

Hegemony and Symbolic Resistance in Malaysia: A Study of Namewee's Music

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ABSTRACT

Wee Meng Chee, better known as *Namewee*, is a controversial Malaysian rapper whose music has courted trouble with the Malaysian government. Although some people dismiss his songs as profane, this paper will highlight that *Namewee's* music actually constitutes a critique of Malaysia's social realities, and it challenges the BN ruling coalition's political discourses, particularly UMNO's ideology of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay hegemony). One recurring theme in *Namewee's* songs is his frustration with policies that discriminate against Chinese Malaysians. To understand the significance of *Namewee's* music, this paper refers to previous scholarly efforts in analysing the ways subordinate groups respond to domination and explores the potentials of rap music as a form of symbolic resistance against the dominant political discourse in Malaysia. *Namewee's* works also stand out considering 'protest songs' are a rare genre in Malaysia.

Keywords: Chinese Malaysians, *Ketuanan Melayu*, *Namewee*, rap, symbolic resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

Some scholars argue that rap/hip hop is not just a form of popular music but a social movement that harnesses the energy of African American youths, who have long considered themselves as a marginalised group in the US (Henderson, 1996; Ogbar, 1999; Watkins, 1998). Many rap/hip hop artistes have highlighted social inequalities and its associated problems in the American society which primarily affect black African Americans due to their subordinate position compared to the dominant white European Americans.

Originating from the South Bronx in New York City in the 1970s, rap/hip hop was created by black youths who grew up in a hostile environment characterised by alienation, poverty and urban ruins. According to Rose (1997), rap music is an outgrowth of these social and political conditions. Since crime, drugs, unemployment and unyielding frustration are elemental to the lives of many African Americans, they are often reflected in the content of rap music. The tension between rap's "confining rhythmic patterns and its aggressive presentation" potentially assaults the White middle class listeners, who are part of the dominant class (Rose, 1997: 208-209).

However, Rose (1991: 276) also points out that rap music has not always been political. Starting off as an apolitical 'party music' with limited social relevance, rap only became a

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political cultural form with the emergence of a group called *Public Enemy*. The success of their album called *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* in 1988 pushed political rap to the forefront of the hip hop music industry. With lyrics peppered with themes of resistance such as *Fight the Power* and *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos*, they opened the door for more politically and racially explicit materials. Another famous political rapper is the late Tupac Shakur, who sold over 75 million records worldwide. His songs are still making money until now even though he died 15 years ago. In 2009 alone, his songs raked in about USD3.5 million (O'Malley Greenburg, 2010). Among others, Tupac's songs dealt with difficult social and political issues such as violence, hardship in inner cities, racism and police brutality in the US.

Due to globalisation, rap/hip hop music made its way from the slums of New York and downtown Los Angeles to other countries around the world. Exported to Asia in the early 1990s, rap/hip hop has become a popular subculture with a large following among the young in Asia. They are most visibly represented by the break dance community and images of rebellious youths in baggy clothes and baseball caps. According to Mitchell (2001), rap/hip hop music today cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African American culture as it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world. Even as a universally recognised popular music, he said that rap music can adapt to local specificities.

Lockard (1998: 256-259) who studied popular music and politics in Southeast Asia, commented that Malaysian rappers in the 1990s did "pretty tame stuff" compared to "American gangsta rap, or even to the hard-edged rap popular among the underclass in Rio De Janeiro (in Brazil) and Capetown (in South Africa)." The local rap groups cited by Lockard (1998) such as *4U2C*, *KRU* and the all-female group, *Feminin* were all Malay rappers that had a huge following among teenagers in the 1990s. Even then, they were not spared from criticism for being too westernised and un-Islamic. They highlighted social issues such as pollution, abandoned children, alcoholism, smoking and bad dietary habits but avoided more controversial topics that might result in increased government interference.

It is safe to say that local political rap was unheard of until Wee Meng Chee or *Namewee* burst into the scene in early 2007 with his home-made music videos (MV). Although his earlier rap songs, *Muar Chinese* and *Kawanku* ('My Friend') attracted a lot of attention on the video-sharing website YouTube, the rapper only gained notoriety with his third MV called *Negaraku - I Love My Country*, which invited media attention and harsh criticisms from various quarters, especially UMNO politicians. His case was even brought up for discussion at the Cabinet level and the rapper was subsequently investigated for sedition (Loh, 2007).

Considering the role of rap music as a form of social critique and a call to resistance elsewhere, it is worthwhile to examine some of *Namewee's* most controversial works to understand how they do the same in the Malaysian context. The rapper may not have a partisan agenda when he spoke out against the government or certain politicians but rap music as a form of youth subculture would require its performers to be authentic or "to keep it real" (Huq, 2006: 110). This in itself can bring about social commentaries that mock and symbolically challenge the prevailing ideology of the Barisan Nasional (BN or 'National

Front') ruling coalition, particularly the political discourses of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

2. BACKGROUND TO STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper seeks to understand how rap music has become a new form of cultural resistance against BN-UMNO's hegemony among Chinese Malaysians as a subordinate group. Guided by previous works that explored the strategies used by subordinate groups to express their resistance against those in power, I examine the lyrics of *Namewee's* rap songs as a case study. For this purpose, I am primarily informed by Scott's (1990) theory on everyday resistance, which proposes that powerless people have their own 'hidden transcript' in response to domination. His theory is derived from his earlier research in Malaysia on the politics of resistance by poor Malay peasants to changes in rice production that systematically worked to their disadvantage (Scott, 1985).

