Ethnic Chinese in Malaysian citizenship: gridlocked in historical formation and political hierarchy

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The ethnic Chinese in Malaysia are a significant minority who call for a critical assessment as far as their cultural identity and political positioning are concerned. Appropriating the concept of 'multicultural citizenship', this article attempts to dissect various demands and aspirations of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia's multiracial hierarchy. It suggests that using the lens of multicultural citizenship can help shed light on Malaysian Chinese as well as the entire nation, where ethnicity and citizenship are gridlocked in historical formation and political hierarchy. In recent times, Malaysian Chinese have articulated their political desires and demands in order to get rid of the disgrace of racial constraints, and also to envisage a more inclusive multicultural citizenship for Malaysia as a nation-state. This article also compares and contrasts three Chinese public figures who have taken disparate stands and approaches with regard to language, culture, race, nation, and party politics.

Keywords: ethnic Chinese; ethnicity; citizenship; Malaysia; politics; political parties

Introduction

Malaysia is still facing a welter of tensions and challenges in its political structure and social configuration, despite almost six decades having elapsed since its establishment as a nation-state. Two competing forces, pro and anti the incumbent political regime, are wrestling with each other with almost equal strength, generating disparate interpretations and discourses about the nation and the many races associated with the country. As a significant minority, the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia critically call for a survey and assessment of their cultural identity and political positioning. Indeed, the Malaysian Chinese are a striking reflection of the diverse, multiple, and complex terrains that members of the Chinese diaspora have traversed in relations with their countries of ancestry and of residence. Originating from China, the Chinese diaspora played a vital role in the independence of Malaya, in 1957, and the formation of Malaysia, in 1963, and since then has changed in a remarkable fashion from being merely sojourners associated with China to being Malaysian nationals and citizens. The implementation of differentiated citizenship since the 1970s, however, has marked the rise of Malay hegemony and the decline of the position of other races on all fronts and in all aspects of Malaysia as a nation-state. As the ethnic Chinese cannot live up to the genuine meaning of being nationals and citizens, their ethnicity is relentlessly hardened to counter national discourses, particularly in issues concerning political voice and cultural rights.

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The central argument of this article is that the concept and idea of 'multicultural citizenship' is helpful for dissecting various demands and aspirations of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia's multiracial hierarchy. First, it reviews the historical trajectories along which contemporary Malaysian Chinese evolved in order to reveal how cultural contents and political ideologies are constantly being reshaped in the crisscrossing webs of family, ethnicity, and nation. Subsequently, it explores the academic and intellectual construction of 'multicultural citizenship' and how the concept can shed light on the Malaysian Chinese and the entire nation as well. It examines how in recent times the Malaysian Chinese have articulated their political desires and demands in order to get rid of the disgrace of racial constraints and also in order to envisage a more inclusive blueprint of multicultural citizenship for Malaysia as a nation-state. So as to demonstrate the diversity and multiplicity of discourses of ethnicity and nation, the article compares and contrasts three Chinese political figures who have been active in the public sphere over the past two decades.

Historical trajectories: Malaysian Chinese in constant reconfiguration

The majority of the ethnic Chinese currently residing in Malaysia have Malaysian citizenship and enjoy the legal status of nationals in the structure of the modern nation-state. That status, however, has not been easy to achieve, as it was attained through many historical vicissitudes involving interactions and reconciliations between races. The roughly five decades preceding the Second World War saw most members of the Chinese diaspora living in British Malaya becoming Chinese nationals as a result of the widespread proliferation and awareness of Chinese nationalism. When Malaysia became independent, large numbers of the Chinese diaspora adopted the citizenship of the new nation and subsequently their descendants have been born Malaysian nationals. As these historical trajectories have unfolded and intersected, the internal consciousness and external relationships of the ethnic Chinese have been in constant reconfiguration. In brief, their subjectivities can be measured by three major benchmarks: family, race, and nation.

Since the ethnic Chinese are now largely Malaysian citizens, it is vital and appropriate to examine their historical trajectories in two essential phases, one of migration and the other of post-migration. 1957 can be taken as the line of demarcation between the two phases as the year marks an important point where the discourses started revolving profoundly around the concepts of nation, race, and citizen. Indeed, the imaginaries and terminologies of what constitutes a nation, and how the Chinese diaspora is of and in that particular nation, changed dramatically from the migration phase to the post-migration phase. In the migration phase, the discourses surrounding family, race, and nation did not integrate the Chinese diaspora seamlessly and intimately into the local spaces. In the post-migrant phases, those discourses, in new versions, have also failed to situate the ethnic Chinese delicately in the national structure.[1] More particularly, in the migration phase, influences from the national and local levels of China incorporated the Chinese diaspora while the British colonial government isolated it in its structured and institutionalized multiracialism. Subsequently, in the post-migrant phase, Malaysia's modern nation-state framework has further depicted immigrants as forever disloyal foreigners, has consolidated racial boundaries, and has differentiated the contents of citizenship. All this occurred in the five aspects that Arjun Appadurai has succinctly invoked for examining forces happening in one space and also those emanating from outside – ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes.[2] The net result is an ever more

thorny identity politics, which is essentially related to the concept of multicultural citizenship that this article intends to explore.

