Institutions and Social Mobilization

The Chinese Education Movement in Malaysia, 1951-2011

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Cover photo: The foundation stone that symbolizes the Chinese education movement is located at the movement headquarters in Kajang, Selangor. Photo taken by Ang Ming Chee.

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For papa and mama

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Last but not least, I owe my achievements today to my beloved family: my parents and siblings in particular, who have been supportive and understanding during my long absence all these years. Their love has been the source of my motivation to continue pursuing my dreams and to be a better person.

ABBREVIATION

BN	National Front coalition (*Barisan Nasional*)
DAP	Democratic Action Party
Dongjiaozong	Alliance of *Dongzong* and *Jiaozong* (董教总)
Dongzong	United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia (马来西亚华校董事联合会总会)
Gerakan	Malaysian People's Movement Party (*Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*)
Jiaozong	United Chinese Schoolteachers' Association of Malaysia (马来西亚华校教师会总会)
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association (马来西亚华人公会)
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MPAJA	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PAS	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Semalaysia*)
PR	People's Alliance (*Pakatan Rakyat*)
Suqiu Committee	Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeals Committee
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation (*Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu*)

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INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

The Chinese education movement in Malaysia is arguably one of the oldest nationwide social movements in Asia. It has ceaselessly engaged in non-violent contentious politics against a non-liberal democratic regime since 1951. Against all odds, the Chinese education movement has been able to overcome many on-going and changing constraints to persist in pursuing its agenda. This book seeks to answer the many puzzling questions that have led to its persistency and possibilities.

Over the years, the state has sought to constrain the Chinese education movement, its organizations, and its supporters through a range of restrictive regulations and discriminatory policies. Unlike liberal democratic regimes, the state in Malaysia has been dominated by a powerful executive branch, especially so during Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as the longest serving prime minister of the country (1981–2003). A weak system of checks and balances has enabled the National Front coalition (*Barisan Nasional*, BN) ruling regime, led by the United Malays National Organisation (*Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu*, UMNO), to weaken the rule of law, restrict media freedom, manipulate law enforcement, and exploit the distribution of state resources to political ends, amongst others.

The lack of recourse to democratic institutions, coupled with the imposition of state-directed restrictions, has yet to bring the Chinese education movement to its knees, however. Instead, this movement has adroitly adapted and established clientelistic relationships with ethnic

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Chinese politicians within the ruling regime in exchange for benefits for the movement. While other social movements in Malaysia — such as the trade union movements or the Islamic movements — have either faded or been crushed, this tactic by the Chinese education movement has prevented it from facing a similar fate.[1] In return, politicians — mostly those associated with the Malaysian Chinese Association (马来西亚华人公会, MCA) or the Malaysian People's Movement Party (*Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*, Gerakan) — make opportunistic use of the collaboration to achieve political gains by acting as brokers between the ruling regime and the Chinese education movement.

Notably, the broader social movement literature — largely predicated on the experiences of stable, industrialized Western democratic states — has not paid sufficient attention to the survival of oppositional social movements in repressive states. Concomitantly, the literature has emphasized the important role of structural institutions, namely, resources, political opportunities, and identities. Problems and tensions arise, however, when these concepts are applied indiscriminately across cultures and state systems. The nature and practice of institutions within single-party-dominated or non-liberal democratic states (commonly found in developing countries) have a different, yet significant impact on the understanding of social movements. The frequent emergence of social movements as vehicles for channelling social — and sometimes political — grievances in non-liberal democratic states points to the urgent need to develop a better understanding of such phenomena empirically and theoretically.

This book argues that structural institutions within non-liberal democratic states are, in various degrees, significantly influenced by informal relationships — that is, those built on interpersonal networks and trust. Such informal relationships seem to have similar, if not greater, effects on state-social movement interactions than official and structural relations do. In other words, social movements in non-liberal democratic states develop parallel, at times overlapping, formal, and informal institutions to prolong their existence and increase their opportunities to effect change.

This chapter first surveys the background of the case study, proposes the research questions and makes four explanatory propositions. It then examines the mainstream social movement literature, identifies its gaps, and traces the rise of social movement studies in non-liberal

democratic contexts. The theoretical framework correlates three main perspectives on the role of extra-institutional variables in the execution of structural institutions: (1) the intra-movement perspective focuses on the roles of social movement organizations and movement leaders in mobilizing movement activities within non-liberal democratic states, (2) the movement-state perspective concerns the dynamic interaction and the movement's actors through various movement repertoires, and (3) the inter-movement perspective explores the role of interpersonal bonds in forging and strengthening networks and alliances. Subsequently, this chapter presents the study's significance in the context of Malaysia's pluralistic society and non-liberal democracy. An elaboration of the research methodology, limitations of the research, and a general roadmap of the book concludes this introduction.