According to Scott (1990:17), "the Malay peasants adopted the safer course of anonymous attacks on property, poaching, character assassination and shunning rather than risking repercussions of open protests". They prudently avoided, with few exceptions, any acts of public defiance against the dominant group. Scott also said other subordinate groups may follow a similar pattern according to their own circumstances. Their politics might also make use of disguise, deception and indirection while maintaining an outward impression of consenting to the ideology of those in power. These are 'public transcripts' acceptable to the dominant group.

Scott (1985) also argued that large-scale uprisings are very rare and these revolts are always crushed unceremoniously. In contemporary Malaysia, political dissidents have been arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) while street protests are often met with the riot police using water cannons and tear gas. To understand how subordinate classes respond to hegemony, Scott (1985: 33-34) identified another form of rebellion, which is more subtle and symbolic. This is what he described as "the quiet, unremitting guerrilla warfare that takes place day-in and day-out such as foot dragging, dissimulation, feigned ignorance, false compliance, manipulation, flight, slander, theft, arson, sabotage, and cultural resistance."

This paper identifies the ruling elites in BN as the dominant class, especially those from UMNO, which prop up Malay hegemony to legitimise its power. UMNO is the biggest political party in the BN coalition that consists of 13 component parties. Since Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957, UMNO presidents and deputy presidents have held the offices of prime minister and deputy prime minister, respectively. According to its constitution, UMNO's political ideology is one that is based on Malay nationalism. Among others, the party guarantees the position of the Malay language as the sole national language and a national culture based on Malay culture. It would also uphold the rights of the Malays and other Bumiputra.

In essence, UMNO's political struggle is encapsulated in the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu*, which can be translated as Malay supremacy, Malay dominance or Malay hegemony. Although *Ketuanan Melayu* is not specifically mentioned in the Federal Constitutions, Ting (2009: 35) said it could be traced to the formation of UMNO itself. Citing Hamidi (1961: 126), the scholar pointed out that the party's founding president, Onn Jaafar once said

UMNO did not adhere to any ideology other than *Melayuisme*, defined by Omar (1993) as “the belief that the interests of the *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race) must be upheld over all else.” To justify its ideology, UMNO leaders such as former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad claimed that there was a social contract between the Malays and the non-Malays, who agreed to the Malay special rights in exchange for citizenship rights (*Malaysiakini*, 2000).

If Chinese Malaysians were considered as a subordinate group to BN-UMNO, their ‘public transcript’ would be the appearance of consent for UMNO’s domination and *Ketuanan Melayu*. While they may privately complain about the discriminatory policies done in the name of Malay special rights, most Chinese Malaysians would generally avoid bringing up issues that put them in conflict with Malay interests openly as this is a surefire way of provoking a negative, and occasionally violent, response from UMNO. Furthermore, race and religion are taboo subjects following the May 13 racial riots in 1969 and those who bring up these matters may be subjected to the Sedition Act of 1948 or the Internal Security Act of 1960.

Official accounts suggest that the racial riots happened because the Malays, who were economically backward, were starting to feel a threat over their control of the public sector (Hwang, 2003). Blame was also attributed to Chinese-based opposition parties for insulting the Malays in their victory parades around Kuala Lumpur following their success in the 1969 general election (Tunku, 1969). Hundreds of people, mostly non-Malays, were killed and many properties were destroyed. Parliament was suspended and the government declared a state of emergency, putting the country under the administration of a National Operations Council (NOC) headed by the then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. After parliamentary democracy was restored in 1971, the government started pursuing more pro-Malay policies with the justification that it needed to address the socio-economic gap among the different races (Crouch, 1996: 24).

Citing Funston (1980), Ting (2009: 38) said the decades of the 1970s and 1980s saw the progressive entrenchment of a political culture affirming Malay primacy in the public sphere and state institutional practices. Tun Abdul Razak, who became Malaysia’s second prime minister, acquiesced to the formulation of the controversial National Culture Policy that asserts the primacy of the Malay culture and Islam in the definition of national culture. In the name of the National Culture Policy, some government agencies have arbitrarily enforced restrictive cultural policies based on their own ideas of how they could serve the cause of *Ketuanan Melayu* or the ideology of *Melayuisme*.

However, Ting (2009: *ibid*) also pointed out that it was actually the New Economic Policy (NEP) that escalated the effects of ethnic preferential policy to an unprecedented level. Citing Shamsul (1988), she said the disbursement of state resources and the running of the public sector became enmeshed with the logic of ethnic preferential treatment. She also said some Malays even consider this policy as a matter of their birthright justified in the name of Malay special rights without understanding their original intention. Non-Malays who raised critical questions on such practices are viewed as challenging *Ketuanan Melayu*.

Therefore, it is not a surprise that Chinese Malaysians will attract considerable controversy whenever they bring up issues relating to Malay interests, for public discussion. For example, a Chinese movement called *Suqiu* created a storm when the media highlighted

that it had petitioned the government to abolish the distinction between *Bumiputra* (natives or 'sons of the soil') and non-*Bumiputra*. While it was a non-issue when the petition was first presented to the government in 1999, there was a sudden upsurge of media attention on *Suqiu* – particularly from the Malay press controlled by UMNO – a year later.