According to their family trees, Malaysian Chinese families experienced dispersion and then reuniting but it has often been considered that there is a need for dispersion again.[3] In much of the migrant phase, Chinese families were split, with linkages between China and Malaya. Before the 1920s, the British colonial government only recruited male labor into the economy, which did not on the whole need female involvement. On the ground back in China, Chinese family traditions tied old people and women down in their home towns and villages, in the hope that the sojourning males would eventually return. The combined effects of British colonialism and Chinese family traditions slowed down or disrupted the process of Chinese families putting down roots and becoming settled in Malaya. This had brought about a deep-seated image of ethnic Chinese as 'immigrants', instead of 'settlers' as well as 'citizens'. Even in the post-migration phase, these labels are often attached by Malays to the ethnic Chinese, who have already been nationals for generations.[4] As a result of racial inequality in citizenship and government policies, many Chinese opt to migrate abroad, thus leading to the phenomenon of remigration among the Chinese diaspora and a brain drain.[5]

Where racial references are concerned, multiculturalism in connection with the Chinese diaspora has reflected both flexibility and rigidity. Ever since the Qin and Han dynasties, far-flung trading networks had crisscrossed the South China Seas, connecting China with various ports in Southeast Asia. While contributing to the awareness of cultural differences, the Sea Silk Roads had not blocked trade between races and instead had brought about a free-flow poly-system comprising various cultures. Flexible multiculturalism changed with the successive advent of Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonialisms. Eventually, the large-scale and far-reaching British colonial governance and 'divide-and-rule' policy compartmentalized races into various ethnoscapes, mediascapes, and financescapes. Multiculturalism in the British era, therefore, started the process of institutionalizing ethnicity and solidifying racial discourses into ideoscapes.[6] After independence, the Malaysian constitution, laws, and policies went on to champion the Malays as representing the Malaysian nation. From the migrant phase to the phase thereafter, and from the colonial era to post-colonial contexts, the ethnic Chinese have never been able to successfully shake off their identity as the 'Other'. Official discourses have sidelined the ethnic Chinese, who continue to speak out from the margin to safeguard their education and language rights.[7]

Along with the evolving forms and contents of family and race, national benchmarks and projects have also generated hard and soft powers on the Chinese diaspora. In the migration phase, particularly from the 1880s through the 1950s, Chinese nationalism had spread beyond its territory into its diaspora through political activities and campaigns as well as through Chinese-language education. As their families were still rooted largely in China, and given their difficulty in blending in as a race into British Malaya, it seemed natural for the Chinese diaspora to identify itself as part of China as a nation.[8] In the post-migration phase, the Chinese have been designated as one of the three major races in Malaysia, the remaining two being the Malays and Indians. In many respects, the Chinese and Indians are subordinate nationals, under the Malays, who are the majority and wield greater political influence. The Chinese diaspora is being forced to seriously question what its citizenship is truly about, as it has had to continually experience the pain of issues concerned with the settlement and migration of family, pride, and rights as a race, and legitimacy and equality in citizenship. There is, therefore, a compelling need to

reconceptualize the issues and problems that Malaysian Chinese have with citizenship in the national framework.

Segmented constraints: power hierarchy in differentiated citizenship

The concept of citizenship that this article attempts to advance covers multiple terrains where rights, responsibilities, identities, and roles of citizens are symbolized, executed, and operationalized. On a narrow definition, citizenship is embodied in documents such as birth certificates, identity cards, and passports. This article explores beyond that to examine how citizenship is implicated and demonstrated in the system of the modern nation-state, with special reference to how citizens are positioned and position themselves in a country; how they exchange social contract and communicate with the government; and to what extent they accept or reject the State's policies. As political scientist Monstserrat Guibernau defines it, 'citizenship refers to the political bond which defines membership of the state'.[9] The following discussion will show how a number of political incidents and policies have marked the changes in Malaysian citizenship, determined the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and designated which race is at the core of citizenship and which at the margins.

The imaginaries and discourses emanating from the Malaysian Chinese are intricately related to the citizenship and ethnicity that surrounds them. This is a result of historical trajectories and political structures, some of which have been discussed in the preceding section. More specifically, the many forms and contents of ethnicity associated with the Malaysian Chinese are predominantly determined by the impacts that citizenship has on them and the imprints it leaves.

In the official and everyday lexicon in Malaysia, the Chinese are defined as a 'race', or 'kaum' in the Malay language. Thus, their ethnicity is marked chiefly by biological primordialism, confined by rules and regulations, and has many racial stereotypes and biases attached to it. These racial markers were formed in the migration era and linger in the post-migration phase, where all kinds of citizenship concepts are contested. Over time, their ethnicity has been consolidated from inside and has developed defensively toward the outside. Despite being designated as two of the three major races in Malaysia's multicultural structure, the Chinese and the Indians are minorities vis-à-vis the Malays as the majority and the Malay hegemony. Although the Chinese are often regarded as a 'significant minority', their power is restricted largely to the economic sector, which has increasingly witnessed the rise of the Malay middle class and the super-rich. In the political and cultural arenas, the Chinese are in an even weaker position to take on the role of all-round citizens.

It should be noted that, along the diasporic trajectories, the Chinese migrants and their descendants first found their ethnicity and then citizenship. Before the colonial eras, the Chinese migrants traversing Southeast Asia were largely merchants, forging extensive trading webs that connected ports in the region. Their ethnicity was noticeable, but with porous boundaries through which business interests could be transacted. The racial 'divide-and-rule' policies of the British government institutionalized representations of ethnicity, and thus the Chinese migrants were gradually separated from other races in living spaces and economic sectors and also by all kinds of documents and registrations.[10] In the last 50 years of British rule, Chinese ethnicity was reshaped for the first time into a certain type of citizenship. But that type of citizenship originated from awareness of Chinese nationalism, amid the huge national crisis engulfing China, and proliferated in the Chinese diaspora in the form of *jus sanguinis*. Many of the Chinese diaspora in British

Malaya took up the role of China's nationals and citizens abroad.[11] Although this long-distance nationalism brought about political sensitivity among the Chinese diaspora, it put obstacles in their way as regards settling down in Malaya and, subsequently, Malaysia.

