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The Chinese Education Movement in Malaysia

Ang Ming Chee

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Ang Ming Chee*

The Chinese Education Movement in Malaysia¹

Abstract

This article explores why and how a minority social movement persists despite persistent constraints placed upon it by a majority-dominated State. The Chinese education movement has been one of the largest, longest, and most sustained social movements in Malaysia. Sociological, economic, and demographic changes of the Chinese community along with domestic political struggles revolving around the ethnic question have influenced the fluctuation of movement trajectory over time. The movement has sustained its activities and received moral and material support from the Chinese communities, despite persistent constraints by the government, scarcity of resources and lack of support from others Malaysian population. This article argues that constraints imposed by the State have been utilized by the social movement organization to mobilize support from the masses, and thus became the most significant factors that have sustained the movement. The article will first look into the evolution of the social movement and analyze the dynamic interaction between the State and the challengers from various perspectives, including the current status update of the social movement organizations and activities organized to sustain continuous collective action. In addition to the analysis of the movement's achievements, this article will also explain the State's reaction towards the movement and the measures undertaken to constrain or terminate the movement.

Keywords:

Social movement, Malaysia, Chinese, Education

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¹ This paper has been written according to a preliminary framework of the author's upcoming doctoral thesis, which will be completed by winter 2010.

Introduction

Arguably, Malaysia's longest-running social movement organization, *Dongjiaozong*, is a rare example in Asia, as an ethnically-based social movement organization actively engaged in contentious politics for more than five decades. The Chinese educational movement in Malaysia was originally started by a group of Chinese school teachers who precipitated a sense of crisis in Chinese society after the release of the Barnes Report in June 1951.² The early stage of the movement saw the collaboration of three significant Chinese associations in Malaya, including the United Chinese School Teachers' Association (*Jiaozong*), the United Chinese School Committees' Association (*Dongzong*), and the Malaysian Chinese Associations defending the status of Chinese education during Malaya's transition from a colonial to a new independent state.³

After the Malaysian Chinese Associations were fully co-opted⁴ into the National Front alliance (*Barisan Nasional*)⁵ in 1961, *Jiaozong* and *Dongzong* jointly formed *Dongjiaozong* as the formal organization of the Chinese language education movement. *Dongjiaozong* was known as "the most crucial institution that sustains and coordinates the financial incomes, (which) unified the movement activities, and is the platform in planning strategies for the movement" (Lee, 1957; Chen, 1992; Tan, 1997: 291; Kua, 1999).

Dongjiaozong is linked and supported by hundreds of Chinese-based community organizations, as well as individual members, through official and unofficial channels. The movement, its organizations, and supporters have faced many challenges and constraints from the ethnically Malay-dominated state. From the inter-communal tensions and anti-communist agenda in the 1960s, the impact of the New Economic Policy since 1971, the influence of the world Islamization movement and the rise of Mahathir Mohammad during the 1980s, globalized industrialization and capitalization of domestic economy in the 1990s, and the post-Mahathir era in the 2000s, the existence and sustainability of the Chinese education movement in Malaysia have been consistently challenged. These challenges, on certain occasions, became opportunities and sources of motivation for the constant struggles of the movement.

Dongjiaozong is often disparaged as chauvinistic or extremist by State officials, and many restrictive regulations and suppressive policies have been imple-

2 The Barnes Report, also known as Report of the Committee on Malay Education: Federation of Malaya recommended that all vernacular schools should be abolished and replaced by a single system of primary school teaching in English and Malaya. It triggered a strong reaction in the Chinese community and brought together all 1,400 associations to discuss this government legislation. The discussion ended with the formation of the United Chinese Schools Teachers' Association and the United Chinese Schools Committees Association (Palanca, 2004).

3 Malaysia was formed officially on September 16, 1963 merging four former British colonies, including federation of Malaya (independent since August 31, 1957), Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore. Singapore left the federation and formed an independent republic State in 1965 due to disparity on state building principles with the National Alliance Front government.

4 After the death of Malaysian Chinese Association charismatic leader Tan Cheng Lock in 1958, the Malaysian Chinese Association has been divided into two fractions the pro-United Chinese School Teachers' Association leaders (lead by Lim Chong Eu), and those who prefer closer cooperation with the Alliance and United Malays National Organisation (lead by Tan Siew Sin, son of Tan Cheng Lock). In 1959, Lim Chong Eu and his supporters resigned from the party positions and formed a new political party, *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*. The Malaysian Chinese Association party commission was then replaced with Tan Siew Sin's close aids.

5 As of March 2007, there are 14 component parties within the *Barisan Nasional*. This includes The United Malays National Organisation, The Malaysian Chinese Association, The Malaysian Indian Congress, *Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu*, Sarawak United People's Party, *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*, People's Progressive Party, Liberal Democratic Party, Sabah Progressive Party, *Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah*, United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation, *Parti Bersatu Sabah*, Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party, and *Parti Rakyat Sarawak*.

mented as a means to extirpate the movement. Yet, the movement lives on. It has skillfully seized opportunities, generated and accumulated resources, and handled its dealing with the State and its social and political opponents with aplomb. In so doing, it has garnered a solid reputation and great respect among the Chinese community as a defender of Chinese culture and rights in Malaysia.

This study will examine the following questions: Why and how does a minority social movement persist despite ongoing constraints by a majority-dominated State? Can this be explained by the strength of the social movement relative to the moderateness of the State? This article argues that the social movement has generated an interdependent relationship between the State and its challengers, which enables the social movement to survive State repression. Both the State and the social movement's activities have been each other's tool to generate support in strengthening their political influence respectively. Thus, room for tolerance within the Malaysian illiberal democratic context, though it has changed little over time, prevented extreme measures from being taken by both actors. The movement has yet to achieve its objectives due to the exclusiveness of its framing process and is therefore unable to garner stronger support from the greater Malaysian community.

Malaya Chinese and Nation Building

Chinese from mainland China started migrating in large numbers to Southeast Asia, better known as *Nanyang*, in the mid-eighteenth century. The weakening power of the *Qing* Dynasty, the spread of mass rebellions, the invasion of foreign powers, and widespread prolonged starvation pushed many Chinese, especially from the Southern region, to answer the call of labor demands from mines, estates, and harbors in *Nanyang*. Over time, a significant portion of them ended in the British settlements as businessmen or traders, thus forming a nascent urban middle class. Many of these overseas Chinese retained strong ties with China and held on to their identity through culture and daily life.

