

The Subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese from the Philosophical Perspective¹

WANG Ruixin^{*}

Abstract

The Chinese first settled down in Melaka some 600 years ago. With the imposition of British colonial rule, they settled in other parts of Malaysia and contributed to the development of the land. However, the “subjective” status of Malaysian Chinese has hitherto been a neglected subject of study and has received scant attention by Malaysian society or the academic community. This study of the past, present and future of the subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese from the philosophical perspective is meant to provide insights into the construction of subjectivity and to suggest the manner by which the Chinese may become a more autonomous and self-conscious community. With the recent trends in regional developments especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese community could play an active role to realize the aims and spirit of the initiative and hence to attain a greater sense of subjectivity and fulfillment.

Key words: Malaysia, Chinese community, subjectivity, philosophical perspective

Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country consisting of the Malays, Chinese, Indians and numerous indigenous communities of Sabah and Sarawak. The Chinese make up the second largest ethnic group of the country and first settled down in the Malay Peninsula as early as 600 centuries ago. They have made significant contributions to the country’s economic advancement and the creation of wealth. Through constant self-advancement and practical applications, they have integrated themselves into the process of the historical progress of the country, and hence have stamped their role as major actor in the nation-building process.

The Federation of Malaya became independent in 1957 and it merged with Sabah and Sarawak in 1963 to form Malaysia. Ethnic clashes in 1969 was a pivotal event that led to

^{*} Dr. WANG Ruixin (王睿欣) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education, New Era University College, Kajang, Malaysia. E-mail: ruixin.wang@newera.edu.my

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radical changes in economic policies driven by considerations of ethnicity. Malaysian citizens were dichotomized into Bumiputera (son of the soil) who symbolize the indigenous or native populations and non-Bumiputera who represent the Chinese, Indians and “Others”. A New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented in 1970 with specific objectives aimed at targeted communities.

Equally significant for the conduct of ethnic relations, independence confers certain special rights to the Malay and native races and citizenship to the non-natives. This consensus translates into dominant political position of the former, especially the Malays, to counterbalance the economic “domination” of the latter, largely though always accurately, identified as the Chinese. These domestic realities as arising from ethnic disparities of power and influence in the political and economic spheres of activities have far-reaching implications on the issue of “subjectivity” of different communities.

Recent trends of development in regional affairs may prove to be relevant to the issue of the subjectivity of the Chinese community. A development of particular impact is the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road proposed by China in 2013 and links maritime countries in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. This in fact is the maritime component of the Belt and Road Initiative which also comprises an overland Economic Silk Road across the Eurasian landmass (王义桅/Wang Yiwei, 2015).

Malaysia is currently Southeast Asia’s largest trading partner of China and is seen as a major player of BRI. The Malaysian Chinese, with relatively their well-developed Chinese education, community organizations and mass media, may collectively play a positive and constructive role in contributing to the progress and deepening the relationship between Malaysia and China. Given the fact that the Chinese are a key player in the economic and social development of Malaysia, China is looking upon them to assume a positive role as a bridge in advancing bilateral relations and to play an important role in the implementation of BRI projects and co-operation (新华网/Xinhuanet, 2013). The overall positive impact arising from this external reality of inter-regional connectivity may help Malaysian Chinese to better realize their subjectivity.

The issue of subjectivity has hitherto received scant attention by the Chinese or researchers. This study will examine the idea of subjectivity of the Chinese community from a philosophical perspective. There is insufficient understanding of the theoretical basis of the subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese and their social practices, and so also the general lack of concern for and a weak sense of subjective consciousness within Chinese society. Hence in focusing on the subjectivity of the Chinese from a philosophical perspective, the attempt to examine this issue with reference to the historical background of development and self-advancement of the Chinese will help in the theoretical understanding of the construction of the Chinese ethnic entity. A better understanding of the subjectivity of the Chinese community is not only relevant to realize the need to be and act for themselves but also that they may clearly recognize their intrinsic role in the nation-building process as the citizens of the country.

