumiputera-centered identity and the Malay culture (Loh 2002). The development of Chinese education, hence, is a result of a continuous social movement that has depended mainly on the strength of the Chinese community and its self-reliance to keep it going (Xia et al. 2018). Meanwhile, as the newspapers were actively setting agenda and transferring salient cues to their readers during the peak of the controversy, thus making it a public agenda (i.e., agenda setting), it must also be noted that the politicians and various stakeholder groups or individuals were not without their own agenda in influencing public policy. The latter scenario is known as “agenda building”.

Although the implementation of Jawi-Khat as part of the Malay Language curriculum in vernacular or non-Malay-medium national-type schools is an issue directly affecting the non-Malays, specifically the Chinese and Indians, the research data suggests that essentially those supporting and opposing it have been markedly divided along ethnic and religious lines. This is not surprising, considering that racially-charged rhetoric has dominated the political scene of multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia since its independence (Sukumaran 2018). Generally, the “Jawi-Khat Move” has been both well-received and defended by the Malay-Muslims. In the case of this study, most Malay-Muslims were of the opinion that the implementation

was sensible and that Jawi should be deemed an integral part of the national heritage considering the Malay language was traditionally written in the Jawi script. On top of that, Malay nationalist leaders in the political arena such as Abdul Hadi Awang and Ismail Sabri Yaakob, often seen to bank on the support of fellow Malay-Muslims, would take this opportunity to be especially vocal in condemning and demonising those who opposed the move (e.g., “Hadi hits out at ‘Islamaphobic’ resistance” 2019; “Ismail Sabri hits out at DAP, Dong Zong” 2019).

On the other hand, among the Chinese and Indians, this policy stirred fears of Arabianisation and Islamisation. Those who voiced their opposition, skepticism and dissatisfaction towards the “Jawi-Khat Move” not only included a number of politicians from the ruling government and a slew of worried Chinese and Tamil stakeholder groups, but also leaders from MCA and Gerakan, both of which are Chinese-based political parties linked to then-overthrown National Front (BN, or Barisan Nasional) government in the 2018 general election. Such opposition especially among the Chinese from both sides of the political divide bears a striking resemblance to the incident in 1987 when Anwar Ibrahim, then Education Minister under BN, approved a plan to send non-Chinese speaking senior assistants and principals to vernacular Chinese primary schools (Wong 2017; Ang 2009; Lai 2019a). This caused Dong Jiao Zong to mobilise a demonstration, where Sia Keng Yek records in his 2005 book *SRJK (Cina) dalam Sistem Pendidikan Kebanagsaan* that “... for the first time in the history of Malaysia, Chinese were united despite geographical location, social or economy class, as well as political stands” (quoted in Ang 2009: 18).

All in all, in the coverage of the “Jawi-Khat Move”, *Sin Chew*, *China Press* and *See Hua* have largely fulfilled the surveillance or information, as well as correlation functions of mass communication. While actively keeping the Chinese community informed of the development on the Jawi-Khat controversy, these leading newspapers in Peninsular and East Malaysia also provided interpretations and discourse on the issue, seen as an attempt to mobilise the readers on how to think about it. They have framed it, albeit critically, as an important matter that required urgent attention from both the Chinese community and policy makers alike. All three papers employed

policy makers, stakeholder groups and opposition leaders as the main news sources, thereby making the reportage on the “Jawi-Khat Move” rather diverse in a way. The newspapers informed their readers most saliently about the responsibility linked to the “Jawi-Khat Move”, as well as opposition, criticism, disappointment and skepticism demonstrated by some quarters towards it. At the same time, they also devoted some space to content calling for a better understanding of and tolerance towards Jawi-Khat, vital in de-escalating any conflict or misunderstanding resulting from the policy. From this study, it can be observed that although the roles of the Chinese newspapers in Malaysia have shifted significantly especially after independence, one thing that remains is their ethnic direction and commitment to the coverage of issues and discourses vital to the Chinese community.

Note

- 1 See Liew (2017) for a more informed understanding of Tiong Hiew King’s business empire. Tiong’s youngest brother Tiong Thai King, a former Member of Parliament for the Lanang constituency in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, is currently a sitting state assemblyman who contested against main opponent DAP in the 2016 Sarawak state election (see “For Chinese-majority Lanang, it is a choice between DAP and BN” 2018).

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