It is believed that UMNO, which suffered an electoral setback during the 1999 general election, was trying to manipulate the issue to shore up declining Malay support following the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the effects from his *reformasi* movement (Tan, 2000). Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir even equated *Suqiu* with "the communists in the past" while UMNO Youth threatened to burn down the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, where *Suqiu* is based, in Kuala Lumpur. The Chinese associations which created *Suqiu* eventually caved in to UMNO's pressure and retracted their petition on the matter (Gan, 2001).

According to Heng (1996: 43), the bitter experience of the May 13 riots revealed to the Chinese "the indisputable fact of Malay superior power backed up by Malay-controlled military and police forces". In an event of a showdown, the Chinese realised they lacked the means to impose their will on issues of fundamental concern to Malays. As a result, they lowered their expectation and gradually accepted their politically subordinate position in Malaysia. UMNO politicians understood this and manipulated the fear of Chinese Malaysians by resurrecting the images of May 13 racial riots from time to time. Such discourses had powerful chilling effects on the Chinese community with warnings from UMNO politicians of possible racial riots effectively putting most Chinese Malaysians on a self-censorship mode.

Despite the Chinese community acquiescence to Malay political dominance, UMNO politicians continued to play with the racial card. Ethnic tensions were heightened in 2005 when UMNO delegates to the party's annual general assembly openly attacked the non-Malays in their speeches. Referring to Chinese and Indian Malaysians as *pendatang* (immigrants), some of them warned that there would be bloodshed should they challenge *Ketuanan Melayu* or the Malay special rights stated under Article 153 of the Federal Constitution. The climax came when a senior UMNO leader who was also the education minister brandished a *keris* (a traditional Malay dagger) during his speech – a gesture interpreted by many Chinese Malaysians as a death threat against those who oppose his party (Chin and Wong, 2009: 78).

However, Gramsci (1971) said that it is persuasion rather than coercion that is used to secure the consent of the subordinates. In tandem with this, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), which is UMNO's main Chinese partner and the second largest component party in the BN, pacified the Chinese by stressing on the importance of having Chinese representatives who could work with UMNO in the government. Despite the perception of UMNO's dominance over other component parties in the ruling coalition, the MCA argued that any sensitive issues are best negotiated with UMNO behind closed doors. It also tried to frighten Chinese Malaysians by reminding them that the alternative to UMNO rule is the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (better known as *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) in Malay) with its ideology of establishing an Islamic state in Malaysia, which the MCA claimed would be even more repressive towards the Chinese (Lau, 2003).

Yet, the effectiveness of coercion and persuasion from UMNO and MCA respectively as tools for hegemonic control are fast eroding because the Internet is providing the younger generations of Chinese Malaysians with alternative sources of information and ideas. While subordinate groups from the Malay and Indian communities have opted for direct resistance by taking to the streets through the *reformasi* movement and Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) respectively, Chinese Malaysians may be rising above their subordinate position using non-traditional means of social protest. This form of social action can be equally powerful in challenging the legitimacy of ruling elites by undermining their ideology. Over time, they may even spur a subordinate group to more direct forms of social action.

There are noticeable changes in the political attitude of Chinese Malaysians towards the BN-UMNO over the last six years since the watershed UMNO meeting where the *keris* incident took place in 2005. For example, Chinese Malaysians are more willing to join public protests against the government now as seen during the BERSIH 2.0 (Coalition for Free and Fair Elections) rally in Kuala Lumpur in July 2011 (Mahavera, 10 July 2011). More importantly, some scholars (Peppinsky, 2008; Ooi *et al.*, 2009) had highlighted that the rejection of BN by non-Malays, including Chinese Malaysians, was responsible for BN's failure to retain its crucial two-thirds majority in parliament in the 2008 general election (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Malay, Chinese and Indian vote for BN

	1995	1999	2004	2008
Malay	69%	53%	63%	58%
Chinese	56%	62%	65%	35%
Indian	96%	75%	82%	47%

Source: Ooi *et al.* (2008: 38)

For the first time, the predominantly Chinese opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP), with the help of Anwar's People's Justice Party (better known as *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) in Malay), was able to capture the state government of Penang, the only state in Malaysia where the Chinese are the majority. The opposition also captured four other state governments, winning seats in many mixed constituencies where no single ethnic group commanded the majority of voters (Chin and Wong, 2009 :80). Seen as incapable of standing up to UMNO's dominance in the ruling coalition, the two major Chinese-based component parties in the BN, MCA and the Malaysian People's Movement Party (better known as *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (PGRM) in Malay) were severely punished by the Chinese voters (Table 2).

My hypothesis is that the BN-UMNO has lost its hegemonic control over Chinese Malaysians to some extent. Political observers such as Ooi *et al.* (2008) suggest that the 2008 general election may have eclipsed the fear of 13 May 1969. Together with others such as Chin and Wong (2009), they provide accounts on how the phenomenon, which the Malaysian media described as a 'political tsunami' could have occurred.