After the Second World War, the entanglement of Chinese ethnicity with Chinese nationalism came to a crossroad in all modern nation-states. Following the 1955 Bandung Conference, the Chinese diaspora was left with single citizenship and had to choose either China or the country of residence for the purposes of nationality.[12] Apart from this, the political impact of the Japanese Occupation 1942–1945, the rise of Malay nationalism, the Malayan Union, and the 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement, and the 1948–1960 Malayan Emergency had in one way or another impacted the racial relations and politics. During the process leading to Malayan Independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the ethnic Chinese basically changed track to the local settings for national imagination and citizen participation.[13]

The whole problem with Malaysia as a modern nation-state lies in the differentiated citizenship that the government has enforced since independence. Under the nominal label of 'citizens', the government designates different positions, expectations, opportunities, and constraints for different races.[14] When Malaya attained independence in 1957, the social contract had exchanged and determined that the Chinese and Indians could convert to being citizens from migrants, while the Malays were to be the preferential race with special rights protected by the Constitution.[15] In 1963, the Malays were combined with the other indigenous peoples to be *bumiputera* (literally, 'son of the land'), a grouping that has ever since grown bigger and more powerful, thus compromising the position of the Chinese and Indians. More importantly, as Khoo Boon Teik (2014) underlines, 'constitutional patriotism' is getting stronger, to some extent, as a response to the linkages between Islamization and the discourse of Malay ethnic hegemony, which reinforce the boundaries between Malays and non-Malays and also between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The 13 May Incident, which occurred in 1969, marked a turning point in race relations and citizenship discourses. Although it was a racial riot between the Chinese and Malays sparked off by the control of the Selangor State Legislature by the opposition parties, the report produced in its aftermath attributed the outbreak to the economic gap whereby the Malays lagged behind the Chinese.[16] As a result, the New Economic Policy was introduced in 1970 for 20 years to eradicate poverty and eliminate the identification of race by economic function and geographical location. Since then, the allocation of national resources has to a remarkable extent favored the Malays and thus many Chinese feel unfairly treated.[17] When he was in office as prime minister from 1981 to 2003, in the midst of rapid economic growth, Mahathir bin Mohammad advanced the Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) in the hope that Malaysia would be a developed country where a Bangsa Malaysia (literally 'Malaysian nationals') would be formed irrespective of race.[18] Nevertheless, the ethnic Chinese have never ceased to make requests and demands as their ethnicity has never been dealt with satisfactorily in citizenship in terms of rights and interests.

It is, therefore, crucial to revisit how citizenship has been evolving as an idea and also policies governing people in political structures. The discourses and institutions of citizenship create both opportunities for and restrictions on individuals and groups. In Ancient Greece, the granting of citizenship freed people from their prior political, social, economic, and religious bonds. Starting in the eighteenth century, with the advent of the modern nation-state in Europe and the subsequent spread of the system to all other parts of the world, notions of citizenship tied people to nation-states. Such a modern framework of the nation-state has established that the State should give rights

to the people, while the latter have responsibilities towards the former. In a State that aims to forge a singular nation, uniform citizenship tends to ignore and deny internal divergent views. As a result, discussions and controversies over citizenship are often diverse and multiple along the lines of political ideology, social class, occupation, and income, as well as gender.[19]

In a nation-state comprising multiple races, frictions over citizenship only become sharper and more polarized. It is in this light that some scholars highlight the need to adopt the perspective of multicultural citizenship to ensure that the rights and interests of each and every race are safeguarded in a structure with multiple sections.[20] Starting in the 1990s, globalizing forces have been eroding national boundaries and State powers, thus leading to citizenship operating beyond nation-states. In a context where 'nationalism' is increasingly being replaced by 'transnationalism', observers and researchers started to invoke the concept of 'flexible citizenship' to describe how citizens and migrants move at ease across various national structures, local connections, and global networks.[21]

It should, however, be emphasized that in Malaysia's political reality and racial discourses, so-called 'transnationalism' and 'flexible citizenship' are only gestures and behaviors of a very limited number of wealthy people. They are a luxury for the majority of ethnic Chinese, who are deeply enmeshed in the traps of Malaysian citizenship. In the context of a differentiated citizenship that is too rigid to change, the ethnic Chinese often eye a better whole picture of Malaysia as a nation-state hoping to involve themselves fully in public life and the state in order to gain full citizenship. In this article, the notion of 'full', 'genuine', and 'all-round' citizenship means that no restriction and difference in participation as citizens in all aspects and realms of the country. In the Malaysian context, full citizenship in relation to multicultural citizenship is one where all races are treated equally in the country.

A new conceptualization: multicultural citizenship for all races

Combining the concepts of 'multiculturalism' and 'citizenship', multicultural citizenship is appropriated here to provide a broader perspective in which to examine the increasingly confined space that the ethnic Chinese occupy as citizens in Malaysia. Since independence and the onset of its nation-building, 'multiculturalism' has been used and abused as a cosmetic label to cover up the cracks in citizenship and to divert the ethos of multicultural citizenship. As Malaysia's official discourse and slogan always put it, the Malays, Chinese, and Indians are the three major races who not only united to attain independence, but have also been working together to push forward the development of the country. Government organs dealing with culture and tourism repeatedly highlighted the splendid richness of Malaysian cultures, combining as they do elements from the three major races and other indigenous peoples. The subtext of all these official discourses is that Malaysia is a site where multiple cultures are converging and that harmony in multiculturalism is a precondition for social stability and national development. However, a critical issue at stake here is the power relations and hierarchy involving the various races in Malaysia, because they determine interactions between 'citizens' and 'government' and the match between 'people' and 'nation'.

The term 'multiculturalism' was coined in the 1960s in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America as immigrants started making a greater impact in these Anglophone countries.[22] In these places, early multicultural policies were implemented largely in school education for people of Asian, African, and Latino descent, with the emphasis on the teaching of the 'mother tongue', non-Christian

religions, halal food, and Asian dress. Over time, multiculturalism has expanded to cover other cultural manifestations in support of marginalized groups.[23]

The ethnic articulation and assertion that are generated by multiculturalism have their genesis in the larger 'identity politics' from the 1960s onward. Over the decades, the concepts and ideas have evolved and changed from 'equality as sameness' to 'equality as difference'.[24] On the basis of individual equality, they have also established 'respect' and 'recognition' as key conditions.[25] In other words, the core value of multicultural citizenship has been based on equality in differences across races to give equality to racial cultures, but to deny differentiated citizenship.

The Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka has for many years been promoting the idea of 'multicultural citizenship', observing and also attempting to revise the identity and position of races and minorities in the structure of the nation-state. He asserts that ethnic cultures are a prime element that defines the everyday contents of each and every citizen, and thus defends the position that ethnic cultures should be upheld as special rights and individual autonomy.

> In that book (*Liberalism, Community, and Culture*), I argue that special rights are consistent with the liberal commitment to individual autonomy (i.e., the view that we have a funda-mental interest in our moral power of forming and revising a plan of life). Our capacity to form and revise a conception of the good is intimately tied to our membership in a culture, since the context of individual choice is the range of options passed down to us by our language and culture. Deciding how to lead our lives is, in the first instance, a matter of exploring the possibilities made available by our culture. However, some minority cultures may need protection from the economic or political decisions of the majority culture if they are to provide this context for their members.[26]

In Malaysia, however, the unique political structure ensures that the ethnic Chinese are a minority without special rights, unable to execute individual autonomy and racial interests to their full extent. Meanwhile, the Malays are the majority – but with special rights – who have extended their hegemony to distort and disrupt Malaysian citizenship. This, of course, is a phenomenon that a true multicultural citizenship should not manifest. Instead, this is an actual reflection of suppressed democracy, human rights, and citizenship.

Researching ethnicity and citizenship, the British scholar Tariq Modood emphasizes that 'The claims that minority cultures, norms and symbols have as much right as their hegemonic counterparts to state provision and to be in the public space, to be recognized as groups and not just as culturally neutral individuals.'[27] He goes on to elaborate the idea that the ideal type of multicultural citizenship is to ensure both equality and diversity:

> The ideal of multicultural citizenship is a critique of the cultural assimilation traditionally demanded by nation-states of migrants and minorities, as well as of their liberal individualism that has no space for groups. Nevertheless, it is clearly grounded in and is a development out of the ideas of individual equality and democratic citizenship … It seeks to pluralize, and hence adapt, not undermine, the unity and equality of citizenship and national identity.[28]

With modification and adaptation, visions and blueprints of multicultural citizenship can be appropriated to uncover the political discourses in Malaysia and the polemics surround-ing the ethnic Chinese. In brief, the government has been premised on Malay hegemony and devising state apparatuses and provisions to increase the size and power of 'bumipu-tera'. The net results are an ever stronger Malay grip on power and a vulnerable situation

for Chinese in all arenas of citizenship. It is no surprise that the Chinese are struggling to further legitimize their ethnicity and rectify citizenship as a whole.

Recurrent demands: cross-racial voices for citizenship

The thirteenth Malaysian General Election, held on 5 May 2013, reflects just how far citizenship has been entwined in racial and ethnic discourses.[29] The campaigns and polemics before and after the elections are vivid testimony that the forces for and against the political status quo came to face each other with almost equal strength. In fact, these two forces represent two strands or visions of citizenship.

The incumbent force is Barisian Nasional (National Front, BN), a coalition in which the major political parties are the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), all of which are race-based.[30] The UMNO has been dominant ever since independence, outstripping the MCA and MIC. The opposing joint force is Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance, Pakatan), made up of the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS). While the DAP and PKR are multiracial, the PAS supports the interests of Muslims.

The irony of the result of the 13th Malaysian General Election is that Barisan Nasional formed the federal government with 60% of parliamentary seats even though it won merely 47.88% of the popular vote, while the Pakatan formed the bulk of the opposition in Parliament after winning 50.87% of the popular vote.

Bridget Welsh, an observer of Malaysian politics, points out that the election strikingly reflects the changes in racial politics and the trend to cross ethnic boundaries:

> The opposition's push for inclusiveness reflected a new ethnic politics, one in which ethnic identity is superseded by a transethnic Malaysian identity and all communities are represented and respected equally. This message appealed not just to non-Malays, who finally felt included after decades of exclusion, but to many younger and middle-class Malay voters. As a result, PR garnered more support across ethnicities and emerged from the contest a more multiethnic coalition.[31]

Noteworthy for the discussion of multicultural citizenship is how differently the MAC and DAP fared in the election. The MAC's performance was disappointing, as it only managed to win 7 of the 37 parliamentary seats and 11 of the 90 seats in state legislative assemblies. In contrast, the DAP achieved considerable success, winning 38 of the 51 parliamentary seats and 95 of the 103 seats in state legislative assemblies. In addition, the winning DAP representatives are mostly Chinese. It is in this context that the incumbent Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak called it a 'Chinese Tsunami' that had shattered the Barisan Nasional base.

The notion of a 'Chinese Tsunami' sparked debate, only to end up as a mere rhetorical bubble in politics. But this notion reflects the fact that citizenship discourses have resurfaced, changing from undercurrents to virtual tidal waves. From the perspective of multicultural citizenship, the incumbent ruling coalition of Barisan Nasional has been unable to prevent citizens from implementing meaningful ethnicity, leading to its loss of supporters in the multiracial nation-state. After its establishment in 1949, the MCA in its early years helped the ethnic Chinese in their transition from Chinese nationals to Malaysian citizenship, paving the way from the migration era to the post-migration

phase. But the MCA has been subordinate to the UMNO and its Malay hegemony. It has never succeeded in Barisan Nasional and Parliament in securing a solid position in Malaysian citizenship for ethnic Chinese culture. As a result, it has been regarded by many Chinese as a traitor, rather than a defender, of ethnic Chinese culture and education.[32]

 In contrast, the DAP has increasingly gained acceptance for its vision of establishing a 'peaceful and prosperous social democracy that can unite its disparate races and diverse religions and cultures based on a Malaysian Malaysia concept'.[33]

Since the twelfth General Election in 2008, Pakatan had been narrowing the gap between itself and Barisan Nasional. Now, with its striking achievement in the thirteenth General Election, the opposition coalition has pushed further forward with its plan to overthrow the ruling parties in order to bring about regime change. It is remarkable that significant discourses and strategies in multicultural citizenship have become a very visible feature of Malaysia's political landscape.

