Revisiting the Kuen Cheng High School dispute: contestation between gender equality and ethnic nationalism discourses

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ABSTRACT By contextualizing the birth of modern Chinese women’s education as well as Kuen Cheng Girls’ High School (KCGHS) in the ethno nationalistic movement in pre-independence years, and revisiting the dispute over changing KCGHS into a co-education establishment in the Chinese education movement background in the post-independence era, this paper illustrates the paradox of Chinese ethno nationalism, that took expression in modernization since its inception. The dispute over converting Kuen Cheng also shows how women’s education, a product of Chinese ethno nationalism as expressed in modernization and an appeal for equal treatment, has unexpectedly become a drive for democratization, equal treatment and pluralization from within the Chinese education movement in the post-independence era, and thus makes the idea of gender equality not incompatible with ethno nationalism and Chinese education.

Introduction

A distinctive feature of the Chinese education movement in Malaysia is its origin as a community-funded education system with broad grassroots support and participation. A concept such as an ethnic nation’s modernization and self-strengthening was promoted in the pre-independence era among the Chinese immigrant society, with the extensive network of the modern Chinese school system as the fortress for political mobilization, to support the Chinese nationalistic movement in their homeland, China. While, in the post-independence era, community support continues to be the basis of Chinese schools, modernity – such as cultural plurality, democracy and civil society – has been further advocated by the mother tongue education movement as a negotiating framework or basis while taking up the issue with the state on the government’s national education system, which is seen by the latter as a site or an instrument of nation-state-building.

However, a recurrent question about the democratization and pluralization of the movement itself has also been raised in face of social changes over these years. The appeal for reform and transformation, such as how to modernize and democratize the Chinese education movement’s organization, is not something that comes from the outside but is a reflection and reaction from within, in the face of the growing rigidity of the movement, which has been getting passive and reflexive in responding to social changes and internal stratification. Is the institutional arrangement of the independent Chinese secondary school modernized and democratized enough to professionally handle conflicting interests among different segments of the Chinese community? How should the Chinese education community respond to new values and pluralization of culture, such as homosexuality, gender equality etc? These are questions frequently asked by reformers from within.

The decision of changing Kuen Cheng Girls’ High School (KCGHS), a Chinese girl school founded in Kuala Lumpur in 1908, by its Board of Director (BOD), into a mixed-sex or co-education (co-ed) school in late 2006, provides a chance for reformers to engage in discussion of – and for researchers
to observe – the modernization, democratization and pluralization of the Chinese education movement. The event raises questions in the mind of some of the movement’s supporters and researchers about what constitutes gender equality and the possibilities of Chinese education to integrate gender equality into its educational programs.

By outlining the development of women’s education in the ethno-nationalistic movement context and revisiting the dispute of KCGHS, this paper aims to study the compatibility of gender equality with modern Chinese education and the condition of modernization, democratization and pluralization of Chinese education.

Women’s education within modernization

Emergence of women’s education

The idea of women’s education was transmitted to many Asian countries through Christian missions in the middle of the 19th century. A few decades later, women’s education, as promoted in the single-sex format, was adopted and advocated by some Asian ethnic nations as an effective means of self-strengthening in response to the oppression of Western colonialism and imperialism.

Lifting women’s intellectual level was important as women were expected to be a modern educator and mother for the purpose of ethnic nation-building during the dawn of the 20th century. Women’s emancipation and nationalism were thus intertwined with Asia’s modernization drive. It is, however, significant to note that the main purpose of women’s education during that time was to strengthen the ethnic nation, the extent of the emancipation effect of women’s literacy on women was sometimes unexpected and unwelcome by some of its advocators. This will be further discussed later in this paper.

The earliest women’s education in Malaya is impossible to date accurately but among the most well-known girls’ schools that can be documented were those established by the European Christian missionary in the 19th century (Zheng 1997; Fan 2005). The other effort of progressive advocacy of women’s education in Malaya came along with the social transformation brought by the Chinese reformists and revolutionaries as Malaya became a place of frequent visits and a platform of political mobilization by these Chinese nationalistic movement leaders (Yen 2002: 177–216).

