

# Assimilation and Chinese Ethnic Consciousness in Malaysia: An Overview

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## Abstract

The Chinese are the second biggest ethnic group in Malaysia. They have maintained their ethnic consciousness relatively well in the multi-ethnic setting of the country. Many aspects of their Chineseness such as language, tradition and religious beliefs are manifested in everyday life. They have formed and maintained social organisations that are exclusively Chinese. Unlike the Chinese in Thailand and the Philippines who have been assimilated into their respective mainstream societies, the Chinese Malaysians are undergoing a different experience. Despite the localisation of certain aspects of their life, they have largely retained their ethnic identity. This study examines the circumstances behind this phenomenon and identifies two main dimensions of Malaysia's inter-ethnic relationships, namely, ethnic exclusion and socio-religious factors. The first part will present a brief account of inter-ethnic policies and the second will focus on the dimensions of inter-ethnic relations.

**Keywords:** Assimilation, Chinese Malaysian, ethnic identity, ethnic consciousness, ethnic relations

## Introduction

The Chinese constitute the second largest ethnic community of Malaysia but has since independence in 1957 undergone a secular decline in its relative strength in the total population. Between 1957 and 2000, this proportion has declined from 35.8% to 24.4% on account of various contributing factors (Tey, 2007). Much had been discussed about the factors that had contributed to the decline and the result of the discussions pointed out two factors; low fertility rate and emigration (see Tey, 2004; Tuin, 2004).

The processes of modernisation and accelerated socio-economic development of the country had adverse impacts on the fertility rate of the Chinese who were more urbanised than

other ethnic communities. Modern development brought about new social values and norms that eventually altered employment patterns and traditional lifestyles in New Villages which the bulk of semi-urban and rural Chinese were settled. There was a visible decline in the average family size of these villages from 6–8 persons in the 1960s and 1970s to about 4–5 persons in about 2000 (Voon, 2004). The decline in Chinese Malaysian fertility rate is further exacerbated by other factors such as emigration for education, employment or settlement. In the case of Sabah, the arithmetic of ethnicity has played to the disadvantage of the Chinese since the formation of Malaysia in 1963. From comprising 23% of the state population and as the second largest ethnic community in 1960, its relative strength declined markedly to 9.7% in 2005 and out-numbered by non-citizens largely from neighbouring Philippines and Indonesia (Voon, 2007a).

It was at the turn of the twenty-first century that serious attention was drawn to the issues of the dilemma facing the demographic situation of the Chinese community. The Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies in Kuala Lumpur, a non-profit organisation established in 1985 to pursue research on the Chinese community and to provide guidelines on policy matters, held three conferences on the Chinese population between 2001 and 2004, including the causes and consequences of population change, on marriage and ageing (see Voon, 2004).

The apprehension arising from demographic issues has wider implications beyond the narrow concern with declining relative presence in the total population. It also touches on other questions of which an important one that is overlooked is that of ethnic consciousness. Hard statistics on population figures might yield hints on the possible social, economic and political impacts of weakening demographic presence but the impact of the more abstract issue of ethnic consciousness on the fate of the community is more difficult to foretell. Whether this sense of ethnic consciousness would weaken the future stake of the Chinese or to what extent is an open question.

This study aims to provide some insights on the issue of Chinese ethnic consciousness in the context of the concept of assimilation. According to Gordon (1964), assimilation is a situation in which immigrant communities are integrated into the host community to lose part of their own culture to adopt that of the host. Based on the American model in which the Anglo-White Americans form the host and dominant society, immigrant groups would blend into this community to move upward socially. The outcome would see immigrant communities weakening their own identities as they become assimilated into the host society (Ziyanak, 2015).