Table 2: Parliamentary seats won by BN's Chinese-based component parties

BN's Chinese-based component parties	1995	1999	2004	2008
MCA	30	28	31	15
PGRM	7	7	10	2

Sources: Ooi *et al.* (2008: 38); Hwang (2003: 325)

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper will enrich the discussion by looking at the influence of *Namewee's* rap music, which fits Scott's (1990: 83) description of the infrapolitics of subordinate groups. The word 'infrapolitics' (like infrared rays) suggests that *Namewee's* music had been a relatively quiet and unobtrusive political struggle that was not so obvious compared to headline-grabbing protests such as the pro-Anwar's *Reformasi* movement, Hindraf demonstrations and BERSIH rallies. Thus, many scholars overlooked their significance in the bigger picture of national politics. Together with other ordinary (mostly anonymous) Malaysians who spoke out against the ruling coalition on the Internet, the rapper's songs, however, may have facilitated the political tsunami by encouraging more Chinese Malaysians, particularly the younger generation, to abandon the BN in 2008.

According to Scott (1990:202-203), an analysis of the hidden transcript can tell us something about moments that carry the portent of political breakthroughs (in this case, the liberation of Chinese Malaysians from the hegemonic control of BN's political discourses). According to him, the first step in understanding such moments is to place the tone and mood experienced by those who are speaking defiantly for the first time near the centre of our analysis. He reckoned that the people who dare to defy those in power are an essential force in political breakthroughs and their actions may have a strong social impact if they are rooted in the hidden transcript of the subordinate group.

Based on the same premise, this paper explores *Namewee's* music to understand how they may have contributed to what Scott (1990) described as a 'rupture' in the supposedly hegemonic relationship between the BN-UMNO and Chinese Malaysians. Researchers such as Phua and Kong (1996) have noted that music is an important and effective medium for people to express their dissatisfaction with society. It can act as social commentaries with calls to resistance emerging in the lyrics as well as through the sound and general 'feel' of the music. Therefore, I conducted a textual analysis on four of *Namewee's* most controversial rap songs – *Muar Chinese*, *Kawanku*, *Negaraku* – *I Love My Country* and *Internet War* – to identify the various resistive elements in these songs. All of these songs were posted on YouTube prior to the 2008 general elections.

Since the social force of a public act of defiance derives its strengths from the hidden transcript of the subordinate group, this paper will show the links between the messages in Wee's lyrics and the collective experiences of Chinese Malaysians in the years leading to the 2008 general elections. My central argument is that *Namewee's* rap songs resonated with the general sentiment of Chinese Malaysians as they stylishly unleashed the various issues that the community had always kept close to their chests but was unable to say

openly due to fear of various repressive laws and threats of racial riots from UMNO politicians.

While acknowledging that *Namewee* was also subjected to severe criticism (particularly on his use of expletives) from the Chinese community itself, this paper will not question his popularity. It assumes that *Namewee*'s rap songs are sufficiently popular with Chinese Malaysians, especially the younger generations who are Internet-savvy, based on the number of hits for the rapper's MVs posted on YouTube. Koh (2008: 51) said that *Negarakuku* attracted so many hits that it entered the list of top ten most viewed videos on YouTube in July 2007 and it had more than two million hits by 28 November 2007. Another gauge of *Namewee*'s popularity is the success of his film, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* that earned over RM7 million in the local box-office, which is a respectable sum for a low budget local production in Malaysia (*I.M. Magazine*, 2011 : 22).

4. FINDINGS FROM TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

One of the most difficult aspects in attempting to decipher *Namewee*'s lyrics, which are written in the Chinese language incorporating various Malaysian colloquial and street slangs, is finding their equivalent and contextually accurate meanings in English. Some of his words even have several different connotations. In fact, *Namewee* himself said that people misunderstood him because some of the meanings of his songs were lost when people start translating them into English and Malay (*ibid*: 20). Hence, I too cannot claim that my interpretations can fully represent the meaning that the rapper tried to convey through his songs. While trying to be as accurate as possible, my interpretations are guided by what I understand of the hidden transcript of Chinese Malaysians based on their collective experiences in Malaysia.

In general, all four rap songs that were examined for this paper have some hidden transcripts that can be considered as counter-hegemonic discourses against BN-UMNO. Their lyrics have various social commentaries that symbolically resisted the BN, particularly UMNO's ideology of *Ketuanan Melayu*. What is more interesting is the fact that some of the rapper's critiques of the dominant discourse were so explicit (especially in *Negarakuku* and *Internet War*) to the point of suggesting that a political breakthrough among Chinese Malaysians may have occurred at the point in time.

Out of the four songs, *Muar Chinese* is the least explicit in its response to *Ketuanan Melayu* as it only deals with the issue of Malay slurs against the Chinese. This subject was further expanded in *Kawanku*. The rapper's social commentaries became bolder with a parody of the national anthem, *Negaraku* (which also means 'My Country' in Malay) in *Negarakuku – I Love My Country*. The song title itself is a mischievous play on the words 'negara' (Malay for "country") and 'kuku' which could be derived from either 'kukubird', a colloquial that refers to the male genitalia, or 'cuckoo' which means someone who is crazy. Unsurprisingly, Wee was reprimanded by BN-UMNO politicians for the song and was pressured to apologise. However, the rapper returned to lambast the ruling coalition with another MV called *Internet War*.

There were various themes in *Muar Chinese* that diluted the significance of its critique against *Ketuanan Melayu*. According to Koh, (2008: 60), the song was a statement against

“three different types of cultural hegemony in Malaysia”, namely the notion of a standard spoken Mandarin Chinese, the representation of Chinese Malaysian as essentially Cantonese, and the conceptualisation of Malaysian culture as Malay-Muslim. In this song, the rapper responded to a particular Malay slur (*cina babi*) by pointing out that the Chinese were mainly responsible for developing the economy of places such as his hometown in Muar.