The rapid growth of Chinese female education in British Malaya in the early 20th century was the product of the Chinese nationalism that spread worldwide during the years of Chinese self-strengthening and the anti-imperialism movement, in response to the oppression by the Allied forces and humiliation in the Sino-Japanese war (1894–95). The modernization projects or self-strengthening movement in China, from the late 19th century until the first quarter of 20th century, were mainly driven by three groups of people, namely the reformists, both inside and outside the Ching Court, and the revolutionaries. These three groups of people were differentiated by their value judgment of how to modernize China. The reformists favored a less radical pathway by advocating constitutional monarchy while the revolutionaries preferred to build a republic by throwing out the Ching Dynasty. The reformists and revolutionaries later realigned themselves either as Communists or Nationalists after the 1911 Revolution, which marked the collapse of the Ching Dynasty. The objective of modernization and self-strengthening by both reformists and revolutionaries is to pursue the ethnic nation’s autonomy and self-determination and the power to ask for equal treatment when the nation has cross-national negotiation.

Although all of the three groups took female education as a means of the ethnic nation’s self-strengthening, Du Xue Yuan’s study has pointed out that women’s liberation was never the intention of female education as advocated by the reform-minded Ching bureaucrats as they were socially conservative and too reserved to allow women to have as equal access to
education as men, or to freely associate with people outside the family, or to walk on the street as freely as their male counterparts, or to freely choose their future spouse (Du 1995). Unlike the reform-minded Ching bureaucrats, the younger extra-Ching-court reformist and revolutionaries were more exposed to foreign intellectual influences and more progressive than their predecessors, that liberating women from the traditional Chinese culture – such as forbidding women from being seen in the public, widow chastity, foot-binding, a woman of no talent was a woman of virtue etc – was taken as an important objective of female education, which marked the first wave of the women’s liberation movement at the dawn of modern China (Du 1995: 249–318).

Both reformists and revolutionaries wanted women to improve so that people of their ethnicity will improve.

Even though women were expected to gain literacy and improve intellectually, their roles as mother and wife and their sexuality were never questioned but only redefined to suit the ethnic nation’s modernization. The wide establishment of modern Chinese girl’s schools by the reformists and revolutionaries in British Malaya during the first quarter of the 20th century was to serve as beachhead for the modernization of Chinese immigrant society, which was an important base for overseas political mobilization to support the nationalistic movement in their homeland China (Yen 2002: 177–216).

History of KCGHS and discourses of women’s education

KCGS in the pre-merdeka context. Starting out as a community funded girls’ primary school in 1908, Kuen Cheng was co-founded by Zhong Zhuo-Jin, an educationist who had close ties, and shared progressive ideas, with the reformists, and Wu Xue-Hua, a female educationist in the early 20th century. Kuen Cheng’s junior secondary school section was later established by the then Principal Hu Xue-Fen in 1925 and the senior high school section in 1940. It was later forced to shut down during the Japanese occupation of Malaya and only had a chance to reopen section by section after the Japanese surrendered in the mid 1940s (Kuen Cheng 1978: 13–17).

Although the original account regarding the idea and discourses of establishing and running Kuen Cheng by the founders could not be found, the close relation that Kuen Cheng as well as other Chinese women’s education institutions in Malaya had with the educational reform and with women’s liberation movement led by both reformists, within and outside the Ching Court, and revolutionaries in China, was well documented (Kuen Cheng 1968; Zheng 1997; Yen 2002).

The ex-principal of KCGHS Zhai Zhao-Xun revealed in her prelude in the Souvenir Magazine of the 60th Year Anniversary of the Kuen Cheng School in 1968 that:

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\text{[For] thousands of years women were devalued by the Chinese society and received education only in the family until 1904 when the home-based education related clauses of the Regulation of School, which was announced by the Ching Court bureaucrat Mr. Zhang Bai-Xi and etc., specified that ‘home-based education should include female students’. Promulgation of the Regulation of Women’s Normal School and Primary School (Nüzi shifan xuetang and nüzi xiaoxue zhangcheng) in 1908 by the [Ching Court] Education Ministry had [further] formalized women’s education and Chinese women since then were able to have equal access to education as men. (Kuen Cheng 1968: 10)}
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As a Chinese immigrant devoted to modern Chinese education for the overseas Chinese, Zhai Zhao-Xun was aware of influences other than that of the Ching court’s educational reform on female education in Malaya. She further described in her prelude that:

The women’s education [in Malaya] founded by the Chinese scholar in the past was not only influenced by the Chinese education system [in China],
Por Heong Hong

but also by the female school as established by the British people. (Kuen Cheng 1968: 10)

Zhai Zhao-Xun however did not go into detail on the idea and differences of women’s education by Chinese reformists and European Christian missionaries. It is claimed by Fan that the female education founded by the mission in British Malaya, which mainly served the Straits-born daughters of wealthy Chinese families, was socially conservative and the purpose of women’s education was to educate woman to be good mothers and wives, as homemaking and Bible reading were the main subjects taught (Fan 2005). A baby feeding course was also included in some of the mission-run girls’ schools.

As for the influence of reformists on women’s education, straits-born Chinese elite and educationist Lim Boon Keng’s idea on female education reflects the position of the reformist:

Our wives will be mothers of our daughters, they possess the power that shapes the fate of our [ethnic] nation. We should thus by all means treat them well and teach them rules for formal relations and give them equal access to receive physical and intellectual education. (Li 1990: 66)

Lim Boon Keng also claimed that:

If women receive no education, half of the nation of their ethnic origin will remain ignorant and retrograde and the whole nation will not improve. (Li 1990: 67)

Tan Kah-Kee, an entrepreneur and founder of several modern Chinese schools in British Malaya, which were closely associated with the revolutionaries, had frequently expressed his view on women’s education:

Living in the modern time, not only men should receive formal education, women must also have access to education. For the less wise persons, the purpose of women’s education is to suit the needs of the family of her future husband, they are not aware that educated women could also educate their cousins before marriage and care for their parents and nurture their children even after marriage. (Fan 2005: 154)

Reflected in their motherhood-based and family-oriented discourses of women’s education, it is clear that both reformists and revolutionaries took women’s literacy as an instrument to strengthen the Chinese race and to suit the needs of the family. There were, however, some (female) educationists of that time who advocated that training women to be independent should be the purpose of women’s education. Three Ipoh based (female) teachers with such an idea made a statement on girls’ education in a Chinese daily in 1932:

It is women’s education instead of empty talk that would realize equality between sexes. And only with women’s education will the intellect and ability of women improve and they be able to develop equally and benefit the society together with their male counterparts. (Fan 2005: 155)

The different views of (male and female) educationists mark two different discourses on women’s education: women’s literacy and ability as an instrument of nation building, or an end of education?

As a female education institution founded in the early 20th century, KCGHS was embedded in a community that was divided not only by different value judgments of how to modernize China but also by various views on why and how to improve women’s social status.

KCGHS in the post-merdeka context. The post-war and pre-merdeka years saw rapid and critical political changes in British Malaya. The right to mother tongue education and the position of Chinese schools became major issues during which the constitutional and political framework of the country was taking shape. Malay and Chinese leaders were able to arrive at some important compromises on citizenship rights, language and education. As part of these compromises, the Chinese primary
schools were accepted as national-type primary schools (Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan, SRJK) within the national system in 1957, together with schools teaching in Malay, English and Tamil. Irrespective of their medium of instruction, all schools adopted a common curriculum to inculcate a shared national perspective. However, with the promulgation of the 1961 Education Act, Chinese secondary schools had to change their medium of instruction to English in order to be accepted within the national education system. Sixteen out of 70 Chinese secondary schools rejected the provision, which marked the birth of the Independent Chinese Secondary Schools, and also gave up all the state’s funding to preserve their autonomy. Hence, the independent Chinese schools have continued to rely on community efforts and under the leadership of the directors, mostly ethnнационаlistic entrepreneurs or merchants of Chinese society, for development funds and operational costs. KCGHS was one of the Chinese secondary schools that rejected governmental funding since 1961.

Based on modernization projection, self-strengthening was promoted among the Chinese community in the pre-war and pre-independence era in response to Western colonialism and Japanese imperialism. In the post-independence years, modernization as expressed in cultural diversity or plurality, democracy and civil society have been advocated by the mother tongue education movement as a negotiating framework while taking up the issue with the external authority, the state, which has been using the national education system as an instrument of nation-state-building since independence.