With continuing large-scale migration, including the arrival of Chinese women beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, and increasing marriages of the more successful Chinese business entrepreneurs with local women, the numbers of (second generation) Chinese increased. *Sehtuan* or community organizations⁶ based on clan, regional and occupational links, established more Chinese schools⁷ to serve the needs of their children. These schools became "an important site of political socialization of the younger generation" (Tan, 1997). The participation of Chinese businessmen as sponsors of these schools also enhanced the social and political status of these individuals in the community. Despite the dialects, customs, traditions and political distinction, the Chinese shared common Confucian influences and acknowledged education as an important factor that would secure better living conditions for their children. Whether locally born or newly immigrated, these Chinese, were "all equally excluded from the British policy during the colonial periods" (Emerson, 1964: 479). As a result, Chinese vernacular education was financed and managed exclusively and independently by the community, and coexisted with other

6 *Sehtuan*, or community organizations, have been a mode of civil education and an effective channel in passing on the cultural heritage in China since the Sung Dynasty. In 1949, there were over 1,500 *Sehtuan* in colonial Malaya. The most important were Chinese chambers of commerce of each state and the Chinese assembly halls. Dominated by wealthy businessmen who were expected to be benefactors to their communities, the *Sehtuan* network represented the real power structure of the Chinese community (Tan, 1997).

7 Historically, Chinese education developed in Malaysia over 180 years, since the establishment of *Wufu* School in Penang, in 1819. In 1904, a new type of Chinese school, offering a curriculum of history, geography, mathematics, science and the teaching of vernacular Chinese (*Baihuawen*) over classical Chinese (*Wenyanwen*) was introduced.

schools of different language streams, i.e. English, Malay, or Tamil, which fulfilled the needs of different communal groups.

These divisions within the educational system were the strategic outcome of the British-inspired divide-and-rule policy; therefore, the Chinese community relied heavily on its own means to establish and sustain the function and financial needs of these schools. Wealthy businessmen, who were also members of the State's Chinese chambers of commerce and assembly halls, were the main benefactors to their community's development by donating space (shop houses or clan houses) and land for schools. They also provided the financial support to hire teachers (mostly from mainland China) and to sustain the expenses of the school. These benefactors became the schools' management committee members and were responsible for making most of the decisions for the schools from the school curriculum to the employment of teachers and their salary schemes.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the growth of Chinese nationalism, the appearance of the Chinese Republic, and the rise to dominance of the *Kuomintang* had brought about a transformation of the political consciousness of the Chinese overseas which tended to alter radically their relations to the government under which they live (Emerson, 1964: 505).

Many Malayan Chinese groups, either first generation migrants or the children of these pioneers, started to settle down in *Nanyang* with their families. They established businesses and a political network with the British colonial administration and started to mix in with the multi-cultural society. Malayan Chinese nationalist awareness blossomed in the 1940s, when Malaya was moving toward independence.

After the British re-took control of Malaya in August 1945 after World War II, they introduced the Malayan Union government on April 1, 1946 as a unified and more cost-effective government structure. It was also conceived as preparation for the possibility of self-rule and independence. The scheme offered full citizenship rights to Chinese and Indians born in Malaya, and dissolved the sultanates into one secular union.⁸ Its imposition shocked the Malay community and promoted the emergence of the first Malay nationalist party, United Malays National Organisation, which was founded on May 11, 1946 to oppose the British-imposed Malayan Union, protect the political interests of the Malays, and demand the return of Malaya to the status quo.⁹ Due to strong protest and pressure from Malay aristocrats and former Malayan governors in London, the Malayan Union was dismantled and replaced by the Federation of Malaya on February 1, 1948 (Chai, 1977: 7).

The Federation of Malaya reinstated the traditional prerogatives of sultans, and restored "special rights" to Malays as *bumiputras*.¹⁰ It also tightened the qualification for federal citizenship by disqualifying over three quarters of the

8 The British ruled Malaya through the "direct and indirect" government. The Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore were the entrepot trade centers. These settlements had non-Malay majorities, and were ruled directly as crown colonies. The Malay states with significant commercial activities (i.e. tin mines and rubber plantations) which included Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang were set up as Federated Malaya States. Those states lacking such activities which included Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, and Johore were ruled as Unfederated Malaya States (von Vorys, 1975: 22, 142).

9 During an earlier meeting on March 1, 1946, 38 Malay parties gathered at the Sultan Sulaiman Club Kuala Lumpur to oppose the Malayan Union government and form a united Malay opposition. The Third Malay Congress, held in Istana Besar, Johore Bahru officially formed the United Malays National Organisation, Onn bin Jaafar was selected as the first president. See Abdul Rahman Putra, 1986: 1.

10 *Bumiputra*, or sons of the soil, refers to those who habitually spoke Malaya, professed Islam, and conformed to traditional Malay customs (*adat*).

Chinese population.¹¹ Thus, disparate ethnic Chinese, although initially divided by their clans, dialects, social hierarchies, political views, and economic identities, were driven to unite themselves over disqualification from citizenship after the painful experience of massacre during the Japanese occupation.¹²

Chin Peng became the Malayan Communist Party's¹³ secretary-general in 1947 after the former leader, Lai Tek,¹⁴ absconded with the Party's funds in March 1947 (Ramakrishna, 2002: 32). In a bid to empower the weakening party,¹⁵ Chin emulated the successful model of Mao's revolutionary movement in China, and launched an armed guerilla rebellion under the Malayan Races Liberation Army. This took place after the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions was outlawed in June 1948 because it sought independence from the British. The Malayan Races Liberation Army-led rebellion eventually prompted the British to declare a State of Emergency on June 16, 1948. The Emergency also gave the British and their Malay successors justification to mobilize a significant amount of resources in their war against communism.¹⁶

As members of the Malayan Communist Party were largely ethnic Chinese, and many Chinese schools were used as centers of Chinese Communist Party propaganda, the British misunderstood the Chinese in Malaya, who were generally stereotyped as communist supporters, or as fence-sitters in the anti-communist campaign (Chew, 1975; Heng, 1988: 251; Freedman, 2000: 55). For example, the British believed the many Chinese squatters who hid in the jungles during World War II had provided supplies to the Malayan Communist Party or had been recruited as new party members (Chai, 1977: 10; Lee, 1998:

11 According to Chai (1977: 8), there were only 350 thousand (11.2 percent) Chinese, and 225 thousand (7.2 percent) Indians were eligible as citizens of Federation of Malaya under the "operation of law" condition on February 1, 1948. For a non-Malay to qualify for citizenship, he must have been born in any of the Malay states, Penang or Malacca and prove that both his parents had been born in any of the territories and had resided there continuously for at least 15 years. To be eligible for citizenship by application, a person, if born in the country, had to prove that he had lived there for at least 10 out of 15 years preceding the date of his application. If not born there, he had to prove that he had resided there for at least 15 out of the 20 years immediately preceding the date of this application. In addition, he was to be of good character, must have an adequate knowledge of Malay or English, and had made a declaration of permanent settlement and would be willing to take an oath of allegiance to the federation, if his application were approved. Ratnam (1965: 78).

12 According to Hirofumi (2008), the Japanese military began the *Kakyo Shukusei* operation (better known to the Chinese population in Malaya and Singapore as *Sook Ching*-purge through purification). The wartime massacres on ethnic Chinese happened during the early phase of the Japanese invasion and occupation of Malaya and Singapore (December 1941–April 1942) and continued in other forms until August 1945 (Peattie, 1996: 230-231). It was estimated that the numbers of victims had been as high as 50 thousand in Singapore and 40 thousand in Malaya (Cheah, 1987: 23).

13 The Malayan Communist Party, formed in 1930, comprised Chinese migrant laborers mainly. By 1955, the rebellion was virtually crushed, although remnants of the party continued the struggle along the Thai-Malaya border. They continued the military resistance against the federal government of Malaya until the 1989 peace treaty. See Ramakrishna (2002) for Malayan Communist Party's struggles in Malaya during the Emergency.

14 Lai Tek, was the Malayan Communist Party secretary general since 1938. He was a secret agent for the Japanese as well as the British; however, the double agent identity was revealed in 1947. For more details of Lai Tek and the elite conflicts of Malayan Communist Party, see Fujio (1995: 37-58).

15 Chin Peng became the Malayan Communist Party secretary-general in 1947 after Lai Tek (Malayan Communist Party Secretary General, 1938-1947) absconded with Party funds in March 1947. Ramakrishna (2002: 32).

16 The lengthy guerilla war (1948-1960) cost the British (and Malayan) government \$850 million. The death toll rose to 11,048 (6,710 guerillas, 1,865 members of security forces, and 2,473 civilians). See O'Balance (1966: 177); Stockwell (1999: 486); Pye (1957: 15).

31-32). One of the largest and most successful strategies imposed by General Gerald Templer,¹⁷ the new High commissioner in 1952, was the Briggs Plan. It forcibly resettled almost 570 thousand Chinese squatters into hundreds of new villages, which in the end helped to control and contain the communist rebellion (Sandhu, 1964; Lim and Soong, 2000).

According to Ramakrishna (2001: 82), “the rural Chinese were the target of government’s Emergency measures: in particular individual detention and deportation, communal fines and curfews”. In total, thirty thousand Communist activists were jailed, and another fifteen thousand were deported to China (Lomperis, 1996: 204). Many of them were Chinese school principals, teachers, and students (Choong, 2004: 184).

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949, most overseas Chinese communities feared that the new Communist State might confiscate their properties and businesses, and were therefore reluctant to express their loyalty to the new Chinese government. This included the Chinese in Malaya who began to consider Malaya as their only hope for a permanent homeland (Heng, 1988: 251).

In an attempt to alleviate the Chinese community’s dilemma, Tan Cheng Lock,¹⁸ with support from various Chinese organizations and guilds, formed the Malayan Chinese Association on February 27, 1949. Initially, the Malayan Chinese Association sought to provide relief and welfare assistance to the displaced Chinese villagers, to redirect Chinese support away from the communists and to provide an image of loyalty of the Chinese in the midst of suspicions aroused by the Emergency against the Chinese community in general.¹⁹

By August 1951, Tunku Abdul Rahman became the party president of United Malays National Organisation and established a multi-ethnic political Alliance, first, in 1952, with the Malayan Chinese Association,²⁰ and then in 1954, with the Malaysian Indian Congress.²¹ This marked the beginning of Malaya’s national politics, characterized by rationally-compromising tactics that have resulted over time in unintended consequences. Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tan Cheng Lock were among the pioneers in Malayan history that

17 General Templer arrived in Malaya in February 1952, to replace Sir Henry Gurney who had died in a terrorist ambush in late 1951. Templer was both High Commissioner and Military Director of Operations, and had full authority to wage counter communist insurgency operations, using policing, intelligence and psychological warfare. See Ramakrishna (2001); Abdul Rahman Putra (1986: 35).

18 Tan Cheng Lock, the Malayan Chinese Association first president, was straits-born, English-educated, and came from a Baba-Chinese family. He served as nominated member at the Malacca Municipal Council and Straits Settlements Legislative Council, and was known to the British highest officials, such as Malcolm MacDonald and Henry Gurney. See Tan (1988: 50-51); Heng (1988: 67, 251).

19 The Malayan Chinese Association started out as a welfare organization, selling lottery tickets to raise funds to help needy Chinese, especially those forced to resettle in the 600 new villages. The Malayan Chinese Association also sponsored schooling in new villages by providing basic education to adults. It was only four years later, in 1952, that the Malayan Chinese Association took its first step towards its political destiny. *News Straits Times*, March 1, 2009, “Malayan Chinese Association Diamond Jubilee: Another struggle, 60 years on.” See Tan (1988: 50); Stubbs (1989); Freedman (2000: 56).

20 The formation of the alliance of United Malays National Organisation and Malayan Chinese Association was a result of the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Election in 1952. The new Alliance of the United Malays National Organisation and the Malayan Chinese Association won landslide victories across the Federation of Malaya. See Abdul Rahman Putra (1986: 35).

21 The Malaysian Indian Congress was established in August 1946 to support Indian independence from British rule. After India gained its independence, it started to support the independence of Malaya. See Lomperis (1996: 207).

promoted communal cooperation to succeed in the election and formed a new Malayan government.