You say – I'm a 'cina babi' (Malay slur translated as 'Chinese pigs').

I say – You're a “pantat mangkok kuih koci” (Malay slur referring to the female genitalia).

This small place is developed by the Chinese.

If you're really that great, don't just make “pull tea” (known as “teh tarik” in Malay, a famous Malaysian beverage)

If you want me to praise you, why don't you go to make furniture in Parit Bakar?

(Parit Bakar is a place in Muar famous for its furniture industry run mostly by small and medium Chinese entrepreneurs.)

(Wee, 2007: 7 March)

Namewee expanded on the major themes in Muar Chinese in his next MV, *Kawanku*. Among others, he continued to lash out against the Cantonese dialect's preeminence among Chinese Malaysians. He also highlighted some of his cynical views about Singapore and the republic's elder statesman, Lee Kuan Yew, for suppressing the people's freedom of thought. However, the rapper is equally critical of Malay slurs against the Chinese, which I consider as an indirect consequence of *Ketuanan Melayu*. The rapper dedicated the song to all his friends and I suspect he intended to convey a message to his Malay friends as the part commenting on the matter was performed in the Malay language.

Say again – Cina balik Cina (Malay slur for “Chinese go back to China”)

If everyone goes back, this is not Malaysia

I'm afraid where you'll go to look for a job

But it's normal because the Malays don't like to work

All go into the jungles live like 'sakai' (Sakai is an aboriginal tribe in Malaysia)

Want to play the guitar but there's no shop

Want to become “mat rempit” (Malay description of motorcycle bums) but there's no motorcycle

There'll be one holiday less because there's no Chinese New Year

Don't fight anymore

Boy, open your mind

This country doesn't consist of just one race

Cina babi (Malay words for 'Chinese pig') – *don't say anymore*

But I must say – 'bak kut teh' (Chinese Malaysian herbal pork rib cuisine) is very delicious

Malay language I speak like shit (meaning he is not proficient in Malay)

But this is my real feeling

It's already 50 years (of independence), *everyday sleeping*

Look forward – 2020 (refers to Vision 2020, proposed by former Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a target for Malaysia to achieve a developed country status)

(Wee, 2007: 24 July)

Besides the retorts against Malay slurs, *Namewee* made no direct reference to criticising the ruling coalition in the song. It was his third MV called *Negarakuku – I Love My Country* that made a mockery of BN-UMNO and their policies. There were three fundamental themes in *Negarakuku*, namely the corruption of the police and inefficiency of the civil service, the 'unequal treatment' of Chinese in Malaysia, especially towards independent Chinese school-leavers, and the acquiescence of the majority of the ethnic Chinese in the country (Koh, 2008: 53). The following are the rapper's allusion to the corruption of Malaysian police, vis-à-vis the Chinese as their source for bribes.

Our police are known as 'mata' (a colloquial often used by Chinese Malaysians; originates from the Malay word 'mata-mata' which means 'police')

It's because their eyes are very sharp

During Chinese New Year, they'll be very hardworking taking out their pens

But they'll seldom give you a 'saman' (Malay word for 'summon') because they're very thirsty and need to drink tea

There'll also be 'kopi-o' (Malaysian colloquial for black coffee) whether to add sugar

If you add 'sugar', they'll smile sweetly at you

And when you're leaving, they'll even say 'tata' (colloquial for 'good bye') to you

(Wee, 2007 July 24)

(Note: Colloquial Malay for bribe is 'duit kopi' or 'coffee money'.)

According to Crouch (1996: 130), UMNO's domination of Malaysia's political system was backed by the Malay elite's domination of the institutional pillars of the state, including the bureaucracy and the police force. The Malays came to dominate both upper and lower echelons of the civil service with the implementation of the NEP in the 1970s. The lack of

meritocracy in the recruitment of civil servants due to BN-UMNO's ethnic preferential policy is cited by some people as the primary reason for Malaysia's bureaucratic inefficiencies (Crouch, 1996: 132). The following are *Namewee*'s descriptions of the 'lazy bureaucrats' in *Negarakuku*.

*Those who sit in government offices are better
 Everything they do can be done slowly
 Until those who are waiting want to curse smelly 'lelai' (likely a distorted
 pronunciation of a colloquial Hokkien which refers to the female genitalia)
 They (civil servants) will still feel carefree
 Sometimes they even take out their 'kuih' (Malay word for "desserts")
 They'll eat their 'nyonya kuih' while you continue waiting
 Even if you curse smelly 'lelai'
 Don't worry – the guard next to you is still dreaming
 He won't bug you
 (Wee, 2007: 24 July)*

Koh (2008: 62) suggests that the rapper is basically frustrated with the refusal of the Malaysian government and its Malay-Muslim majority to acknowledge the place of Chinese and Indian Malaysians, treating them as 'perennial outsiders'. The following reveals how *Namewee* sarcastically urged Chinese Malaysians not to complain but to look at the positive aspects of the government's 'unequal treatment' against them.