Subjectivity: The Theoretical Basis of the Construction of Malaysian Chinese as an Ethnic Group

According to Johnson (2000: 317), the “concept of subjectivity refers to our self-conscious awareness or perception of something, including ourselves. It is the point of view that we adopt as individual perceivers and knowers.” The “subject” is a person who carries out all kinds of practical activities in the capacity an individual, an organization, a community or even all human beings. Through practical activities, a person engages in a subject-object relationship and by becoming the creator and promoter of this relationship, he gains, displays and confirms his power, function and status. Therefore, the person must serve as the subject to gain subjectivity through understanding and changing specific conditions or situations of society, in a conscious process that may indicate a person’s initiative, creativity and independent position and character (李德顺/Li Deshun, 1987).

During the historical process of contributing to the development of Malaysia, the Chinese community has experienced a process of gradually forming and realizing their subjectivity through the display of their initiatives, creative resources, and autonomous character. This subjectivity crystallizes in the context not only of the objective realities of Malaysia’s political, economic, cultural and educational affairs, but also in that of subject-object relations in the social interactions among the Chinese and other ethnic communities. Through the practical activities arising from these two relationships, the Chinese have been able to settle down peacefully in the country and to continuously develop its societal power and subjectivity. The more the Chinese are conscious of their subjectivity, the stronger their independent, self-conscious and autonomous self-development, and consequently the stronger their sense of community. In short, the establishment and formation of subjectivity are the key to the construction of the Malaysian Chinese as an ethnic group.

The Chinese community is finding itself in a new era that calls out for and also encourages a sense stronger of subjectivity. Under the progressive impact of BRI, the issue of the subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese is no longer a theoretical issue but one of practical concern relating to the well-being and advancement of the community, and one that is intimately linked to the stability and progress of the Malaysian society. Indeed, the subjectivity of the Chinese has to be established through and to emphasize the social practices and performance of the community. This is because “the subjectivity status of an entity is formed and displayed through practical actions” (袁贵仁/Yuan Guiren, 1988: 25).

Malaysian Chinese in History: The Suppressed Subjectivity

From the era of the Melaka sultanate until the end of the colonial period spanning over several hundred years, the Chinese, looked upon by their home country as having settled overseas, had retained their more obvious “China” attributes in their self-consciousness and

perceptions. Their subjectivity that began to form was reflected through their daily activities and practices in a colonial society.

Practical Activities of the Chinese in the Colonial Period

The subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese was first reflected in economic activities through their labour resources. The early period of Malayan development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the opening of the ports of Penang and Singapore, followed by tin mining and rubber and oil palm production in inland districts. These were pioneered by the Chinese and in turn attracted large inflows of Chinese workers. As workers in the mines, plantations and farms, small towns and ports, their contributions and influence on the Malaysian economy were more significant than those of other ethnic groups (Chai, 1967; Lim, 1967; 李其荣/Li Qirong, 2010). Additionally, they were entrepreneurs who initiated the age of capitalism in Malaya. With the limited capital and “their own wealth, and the tactful use of ethnic organization and secret societies, they helped to build and develop the capital and market network” (Tarling, 1999: 143; Tai, 2013). However, in the early development of the Malayan economy, they assumed a subsidiary position as their capital was over-shadowed by colonial capital and enterprises (Jackson, 1968; 韩方明/Han Fangming, 2002).

Living in a land with its sultanate and a superimposed colonial structure, early Chinese communities were preoccupied with livelihood issues while those that affected their legitimate status were not of central concern. The absence of any political awareness did much to discourage attempts to be involved in the broader issues of the land. The Chinese were largely small producers and petty traders and retailers. The capital-intensive sectors were primarily held in the hands of the Western capitalist enterprises while the Chinese were the intermediaries between them and local farmers (Allen and Donnithorne, 1962).