Contestation within modernization

Other than ideological differences, such as a divergence of views on how to modernize China and why to improve women’s social status, the community where KCGHS gained its financial and manpower support was not as coherent as the Chinese ethno-nationalists had projected or proclaimed but was in reality divided along class and power lines. Conflict between the financiers or directors, mainly entrepreneurs or merchants of the Chinese society, and the school managers, such as the administrator board and teaching staffs, was frequent ever since the inception of such a community-based education system, which functioned as an ethnic nation’s modernization fortress in the pre-war and pre-merdeka years (Zheng 1998: 224–235). Although Chinese people with different class backgrounds and social status were able to come together and work under the flag of the Chinese nation’s modernization, conflict would ceaselessly emerge whenever it came to decision making in the daily operation of the modernization machines, such as whom and how to manage a Chinese school. A principal who can manage to maintain good relationship with the financiers could stay longer and carry out his or her job more smoothly but conflict is still common.

The conflict between the financiers and the school managers continues to emerge even in the post-merdeka era, as the community-funded feature of the independent Chinese school system provides an institutional base through which the wealthy and ambitious could respectively acquire leadership status and a platform through which the grassroots could sincerely engage in the movement of mother tongue education. The conflict is more complicated when the schools become sites of contestation of different segments of the Chinese community as they try to gain power over the resources of the schools. Sometimes the conflict could be between financiers and financiers, or between a school administrator and a graduate organization, and the dispute could be who can, and how to, make decisions on certain issues. The dispute between Kuen Cheng’s Board of Director (BOD) and Kuen Cheng Old Pupils Association (KCOPA) on the matter of whether to change Kuen Cheng Girls’ High School (KCGHS) into a co-ed school is one such conflict. This will further be discussed in the next section of this paper.
The contestation or conflict mentioned above is a paradox for both modernization and ethno-nationalism. The class conflict, power difference and internal dynamics that modernization brings in a modern Chinese community are themselves products of ethno-nationalism. The expression that ethno-nationalism takes in the form of modernization, self-strengthening, equal treatment, autonomy and self-determination, becomes the ground where the community subgroups could require similar radical reform. The contestation created by modernization thus requires a modern response or solution.

Kuen Cheng dispute

The KCGHS dispute emerged in late 2006, just two years before the girls’ school could celebrate its 100th birthday, when the Board of Director (BOD) of the school announced through the media that they were going to turn KCGHS into a sex-mixed or co-ed school (Sin Chew Daily 2006c). The announcement almost instantly drew opposition from the Kuen Cheng Old Pupils Association (KCOPA) (Sin Chew Daily, Metropolitan 2006).

Debate of single-sex education

In a press conference on KCGHS’s fundraising concert expected to be held on 9 October 2006, three official reasons for conversion were given by the BOD (Nanyang Siang Pau, City folks 2006b):12

1. Co-education is a trend that has been adopted by most schools in Malaysia as well as those overseas, and that it is deemed a more balanced social environment for shaping normal association between the sexes.
2. The decision was made to accommodate parents who wish to send both sons and daughters to the same school.
3. The students studying at SRJK(C) Kuen Cheng 1 and 2 (co-ed) could not continue their secondary education at Kuen Cheng High School as the latter allows only girls to enroll. Changing KCGS into a co-education establishment will stop the exodus of male students of SRJK(C) Kuen Cheng 1 and 2 to other schools.

The conversion project soon received wide coverage by the Chinese media and active participation of the Chinese community in debating the advantage(s) and disadvantage(s) of single-sex schools. For those who favored a co-ed system, they claimed that a single-sex education environment ‘is biased against the other sex’, ‘discriminates males’, ‘is backward and conservative’, ‘breeds female students with imbalanced minds’, ‘breeds homosexuality or lesbians’ and ‘meets only half of the potential high school market’ (Nanyang Siang Pau 2006c). Supporters of the co-ed system, who aligned themselves with the BOD, considered segregation by sexes a relic of a feudalistic element of Chinese tradition, which used to ban free association between sexes, and it is thus backward and conservative to preserve the all-girl environment (Nanyang Siang Pau, KL and Selangor 2006d). They were also worried that, deprived of the chance to associate and to learn together with their male counterparts, female students in a single sex environment will have a higher chance to develop imbalanced minds or homosexuality.