Apart from competition between the political parties, campaigns and movements by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also demonstrated cross-racial cooperation for the benefit of multicultural citizenship. This is particularly true of Bersih (literally 'clean' in Malay), the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, which is a joint force of sixty NGOs with the agenda of reforming the current electoral system in Malaysia to ensure free, clean, and fair elections. In both 2011 and 2012, Bersih succeeded in launching massive rallies in the capital Kuala Lumpur, bringing together many citizens irrespective of race. By any measure, this demonstrated how multicultural citizenship has matured in Malaysia, with voices that are ethnic and beyond.[34]

Divergent approaches: stances and strategies of Malaysian Chinese

Three Malaysian Chinese are selected here for study: Hou Kok Chung (born 1963), Hew Kuan Yau (born 1970), and Wong Chin Huat (born 1973), against the background of an increasingly turbulent political scene. They represent a generation of Malaysian Chinese who have taken part, actively or proactively, in the public sphere over the last two decades, debating whether and how the Chinese should position themselves within Malaysia and vis-à-vis the Malays.[35] They each demonstrate different approaches to Chinese ethnicity and Malaysian citizenship and thus disparate discourses of multicultural citizenship.

Table 1 provides basic profiles of these three Malaysian Chinese. Hou Kok Chung is now in his early fifties, while Hew Kuan Yau and Wong Chin Huat are in their forties. Their primary schools were all National-Chinese, a stream of Chinese-language schools incorporated in the national education system. As regards their secondary education, Hou and Wong continued in National-Chinese schools, but Hew went to an independent Chinese school that was funded entirely by Chinese communities. All of them hold doctorates; Hou obtained his PhD degree from the London School of Oriental and African Studies (UK), Wong from the University of Essex (UK), while Hew obtained his from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Before studying for his PhD, Hew did an MA in Jinan University, China, while Hou and Wong received their MA degrees in Malaysia, from the University of Malaysia and the National University of Malaysia, respectively. When it comes to political activities, Hou is affiliated with the MCA, Hew with the DAP, and Wong does not belong to any political party. As part of the trend that sees citizens increasingly resorting to the Internet for political observation and discussion, Hew and Wong are active on social media such as Facebook to express their views while Hou has yet to make full use of Internet platforms.[36]

Table 1.   Three Malaysian–Chinese politicians and political activists.

Name	Hou Kok Chung	Hew Kuan Yew	Wong Chin Huat
Identities	Politician, professor	Politician, cartoonist	Political scientist, political activist, columnist, lecturer
Year of Birth	1963	1970	1973
Place of Birth	Johor, Malaysia	Perak, Malaysia	Perak, Malaysia
Language(s) mainly used in the public	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese, English, Malay
Pre-undergraduate schools	National-Chinese (primary, secondary)	National-Chinese (primary), Independent-Chinese (secondary)	National-Chinese (primary, secondary)
Degrees	• PhD, London School of Oriental and African Studies, 2001 • MA, Chinese Studies, University of Malaya, 1990 • BA, Chinese Studies, University of Malaya, 1987	• PhD, History, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002 • MA, History, Jinan University, 1997 • BA, Diploma in Malay studies, Southern College, Malaysia, 1994	• PhD, Political Science, University of Essex, 2012 • MA, Industrial and Organizational Psychology, National University of Malaysia, 2000 • BA, University of Malaya, 1996
Major Career	• Parliament Member for Kluang, Johor, 2008–2013 • Deputy Minister for Higher Education, 2008–2013 • Professor, University of Malaya, 2001–2008	• Senior Manager, a private company in China, 2006–2010 • Secretary to leaders of Democratic Action Party (DAP), 1997–2002.	• Fellow, Penang Institute • Lecturer, Monash University Sunway Campus
Political Party	Malaysian Chinese Association	Democratic Action Party	Nil

Over the past two decades, they have been writing and speaking in public. Where publications are concerned, Hou and Hew mainly use Chinese, while Wong is effectively trilingual in Chinese, English, and Malay. Here we shall examine their views and policies in three specific areas: language and culture; race and the nation; and party politics. These are the areas that have often ignited debate ever since Malaysia's independence. As the following discussion will show, Hou is conservative, Hew strategic, and Wong radical. These attributes and stances are in relative terms, for the purpose of comparing and contrasting.

Language and culture

All three of these Malaysian Chinese see the value of maintaining Chinese language and culture in the setting of multicultural citizenship for Malaysia. This should be no surprise, as they were all educated in Chinese language schools, either National-type or

independent. Nevertheless, they have adopted different approaches to promoting the carriers and contents of Chinese culture.

Among them, Hou Kok Chung appears to look backward to historical linkages with China and inward to ethnicity in his search for a better way forward. It would seem that he underscores the need to strengthen diasporic ties from the migration phase to the post-migration phase in order to reinforce Chinese cultural substance. He has written that 'As multicultural influences have been taking place, the ethnic Chinese social structure, behavioral model, and value style are undergoing dramatic transformation. But in order to find a position for the Malaysian Chinese, we have to seek enlightenment from history and a set of methods for balancing old and new traditions.'[37] In addition, he has said:

> If we do not understand our own history, it would get us nowhere to talk about Chinese culture and it would be also inadequate to explain our culture to other races. As others have many misconceptions about us, we can only sing the song of 'here is our country' to express that we are equally loyal but we are not able to get ethnic interactions to happen in an appropriate way.[38]