Placing recent demographic changes in the Chinese community from the theoretical perspective of a linear progression of assimilation, it might seem to indicate that the Chinese might lose their ethnic consciousness and be progressively assimilated into the dominant community. The reality of the Malaysia situation is that the Malays assume the position of the host community as the largest ethnic group and possessing dominant political power. Despite having settled down in Malaysia from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Chinese have not been assimilated but have preserved their identity as a separate ethnic

community. The phenomenon of the theoretical straight-line assimilation process that is seen in America does not offer an all-encompassing explanation on the relationships between immigrant and host communities. The Malaysian case reflects the dynamics of inter-ethnic relationships that do not work in favour of assimilation.

### **Assimilation and the Chinese in Malaysia**

British colonial administrators were meticulous in their statistical compilations of resource inventories of their possessions and the inhabitants were one of these resources. The population census was one of the first administrative tools that was used to the full to differentiate and categorise the diverse indigenous and immigrant communities. This is a common colonial policy that resorts to using ethnic identification as an administrative tool (see Shamsul, 2001). The Chinese identify themselves as well as being identified as a group of people with shared culture and a common ancestry. Different ethnic communities would tend to identify each other as “strangers” (Barth, 1969). Culture, origins and to some extent skin colour are the outward symbols that are used to demarcate ethnicity. These perceptions of who belongs to which ethnic groupings are then intertwined with the labelling conferred by the authorities. As in the days of colonial rule, the current political situation in Malaysia similarly reaffirms the social boundaries that create ethnic consciousness among different ethnic communities in the country.

There are two dimensions in the construction of “Chineseness” in Malaysia. The first refers to the culture and way of life of the Chinese. These imply distinctive attributes such as language, beliefs, cultural traditions including the culinary and aesthetics. Much of these daily experiences are exhibited unconsciously as they live their everyday life. This leads on to the second dimension which is their conscious identification of who they and the “others” are. As they interact with other communities and the authorities, they develop a sense of being different even as they are being differentiated. However, it is noted that the state of Chineseness is not static but would evolve according to the intensity of interactions with other communities.

As in Malaysia, Chinese communities in other parts of the world have different encounters with the host communities. While some retain their Chinese identity, others have integrated into the host societies. The Thai-Chinese community seem to have been successfully assimilated though there are also contradicting observations concerning this issue (see Pan, 1998). In general, the second generation Thai-Chinese have adopted Thai names and use Thai language in their daily life. A similar trend can be seen among the younger Chinese in the Philippines. They identify themselves with the Philippines and join Filipino groups such as Rotary Club and Jaycees and usually has a Christian name (Ang See, 1997).

The Chinese in Malaysia have been able to maintain their distinctive identity and culture and have been allowed to do with little political interference. Far from being assimilated, they have instead maintained a sense of ethnic consciousness. Despite communities such as the Baba and Nyonya of Melaka who have adopted many aspects of local-Malay elements in their daily life such as language, food and clothing, yet this process does not tantamount to

being assimilated (Tan, 2018). The Baba and the Nyonya are descendants of Chinese-Malay marriages during the colonial period. Generations of living a near Malay way of life have not led them to abandon their ancestral roots and traditions. Among the bulk of the Chinese population, the outlook of their Chineseness are even more prevalent. Confucian teachings are still observed and being instilled through Chinese education, social institutions and folk religions. Many continue to receive their education in Chinese and proficient Mandarin and their native dialects. Chinese remain true to their cultural and festive traditions that regular their daily lives and inter-personal relations. The influence of changing social values associated with the adaptation to modernity has not completely displaced core moral values.

The social infrastructure of the Chinese plays a salient role in the preservation of Chinese identity. Various types of Chinese associations set up by the early Chinese immigrants based on common surname, dialect or craft continue to remain relevant to Chinese social life. The various chambers of commerce at the local and national levels play a significant role in representing Chinese capitalist and commercial interests. Politically, various Chinese-based parties compete to represent Chinese interests and rights. The existence of these organisations contributes to the distinctiveness of Chinese identity in the country. Likewise, interactions with the host community have not dented their Chineseness either. In fact, as will be explained in the following section, it is the outcome of this relationship that also contributes to the maintenance of Chinese consciousness in Malaysia.