The transition from a colonial to an independent state went beyond State capacity or the State's political system. Many other issues which the British had paid little attention to needed to be confronted, and possibly solved. The future of educational policy was illustrative, as the formation of independent Malaya was dominated by the Malay elites who wanted the Malay language as the dominant official language for post-independent Malaya. On the other hand, minorities, especially the Chinese and Indians preferred, a multi-lingual, multi-communal, and multi-cultural new state. The vernacular school has since then become the topic of debates, as a symbol of the rights of these minorities.

Thus, many Chinese school teachers in the newly post-independent Malaya were closely engaged with the civil war in China. School teachers were divided according to their political ideology either those who supported the nationalist republican revolution of *Sun Yet San* and his *Kuomintang* party, or those who supported the Communist party of China. Following the victory of the latter in 1949, British officers, along with their Malay bureaucratic approach, justified regulation and control over Chinese schools as an anti-Communist measure.

The 1951 Barnes Report proposed the abolition of separate vernacular schools. The 1952 New Salary Aid Scheme took over the administrative control of Chinese school teachers' employment and qualification requirements. The 1961 Education Act conferred upon the Minister of Education the arbitrary power to convert primary Chinese schools into national primary schools (National Education Act, 1961, Section 21 (2)), and also included other educational ordinances that proposed significant discrimination and marginalization of Chinese vernacular education in Malaysia.

Article 8 (1) of the Malaysian Constitution, which clearly spells out the principle of equality of all Malaysians, and Article 12 (1) forbids discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, descent, or place of birth. Nevertheless, the educational policies meant unjustified treatment to the Chinese community in the new nation-State. Thus, it was crucial for early independent politics and struggles over the definition of citizenship from which this particular social movement organization was born. It was then carried on by the teachers' association and school committees.

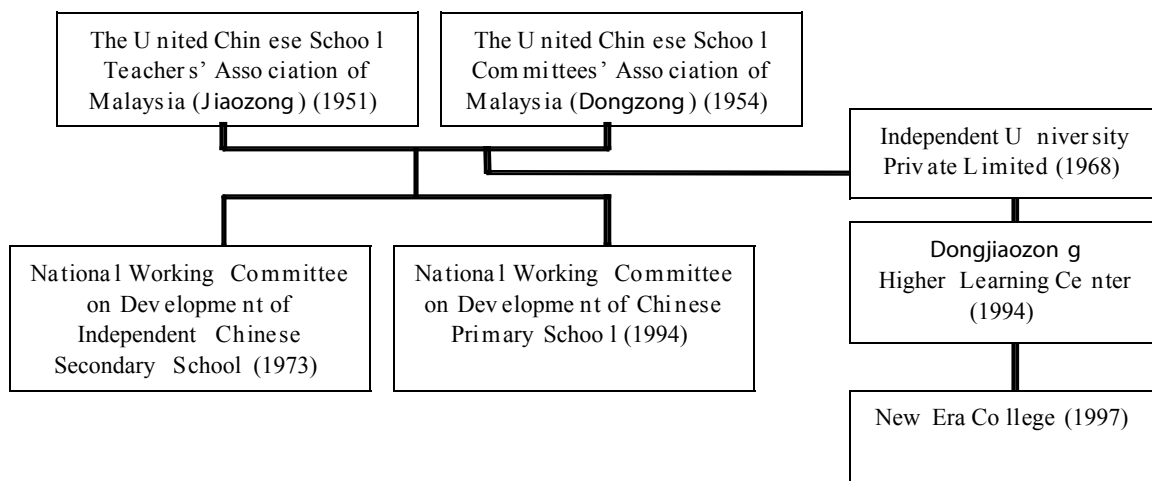
Jiaozong was formed in December 1951 when the teachers realized the urgency of forming a national organization after the Fenn-Wu Committee met them during the Committee's survey of Chinese schools in the peninsula between February and April 1951. As a result of discussions with the Fenn-Wu Committee, the teachers were alerted to the implications of the Barnes Committees' recommendations even before the report was published. According to its Inaugural Manifesto, the three main objectives of the teachers association is to promote Chinese culture and defend Chinese education, to improve Chinese education through co-operation with the government, and to safeguard the interests and improve the working conditions of the Chinese school teachers²² (Tan, 1997: 91-92).

After the creation of *Jiaozong*, school management committees also felt threatened by several new educational policies, and therefore decided to establish the umbrella organization *Dongzong* to coordinate the responses to the government proposal at the State level. Community leaders who sat on the Management Committees of Chinese schools were the second major component

22 The Inaugural Manifesto of the United Chinese School Teachers Association, reprinted in *Jiaozong 33 nian*, pp.12-13. Quoted in Tan (1997).

of the movement to defend Chinese schools. Later, these two organizations formed jointly the *Dongjiaozong* as the unified and formal movement organization (*Dongzong*, 2003).

Dongjiaozong Organization Structure Diagram²³



The debate over the “vernacular school as an obstacle to nation-building in a multi-ethnic society or as the harbinger of a transformed political identity” (Tan, 1997) has triggered an ongoing struggle between the Chinese education movement with the Malay dominated government, as well as within the Chinese community. *Dongjiaozong* generally receives support from the majority of the Chinese community in Malaysia. The movement struggles to resist the encroachment of the State in the curriculum and medium of instruction of vernacular schools, presses for public financial support of Chinese schools (Chinese primary schools, independent Chinese secondary schools, and tertiary academic institutions), and advocates legitimate official recognition of these schools within the national education system. In this process, the cause of Chinese education has become a key factor in Chinese political mobilization. This movement has resisted Malay cultural domination and has become a crucial motif within an evolving political vision to carry out Chinese integration into Malaysian society while retaining their cultural identity (Weiss, 2006: 63-64).

The British did not succeed in closing down, or ending out, the Chinese school for two reasons. First, with the Emergency at its height, the colonial government was reluctant to take harsh measures against the Chinese schools, as this would have alienated more Chinese. Second, and no less important, the British were simply not able to provide alternatives to the Chinese schools which were meeting a critical need for more education created by the post-war baby boom (Tan, 1997: 283).