Hew Kuan Kew is more defensive and aggressive as a political satirist in standing up to Malaysia's ruling parties and politicians. Rather than making a fetish of cultural enrichment and drawing on the past tied to China, he focuses on claiming cultural respect in the racial politics and national discourses of Malaysia. He blames the Malays as the dominant majority for the suppression of Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia. He has advanced the concept of 'cultural leadership' to look at what has ailed Chinese language and culture. According to him:

> Since independence, the ethnic Chinese have been enormously suppressed by the 'cultural assimilation' forces from the Malay radicals in the UMNO...I decided to adopt the term of 'cultural leadership'. This is because since the 1990s the Barisan Nasional-led government has altered its image of radical racism to take up a 'moderate and open' attitude to minority interests and thus they have won unprecedented support from the ethnic Chinese. The government has replaced 'racial politics' with 'development politics' in the country while advocating 'Asian Value' towards foreign countries' ...However, the 'real needs' of the Chinese are ignored in their objection to the double standard of bumiputera and non-bumiputera under the UMNO hegemony.[39]

Wong Chin Huat is an all-rounder. He has alerted citizens to the full picture of a Malaysian multiculturalism that is more than Malay and Chinese. He argues that, to achieve equality in multicultural citizenship, it is vital to diminish the status of Malay as the national language and English as an elite language and place them as mother tongues on a par with other minority languages in Malaysia:

> Recognizing Malay and English as mother tongues help [*sic*] us to recognize the real stakeholders in the debate on multi-stream education. Notwithstanding the high degree of overlapping, the stakeholders here are Malay speakers, Chinese speakers, Tamil speakers, English speakers, speakers of various native and nonnative tongues, not Malay, Chinese, Indians, Sabahans, Sarawakians and others.[40]

Races and the nation

Wong Chin Huat goes so far as to propose a brand-new paradigm for looking critically at the education system, which mainly comprises schools using Malay, Chinese, and Tamil languages as mediums of instruction.[41] In his analysis, he points out that there are two

models that the Malaysian government and citizens have adopted, and that one of them should be pursued more resolutely in future as an education policy to better integrate races into the nation. He mentions that 'the chosen Policy Option 1 "Integration of streams" has failed miserably – increasingly many Chinese parents send their kids to Chinese-medium schools despite the marginalization and stigmatization of these schools' and 'the un-chosen Policy Option 2 "Integration within streams" has succeeded somewhat – the Chinese-medium schools have attracted more non-Chinese parents to send their kids there compared with the state-preferred Malay-medium schools'.[42] In reality, there are solid grounds for him to advance such a new paradigm given that the Chinese-medium schools have fared better in academic performance and in attracting non-Chinese students.

Hew Kuan Yau admits that it is an uphill task to build a 'Malaysian Malaysia', a vision that his Democratic Action Party (DAP) champions. He argues that the vision is still a highly contested concept, often reduced to a slogan without actuality, because it is denied by the dominant UMNO, which has established a 'Malay nation-state'.[43] He has offered a structural approach to ratifying differentiated citizenship and realizing a 'multi-racial Malaysia' by emphasizing the importance of reallocating economic resources and not just simply pursuing cultural equality:

> Whether or not it is out of intention and deliberation, a 'Malaysian Malaysia' cannot be fought for only in the sociocultural arenas. Even greater attention should be paid to the socioeconomic aspect, where we should lay out new plans and alert all the races to this new agenda that the DAP has put in place.[44]

Hew emphasizes that the demand for a fair share of economic resources in Chinese education is in line with his DAP's belief in equality and freedom and citizen participation in government policies and in the whole country. According to him:

> The DAP believes in pursuing equality and free development for Chinese education. That is to attain equal status for all races and diversity in education. After all, the whole purpose of Chinese education lies in vying for fairer allocation of economic capitals and also in getting real participation by all citizens in efforts to determine how the government frames its policies.[45]

Hou Kok Chung has not offered any critical resolution to resetting racial profiling and reconfiguring Malaysian citizenship. In his view, the Malays as the majority race would not believe in the vision of 'Malaysian Malaysia': 'From the perspective of the Malays, to advocate "Malaysian Malaysia" is simply a vehicle manipulating democracy to serve the interests of certain ethnic group.' According to him, the best the ethnic Chinese can possibly do is to get into the political establishment and seek recognition of their cultural equality from the Malays:

> The most important objective for the Chinese is to get into the mainstream of Malaysia's nation-building project so that the Malays can understand the Chinese and recognize they are also 'Malaysian'. Only with that can fair dialogues be conducted and equality achieved to nurture one's own culture.[46]

Party politics

There has been an obvious shift in Hou Kok Chung's perception of how party politics should work for ethnic cultures in relation to citizenship and the nation. That change happened around 2008 when he became a full-time politician. Prior to that, when he was

teaching in the Department of Chinese Studies, in his collection of essays, *Jin wo lai si* (I Am Pondering Now) (1993), he voiced doubts about the MCA as a political party suited to protecting ethnic Chinese interests: 'Concerning the MAC's performance as well as the internal problems the party has, many intellectuals have become very sick of it and estranged from it. Not only do I think this way, but many scholars and students I know also share the same feeling.'[47] Also, he has constantly reiterated the idea that Chinese intellectuals should place a premium on academic research instead of indulging in politics.

> Of those intellectuals concerned about their own ethnic group, many would rather immerse themselves in pushing for political reforms while few have the patience to work quietly in academia. The majority of the people can only comprehend the visible forces in political power, but ignore abstract forces in academia ... In our effort to safeguard Chinese education, we only care about the basic level of competence in written Chinese. We have never been aware that such a perception would never genuinely enable us to inherit the culture and come up with something new.[48]

In the twelfth Malaysian General Election (2008), Hou contested and won in the parliamentary constituency of Kluang on the National Front ticket. He served as the Deputy Minister for Higher Education from March 2008 to April 2013. He lost in the thirteenth General Election (2013), but is currently the vice-president of MCA. Although he has not given any clear reason for his change from dedicated academic to full-time politician, it is apparent that he places a lot of faith in the Barisan Nasional regime's addressing the needs of citizens, of whom the ethnic Chinese are part. As his current political views show, he has rehashed the old argument that ethnic Chinese have to count on how UMNO perceives and advances citizenship.