### **Inter-Ethnic Relations**

The discourse on Malaysian Chinese identity cannot ignore the importance of the Malaysian Constitution. The inter-ethnic bargain that happened prior to the independence of Malaya had promulgated the idea of a multi-ethnic nation that specified the special rights of the Malays and guaranteed freedom in the usage of mother tongue language, religion and the running of vernacular schools of other communities. These conditions were incorporated into the Constitution which was adopted prior to the British granting of independence to the Federation of Malaya in 1957. It is realised that ensuring a sound and workable basis of inter-ethnic relations was a prerequisite for nation building. This is subsequently strengthened by the enunciation of *Rukun Negara* or National Principles in 1970. Hence the idea of forced assimilation of the minorities that was put into practice in some newly-independent countries was abandoned in Malaya (and Malaysia in 1963) (Lee, 2000).

Malay cultural domination often overshadows the cultures of minority groups. The National Cultural Policy confirms the primacy of Malay culture in shaping the national culture. Similar effects are seen in the education and language policies (Lee, 2012; Holst, 2012). The degree of Malay dominance in the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian nation) implies that “Malay assimilation” is evident in the many provisions of the Constitution (Nagata, 1979). Implicit in the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* is that of a “Malayised” nation. Although the minorities are not

forcefully assimilated, this version of Bangsa Malaysia provides avenues for the permissible assimilation of the minorities. Hence, it might appear that Chinese might gradually be assimilated and Malayised or *masuk Melayu* (“to become a Malay”). Such a notion would seem to confirm the assumption of Robert E. Park (1914). The straight-line assimilation perspective attributed to him gives the impression that assimilation of the minorities is imminent and unavoidable. The minorities will adopt the culture of the dominant group as part of the process of achieving a level of like-mindedness to allow a united society to form based on the process of assimilation.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to take into account that, in any society, there are many circumstances that could influence how an individual decides. Park’s observation might be true in some cases but not in others. For instance, instead of converging, some African Americans have decided to form their own sub-culture which is evident in many parts of America today. Hence, Park’s assimilation theoretical argument may be applicable only in certain contexts. Scholars such as Zhou Min (1997) have proposed alternative versions of assimilation. Zhou asserts that not all members of the minorities will be assimilated. Some may accept and adopt the culture of the dominant community while others choose to retain the attributes of their own community. Assimilation is then segmented in the sense that it is dependent on how a member of a minority group interprets his position in relation to the dominant group within the context of a socially stratified society. In the absence of forced assimilation, the decision to accept or reject assimilation is entirely an individual decision. Some may interpret assimilation into the dominant group provides an avenue for upward mobility while others may maintain the *status quo* and do not see the benefit of assimilation. In this context, assimilation not a phenomenon that is sequentially waiting to occur.

It is claimed that Chinese perceptions of Malay cultural dominance vary according to the size of their population in an area (Raybeck, 1983). In the western part of Peninsular Malaysia where they are numerically concentrated, the Chinese are engaged in business in urban centres and are free to pursue a vigorous social and cultural life with minimum real contact with other communities. But where they are found in relatively small numbers such as in the east coast states, they are able to adapt and interact with the majority community without difficulty. In particular most have acquired a good command of the national language and maintain regular contacts of different types and levels. Such trends can be observed among the *Peranakan* Chinese in Kelantan. They are the descendants of early Chinese immigrants and acculturation among them points to a certain degree of outward assimilation. Nevertheless, they are conscious of their ethnicity and will practise their Chinese way of life within their own community (Raybeck, 1983). Similar observations are confirmed by Tan Chee Beng (2002) and Tan, Ngah and Mohd Shahrul (2013) among the *Peranakan* Chinese in the adjacent state of Terengganu where the Chinese are numerically small. They have effectively retained their cultural identity and not been assimilated to any extent beyond frequent outward interactions.