Other reason given was not related to gender, but rather the fact that the consideration of market strategy of changing KCGHS into a co-ed system was expected to boost the total number of enrolments. Survival of the Chinese education, Kuen Cheng in this case, comes before gender equality. Some Chinese education supporters even claimed that to preserve the all-girl system or to go co-ed is not the core issue, the urgent task is to revive the independent Chinese school based on traditional Chinese culture (Zhang 2006).

Supporters of single-sex education, however, rebutted pointing out that there are also homosexuals in a co-ed environment and it is not true that students of an all-girl school are deprived of the chance to associate with their male counterparts, since
they are free to associate after school (Nanyang Siang Pau, KL and Selangor 2006a). While advocates of girl school denied that segregation by sexes was once practiced in the earlier historical stage of single-sex school to avoid free association between sexes both in the mission’s girl school and the Chinese girl school. They, however, argued that the reason behind the idea of a single-sex environment has changed. Scientific evidence of single-sex education studies was given to show that a graduate of an all-girls school has more satisfaction over her own profession and greater self-confidence in her own sexual identity than their female counterparts from co-ed schools (Nanyang Siang Pau, City folks 2006a). The results of other studies were also given to show that the single-sex education environment is conducive to a bisexual personality, which will help girls and boys gain independence and confidence (Nanyang Siang Pau, KL and Selangor 2006b). It was further claimed by single-sex advocates that all-girls schools create an environment free of sexual discrimination and unfair competition between sexes, which is an unwelcome result of the socialization of the sexes. It is in such discrimination-free environments that female students are able to learn the so-called ‘hard’ or ‘masculine’ subjects, such as science, physics, and mathematics, without being laughed at by their male counterparts. It was also argued that, in a single-sex environment, where division of labor by sex is absent, every female student has an equal opportunity to learn how to handle various kinds of tasks, heavy or light, easy or tough, independently or without the help of male counterparts (Por 2006).

In short, those against the conversion idea, knew well that the success of a single-sex school depends on experimentation with a thorough grounding in the complexities of gender differences in how girls and boys learn. They also do not believe that ‘all girls learn one way and all boys learn another way’. On the contrary, they cherish and celebrate the diversity among girls and among boys. Thus, the ex-pupils that did not agree with the conversion expressed regret that changing KCGHS into a co-ed was like wiping out the plurality and diversity of the independent Chinese education, since there are only two private Chinese girls’ schools in the country, one in Kuala Lumpur and one in Penang. The Chinese education supporters in the Kuala Lumpur area will be deprived of choice if KCGHS turns co-ed. An all-girl environment is thus a marketable value or niche of KCGHS, instead of a liability, as it is the only independent Chinese girl school in Klang Valley.

Revisiting the discourses of pro-co-ed and pro-girls’ school, it is clear that both sides were concerned about the learning outcome of female students. It is, however, worth noting that the concern for female students by the co-ed supporters was family centered and heterosexuality oriented while that by the single-sex advocates was focused on ability, competence and confidence building. The so-called ‘imbalanced mind’ of a girls’ school, as labeled by the co-ed advocates, reflects worry that female students could be losing femininity, and ignoring the importance of getting engaged in a heterosexual relationship, in an ‘imbalanced’ single-sex environment. Co-ed and free association between sexes were directly equated to gender equality. Femininity and heterosexuality was taken for granted and socialization of sex-role was unquestioned. No scientific evidence of comparative studies was given to show that female graduates of co-ed schools outperform or have more confidence in one’s own sexual identity and more sensitivity over gender equality than their counterparts in girls’ schools. The survival of Chinese education thus precedes reflection of what is, and how to realize, gender equality under the conversion project.

It is also worth noting that people of opposite views are divided by their different views and into different organizations, not on sex. Although many members of KCOPA were against the conversion project, there were also many ex-pupils supporting the co-ed plan. While 32 out of 42 directors were males, some of the female directors in the BOD were in agreement...
with their male counterparts on advocating the co-ed plan. The KCOPA and BOD are two platforms where people of different views, regardless of sex, on the conversion project could mobilize support and gather resources.