The economic presence and influence of the Chinese community were confined to in the port cities, the towns and tin- and rubber-producing areas. Apart from the preoccupation with their livelihood, their other concerns were to develop and manage their internal social and cultural infrastructure at the local level. One of their primary commitments was to provide education for their children through community efforts to establish schools and to teach, among other subjects, the Chinese language. These efforts have cumulatively led to the establishment of schools numbering more than a thousand at the primary level and respectively 60 and several at the secondary and tertiary levels (郑良树/Tay Lian Soo, 1998-2003; 莫顺生/Mok Soon Sang, 2017). Collectively, these educational institutions have become a major cultural resource and heritage of the Chinese.

The 1919 May Fourth Movement in China was a pivotal socio-cultural event that aroused the patriotic sentiments of local Chinese. Their schools began to adopt Mandarin as the medium of instruction. With the increase in literacy and education, Chinese newspapers and magazines began to appear and enjoyed popular support as means to enrich the cultural life of the

community. At the same time, local Chinese communities in the towns set up places of worship and organizations based on ancestral village origins, clans, dialects as well as occupational affinities. These collective social assets, to a large extent, provided the generic socio-cultural elements of community identity of the Chinese. Overall, however, their presence was localized and too segregated to exert any impact on an organized or national scale to give rise to a society sharing a sense of living or prospering as a coherent community (颜清湟/Yen Ching Hwang, 2005).

Manifestation of the Subjectivity of the Chinese in the Colonial Period

The function and influence of the Chinese community during the colonial period were mainly based on their economic and cultural activities. Despite their large physical presence in some economic sectors, their influence was very much subdued. Their cultural promotion activities were confined within the community and had little direct impact on the society at large. In colonial politics, the Chinese were passive onlookers and their influence was almost absent. All in all, Chinese initiative and subjectivity began to show during this period but were still lacking in the ability to act independently or to make their own decision in the wider context. The objective realities then did not allow the Chinese the freedom to act or decide independently or to exercise their rights freely.

From the subjective perspective of the Chinese, their status as early immigrants had led them to preserve their “China” attributes and a sense of the transient nature of their community which led them to maintain their cultural affinity to China. They retained and passed down Chinese traditional thoughts and customs through practice and in the schools (许云樵/Xu Yunqiao and 蔡史君/Cai Shijun, 1984). Besides playing an important role in the maritime trade between China and Malaya, their political activities were influenced by affairs in China. This can be seen in their support for and assistance in China’s war of resistance against Japan. These “China” attributes and the urge among many to save enough to return to their home villages created an “immigrant consciousness” that discouraged them to act like permanent settlers or to possess a sense of attachment to the land as rightful partners.

From the objective perspective of the colonial period, Malayan society was subjected to the interplay of three kinds of forces, namely, traditionalism, colonialism and modernism. The traditional power structure of the sultanate and the *rakyat* (subjects) was submerged under the growing domination of colonial rule. At the same time, elements of modern governance and administration and the progress in economic and infrastructure developments improved the livelihood of the people. Corresponding to politics, the economic structure was also a combination of the dominant colonial export economy, the traditional subsistence economy in a subordinate position, and the labour-intensive mining, rubber planting and petty trade economy in which the Chinese were largely occupied in an intermediate position. This situation created a dualistic economy in which the Malays lived in rural villages and tied down to rice farming

and smallholder rubber production, and the Chinese were found in the towns and outskirts to engage as workers and small owners in a cash economy consisting of rubber production, mining and trading (see Lim, 1967; 李毅/Li Yi, 2003). Under the colonial umbrella of British rule, the sultans symbolized Malay sovereignty of the states comprising the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang and the Unfederated Malay States of Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu. This had enabled the Malays to engage in administrative and political activities. In contrast, the Chinese community, burdened by their China ties and an aversion to politics, were much more interested in profit-generating activities. This colonial policy of “divide and rule” that led to the separation of ethnic communities in different economic niches created the underlying cause of communal problems after independence.