The State dilemma paved the way for the incorporation of Chinese schools within the national system. Today, the Malaysian national education system consists of two categories of primary schools: the National School and the National-Type School. The medium of instruction in the former is the Malay language with English as a compulsory subject, while the medium of instruction and examination in the latter is either Chinese or Tamil, with Malay and

23 The author translated and re-developed the diagram from its original version in Mandarin posted by the United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia. Website at <http://www.djz.edu.my/home.htm>

English as compulsory subjects. At the secondary school level, fifty four out of seventy Chinese secondary schools nationwide accepted government's terms of conversion into the national system after the implementation of 1961 Education Act; the remaining 16 Chinese independent schools continued their autonomous existence as Mandarin medium secondary schools. Despite the variety of instructional language mediums, all schools in Malaysia, including both types of public national schools as well as the private schools, follow the integrated curriculum established by the Ministry of Education.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese educational movement was unable to achieve its objective of maintaining the original characteristics of the Chinese school, nor was it possible to retain the movement's original fellowship with Malaysian Chinese Association, when it was fully co-opted within the National Front after the death of Tan Cheng Lock (the first president of the Malaysian Chinese Association). After Tan Siew Sin and his allies took over the Malaysian Chinese Association, the pro-National Front Chinese leaders preferred closer cooperation with the United Malays National Organisation and proposed an adapted agenda for Chinese education in Malaysia. Having lost the support from the Malaysian Chinese Association, the advocates of the Chinese educational movement had fully manipulated the "sense of danger of being demolished" and the change in "the fundamental characteristic of Chinese primary school" (Chin UH, 2000) to mobilize support from Chinese communities in defending and developing Chinese education. There is a strong belief among ethnic Chinese in Malaysia that for Chinese culture to survive and flourish, Chinese schools are essential. An extensive network of vernacular schools throughout the country was therefore established slowly as from the 1960s, with strong a commitment from the Chinese community throughout Malaysia under the patronage of *Dongjiaozong*.

Our culture is the soul of our ethnicity; our educational mechanism is the castle of our ethnicity's culture.

Lim Lian Geok, Jiaozong Chairman (1953-1961)

In its early phase, the movement successfully voiced shared grievances and established collaborative networks among school teachers and management committees. Nevertheless, it was limited to the elites and the educated class. It had yet to receive popular support, especially from the middle and lower classes, due to the limitation of post-World War II Malaya, where securing livelihoods and rebuilding homes and lives was a more important agenda for most. Nevertheless, the inter-communal grievances continued to exist and were tense until the breakout of the May 1969 riots²⁴ after the Malay-dominated ruling Alliance failed to secure a two-third parliamentary majority (Singh, 2001: 49-50).

Following the 1969 riots, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, declared a state of national emergency,²⁵ which lasted until 1971. The regime also introduced affirmative action to "eradicate poverty irrespective of

24 The national ethnicity riots on 13 May 1969 were a dark spot of Malaysian stability. The riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur a day after the 1969 Federal elections due to simmering racial tension between Malays and Chinese and took the lives of hundreds of people. Order was restored after four days but for two months incidents of communal violence persisted. The exact casualty list of this riot has never been told to the public until today. The government deems that it is a threat to national security and disallows discussion on this topic. The exact number of casualties in this riot varies, depending on whether it is a government figure or provided by independent academic research. Hwang (2003) indicated that, according to the police, 196 people had died and 149 had been wounded.

25 In Malaysia, when a state of emergency is declared, the Emergency Ordinance is enacted and Parliament, as well as the Constitution, are suspended by the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (Head of State of Malaysia), under article 150 of Malaysian Constitution.

race” and to “restructure society to correct the economic imbalances of wealth holding to which led to the identification of race with economic function”. In 1971, the government launched the New Economic Policy to reform the economic institution and reduce poverty substantially, thus leading to the growth of ethnic Malay middle and business classes. Increasing “influence of political patronage on the business sector, and the increasingly inequitable distribution of wealth, and the apparent increase in corruption and other abuses of power” (Gomez and Jomo, 1999: 1) led to deeper misunderstanding and increased Chinese mistrust toward the Malay-dominated State. Thus, educational issues have often been manipulated as a political concern, both by political parties and by the movement’s actors. The high-profile attention given to Chinese education issues has helped to minimize the collective action problem and free-riding mentality caused by the continuous construction of injustice framed within Chinese society. Consequently, it also has helped to sustain social movements indirectly.

Institutional Reform and Revive Movements

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Chinese education movement saw a more prominent role played by the school committees as most Chinese school teachers (who were members of the teachers’ association) were given the status of government employees by the Ministry of Education. With this change, they enjoyed a more secure salary scheme and better welfare coverage as civil servants; their involvement in the movement was also restricted as members of the civil service system under the Ministry of Education. On the other hand, younger and newer leaders emerged within *Dongjiaozong* working committee and provided changes of strategies to approach Chinese education issues.

These leaders shifted the movement’s momentum toward giving support for Chinese educational institutions outside the national system, such as the Independent Chinese secondary school and the proposed Merdeka (Independent) University; thus making the movement more inclusive, broad-based and better known outside Chinese- educated circles. One of its attempts was to start a campaign to save Chinese private secondary schools from minimal enrollment, lack of funding and insufficient facilities.

In 1973, *Dongjiaozong* established a Working Committee, which was tasked with drafting a more competitive curriculum for the 60 Chinese independent schools. The Committee also had to design, prepare and print standard textbooks, and outline comprehensive and high-standard examinations tailored to the schools’ special needs. The schools’ high academic standards have now been well received by the Chinese, and some Malay and Indian communities in Malaysia, and the recognition secured sizeable numbers of students each year.²⁶ Yet, the Ministry of Education and the Public Service Department of Malaysia have yet to validate the examinations, certificates, and graduates from these independent secondary schools.

In the late 1970s, *Dongjiaozong* led a campaign to establish the privately-funded, Merdeka University “to serve as a non-profit making body to meet the demands of those students who have no opportunity to pursue higher education in local universities and to help the government shoulder the responsibility in education”.²⁷ The campaign generated overwhelming support from a wide

²⁶ The outstanding academic achievement of Chinese graduate students has also been acknowledged by Chinese descendant communities in other Southeast Asia countries, especially in Thailand and Indonesia.