These situations indicate that assimilation into Malay society is not regarded as a viable option even among small local Chinese communities. The interplay of various factors contributed

to such reactions. One of such factors would be that the community does not see the value of being Malayised as the “trade-offs” between what may be gained or lost are heavily biased towards the latter. It is an acknowledged fact that the government position on that the Malays is that they are economically lagging behind other communities especially the Chinese. The New Economic Policy (NEP) that was launched in 1970 was designed specifically to narrow the income gap between the Malays and non-Malays. This policy is further reinforced by the division of the citizenry into Bumiputera (the Malays and natives of East Malaysia) and non-Bumiputera (the Chinese, Indians, and others). The Bumiputeras were given accorded to certain preferential treatments which tend to exacerbate the consciousness of ethnic differences and identities (Voon, 2007b). Certain development policies such as the land schemes are Malay-centric with limited non-Malay participation. These land schemes have emerged as mono-ethnic enclaves that contributes to ethnic polarisation. The Malaysian political structures (constitutions, government policies and political parties) have to a certain extent contributed to the development a system that has caused Malaysians to live in ethnic seclusion (see Freedman, 2001). Political parties are largely ethnic-based that appeal to primordial loyalties. The realities of Malaysian politics and policies are such that the indirect appeal to ethnic consciousness has become the battle ground of political rivalry and power.

It is obvious that assimilation of any form is not occurring in Malaysia, nor is it an option for the government or the ethnic communities. Current ethnic-based politics have entrenched social and physical spatial division and ethnic exclusion that had their origins in the colonial period. Decades of ethno-centric development policies have given rise to separate ethnic societies with cultural and economic predilections but without shared commonalities (Voon, 2002).

Culturally, being Malayised would carry the consequence of being Islamised. Constitutionally, all Malay are Muslims. In general, the Chinese regard embracing Islam as forfeiting their Chinese identity and cultural practices (Tan, 2004). The act of religious conversion is a lifelong commitment to Islamic practices to the exclusion of basic attributes on which Chineseness is built. This includes forgoing their names (Giok & Nidzam, 2013), the “Chinese” way of life such as ancestral worship, eating habits and severing practical ties with various cultural loyalties. This religious barrier does not confront the Chinese of Thailand or the Philippines. The Chinese community in Thailand continue to maintain their traditional practices and ancestral worship or to speak Chinese dialects at home even as they accept Thai identity (Chan & Tong, 1993). The commonalities found in both Chinese and Thai religious beliefs and the way of life have contributed to the process of assimilation. In Malaysia, assimilation through embracing Islam would not entitle to non-Bumiputera converts to the special privileges accorded to the Malays and other Bumiputera communities (Tan, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The Chinese of Malaysia have tenaciously maintained their ethnic consciousness and their ties to primordial loyalties. The idea of keeping alive their Chineseness is embedded as a

cultural and moral obligation as part of their historical tradition. Yet, the primordial sentiment is a social construct and not an unshakable principle as demonstrated by the readiness among Thai and Filipino Chinese in assimilating into their respective host societies. The straight-line assimilation theoretical perspective has not been able to explain Chinese assimilation in Malaysia because of a unique and complex set of circumstances that militate against assimilation into Malay society.

In the multi-ethnic setting of Malaysia, the various ethnic communities are generally in favour of maintaining the status quo rather than to attempt or enforce an assimilation policy of a citizenry that is marked by a diversity of ethnic origins which their attendant social, linguistic, religious and cultural sentiments. The issue of assimilation is not a one-way absorption of minority groups into the host community but involves implications and repercussions ensuing from the process for both parties. It also involves trade-offs between the costs and benefits for both sides. At the present stage of Malaysian nation building, all ethnic communities with their entrenched strengths and weaknesses are apparently not ready for the changes that would accompany the assimilation process.

Given the complexities of the current Malaysian development and inter-ethnic relations, the importance of ensuring social stability and economic prosperity weigh heavily in favour of the maintenance of the status quo. The Malaysian nation is built on the basis of inter-ethnic understanding anchored on the supremacy of the Constitution and the broad principles of living harmoniously and adhering to the codes of Rukun Negara.

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