While Hou has become affiliated with the ethnically Chinese MCA, Hew Kuan Yau has been a faithful believer in the citizen-based DAP ever since he started to observe and participate in politics. From 1997 to 1999, he was an aide to the DAP's prominent leader, Lim Kit Siang. Subsequently, from 1999 to 2002, he was the head of the DAP's Bureau of Politics and Education at national level.

He severely took to task race-based political parties, racial politics, and racist policies: 'I absolutely cannot accept that all through the years both the ruling and opposition political parties have explained their policies in racial terms. That has poisoned all citizens into becoming used to looking at politics and political issues from racist angles.'[49] He has supported the DAP as 'a political party which is taking the middle path with a slight leftist leaning and which can fairly meet the needs of grassroots people of all races'.[50]

Hew points out that it is all the more important to strategically combine all opposition forces to overthrow the ruling Barisan Nasional: 'The alternative alliance (to take over the Barisan Nasional) integrates all the major opposition political parties. The DAP believes that only if united can the opposition forces be stronger.'[51] More importantly, he highlights the DAP's role in supporting a genuine citizenship regardless of racial and religious differences: 'Without the DAP, the alternative alliance is only an opposition dominated by the Malays and Muslims.'[52] Clearly, he opposes the Malay and Islamic influences that have had a major impact in shaping party politics.[53]

Wong Chin Huat has never joined any political party. He is currently a research fellow at the Penang Institute, a think tank associated with the Penang State Government, but since as early as the 1990s he has been arguing vigorously in newspapers, academic journals, and social media for political reform and regime change. His political aims are articulate and solid, pushing for media freedom, freedom of assembly, electoral reform, and changes in party politics. From 2000 to 2001, he was the Executive Secretary of the

Malaysian Chinese Organization Election Appeal Committee, advocating broad institutional and policy reform.[54] He was arrested three times for his leading role in electoral reform movements, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) and the Coalition for Clean and Fair Election 2.0 (Bersih 2.0). As has been discussed in the previous section, the movements are multiracial forums addressing policies and politics that all citizens are concerned with.

One of the caveats Wong has repeatedly stated is that both Malay hegemony and Islamization are two key factors dividing Malaysian citizens. The following excerpt illustrates his view:

> This is a dramatic turn in the politics of nation-building. As a regime maintenance strategy, expansion of Malay literacy is now replaced by confinement of Muslims by Malay literacy. The ideology of Malay/Muslim supremacy will now fight for its survival through, no longer assimilation of the non-Malays, but the creation of a Malay-speaking, Muslim-centric ethnic-partisan core ... From the standpoint of multiculturalism, this end of assimilation is a catastrophe, not a triumph. A deeper religious divide defined by language is being created through religious cleansing of the national language.[55]

Assuredly, the blueprint of multicultural citizenship that Wong has in mind is secular and a true democracy with equilibrium in various political entities. Wong is resolutely attempting to defy restricted ethnicity and instead envision a full blossoming of citizenship. It is more than ironic and challenging to Malaysian politics when Wong poses the following question:

> However, if the plural socio-political order – multiculturalism, multiparty democracy and secularism – as a whole has never really enjoyed legitimacy, but rather has been tolerated as a legacy that needs some kind of homogenisation, should we really be so surprised by the rise of far-right Muslim nationalism and the absence of a solid cross-ethnic defence of diversity?[56]

Conclusion

Historical precedents had not allowed the ethnic Chinese to become firmly embedded within Malaysia and thus their position has never fitted in with that peculiar system of nation-state and they have never been appreciated as full citizens. From the migration phase to the post-migration context, the ethnic Chinese have, either simultaneously or consecutively, been isolated by the British colonial 'divide-and-rule' policies along racial lines, absorbed by the far-reaching Chinese nationalism, and marginalized by the Malay hegemony. As a result, the Chinese have been constructed as an ethnic group with remarkable cultural identities, but have yet to become full-scale citizens. In fact, neither the ethnicity nor the citizenship associated with the Chinese has been fully recognized and realized by the majority race and the nation. Their ironic and embarrassed position at the national margins is a vivid reflection of how multicultural citizenship has been disgraced, distorted, and breached.

It should be pointed out that, in Malaysia's multicultural citizenship, the variants between races are equivalent to discrepancies in citizenship. In view of differentiated citizenship, the ethnic Chinese have been constantly searching for and struggling to achieve the genuine meaning of multiculturalism. The three Chinese public figures under study here mirror the same aim of reconfiguring citizenship, but with disparate approaches. Hou Kok Chung is hoping to incrementally change the status of Chinese ethnicity by working with his ethnic Chinese party MCA and by seeking better understanding and support from within the incumbent political establishment, where the Malay ruling party UMNO dominates. Hew

Kuan Yau puts his faith in his multiracial opposition party DAP and in his envisioning of Malaysia as a nation where citizenship is unshackled from the Malay hegemony and Islamic domination. With no affiliation to any political party, Wong Chin Huat reaches beyond the ethnic Chinese and attempts to lift all minorities to be on a par with the majority Malays to achieve equality in Malaysian multicultural citizenship.