²⁷ Summarized from the English version of Merdeka University: *Kenyataan-keyataan dan kritikan-kritikan* University Merdeka Bhd. 1978, quoted in Aliran (1979) *The Real Issues: Aliran on the Merdeka University* (Pulau Pinang, Malaysia: Aliran Publications), p.5.

spectrum of the Chinese community, mainly because the Chinese in particular felt marginalized by the New Economic Policy launched since 1971. Hawkers, market sellers, trishaw peddlers, workers, as well as businessmen, all donated to the cause in order “to find alternative channels for education, through self reliance and community based institution, when the public sector could not meet their expectation” (Tan, 1997: 288-291).

The application for establishing the university was rejected outright. The reasons proffered by the Minister of Education included that the use of the Chinese language as the medium of instruction, and the meant to cater students from independent secondary schools only, would be contrary to the national policy.²⁸ Subsequently, Merdeka University Berhad, a company formed to manage the affairs of Merdeka University, filed a suit against the government in September 1981. The court case “raised the question of the Chinese community’s rights to establish a private university” (Verma, 2002: 74). Even so, the lawsuit was ultimately rejected by the courts. Frustration in the Chinese community over this rejection was worsened by the fact that the very same State approved the establishment of the English-medium, International Islamic University in the early 1980s (Lee, 2000: 9).

During the 1980s, the movement went beyond the issues of language, education and culture and established closer cooperation with both “contained contention” and “transgressive contention” actors.²⁹ In 1982, *Dongjiaozong* openly campaigned to support two *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* candidates in the national election; this effort was short-lived after it was criticized by the Democratic Action Party as supporting the National Front.

Also, the Malaysian government made efforts to de-certify the movement rationale by publicly chiding Chinese schools and considering them obstacles to the assimilation of Chinese children into Malaysian society. The movement’s activists claimed that the current national education system had at best a superficial effect in uniting students of all races by promoting the integration of students from diverse races. The United Malays National Organisation-led National Front government tried to ensure that National Schools were the popular choice of all Malaysians by suppressing equal development opportunities, and limiting fund distribution to Chinese and Indian mother tongue education.

Over the years, the Malaysian Chinese Association policy towards Chinese education and its relationship with *Dongjiaozong* altered accordingly vis-à-vis its relationship with United Malays National Organisation. As the biggest Chinese-based political party in the National Front, the Malaysian Chinese Association has both the duty and the burden of addressing Chinese education development in Malaysia. With the increased domination of the United Malays National Organisation in the alliance relationship, other member parties (including the Malaysian Chinese Association) have been less successful in getting their demands. This has created a cooperative yet competitive relationship with *Dongjiaozong*. Critiques and demands from *Dongjiaozong* have hit the Malaysian

28 See Abdoolcader J., as quoted in Visu Sinnadurai (1986) “Rights in Respect of Education under the Malaysian Constitution” in Trindade and Lee (eds.) *The Constitution of Malaysia: Further Perspectives and Developments* (Singapore: Oxford University Press), p.52.

29 The concept of “contained contention” includes events taking place in the form of formal structure by established political actors while “transgressive contention” has more volatile and unpredictable features in that it is initiated by newly self-identified political actors employing innovative collective action, which is unprecedented and forbidden within the regime in question. For more explanation on these two concepts, see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Chinese Association hard because the movement's supporters have constituted an important block of votes for the party.

One example was the Tunku Abdul Rahman College, first established in 1969,³⁰ which rapidly expanded since 1971. This college has been under the direct patronage of the Malaysian Chinese Association, politically and financially. The Tunku Abdul Rahman College offers alternative tertiary level educational opportunities for many Chinese students who are unable to enter the national universities in Malaysia due to the implementation of a restrictive ethnic quota system of the New Economic Policy.

Thus, many Malaysian Chinese Association leaders and individuals, either at central or local branch levels, became patrons of most of the Chinese schools across different levels (especially at primary school level). "Malaysian Chinese Association members now sit on school boards and committees, which finance and manage these schools" (Ling, 1995: 56-57). The Malaysian Chinese Association has also been relatively successful in organizing fund-raising events to generate financial support for Chinese schools through its membership networking and business links. All told, Malaysian Chinese Association leaders (both at the state and at national level) come from diverse educational backgrounds and have equally diverse political interests and approaches. These differences have resulted in a wide-range of reactions to and stances toward the Chinese educational movement.

For one thing, Chinese politicians in the Malaysian Chinese Association and *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* have multiple roles in relation to the movement. They range from acting as "broker" on behalf of the ruling government in mediating the requests from the movement entrepreneurs to functioning as lobbyists of the Chinese community in demanding sufficient support from the government to develop Chinese education. To some extent, this dynamic relationship has successfully sustained the operation of many Chinese schools, but the role of the Malaysian Chinese Association as part of the government has also limited its freedom to oppose any educational policy or demand fundamental changes. Funding distribution and support to the Chinese schools is illustrative, as it has been "routinized" as part of the country's electoral cycles.

Due to favorable governmental policy for Malays, and Islam, Chinese vernacular education in Malaysia continuously suffers significant discrimination in the political, social, cultural, and economic spheres (Chin, 2000). The Chinese have always been proud of their ability to self-sustain their schools, as well as promoting and protecting mother-tongue education by providing financial and spiritual support to the Chinese educational movement (*Dongjiaozong*, 2002).

The Chinese community has to raise millions of *ringgit* each year to ensure the proper development of their primary schools, despite 20.4 percent of the annual National Budget is allocated for education (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2004). Concomitantly, Chinese primary schools have faced perpetual shortages of qualified teachers, and thus have to depend on temporary teachers. The predicament has persisted and worsened as the State continues to lack a long-term plan to expand or deal with the issue of training teachers for Chinese primary schools (Lee, 2000).

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, and multi-religion country. As of 2000, out of its 21,890 thousand citizens, Malays accounted for 53.4 percent, Chinese 26.0 percent, and Indians 7.7 percent. Meanwhile, the

³⁰ *Tunku Abdul Rahman* College was established on February 24, 1969 with Malaysian Chinese Association support. The college started in 1969 and offered classes at the School of Pre-University Studies. The School of Business Studies was established in 1971, and it was further expanded in 1972 to include the School of Technology, the School of Arts and Science and the Extra-Mural Studies Department. The School of Social Science and Humanities was established in 1999. For more details, please see http://www.tarc.edu.my/about/abt_history3.htm.

