



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Malaysia : Chinese

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Profile

Ethnic Han Chinese represent Malaysia's largest minority, numbering around 7.4 million, and constitute close to a third of Malaysia's overall population. Principal first languages include Hakka, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, Mandarin and Hokchiu, and Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, Confucianism are their principal religions.

While Mandarin is the language of instruction in private Chinese schools, the languages of most Chinese in the country are actually Hakka, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese and Hokchiu. The Hokkien tend to be concentrated in Penang, the Cantonese and Hakka in Kuala Lumpur, whereas Mandarin is predominant in the south peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak, alongside Hakka.

Historical context

Chinese trading communities have long been present in Malaysia, and were present in fifteenth century Malacca, but large-scale migration only began in the nineteenth century as a result of British policy. Young Chinese males were encouraged to go to Malaysia to work in tin mining for several years before migrating back to China with their earnings. In the early twentieth century, immigration by Chinese women increased, and settled Chinese communities developed. The increased size of the population allowed the community to build temples, schools and community and political associations. Most Chinese were found in urban areas and had little interaction with Malays and other indigenous peoples, who lived mainly in rural areas. Chinese migration to Sabah and Sarawak followed a similar pattern.

After independence, the Chinese hold on the economy became stronger. The 1969 13 May race riots led to the constitutional amendments on 'special rights' and the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Chinese activists and politicians who protested against the NEP and the erosion of non-Malay culture and education were arrested, as late as 1988, and detained without trial under the Internal Security Act. As the Malaysian government moved toward Malay-only state schools in the 1970s, most Chinese (about 90 per cent in primary schools) preferred to send their children to private Mandarin-language schools.

Although the Chinese are represented in the government, they are marginalized in the key policy decision-making process. In successive elections, the majority of Chinese votes have gone to Chinese-based opposition political parties. Resentment over the *Bumiputeras* remains high among members of this minority, although the Chinese have also benefited from the country's relatively good economic performance of recent decades.

There were anti-Chinese demonstrations in December 2000 following the questioning of the special rights for Malays by a newly formed Chinese group -- the Malaysian Chinese Organizations' Election Appeals -- which also advocated equal civil and political rights.

Current issues

Many members of the Chinese minority continue to feel they are victims of discrimination through the actions of public authorities who continue to favour *Bumiputeras* in terms of employment and education, the use of an exclusive Malay-language policy for state schools, and various other measures which are still in place in order to enhance the position of Malays in many areas of society.

While there has been a perceptible shift in some official statements since 2003, suggesting that affirmative action programmes have either not worked as expected or should be replaced, overall there have not been any significant developments in the following years other than permitting English to be used for the teaching of mathematics and sciences in state schools, and teaching Mandarin as an elective in some state schools. None of these steps change the main causes of exclusion and disadvantage, which may constitute discrimination since they appear to be in place to maintain Malay dominance of society, if not of the economy.

However, recent statements in 2006 made by the government coalition's main dominant political party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO), are particularly worrying for the Chinese minority. Several high-profile speakers during a telecast conference referred to the need to defend their race and religion with their own blood and warned non-Malays (especially the Chinese) against any threats to the special rights for *Bumiputeras*.

The ruling BN party, led by UMNO continues to use anti-Chinese sentiment in order to bolster votes and drive wedges between constituencies. UMNO has over the years warned of the need to defend against threats to ethnic Malays, often using the ethnic Chinese as a convenient scapegoat. Such rhetoric strains community relations. In 2015, a violent mob of two hundred people attacked a group of ethnic-Chinese over an accusation that a Chinese man had sold a counterfeit phone to a Malay, when in fact, the Malay had stolen the phone. Such an incident demonstrates how fragile the peace is between communities.

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