Malaysia's differentiated citizenship has muzzled the citizenship rights as well as the interests of the ethnic Chinese. To put in place the ideals of multicultural citizenship is to propose equality and respect, and thereby revise racial relations on all fronts in nation-states. Hopefully the ethnic Chinese can be released from the gridlock of racial politics and subsequently take their rightful place in the panorama of Malaysia's multicultural citizenship. Amidst the gradual awakening of citizenship among the people, the success of party politics is contingent on both citizenship and ethnicity being fully exercised and implemented. The many cross-racial political coalitions and social movements show that the Malaysians are simultaneously defending ethnicity and claiming citizenship.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Notes

1. Using migrant and post-migrant phases to examine the history of Malaysian Chinese was first suggested by Yow in his article, "Jiazu, zhongzu, guozu," 147–50.
2. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 32–3.
3. On the remigration of the Chinese diaspora, see Wang, "Patterns of Chinese Migration," 3–21.
4. This corresponds to the Chinese idioms of 'luoye guigen' (fallen leaves to return to the roots) and 'luodi shengge' (leaves to grow roots where they fall). 'Luodi shengge' was the theme for the 1992 conference on the Chinese diaspora held at the University of California Berkeley and the presented papers were selected and published in Wang and Wang, *The Chinese Diaspora*.
5. Therefore, many Malaysian Chinese ended up working in Singapore and taking up Singapore citizenship. See Lam and Yeoh, "Negotiating 'Home' and 'National Identity'," 141–64; and Sin, "The Skeptical Citizen, The Mobile Citizen, and the Converted National."
6. Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya," 352–3; Abraham, "Race Relations in West Malaysia," 18–32; and Cham, "Colonialism and Communalism in Malaysia," 178–99.
7. Gomez, *The State of Malaysia*.
8. Yen, *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution*; and Leong, "Sources, Agencies and Manifestations."
9. Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, 61.
10. Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya," 352–3.

11. Ching-hwang, "Overseas Chinese Nationalism," 397–425; and Leong, "Sources, Agencies and Manifestations."
12. Shimazu, "Diplomacy as Theatre," 225–52.
13. Hara, *Malayan Chinese and China*.
14. Hefner, "Introduction: Multiculturalism and Citizenship," 1–58. On differentiated citizenship, 28–34.
15. This is the so-called 'Bargain of "57"'. The Malay special rights include the Laws of Malay Reserve Land, Islam as the national religion, and Sultans as symbolic rulers. Milne and Mauzy, *Politics and Government in Malaysia*. On the Constitution, see Fernando, *The Making of the Malayan Constitution*. On the formation of Malaysia as a nation state, see Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*.
16. *The May 13 Tragedy: A Report*; Rahman, *May 13, Before and After*; and Slimming, *Malaysia: Death of a Democracy*.
17. Gomez, *The State of Malaysia*; Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process*; Means, *Malaysian Politics*; Means, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation*; Also, it is worthy here for a revisit to the classical study in Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*.
18. Khoo, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism*.
19. Shafir, "Introduction: The Evolving Tradition of Citizenship," 1–28.
20. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*.
21. Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt, "The Study of Transnationalism," 217–37; and Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.
22. Goldberg, *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*.
23. Modood, "Multiculturalism and Citizenship," 50–4.
24. Young, *Justice and Politics of Difference*.
25. Taylor, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition."
26. Kymlicka, "The Rights of Minority Cultures," 140.
27. Modood, "Multiculturalism and Citizenship," 50–1.
28. Ibid., 52.
29. For succinct reports on the 2013 General Election, see Weiss, *Electoral Dynamics in Malaysia*; Chin, "Editorial: Chinese Tsunami or Urban Revolt?," 444–501; Chin, "So Close and Yet so Far," 533–40. Pui Yee, "Continuing Revolt of the Urban Chinese Voters," 549–56. On the 1999 General Election, see Chin, "A New Balance."
30. On Barisian Nasional until the 1980s, see Mauzy, *Barisan Nasional*.
31. Welsh, "Malaysia's Elections," 145.
32. Heng, *Chinese Politics in Malaysia*; Loh, *The Politics of Chinese Unity in Malaysia*.
33. Qiu, *Chaoyue jiaotiao yu wushi*.
34. On the roles and activities of non-government organizations in Malaysia politics, see Weiss and Hassan, *Social Movements in Malaysia*.
35. On ethnic Chinese political participations and activities, see Gungwu, "Chinese Politics in Malaya," 1–30; Lee and Heng, "The Chinese in the Malaysian Political System," 194–254; Lee, "Politics of the Chinese in Malaysia," 489–523; He, "Duli hou xi Ma huaren zhengzhi yanbian," 69–125. On the most recent issues Malaysian Chinese are concerned with, see Sim and Soong, *Give and Take*.
36. For assessment on the significance of the Internet in Malaysia's politics, see Leong, *New Media and the Nation in Malaysia*.
37. He, *Ta li ta wai*, 151.
38. Ibid., 153.
39. Qiu, *Di san tiao lu*, 10 & 26.
40. Wong, "Mother Tongue Education and Inequality," 5.
41. Tan, *The Politics of Chinese Education*; and Zheng, *Malaixiya huawen jiaoyu fazhanshi*.
42. Wong, "Can Chinese-Medium Schools," 11–12.
43. Qiu, *Chaoyue jiaotiao yu wushi*, 109.
44. Ibid., 110.
45. Qiu, *Pipan jihui zhuyi de pipan*.
46. He, *Malaixiya huaren*, 168.
47. He, *Jin wo lai si*, 116.
48. Ibid., 16. The emphasis on academic research to foster Chinese culture and the skepticism of the MCA are also another collection of his essays, He, *Ta li ta wai*.

49. Qiu, *Pipan jihui zhuyi de pipan*, 50.
50. Ibid., 52–3.
51. Ibid., 278.
52. Ibid., 254.
53. On Islamist influences and their manifestation in Malaysia's politics, see Hussein, "Muslim Politics and the Discourse on Democracy," 74–107; and Hoist, "Implementations of Ethnicization," 104–14.
54. The committee was better known as Suqiu (literally, making demands). Suqiu was accused by the then prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad of being a threat to national security comparable to communist insurgents and religious fanatics.
55. Wong, "The Undermining of Bahasa Malaysia," 11–12.
56. Wong, "The Illegitimate Trio of Multiculturalism," 13.

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