*Don't blame the government for only taking care of the natives
 Don't blame the government for not treating us fairly
 This shows that we the Chinese are not afraid of hardship
 This shows we can find our way out
 Don't think that this policy is very funny
 It'll only prove we are good
 Only the unspoiled child does not rely on others
 Otherwise you still see those who haven't stop feeding on their mothers' milk
 (Wee, 2007: 24 July)*

However, the 'unequal treatment' closest to the rapper's heart is the plight of independent Chinese high school students in Malaysia. Education has been a sore point of contention between BN-UMNO and Chinese Malaysians ever since the government introduced a policy to convert English-medium schools to Malay in 1970. As a result, many Chinese Malaysian parents, who preferred to send their children to English-medium schools,

switched to Chinese primary schools. This revived the independent Chinese schools, which have their own curriculum but without government support (Crouch, 1996: 160-161). Most independent Chinese school-leavers, including *Namewee* himself, had to go abroad for their tertiary education. As of today, the government does not recognise the certificates issued by these schools for admission into public universities.

Independent Chinese school students who want to enter local universities so difficult

Actually we don't need to be pissed off with this

It's a great plan by the government to make us go everywhere, go abroad to find opportunities

After that we can come back to repay our country

This plan is so good there's no word to describe it

Everywhere you can find Malaysians

They're like refugees – it's so fun

2007 – "Visit Malaysia Year"

Chinese culture is highlighted for promotion

Independent Chinese school students the government basically doesn't want to care

Certificates can throw into the 'longkang' (a colloquial used by Chinese Malaysians, Malay word for 'drains')

Just like me, finished secondary school and go to Taiwan

After learning something come back to help the country

(Wee, 2007: 24 July)

Following the publicity on *Negarakuku*, the government and the Malay press went on an offensive against *Namewee* – similar to what happened to *Suqiu* seven years earlier. Political pressure, together with persuasion from MCA leader and then Health Minister, Dr Chua Soi Lek, forced the rapper to tender a public apology through his father. However, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz, said that the Cabinet was not in the position to forgive him and the law would have to take its course (Loh, 2007).

Citing Reactance Theory (Brehm and Brehm, 1981), Scott (1990: 109) has highlighted that forced compliance would always fail to produce attitudes sustaining compliance but "produces reaction against such attitudes." Although the use of threat and coercion can force a person to comply, they also increase the person's covert reactance. Likewise, the *Negarakuku* episode was actually a turning point that motivated the rapper to reassert his

points of view more forcefully when the opportunity arose. Compared to his earlier songs, his next MV called *Internet War* was even more caustic of the BN-UMNO.

Your mother's useless weighing scale already tilted to one side (weighing scale is a BN symbol; most likely to refer to the ruling coalition)

I'll use "san zi jing" (Mandarin for "Three Character Classics", a classical text for children) because I'm not sufficiently literate

But don't worry – I can also use ABC

If I'm not happy, I'll scold a few words

I smear other people's reputation? – Better than being corrupt officials

Look – I'll give them (corrupt officials) a few words

PKM you... "Ah Ding" (it's unclear who "Ah Ding" is but most likely a senior UMNO politician who had criticized Wee)

Listen carefully... PKM you... "Ah Ding" (PKM is an acronym for Malay expletives referring to the female genitalia)

You talk dog fart grand philosophy till you're sweating all over

Rather than listening to you, it's better for me to go online watch AV (acronym for adult video)

You may use White Terror but we can fight back with our writings

Let everyone in the world know and make you look bad

(Wee, 2007: 31 October)

Even though *Namewee* did not mention any name, it was obvious that his criticisms were directed at BN politicians, particularly with his reference to the 'weighing scale' which is also the symbol of the ruling coalition. Here, he accused these politicians as merely spouting empty moral arguments (which he referred to as "dog fart grand philosophy" in Mandarin) and suggested that to be seditious/defamatory (as he what he was accused of doing through his music) is better than being corrupt. The rapper also warned that he would retaliate with words if they threaten him. With the Internet, he could expose to the world what the UMNO politicians were doing to him and this would tarnish their reputation (Koh, 2008: 67).

Besides acerbic comments on the ruling coalition's authoritarianism and corruption, *Internet War* was unique because its profanities were coded in acronyms. In the song, *Namewee* repeatedly mentioned TMD CCB and KNNABCCB, which are acronyms for some offensive colloquial Hokkien expletives referring to a person's mother's genitalia. The rapper also demonstrated his flair in the Chinese language with his imaginative use of Chinese proverbs and nuances to get his point across to the audience, particularly the Chinese Malaysians. He even saw the underlying social movements on the Internet that were changing the political landscape in his country – one that caught the BN-UMNO by surprise.