The dispute, as illustrated above, can be seen as a continuation of the contending discourses between ethno nationalism and gender equality since the conception of women's education within ethnic national modernization during the early 20th century. It brings us back to the century-old question of what is the objective of women's education? Which is the best arrangement for women's education? Girls' school or mixed-sex education? It is hard to say whether the co-ed idea or the all-girl school discourse has won the mass support, but the conversion issue has again opened up the debate of gender equality within the Chinese education community. Women's literacy, liberation and gender equality, although bred within ethnic nationalistic modernization discourse, gains its own importance after decades of development. Self-strengthening, equal treatment and appeal for more democracy later become the grounds for gender equality and the women's movement, which formed a modernization challenge from within the ethno-nationalistic movement.

Procedural dispute

If contestation is unavoidable in a community-funded education system, what is the appropriate arrangement to settle the dispute? As has been mentioned in the section on 'contestation within modernization', it is common that the independent Chinese school becomes the site of contestation between different segments of the Chinese community, especially when it comes to decision-making. Other than debating the reasons for conversion, procedural justice and institutional fairness were also fields of contestation, as KCOPA had required that the BOD should be transparent and stick to democratic procedures in making any decision, not to say such a big decision, regarding turning the hundred-year-old girls' school into a co-ed school.

The first news about the conversion project was released by the BOD on 24th September 2006 through a press conference. The president of KCOPA was reported to be against the decision when she was interviewed by the media a day after the news was released.

In the face of the opposition from the ex-pupils and some commentators, the principal promised to collect the opinions of parents before the Sponsors' Annual Meeting (SAM) on 2007 (Nanyang Siang Pau, KL and Selangor 2006c) and the vice chairman of the BOD agreed to organize a conference in order to look into the advantages and disadvantages of both single-sex and co-ed systems before any decision was made (Oriental Daily, Central Malaysia 2006). The poll was, however, carried out a week later by the school administrator, an ally of the BOD in this case, with the questionnaire focused mainly on whether a co-ed system would bring convenience to parents who wish to send both sons and daughters to the same school and whether a homosexual problem would worry the parents. The opinions of the ex-pupils and the KCOPA members were not sought or collected.

In response to the exclusion of the ex-pupils’ opinions of the survey, the KCOPA took the initiative to collect ex-pupils’ opinions by organizing a public forum to debate the advantages and disadvantages of single-sex schools (China Press, KL and Selangor Today 2006). Just a day after the forum, where the majority of the attendants showed objection to the idea of opening the doors to boys, the BOD's chairman William Cheng restated that the decision on conversion was agreed and passed unanimously at the BOD's meeting dated 26th September 2006 (Nanyang Siang Pau, City folks 2006b). The restatement somewhat contradicted what Chen Da-Zhen, the vice chairman of BOD, had said on 25th September, that the conversion decision will be made only with reference to the result of the research on both single-sex and co-ed systems (Oriental
But no research had been carried out when William Cheng restated the 9/26 decision on conversion. The so-called 9/26 decision again provoked anger among the ex-pupils. One of the directors, Ye Feng-Mei, who was also third batch graduate of the KCGHS and ex-president of KCOPA, claimed that the 9/26 decision was not legitimate as the conversion project was not on the agenda of the meeting. According to Ye, she would have attended the meeting if the conversion issue were on the agenda (Sin Chew Daily 2006b). Together with Ye, the KCOPA expressed reproach that the 9/26 meeting was undemocratic and without transparency. They claimed that KCGHS is common property of the Chinese community and thus should not be in the grasp of only a few people. They urged the DOB to listen to the old girls’ opinions and be open to accepting the role of the old pupils’ association in the ranks of Chinese education community (Sin Chew Daily 2006a).

Due to KCOPA’s opposition, the 9/26 decision, or conversion issue, was put to the vote again in the BOD meeting on 19th October 2006. Only four out of the 17 present voted against conversion. But the BOD indicated that the decision regarding the conversion project was not final until it was passed in the SAM, which was then expected to be held a year later (Nanyang Siang Pau 2006a). KCOPA was still not satisfied. The 10-out-of-42 representation of the old pupils in the DOB was not proportional to their strength, claimed Jean Lee, the then president of KCOPA, which had 1600 members (Nanyang Siang Pau 2006b).

