

Gerakan Pendidikan Cina di Malaysia – Satu Kajian Tentang Perjuangan Dong Jiao Zong (1970-2002) (Chinese Educationist Movement in Malaysia – A Study on the Struggle of Dong Jiao Zong (1970-2002) by Cheong Yuen Keong (2013), Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, ISBN 978-967-5832-71-0, 438 + xxvi pages.

The Malaysian public education system is unique in that the primary schools are taught in three different media of instruction, namely, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. This was the fruit of interethnic compromise and negotiation at Independence in 1957, against the odds of a forceful assertion of Malay nationalism. Notwithstanding this initial concession, the 1956 Razak Education Report reiterates one of the terms of reference assigned to its committee, that the “ultimate objective” of the education policy was to gradually switch to the use of the Malay language as the “main medium of instruction”. It was this “ultimate objective” which became the perpetual bone of contention between the official implementation of the Malaysian education policy and the Chinese educationists’ struggle till today.

Dong Jiao Zong (董教总), the acronym for two national associations, the United Chinese School Committees’ Association (abbreviated in Mandarin as 董总 or *Dong Zong*), and the United Chinese School Teachers’ Association (abbreviated in Mandarin as 教总 or *Jiao Zong*), is almost synonymous with the Chinese educationist movement in Malaysia. While they are recognized as the foremost bastion of Chinese education in Malaysia, they are poorly understood by those who are outside the Mandarin-speaking milieu in Malaysia, i.e. those who do not read Chinese newspapers regularly or are not involved in Chinese associations; let alone those who do not speak the language. Hence *Gerakan*, the doctoral thesis of Cheong Yuen Keong in the Malay language on the struggles of the Chinese educationist movement (as epitomized by *Dong Jiao Zong*) is a welcome contribution to the academic literature on Chinese education in Malaysia.

As pointed out by Cheong, *Dong Jiao Zong* are not the only associations who are committed to the preservation and promotion of the Chinese education in Malaysia. They are nonetheless recognized as the most authoritative social force, with an organized and dedicated institution for this purpose. Besides acting as a watchdog over the general operations of the Mandarin-medium primary schools, *Dong Jiao Zong* are also intimately involved in sustaining the standard of secondary Mandarin-medium private schools through periodic revision of their curriculum, the writing of school textbooks and the administration of common examinations known as the Unified Examination Certificate. Since 1998, *Dong Jiao Zong* have also run a non-profit tertiary educational institution, the New Era College, the fruit of persistence after decades of unsuccessful attempts. It is nonetheless bound by the pre-conditions set by the government,

which stipulated that it is only allowed to use Mandarin as the medium of instruction for Chinese studies course. Other courses have to be offered in English or Malay medium.

Gerakan consists of an introductory section and ten chapters which examine contestations and struggles spearheaded by Dong Jiao Zong over a range of issues related to the preservation and sustenance of Chinese education in Malaysia. The introductory section sets out the conceptual perspective of the book, framing the Dong Jiao Zong as a social interest group and its struggles as a form of social movement. The author points out that at the heart of the conflicts are the opposing visions of national integration through education, i.e. monolingualism versus multilingualism.

Chapter 1 sets the historical background of the Chinese education till 1970. Chapter 2 to 7 cover a series of struggles over various issues using a thematic approach: attempts of Dong Jiao Zong at building a comprehensive system of Chinese education, speaking up on the formulation of national education policy, safeguarding the *status quo* of the Chinese primary schools, seeking compromise in the implementation of national education policy, demanding for the building of new Chinese primary schools, and fighting for equal treatment of Chinese schools in the national education system. Chapter 8 then reviews the various strategies and partnership adopted by Dong Jiao Zong over the decades to fight for its cause. Chapter 9 assesses the effectiveness and impact of Dong Jiao Zong's struggles, before chapter 10 ends by making overall conclusions based on the issues discussed in various chapters of the book.

The author has collected information based on in-depth interviews, observation and study of documents, and also benefits from his own experience as a teacher in various categories of schools. Notwithstanding his inside knowledge and sympathetic perspective, the author maintains his scholarly distance by including, where relevant, the official perspective on the issues concerned. Hence besides using Chinese sources extensively, the author also consults and cites a fair amount of Malay and official sources to articulate the perspective from both sides.

Cheong notes that over the decades, Dong Jiao Zong's approach has evolved from a narrow ethnic based struggle to a civil and human right-based discourse of defending mother tongue education. He also concludes that Dong Jiao Zong were successful in their struggle to negotiate for a more accommodative policy implementation which did not threaten the status quo of the Chinese primary schools but were unsuccessful in so far as changing the basic orientation or the "ultimate objective" of the government education policy. On the other hand, the ideological orientation of the government towards the role of education, though less explicitly, has arguably evolved from a "majoritarian" nation-building perspective to one which is more responsive to the exigencies of an open Malaysian economy in the face of globalized economic forces. The short-lived switch of the teaching language for mathematics and science to English, as well

as the decision to allow for the establishment of English-medium private tertiary institutions implemented from the 1990s are some of the indications of such shifting official perspectives of the policy makers. This was contrary to the position of the government during the 1970s and 1980s on the insistence of using the Malay language in all tertiary educational institutions when rejecting the application of Dong Jiao Zong to set up a private tertiary educational institution, the Merdeka University.

While the book is well written as a whole, the publisher may wish to consider doing a thorough copy editing if a reprint is undertaken in the future, in order to eliminate the more than few typos and occasional errors in the spelling of names. The one minor doubt is the generous and loose usage of the term “*gerakan*” (movement) by the author, in particular in the titles of the various chapters. The author may have intended to use the term to indicate that other social actors besides the Dong Jiao Zong were also involved in fighting for the issues. However, should each of these initiatives to tackle specific issues be described as a “movement” in its own right? The handling of some of the issues did not appear to involve mass mobilization but media war and lobbying. The issues discussed in each chapter are organized according to the thematic concern, but the various events of contestations are not necessarily interrelated or temporally continuous. It may be more appropriate in that instance to name it merely as “struggle” or “campaign” rather than “movement”.

As a whole, the strength of the book is its comprehensiveness and thoroughness, with meticulous care in handling the details of various events. It may be regarded as an essential, basic reference book for all students of the Malaysian Chinese education movement spanning the three decades, in particular for those who cannot read Mandarin. Given the scarcity of good English-language academic works on the subject, the author may wish to consider translating the book into English for the benefit of foreign scholars.

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