Chinese population in Malaysia has increased from 3,682,100 (33.8 percent of total Malaysian population) in 1968 to 5,691,400 (26.0 percent of total Malaysian population) in 2000. This means a higher number of Chinese children at school age (seven to twelve years old for primary education) from 434,914 in 1968 to 622,820 in 2000 (43 percent increase in 32 years). Due to the government's "one language, one educational system" policy, this population growth contrasts with the declining number of Chinese primary schools from 1,332 in 1968 to 1,288 in 2000 (Chan and Tey, 2000). Despite increase of Chinese population, the establishment of more Chinese National Type Primary Schools were not allowed by the Ministry of Education.

Table 1. Total Population of Malaysian Citizens by Ethnic Group ('000)

Year	Malay and Other Bumiputera	Chinese	Indian	Others	Total
1968	6,277.5 (57.0%)	3,682.1 (33.8%)	982.4 (9.0%)	Missing data	10,892.0
1991	11,087.4 (60.6%)	5,141.2 (28.1%)	1,445.4 (7.9%)	622.0 (3.4%)	18,296.0
2000	14,250.4 (65.1%)	5,691.4 (26.0%)	1,685.5 (7.7%)	262.7 (1.2%)	21,890.0
2001	14,675.5 (65.1%)	5,842.4 (25.9%)	1,724.3 (7.7%)	282.1 (1.3%)	22,524.4
2002	15,009.3 (65.3%)	5,920.2 (25.8%)	1,751.9 (7.6%)	289.5 (1.3%)	22,970.9
2003	15,351.2 (65.5%)	5,997.0 (25.6%)	1,779.3 (7.6%)	296.9 (1.3%)	23,424.3
2004	15,701.4 (65.7%)	6,074.6 (25.4%)	1,806.8 (7.6%)	304.3 (1.3%)	23,887.1
2005	16,060.5 (65.9%)	6,154.9 (25.3%)	1,834.8 (7.5%)	311.8 (1.3%)	24,362.0

Sources:

1. Department of Statistics (1969) "Table 1.1. Demography: Population as at 31 December 1968" in Annual Bulletin of Statistic Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Department of Statistic), p.1.
2. Department of Statistic (2001) Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics Report, Population and Housing Census 2000. November 6 (Putrajaya, Malaysia: Department of Statistic).
3. Department of Statistic (2005) "Table 3.8 Mid-Year Population Estimates by Ethnic Group and Sex" in Year Book of Statistic (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Department of Statistic), p.37.

The movement's activists advocate that sending children to Chinese primary schools is one of the most practical ways to sustain the remaining schools today. Most of these schools were built in the pre-independence period with donations by the Chinese community, and were later absorbed into the national educational system following independence. Today, more than 90 percent of Chinese parents send their children to Chinese primary schools. Although most of these schools are over-crowded, the better academic environment and performance, and the increasing economic value of the Chinese language have attracted a growing number of non-Chinese students. According to the Ministry of Education's own statistics, there are 65 thousand non-Chinese children (or

10.7 percent of the total) studying in Chinese primary schools (Weiss, 2006; *Dongjiaozong*, 2007).

Table 2. Number of Government Subsidized Primary Schools and Total of Students in 1968 and in 2000

Types of Primary Schools	1968		2000		Increase/Decrease	
	Number of Schools	Number of Students	Number of Schools	Number of Students	Number of Schools	Number of Students
National School	2,770	666,389	5,407	2,218,747	+ 2,637	+ 1,552,358
National Type School (Chinese)	1,332	434,914	1,288	622,820	- 44	+ 187,906
National Type School (Tamil)	670	81,428	526	90,280	- 144	+ 8852
TOTAL	4,459	1,182,731	7,221	7,326	+2,449	1,749,116

Notes:

1. There were 1,435 government-sponsored English-based primary schools in 1968. All of these schools have been transformed into National type school, using Malay as the main instruction medium from 1970 onwards.

2. The statistics of National Type School include the special schools.

Source: Ministry of Education and Unit of Survey Research and Information; *Dongjiaozong* Chinese Primary School Committee.

On October 27, 1987, Malaysian police carried out the infamous *Operasi Lalang* (Weeding Operation), by which they captured 106 persons under the draconian Internal Security Act. This operation was provoked after Anwar Ibrahim, the then Minister of Education, appointed one hundred non-Chinese educated senior assistants and principals to vernacular Chinese primary schools.

The Chinese community reaction to this policy was furious. They saw it as another attempt by the government to change the Chinese primary school into a national school. On October 11, 1987, *Dongjiaozong* gathered at the Hainanese Association Building in Kuala Lumpur where for the first time in the history of Malaysia, Chinese were united despite geographical location, social or economy class, as well as political stands. This gathering called for the government to resolve the appointments issue by the latest on October 14, 1987; if not they would call a three-day nationwide boycott in Chinese schools (Sia KY, 2005: 128).

This incident was mirrored by a large anti-Chinese protest of some ten thousand demonstrators was held. Malay politicians used the occasion to condemn the National Front Chinese-based political party for their collaboration with the opposition party, as well as *Dongjiaozong*. The official investigation from the government indicated that arrests were necessary to contain escalating racial tension. Although most of the detainees were released either conditionally or unconditionally, forty of them were issued two-year detention orders. Among the detainees were politicians, opposition leaders and social activists (Sia, 2005; *Dongzong*, 2003).

During the 1970s and until the 1980s, the movement started to gain sustainability; most of its efforts concentrated on providing assistance to existing Chinese primary schools and the Independent Secondary School. Once again, the State resurrected the ghost of the past to instill fear in Malaysians, inasmuch as to suppress society in the name of national harmony and stability in the multiethnic society. In doing so, it implemented more authoritarian controls over

opposing challengers to the status quo. The challengers also learned their own lessons to “find creative ways to avoid suppression and convince the public that an omnipresent government is fallible but also to strike an optimal balance among strategies of protest, both inside and outside the system” (Weiss, 2006: 241).

This social movement began as a communal struggle between the Chinese minorities within a majority Malay-dominated State. Since the 1970s, the movement has broadened its advocacy, which today includes the fight for rights, by promoting a society of tolerance and respect for diversity rather than narrow-minded chauvinism. Such appeals take advantage of common frames uniting opposing actors, while making reformist demands appear morally irrefutable and universally relevant (Weiss, 2006: 49). Nevertheless, the Malaysian government has used various legal mechanisms to suppress and decertify the movement.