Characteristics of the Subjectivity of the Chinese in the Colonial Era

The subjective and objective realities prevailing in the colonial era were to a great extent to constrain the autonomy of Chinese subjectivity. Other than their emotional ties to China, the Chinese had to pursue their livelihood within the confines of colonial control and the local Malay environment. They were in no position to withstand oppression or resist unreasonable or arbitrary rulings, neither did they able to affect the *status quo* to act with greater autonomy. In short, they were rather powerless to alter their own subjective reality or the broader objective reality of colonial society. It was under these political and economic objective realities and their lack of subjectivity that had led the community to be “subdued” and be manipulated for their “instrumental value”, to an extent that they had little autonomy in deciding their larger political and economic fate in their relations with the colonial ruler and the Malay community. Due to the absence of a strong initiative in building subjectivity and the lack of autonomy in their own practical activities, the impact and influence of the Chinese was spatially confined. This had further impeded the realization of their subjectivity and, more seriously, their inability to take the initiative or fully exploit their creativity to boost a greater sense of the Chinese as an integrated ethnic group.

Reconstructing Chinese Subjectivity

Malaysia gained its independence from Great Britain through the united efforts of the Malays, Chinese and Indian communities. They founded a political alliance to form a government to embark on the road to development and modernization. The post-independence period witnessed the Chinese, as citizens of the country, began to deepen their sense of belonging. Through direct participation in the national development process, their subjectivity became more firmly established. It is clear that the influence of an immigrant community in a country would grow when they are able to change their uncertain status to become citizens (韩方明/Han Fangming, 2002).

Practical Activities of the Chinese in the Development Process of Malaysia

The subjectivity of the Chinese was largely manifested through the development process. They were a major source of human resources that drove the development process. With a generally higher level of education than other ethnic groups and having better access to capital, they took advantage of the *laissez faire* development policy to engage in a diverse field of economic activities in the primary, secondary and tertiary industries as well in the technical and professional services. The colonial policy had produced a pattern of development in which different ethnic communities were identified with specific economic activities and the prevalence of widespread rural poverty. General discontent led to serious ethnic clashes in 1969. The government had to implement the NEP from 1970 with the dual objectives of raising the economic participation of the Malays and other indigenous communities, collectively known as Bumiputera, and to eradicate poverty (see Gomez, 1999 and 2003). In attempts to raise the economic performance of the Bumiputera, a series of preferential measures were put into effect. The economic space of the Chinese community was to some extent adversely affected. Chinese capital was confronted by problems that hampered some businesses. Some Chinese companies shifted their operations overseas while others opted to join hands with Bumiputera capital. Under these circumstances, many Chinese companies were forced to innovate and modernize (see Chin, 1915; 颜清煌/Yen Ching Hwang, 2009). During the 1990s, the introduction of the “National Development Policy” opened up more opportunities for Chinese capital which was granted access to national development projects and became more deeply engaged in the manufacturing, finance, energy and transportation sectors. The aggregate worth of Chinese capital has thus expanded substantially. Apart from gaining influence locally, Chinese capital is now more internationalized than before. The importance of Chinese business in the Malaysian economy is well acknowledged. Today it is ranked among the topmost in aggregate size and influence among Chinese business communities outside Greater China.

The subjectivity of the Chinese is progressively manifested in the arena of political affairs of the country. The Chinese role in Malaysian politics began to gain momentum in the post-independence period. From the domination of a single Chinese political party, namely, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), which was one of the three parties involved in the series of independence negotiations with Britain in the 1950s, the Chinese political scene has become more vibrant with the presence of several more parties. In the 60 years to 2018 that the MCA, and later on the Gerakan, were members of the National Front (Barisan Nasional) government, selected party heavyweights were appointed to ministerial posts under the dominant leadership of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) whose senior leaders occupied the prime ministership and other major portfolios. In 2018, the coalition was deposed by a new multi-ethnic coalition of which the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) was one of the driving forces that brought about the change.

Whether in or out of the government, the mandate of all Chinese-based political parties was and will be to safeguard the rights of the Chinese community. Despite their declining

presence in the population, the votes of the Chinese electorate have always been crucial for any coalition hoping to win a general election. This fact has also resulted in the political appeal of the Chinese votes to political parties of all shades of ideology (梅玫/Mei Mei and 许开软/Xu Kairuan, 2014).