Shit talking politicians cannot run away

My blog has become a platform to expose scandals

No matter what the politicians say they can't escape the people's judgment

Hiding evidence can't cover the people's anger

Changing (political) strategies can't change the people's perception

Covering people's mouth can't take away my keyboard

Censoring news also can't stop information from spreading on the Internet

(Wee, 2007: 31 October)

Interestingly, an Internet war actually occurred prior to the 2008 General Election. While the rapper was talking about a possible cyberwar against the BN, there was already a legion of pro-Opposition bloggers such as Raja Petra Kamaruddin and Nathaniel Tan who were battling the BN on the Internet. In these battles for the hearts and minds of Malaysians, the Opposition emerged victorious. Even the then Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, conceded that the ruling coalition had under-estimated the power of the Internet that allowed the Opposition to capture a record number of seats. Conceding defeat, Abdullah said: "In the last election, we certainly lost the Internet war, the cyber war." (*Malaysiakini*, 2008: 25 March)

5. WHY NAMEWEE'S MUSIC RESONATES WITH CHINESE MALAYSIANS

We can simply say that *Namewee's* music resonates with Chinese Malaysians because the rapper is charismatic and has a forceful character, in the same vein as Scott's (1990) example of a Mrs Poyser who spoke out against her landlord. Like other popular singers, he would be able to influence certain people, particularly those from the younger generations, through his music. In fact, there are parallels between *Namewee* and other rappers such as the Hong Kong rap group LMF. Like *Namewee*, LMF's rap songs highlighted various social issues and were characterised by the use of expletives. According to Ma (2002), one of the reasons for LMF's popularity among teenagers is due to its ability to create strong "emotional energies", a concept he derived from Collins' (1990) sociology of emotions.

While I do not deny *Namewee's* musical talent or his ability to create strong "emotional energies", Scott (1990: 221) had pointed out the complete surrender of the personal will (in this case, among Chinese Malaysians as a subordinate group) to a charismatic figure is a rare phenomenon. In tandem with Scott's argument, I suggest that the real source of *Namewee's* charisma is his personal courage in speaking out the hidden transcripts of Chinese Malaysians in the face of power. Sociologists have pointed out that charisma is relational since it is something that others confer upon a person (Scott, 1990: *ibid*). From this perspective, I will add that *Namewee's* charisma is derived from other people's recognition of his messages and admiration of his courage to say them openly. Chinese Malaysians became attracted to his music because they "quite genuinely recognised themselves" in his

songs and the rapper “quite genuinely speaks for them” (Scott, 1990: 222). In a nutshell, *Namewee*'s songs reflect their collective anguish for having to endure the indignation inflicted by UMNO politicians.

On the issue of dignity, UMNO politicians' error was taking the non-Malays, particularly Chinese Malaysians, whom they thought could be easily cowed into submission, as a convenient punching bag to shore up eroding Malay support. While Chinese Malaysians craved for political stability, they also care about 'saving face' as much as the Malays. It is very common for the Chinese to talk about '*mian zhi*' (face), which is similar to the Malay concept of '*air muka*'. Instead of giving face to the Chinese for backing the ruling coalition throughout the 1990s, UMNO politicians repaid the favour by insulting and stigmatising them to achieve their own political agenda.

Although Chinese Malaysians could accept (albeit grudgingly) the ruling coalition's ethnic preferential policies since the 1970s (Saravanamuttu, 2002), they could not take the increasing insults inflicted by UMNO politicians in recent years, to the point that they overcame their inhibitions. This partly explains why they were willing to take the risks of abandoning the BN in the 2008 general elections even though they were not keen with the alternatives offered by the Opposition parties, particularly the prospect of an Islamic state proposed by PAS. Scholars had suggested that the majority of Chinese supported the BN in the 1995 and 1999 general elections due to the ruling coalition's greater emphasis on the discourse of 'developmentalism' (Loh, 2002), and their fear of a theocratic 'Islamic state' should PAS form the government (Chin, 2001), respectively.

There were various incidents that injured the Chinese Malaysian's dignity over the past 12 years but I would consider the *Suqiu* controversy in 2000 as one of the most humiliating episodes for the community. *Suqiu*, which means 'appeal' in Chinese, refers to an electoral memorandum signed by more than 2,000 Chinese organizations. There were various proposals in the memorandum, including a suggestion for the government to consider abolishing the distinction between *Bumiputra* and non-*Bumiputra*. For this, the *Suqiu* committee that drafted the memorandum received violent threats from the UMNO youth wing and was even given a public dressing down by the prime minister who described them as akin to the 'communists' during the national day speech that was televised live that year.

Eventually, the *Suqiu* committee, comprising Chinese community leaders, was forced to 'admit defeat' and retracted the part of their appeals that UMNO deemed as 'seditious'. With good intention, these community leaders actually thought that the BN would welcome their appeals, which were first presented to the ruling coalition prior to the 1999 general elections (Ramakrishnan, 2000). They had not imagined that the issue would become so politicised. The public nature of this controversy also made it difficult for the community leaders to gracefully '*xia tai*' (Chinese for 'exiting the stage') and the repudiation of their appeals by UMNO was a slap in the face for the Chinese community as a whole.

However, I believe that the straw that broke the camel's back were the antics of UMNO politicians during the party's general assembly for several years prior to the general elections in 2008. One of the most provocative acts in the eyes of Chinese Malaysians was the wielding of the *keris* ceremony, introduced at the UMNO Youth's general assembly in 2005. For three consecutive years, UMNO Youth held a procession carrying the *keris* to the

meeting hall, where the traditional weapon was handed to the party's youth chief, Hishammuddin Hussein, who unsheathed and kissed it.

On its own, the *keris* wielding ritual is a Malay cultural ceremony that carries no symbolic meaning to the Chinese. To make sense of its significance, it must be seen in the context of what happened during UMNO's meeting in 2004. At the assembly, the party's newly elected deputy chairperson Badruddin Amiruldin brandished a book on the 1969 racial riots and said those who questioned Malay rights were akin to stirring a hornets' nest. "Let no one from the other races ever question the rights of Malays on this land. Don't question the religion because this is my right on this land," he warned. (Gatsiounis, 2004).