An international conference on women’s high school education was later convened by the KCOPA on 29th April 2007 and the papers presented were compiled into a book. The value of single-sex education and women’s education was widely discussed and reviewed. The forum and conference functioned not only as platforms to collect opinions and learn scientific evidence but also a site for wider participation and discussion. The KCOPA repeatedly claimed that discussion, participation, transparency and democracy should be the basis for decision making in a community funded school.

A month later, over 90% of the sponsors in both SAM and the ad hoc Sponsors’ Meeting voted for conversion on 20th May 2007 (Sin Chew Daily 2007b). It was, however, claimed by Jean Lee that the ad hoc Sponsors’ Meeting was not legitimate as she was twice denied the right to attend BOD meetings, on 26th December 2006 and 8th May 2007 respectively. Some old pupils who were examiners at the polling station claimed that the voting procedure of the ad hoc Sponsors’ Meeting was somewhat abnormal as some representatives had cast more than 20 votes (Sin Chew Daily 2007a). The KCOPA later filed a suit against the legitimacy of the SAM and the ad hoc Sponsors’ Meeting on August 2007 but was turned down by the court on November 2007. They brought the suit for the second time early in 2008 and the case was still under process when this paper was finished.

Procedural justice was what the KCOPA had looked for during the whole decision-making and negotiation process. The modernization discourse of the Chinese community, which takes its expression in self-strengthening, equality and autonomy in the pre-merdeka era, and plurality and democracy in the post-independence years, provides framework where the community subgroups could require a similar radical reform. The radical reform that KCOPA had demanded was the preservation of plurality, in this case the single-sex school, within the Chinese education community and a more transparent and democratic decision making process. The old pupils also radically demanded that the voices of both the minority and majority be heard and the status of KCOPA be equal with the BOD.

Conclusion
It is modern Chinese education that gives rise to new social stratification and class
differences in the Chinese community. As products of Chinese education and the ethno nationalistic modernization project, the old pupils of KCGHS are those middle classes who have more time, energy and financial resources to spend and are likely to compete with the old entrepreneur and merchants, who used to be the leaders of the Chinese school, with control over the resources of Chinese schools. It is the community-funded feature of the Chinese education movement that provides an institutional basis for the newly emergent class, such as old pupils of KCGHS, to engage in the management of an independent Chinese school.

However, having more time and financial resources to spend is not the only feature of middle classes. As a modernization product, the middle classes have more access to scientific knowledge and a wider vision than their elders and predecessors. In the sense of modernity, knowledge is power. It can challenge the prevailing social structure and political order in the name of a normative ideal, such as demand for gender equality and democratization. Pluralization is another unexpected product of modernization. With pluralization, the Chinese community is divided not only by class or income, but also along different value judgment lines. Women’s literacy and gender equality, as plurality bred within an ethnic nationalistic modernization discourse, unexpectedly gains its own importance after decades of development and becomes an independent drive that leads to the formation of the plurality of the Chinese community. The modernization discourse of ethno nationalism, such as self-strengthening, equal treatment and an appeal for more democracy, becomes the basis for gender equality and the women’s movement, forming a modernization challenge from within the ethn-nationalistic movement. But the prevailing internal power structure of the Chinese community will always function as a counter change force from within. The role of the BOD in this case is such a force that it has been passive in learning the new progressive ideas of single-sex education, which is different from what the ethno nationalists had promoted in the early 20th century.

The idea of gender equality is not incompatible with ethno nationalism or modern Chinese education, but conflict will ceaselessly emerge if the prevailing internal power structure is not democratized and modernized enough to take up the new voice, new challenge and emergent new value. In the case of the KCGHS dispute, majority rule was equated with democracy by the BOD, without taking into account the minority’s voice and divergent views. That was the counter change of the BOD from within to maintain the prevailing power structure, such that the BOD could exercise power and have control over the resources of KCGHS in the name of Chinese education. But with pluralization as a product of modern education, the prevailing power structure of the Chinese education community is likely to face changes and challenges from within all the time.

For those who used to label the Chinese education movement as ‘chauvinistic’, they should learn that the Chinese education community is not a unity without plurality, as pluralization has become a pace maker for change from within, ever since the ethn-nationalistic movement has been sharing its expression with modernization, at the beginning of its inception.