In the 14th General Election in 2018, the coalition known as Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan) consisting of a Malay, an Islam-based, and two multi-ethnic parties succeeded to form a new government after 60 years. Of the two multi-ethnic parties, the DAP has a large Chinese component, whereas the Malays form the core of the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat). Having won a considerable number of parliamentary seats, the DAP nominated several Chinese as well as Indians and Malays for appointment to ministerial and other executive positions. The party also succeeded in retaining the state government of Penang.

Apart from this, the Chinese community has established more than 7,000 officially registered non-political organizations known as *huiguan* (clan and other associations of diverse affiliations) working for and safeguarding the rights and well-being of the Chinese. As civil societies, they provide important channels to communicate with the government directly to voice the grievances and requests of the Chinese to ensure the overall interests of the community (许梅/Xu Mei, 2004: 62; 文平强/Voon Phin Keong, 2018).

The subjectivity of the Chinese has also gradually formed through the advancement in the areas of education and culture. The community began to organize Chinese schools 200 years ago. A relatively complete primary to tertiary educational system has been put in place. Boasting almost a tenth of a million full-time students from all levels of society, the system is more complete than any other outside Greater China. Significantly, the number of non-Chinese students is growing each year, and is close to 15 per cent of total enrolment in Chinese primary schools. In the process, the student body in these schools has become the most ethnically diverse in the country (《东方日报》/*Oriental Daily*, 2018). This is a reflection of the economic and cultural appeal of Chinese education and its language. In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative of which Malaysia is an active supporter, the soft power allure of Mandarin will continue to surge, not just in Malaysia but in many other countries of the world.

Chinese education is the foundation of culture and a crucial conduit for the dissemination and transmission of Chinese culture and cross-cultural interaction (Voon, 2008). Another pillar of Chinese culture is the vibrant Chinese print media dating back to the nineteenth century and enjoying a healthy circulation surpassing those of the English and Malay newspapers. Indeed, it is recognized as the best developed press system among the Chinese living overseas (王睿欣/Wang Ruixin, 2019). The public support for Chinese literary and classical works and cultural celebrations helps to create a platform for promoting mutual understanding and cultural exchange between the ethnic communities. This positive display of Chinese culture has, to a large extent, contributed to the cultural diversity of Malaysia and helping to turn Malaysia into a model of inter-ethnic understanding and accommodation.

Manifestation of the Subjectivity of the Chinese in the Development Process of Malaysia

Arising from the totality of the economic, political and cultural activities of the Chinese in post-independence Malaysian development, it is possible to discern the emergence of a community tied to a common fate of coexisting and prospering internally as well as together with other ethnic communities in the country. The effects on Malaysian society are imprinted on areas of the economy, politics and culture.

Economically, the Chinese community is able to display their aptitude for commerce and industry by mobilizing their capital resources, entrepreneurial flair, and international corporate and marketing networking to diversify and upgrade their business operations. Whether in plantations, manufacturing or industry and trade, they are among the leading investors and producers. They are responsible for the development of the majority of the country's small and medium-sized enterprises that support a large labour force. They are also among the foremost participants in BRI-related dealings and investments. Their contributions to the prosperity of the Malaysian economy have often been complimented by the government.

In politics, their role has historically been subdued and had limited space to exercise their political rights. Various official rules and regulations are in place, some dating back to pre-independence days, to restrict the political space of Malaysians of all ethnicities. Nevertheless, despite existing restrictions, the Chinese community enjoys political rights that are not accorded to the Chinese in other countries (蒋炳庆/Jiang Bingqing, 2015).