Meanwhile, UMNO Youth executive council member Dr Pirdaus Ismail, who defended Badruddin's statement, said they should remind 'Chinese chauvinists' not to question Malay privileges. He said: "Badruddin did not pose the question to all Chinese in the country... Those who are with us, who hold the same understanding as we do, were not our target. In defending Malay rights, we direct our voice at those who question them" (Gatsiounis, 2004)

UMNO Youth further aggravated the Chinese in 2006 with more controversial statements from some delegates to its annual meeting. For example, Malacca's delegate Hasnoor Sidang Hussein said, "UMNO is willing to risk lives and bathe in blood in defence of race and religion" while UMNO Youth executive council member Azimi Daim said, "when tension rises, the blood of Malay warriors will run in our veins". The most alarming statement, however, was made by Hashim Suboh, who was a delegate from Perlis. Directing his question to the UMNO Youth chief, he asked: "Datuk Hisham has unsheathed his *keris*, waved his *keris*, kissed his *keris*. We want to ask Datuk Hisham when he is going to use it" (*New Straits Times*, 2006)

Despite concerns among Chinese Malaysians of the *keris* wielding ceremony and insensitive remarks made by UMNO delegates, Hishammuddin wielded the *keris* again during the UMNO Youth meeting in 2007. He defended his action by explaining that the ritual's objective was to inject a new spirit among younger Malays and he had no ulterior motives. It was only after the general elections in 2008 that Hishammuddin apologised to the non-Malays for their fear and admitted that the *keris* wielding ceremony was among the causes of BN-UMNO's poor electoral performance (*The Star*, 2008)

In view of these, I would suggest that *Namewee's* music also resonates with Chinese Malaysians as it helped them restore some of their lost sense of dignity by speaking back to BN-UMNO. According to Scott (1990), subordinate groups would experience some sort of psychological release in their expression of 'truth' in the teeth of power. The Chinese community as a subordinate group vis-à-vis the UMNO would find the unleashing of their hidden transcripts via *Namewee's* rap songs offering immense satisfaction as they have been containing their pent-up frustrations for many years.

Notwithstanding UMNO's increasingly racial rhetorics in recent years prior to 2008, Chinese Malaysians' unhappiness with the BN can be traced back to the early 1970s when the government started implementing more discriminatory policies. Due to the fear of ethnic conflict or being arrested for sedition, they would usually remain silent on these issues even though some Chinese politicians would discuss them from time to time. However,

unlike the majority of ordinary Chinese Malaysians, *Namewee* was courageous (or foolish) enough to say something about them in his rap songs. By revealing what they had been suppressing, "it was as if a dam impounding their hidden transcripts had suddenly broken", to borrow Scott's (1990: 211) words to describe such a scenario.

Namewee's rap songs can also be seen as publicly avenging for the humiliations of Chinese Malaysians at the hands of UMNO politicians. Scott (1990: 214-215) pointed out that "to speak of a loss of dignity and status is necessary to speak of a public loss" and "a public humiliation can only be fully reciprocated only with a public revenge". For example, the Chinese could privately complain about how UMNO politicians denigrated them, but these could hardly compare with "a public assertion of honour or a public turning of the tables, preferably before the same audience", again, to borrow Scott's (1990: 215) words. This is exactly what *Namewee* achieved with his rap songs. Many Chinese Malaysians watched on television how UMNO politicians threatened them by wielding the *keris* and labelled them as outsiders but they also could see how the rapper responded in kind on the Internet.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that there are various counter-hegemonic elements in *Namewee*'s music that symbolically challenged the BN-UMNO's political discourses. However, their resistive potentials are tied to the hidden transcripts of Chinese Malaysians as a subordinate group vis-à-vis the ruling coalition. *Namewee*'s music resonates with them because the messages in his songs concur with their hidden transcripts. They would be less appealing if they undermine or do not accurately reflect the social reality in Malaysia. His songs are popular as there are not many channels that allow the Chinese Malaysians to publicly reassert their sense of pride and reclaim their dignity from the ruling elites, whom they perceive as increasingly arrogant and repressive.

Koh (2008: 67) points out that *Namewee*'s songs were initially "an expression of personal frustration to be shared among friends and fellow bloggers." In the larger context, however, this paper has shown that his music can become more than just an artistic expression of personal frustration. According to Phua and Kong (1996), culture is often political and can be appropriated for political ends. Even in a politically conservative country such as Singapore, there are alternative rock bands that use music to express their views of societal problems and as a call to resist against the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP). In a similar fashion, *Namewee*'s music responded against BN's political discourses, particularly UMNO's Malay-centric vision for Malaysia as a nation and the collective indignity it entailed for the non-Malays.

Besides the notion of psychological release, the resonance of the rapper's music is another indicator on whether Chinese Malaysians will support the BN-UMNO in the immediate future. Unlike previously, it would be difficult for the ruling elites to threaten them anymore using scare tactics. BN's discourses that manipulated Chinese Malaysians' fear of a racial conflict on one hand and the spectre of an even more repressive Islamic state on the other may no longer be as effective as they were in the past. The efficacy of symbolic resistance lies in the fact that every vote matters in competitive elections. Political parties

that want to win elections must endear themselves to as many people as possible, including the various subordinate groups.

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