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Notes

1. State here is not a territorial but a political science term, which implies a distinct set of institutions that possess the power to make the rules and regulations that govern the people in
one or more societies, having sovereignty over a
definite territory.

2. Li Hong-Zhang and Zhang Zhi-Dong were
representative figures of reform-minded
bureaucrats within the Ching court while
Kang You-Wei and Liang Qi-Chao were
reform-minded intellectuals from outside
and Sun Yat-Sen the leader of
revolutionaries.

3. The divergence between reformist and revolutionaries
is beyond the scope of this paper, for
further information see Colin Mackerras (1998).

4. Merdeka is a Malay word meaning independence.

5. ‘Kuen’ means women or female; ‘Cheng’ means
successful.

6. A full account of Ms Wu Xue-Hua’s contribution
and participation in promoting female education
could not be found but her role as a founder of
KCGS was documented in Kuen Cheng (1968: 11–12). Few studies and a lack of documentation
of the early female educators reflect the
gender insensitivity and bias of scholars in
related fields.

7. Zhai was the principal from 1960 to 1990 –
documented in Gu Hong-Ting (2003: 266).

8. ‘Overseas Chinese’ is a China-centered term.
The term is used here to reflect the emotional
connection and perception of the early
Chinese immigrants in Malaya towards China,
which was very different from that of the
Malay(s) born second and third generation
of Chinese descendants both before and after
independence.


10. It is not the attempt of this paper to go into
detail regarding the development of an Independant
Chinese Secondary School and the
differences of the systems of Chinese primary
and secondary schools. For a detailed account,
see Tan Liok Ee (2002). And also Kua Kia Soong
(1999).

11. Though the financiers of Chinese education
form the wealthy class of Chinese community,
they are divided along different party or
factional affiliations and ideological lines.

12. See also The Star, Education

13. It is Penang Chinese Girls’ Private High
School.

14. Though the senior high school section of Kuen
Cheng was established in 1940, it was forced
to close down during the Japanese occupation
and reopened in 1955. As a third batch
graduate, Ye left Kuen Cheng High School in
1959.

15. There were in total ten female directors, all old
pupils of KCGHS, in the BOD.

16. Jean Lee was the then President of KCOPA.

17. All papers were collected in Collections of Papers
of International Conference on Women’s High School
Education (2007).

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Special terms
ban free association between sexes 男女授受不親
Chen Da-Zhen 陳達真
Cheng 成
China Press 中國報
Chinese education 華教
Chinese education community 華教社群
Hu Xue-Fen 胡學芬
Kang You-Wei 康有為
Kuen 坤
Li Hong-Zhang 李繡章
Liang Qi-Chao 梁啟超
Lim Boon Keng 林文慶
Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報
Nüzi shifan xuetang and nüzi xiaoxue 女子師範學堂及女子小學章程
Oriental Daily 東方日報
plurality and diversity of the independent Chinese education 華教多元性
Regulation of School 學堂章程
Sin Chew Daily 星洲日報
Sun Yat-Sen 孫中山
Tan Kah-Kee 陳嘉庚
William Cheng 鍾廷森
woman of no talent was woman of virtue 女子無才便是德
Wu Xue-Hua 吳雪華
Zhai Zhao-Xun 翟兆興
Zhang Bai-Xi 張百熙
Zhang Zhi-Dong 張之洞
Zhong Zhuo-Jin 鍾卓京
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Heong-Hong Por grew up in Malaysia and received her Masters degree from the Institute of Health and Welfare Policy, National Yang Ming University of Taiwan. She then moved back to Malaysia and joined the Media Studies Department at the New Era College, a product of the Chinese education movement in Malaysia, in Kajang Town, 2002. She is now a lecturer and researcher at the Malaysian Center for Ethnic Studies of New Era. With her multi-disciplinary concern, Por has written a number of papers, including media message analysis, Malaysian healthcare politics and gender politics. She has also been active in movements for media independence, gender equality and social democratization. Her bilingual background allows her to look into the specificity of the Chinese speaking community and situate it into a wider mixed-ethnic/lingual background of Malaysian context.

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