As citizens in a multicultural country, the Chinese are afforded close to unrestricted space to practice and develop their culture. Unlike many Chinese overseas, they have been able to preserve, create new cultural products, and to transmit their culture down the generations. Certain cultural traditions of the Chinese have been accepted and even practised by non-Chinese communities, such as calligraphy, the display of fireworks and other cultural pursuits. The outcome is that Chinese cultural elements are now part of the colourful multicultural mosaic of Malaysia. While the Chinese enjoy their cultural rights and freedom like all other ethnic communities, they are aware of their responsibilities in their respect for the cultural and religious sensitivities of other citizens.

In a nutshell, the characteristics of the subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese, such as initiative and creativity, have been established and developed in this period. The Chinese started to have more autonomy in their practical activities in the society. While facing the objective and subjective factors that affect and limit their existence, they became more independent and have more power and possibilities to make their own decision.

From the subjective perspective of the Chinese community, the possibility of qualifying for citizenship brought about by independence offered the prospects of changing their status from "immigrants" to "citizens". This change did much to ingrain a conscious sense of their "local attributes" that have since gradually replaced their "China attributes". They began to see themselves as citizens and belonging to the land. The euphoria of independence and communal goodwill did much to boost the sense of identifying with the future of the nation. The Chinese

adapted to the changed environment and lived in harmony with their ethnic counterparts. They played an part in the nation-building process to contribute to the overall progress and development of the country.

From the objective perspective, by virtue of historical reasons, Malay dominance in politics and the government was acknowledged. Non-Malay communities participated in the political process through the arrangement of power sharing system that underpinned the basis of coalition politics. This created a politically equilibrium structure that helped to ease ethnic contradictions and tensions (韩方明/Han Fangming, 2002). Through coalition politics, the Chinese and Indians, each with their political parties, became partners in the government to share the ruling power and work for the benefits and rights of each community (吴前进/Wu Qianjin, 2013). The post-independence reality was one of the compromises among the ethnic communities in which the economy would consist of different capitalist interests and investors representing the state, the Chinese, Malays, and foreign interests. While the objective reality was inseparable from Malay dominance in politics and the control of “state capital”, the impact the Chinese in the economy and politics, not least in the electoral sense, cannot be taken lightly, nor their role in the development of Malaysia be questioned.

Features of the Subjectivity of the Chinese in the Development Process of Malaysia

The objective and subjective elements in post-independence development process have laid the basis of the Chinese as a subjective and self-directed entity. The “localization” of their loyalty and sentiments have helped to enhance the Chinese passion and motivation to participate in Malaysia national life. Participation in politics and the government empowered them to engage as rightful players in the nation-building process. They state their stance on policies that are unfavourable to Chinese interests or to object to unfair and unjust measures. As a subjective entity, they work to influence the social reality to meet their own needs and are able to decide on measures to face changing objective and subjective situations in the country. The subjectivity, to a large extent, enables the Chinese be their own masters rather than to serve as “tools” to be controlled or used by others. They enjoy more autonomy in making decisions vis-à-vis the current state of affairs in a multi-ethnic setting. Keeping faith with the idea of “peaceful coexistence” as guidance, they practise “political adaptation”, “economic development”, and “cultural accommodation” as well as to seek co-operation and communication with all ethnic communities to overcome contradictions and dissensions and to promote understanding. In this manner, the Chinese demonstrate the meaning and value of their role in nation building (吴前进/Wu Qianjin, 2013). As such, Chinese contributions to and influence on nation building and development are those of citizens to their home country. Acting with this self-directed initiative, the subjectivity of the Chinese is better developed and to put into good use through releasing their enterprise and creativity, and in the process to galvanize their ethnic identity.

Future of the Subjectivity of the Chinese

The history of the Chinese in Malaysia is marked by the change in their status from being sojourners to becoming citizens and active partners in the nation-building agenda (颜清煌/Yen Ching Hwang, 2005). The subdued subjectivity of the Chinese is exerting itself and being reconstructed. However, due to constraints of the objective environments and in the exercise of their autonomy, the subjectivity of the community will not be truly realized unless these constraints are overcome.

The Dilemma of the Subjectivity of the Chinese

Viewed from the perspective of history and practical reality, the subjectivity of the Chinese faces a dilemma arising from, firstly, the lack of certainty in their own identity and secondly, its marginalization.