Political Opportunities and New Politics in Malaysia

Despite the failed attempts to establish an independent university, *Dongjiaozong* managed to set up the New Era College in 1997, at a time when private colleges and institutions were blooming in Malaysia under the new and more liberal tertiary educational policy. This community-funded tertiary institution can be seen as a tertiary-level extension of the Malaysian Chinese school system. The existence of the movement organization, plus the operation of the Chinese primary schools, Independent Secondary Schools, and the New Era College are landmarks of success of the movement today.

Here, it is observed that, interestingly, *Dongjiaozong* adapted the lessons learnt from the Merdeka University struggle. The New Era College was designed with emphasis on providing multi-cultural, holistic, and socially responsible education. The college welcomes both Chinese-educated and non-Chinese educated students to enroll in the college; this liberal policy was quite different from that of Merdeka University that only targeted single-community students. The college emphasized upholding academic freedom and student autonomy, something which had been seriously lacking in most of the tertiary educational institutions in Malaysia.³¹

During the 1999 general election, the National Front government faced waves of challenges from the United Malays National Organisation-Anwar faction, including accusations of cronyism and corruption under Mahathir’s administration. Anwar was removed from all his political positions, including that of deputy Prime Minister and was jailed under the charges of corruption and sodomy. The departure of Anwar and his allies from United Malays National Organisation weakened the United Malays National Organisation political domination in many electoral constituencies, and the party was seriously challenged by the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia, as well as the People’s Justice Party. By use of gerrymandering, the role of Chinese (and other minority) votes became overwhelmingly significant especially in the Malay majority constituencies, where supporters were divided by the two factions.

This created political opportunities for *Dongjiaozong*, and with support from more than 2,000 Malaysian Chinese organizations, this political opportunity was utilized to form *Suqiu*, or the Malaysian Chinese Organization Election Appeals Committee. They submitted a list of seventeen demands, including the promotion of non-ethnic issues (i.e. democracy, human rights, justice, and national unity) and communal issues (i.e. modernizing New Villages, egalitarian multiculturalism, implementation of a meritocratic system at university). The demand for the government to abolish the special rights and privileges of the

31 See Universities and University Colleges Act 1971, Universities and University Colleges (Amendments) Act 1975.

Bumiputras in the Malaysian Constitution, especially, has been widely criticized and described by Malay politicians as “robbing the Malay community” of their rights as the indigenous people of Malaysia.

Although *Suqiu*'s demands were accepted in principle by the National Front's Malaysian Chinese Association and *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*, the United Malays National Organisation condemned them as inappropriately communal and threatening; therefore, they were never implemented officially (Martinez, 2001; Weiss, 2006: 135). The controversial demands were withdrawn due to pressure from the United Malays National Organisation and Malay-based organizations. One of the justifications was to avoid repetition of the 1969 racial riots, as well as to preserve racial coexistence in the Malaysian society. The “opposition political parties and other forces have taken its prior experience of coalition building one step further, thus unified in a single coalition and reached a reasonably stable consensus on a set of immediate priorities, policy references and leaders” (Weiss, 2006: 241); the Alternative Front failed to form an effective counter alliance due to the opposition's strong ethnic appeal and community dependence (Loh and Saravanamuttu, 2003).

The lack of symmetrical power to counterbalance the government's actions further contributed to the arrogance of the State on not compromising with the requests by the movement challengers. With Mahathir passing the baton to a “clean and reputable” Abdullah Badawi as the new Prime Minister in 2003, the situation of Malaysian domestic politics and focus of policies has changed since then. Although Abdullah has been trying to reform the party and government, the government's general bias against Chinese education seen as detrimental to the development of a national culture and as a hindrance to national unity and assimilation continues (Lee, 2000). Nevertheless, as a leader still finding his way and who needs electoral support from the Chinese, Abdullah is unlikely to implement extreme measures to remove vernacular schools.

Since independence, Malaysia's ruling multi-party and multi-ethnic coalition, the National Front, has enjoyed unchallenged preeminence with the control of both legislative and executive pillars of government institutions. They have won every parliamentary election since then. The National Front, under the lead (and domination) of the United Malays National Organisation, remains the most vital and powerful political alliance in Malaysia (Means, 1998: 98). Despite factions and internal power struggles within the alliance, it still successfully constrains civil society and its activities using institutional and structural tools (Uhlir, 2001: 196-223; Loh, 2003).

Although the movement has successfully set up a nationwide system of vernacular schools that has served to spread the use of Mandarin Chinese and the continuation of Chinese culture, it requires a strong coalition, better opportunities, more resources, and greater will power in order to help the movement to achieve its objective.

Conclusion

The movement has successfully set up a system of vernacular schools nationwide that has served to spread the use of Chinese language and the continuation of Chinese culture. The State has yet to forcefully close any Chinese schools due to the interdependent relationship between the State and the challengers, which helps the social movement to survive State repression. Both the Malay-based and Chinese-based political parties have benefited by using Chinese education issues to generate haters among the Malays, and support from the Chinese in contained contention politics.

With its origins as an ethnically-minority movement against a majority-dominated State, the movement that supports Chinese language education

has broadened its advocacy over time to include fighting for the expansion of civil rights, and promoting a society of tolerance and respect for diversity rather than one that rests on narrow-minded chauvinism. Such appeals seek a common ground that can unite opposition actors, while making reformist demands appear morally irrefutable and universally relevant (Weiss, 2006: 49). Nobody stopped the Malaysian government from using a myriad of legal (and at times coercive) mechanisms to contain and decertify the movement.

On the other hand, the movement has engaged in various forms of transgressive contention and engagement to sustain its activities within the illiberal democracy environment. The framing on the importance of mother tongue education, closely bound with Chinese rights, as well as the continuous threat by the State, has helped to sustain the movement. The growing presence of the People's Republic of China, especially its influence in world politics and economy, has raised the economic value of Mandarin as the next most significant and profitable lingua-franca of the world in this century. The fact that this social movement has begun and survived as domestic resistance to State repression has been self-sufficient with the support of the Chinese community in Malaysia. China's influence or intervention in this movement is almost absent. More practically, the movement still needs to establish strong ties and collaborative relationships with other activists, non-governmental organizations, and the civil society in Malaysia in order to generate a strong collective action that will be powerful enough to achieve its final goal.

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