THE CHINESE EDUCATION MOVEMENT

As early as 1920, leading Chinese community leaders in the Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca protested against the British colonial administration's efforts to exert order over Chinese vernacular schools in Malaya through the 1920 Registration of Schools Ordinance.[2] Loosely structured and lacking the capacity to respond uniformly to changing developments, pre-World War II resistance was confined to towns and districts. Although activists enjoyed the support of the local Chinese population, in particular the Chinese-speaking community, most attempts to oppose colonial policies ended poorly.[3] The British simply expelled these agitators. Not until after World War II did the movement coalesce into an organization-led entity.

The Chinese education movement formally began in 1951, led by a group of Chinese schoolteachers who precipitated a sense of crisis in the local Chinese society after the release of the *Report of the Committee on Malay Education* (Barnes Report). This report recommended all vernacular schools to be abolished and replaced by a single system of teaching primary schools using only English and Malay as mediums of instruction. The early years of the movement witnessed collaboration amongst three major Chinese associations of the time: The United Chinese Schoolteachers' Association of Malaysia (马来西亚华校教师会总会, *Jiaozong*), the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia (马来西亚华校董事联合会总会, *Dongzong*), and MCA.

They were drawn together under the framework of the Grand Three Associations of Chinese Education (三大机构华文教育中央委员会, Grand Three) and sought to defend the status of Chinese education during Malaya's rocky and uncertain transition from a colony to a new nation state.

However, the collaboration of the Grand Three began to break apart in 1960 when MCA President Lim Chong Eu (林苍佑) and his supporters — many of them sympathizers of Chinese education movements — left MCA over disagreements with the then Prime Minister Abdul Rahman (1957–70). When the new leadership of MCA dropped its uncritical support for the Chinese education movement, it marked a historical turning point for the movement, where *Dongzong* and *Jiaozong* began their long journey of resistance as *Dongjiaozong* (董教总).

The Chinese education movement has fluctuated along with the political developments in Malaysia. In 1965, the Chinese population in Malaysia suffered a dramatic drop from 42 per cent in 1963 to 25 per cent after Singapore departed from the Federation of Malaysia, putting the Chinese in the new state of Malaysia at a political disadvantage (Ongkili 1985, p. 154). Many Chinese communities began to relate the right to operate Chinese schools in a "Chinese way" to the preservation of their culture and to the security of their ethnic identity amid heavy-handed nation-building policies and Islamization by the ruling regime. It was during this time that *Dongjiaozong* made a name for itself nationally through its unsuccessful efforts to establish Malaysia's first independent Chinese university, Merdeka University (独立大学).

Today, outside of China and Taiwan, only Malaysia has a complete Chinese education system, and it is the only country in Southeast Asia that has managed to perpetuate the Chinese education system established during the colonial era. The Chinese education movement led by *Dongjiaozong* remains a legitimate organization in the eyes of the Chinese-speaking community in Malaysia. *Dongjiaozong* regularly conducts activities such as seminars, donation campaigns, and press conferences, and submits memorandums to the authorities to put forth the movement's demands. In the face of a repressive state, the movement has refrained from organizing extra-constitutional or violent-oriented activities to avoid confrontations with the state.

The movement manoeuvres within the country's limited democratic space to mobilize and maintain resistance through the networks of Chinese school communities at the local, state, and national levels. Thus far, it has continued to exercise its influence from within and beyond the state to promote the status of Chinese language and Chinese education in state policymaking. To develop a better understanding of the conditions that have induced the processes and persistence of such a movement, this book brings a social movement perspective into the analysis to illuminate the historical and cultural experiences of the struggles of the Chinese education movement beyond the mainstream, Western-centric social movement literature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS

The principal question this book seeks to answer is: How does a minority social movement persist in pushing its agenda despite facing on-going constraints imposed by a non-liberal democratic state?

The secondary questions of this book include:

(a) What are the factors that have motivated the movement's activists (and general supporters), and how have these factors changed over time?
(b) How do social movement organizations sustain a prolonged social movement?
(c) How have the interactions between the challengers and state authorities influenced the movement's trajectory, and how have these interactions changed over time?
(d) How has Malaysia, a non-liberal democratic state, constrained the movement? Why has the state yet to terminate the movement? Has it chosen not to do so, or have there been constraints placed on its repressive capacities?

To come to grips with these questions, the author suggests the following four propositions:

Proposition 1

Continuous threats and attempts by state authorities to dilute the identity of the ethnic minority have shaped a culture of resistance that has become a key source of motivation for the social movement.