The first is the general lack of certainty of their own identity. The younger generations have largely been integrated into the “Malaysia way” and have become relatively matured Malaysian citizens from their daily behaviour and routine habits. They have cultivated an innate sense of being “Malaysian”. Through this localization of identity, they hope to integrate themselves into the mainstream in order to acquire their rights, interests, social status and to show their worth and meaningful contributions to the development and well-being of the country. However, the primordial attributes of the Chinese as an ethnic group and their multiple layers of cultural relationships with their ethnic background have caused them to seek and preserve their “China attributes.” These primordial attributes subside under conditions of multicultural accommodation and tend to surface at times of interethnic controversies. The outcome is that the subjective identity of the Chinese tends to waver with varying intensity between their Chinese and Malaysian identities (何国忠/Hou Kok Chung, 2002).

Related to the dilemma arising from the lack of certainty in identity is that of the certainty of the value of Chinese subjectivity. The two sides of this value are instrumental and subjective values. The former satisfies the legitimate needs of Malaysia’s social development and the latter satisfies the reasonable needs of the self-development of the Chinese community. In the modern society’s over-emphasis of instrumental rationality, the “instrumental value” of the Chinese is naturally overly relied upon in the development process. The existential value of the Chinese community is reduced to a one-sided emphasis on their economic value and utilitarian worth. The consequence is the marginalization and neglect of the spiritual and humanistic values as well as the well-being of the Chinese in the larger intentions of the development of Chinese subjectivity. The imbalance between instrumental value and subjective value leads to a situation in which form has overridden substance. In short, there is a lack of meaning or profound thought behind the cultural and political activities of the Chinese, and hence the inability of the community to enrich their existence in a deeper interpretation and appreciation of their culture (何国忠/Hou Kok Chung, 2002).

The second source of the dilemma is that the subjectivity of the Chinese is being marginalized. Despite having made significant contributions to the development of the country, the Chinese have not been able to raise their status to an equivalent level with the Bumiputera. The basic reason for this lack of progress is attributed to the fact that Malays and other Bumiputera are accorded certain special rights through the Constitution and acquire dominant power in politics and the government. These advantages become instruments to implement policies that prioritize the needs of the Bumiputera. To a certain extent, the preferential treatment is extended to the Bumiputera at some expense of the non-Bumiputera communities. Minorities thus possess limited political power and unequal status in selected areas of national life (周兴泰/Zhou Xingtai, 2018). Ethnicity becomes a basis for the allocation of resources and the non-Bumiputera, especially the Chinese, are regarded as economically more successful and are placed in an under-privileged position in the distribution of resources under certain circumstances (张茂桂/Zhang Maogui, 1993; 何国忠/Hou Kok Chung, 2002).

Going Beyond Subjectivity

To realize full subjectivity, the Chinese community has to overcome their dilemmas and various other limiting factors.

First of all, there is a need to get rid of their doubts on subjectivity. These doubts are of two types. One is concerned with the absolute nature of subjectivity. Through targeted activities, individuals and communities establish a consciousness of themselves and at the same time a consciousness towards others. “The result of the absolute conception of the self and others is that the reality of the others acquires independent and absolute entities” (才金龙/Cai Jinlong, 2014: 104). All “others” apart from the “self”, including all individuals and communities that have subjectivity become the antitheses of the “self” and thus have to be constrained and subjugated. Arising from the belief in absolute subjectivity, individual ethnic groups compete with each other and frustrate the formation of a shared consciousness as a community. Consequently, the Chinese are forced to redefine “self” vis-à-vis the absolute “others”.

The second source of doubt arises from the “instrumental value” of subjectivity. The idea of absolute subjectivity uses a type of basic value orientation tied to materialism. This type of basic value orientation simplifies the subjective value including the instrumental values in economic production and political participation. This “instrumental value” bias, to a large extent, is the reason for the loss of subjective value in Malaysian society. Individuals or ethnic communities are unable to derive or establish the value of their spiritual existence at the emotional, mental or humanistic levels. Not being able to comprehend each other culturally or spiritually, different ethnic communities tend to politicize racial and cultural issues. The bias towards “absolute subjectivity” and “instrumental value” have caused different ethnic communities to put their own interests above others. Unless these biases are discarded the real sense of a Malaysian community would not emerge. It will be possible for each ethnic minority

to gain subjectivity if overall inter-ethnic understanding of and respect for each other community's culture, values and sentiments are realized.

It is also important to construct a community of common destiny in order to check the almost perpetual adverse impacts of racial politics on national harmony. The loss and marginalization of the subjectivity of the Chinese is the inevitable outcome of this type of perception and practice. In order to remove the bias towards absolute subjectivity, there is a need to examine and reconstruct subjectivity and the relationship between “self” and “others” among all ethnic groups.

If the majority and minority ethnic communities regard each other as subjects of equal standing, each will have potential access to comparable levels of status and power, constructed and confirmed through a process of “inter-ethnic subjectivity” (蒋家军/Jiang Jiajun, 2018). When the subjectivity of every ethnic community is openly acknowledged, there is a greater possibility that a “Malaysian” identity and this consciousness will override ethnic consciousness to promote understanding, inclusivity, co-operation and coexistence. The basis of this possibility is the building of a community with a shared future in the process of nation building that does not create policies based on racial policies that alienate anyone, and if all ethnic groups respect each other, communicate rationally, accept each other's cultural and ideological differences, the progress of the country can be achieved through coexistence yet allow the preservation of different cultural identities.

Conclusion

The study of the subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese from the philosophical perspective has to be based not only on history and the contemporary situation, but also to point the way to the future. The subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese is established and developed through continuously overcoming and transcending limitations arising from the subjective and objective realities of intra- and inter-ethnic experiences. The Chinese experiences are based on a process of continuous contributions in the areas of politics, economy, culture and education, and also an unending process of improvement its autonomy, initiative and creativity. This process in the construction of their subjectivity has been one of unfulfilled aspirations. This is because the community finds itself in an objective environment built on the conventional notion of “racial benefits” and “racial politics”. It is only when all ethnic communities arrive at a consensus that transcends the objective reality of “racial politics” that provides the key to fulfilling the aspirations of not only the Chinese but also other minority communities to realize their subjectivity.

In view of the objective reality of Malaysian racial politics and unequal distribution of power sharing, it is almost impossible for ethnic minorities to claim complete and equal status in all but non-primordial interests. In the unlikely event that the Chinese and other minorities are assimilated into a Malay/Bumiputera-based entity, they would have to face, firstly, sacrificing

their distinctive subjectivity and, secondly, the prospects of being viewed as always different from the Malay/Bumiputera communities in their religious beliefs and customary practices and hence to trivialize their sense of subjectivity.

Given the fact that Chinese overseas communities, even in largely immigrant societies, are generally unable to let their subjectivity to come into full play, it will be more meaningful to leverage on external objective realities to facilitate the display of their initiative and creativity. A favourable aspect of the external objective reality takes the form of the Belt and Road Initiative. Among the objectives of this Initiative is that of promoting international exchange and co-operation in which the Chinese communities of Malaysia and Southeast Asia are in an excellent position to act as a catalyst and a cultural bridge between their countries and China. Eventually, the positive efforts of the Chinese community to contribute to the mutual interests of Malaysia and China through BRI will help to elevate the subjectivity of Malaysian Chinese beyond the national level.

The construction of a community's subjectivity, especially in the context of a multi-ethnic society comprising a majority-minority dichotomy, is an issue in which inter-ethnic consensus is a near impossibility. In the absence of an enforced cultural assimilation policy, the minority community will always work towards realizing its subjectivity and to play a more active and meaningful role in nation building than being a passive onlooker. It is in this context that the Chinese community in Malaysia has, particularly since independence more than six decades ago, attempted to accomplish as their common aspiration.

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