

## "Threads of Influence: Exploring the Nexus of History, Religion, and Culture in Shaping Chinese Women's Political Engagement in Peninsula Malaysia"

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### **Abstract**

*The multi-ethnic factor has influenced gender-based political parties and culture. Thus, we shed light on how political socialization through indicators of religion, history, and culture influences Chinese women's behavior and political involvement in Peninsular Malaysia. The political participation of Chinese women in Malaysia remains low, as evidenced by the representation of Chinese women in decision-making sectors such as the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) and Parliament. We adopt a qualitative approach through intensive interview techniques with ten purposively selected participants. The primary informants interviewed include female Chinese political representatives, male politicians, academics, and NGO activists. Ultimately, we illustrate how political socialization through cultural, religious, and historical agents influences the political involvement of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. The political culture of Chinese women is not static and has evolved based on contemporary changes before and after independence. The political culture of Chinese women has shifted from referencing Mainland China to survival in Malaya.*

**Keywords:** Chinese Women, Political Socialization, Religion.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The migration of Chinese communities to the Malay Peninsula commenced as early as 221 BC, following the establishment of trade and diplomatic relations between China and the states in the Malay Peninsula (Wheatley, 1966). The initial diplomatic ties between the kingdoms of the Malay Peninsula and mainland China were driven by the need for essential commodities available in the Peninsula, as well as the desire for protection and recognition from the Chinese government. However, the influx of immigrants from mainland China and India accelerated during the British colonial period. Consequently, the resulting multi-ethnic society in Malaysia has led to differences in religion, culture, language, and lifestyle. The multi-ethnic groups, known as Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others, have employed ethnic-based approaches to dominate political discourse and analysis in Malaysia since independence- as evident in the existence of ethnically-based political parties in Malaysia, such as UMNO, MCA, MIC, and PAS. Regarding religion, four major religions or cultures play significant roles in Malaysian politics: Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Christianity. The presence of diverse religions, cultures, and histories directly and indirectly influences the behavior of political actors in Malaysia, including Chinese women.

The political participation of Chinese women in Malaysia remains low. The percentage of Chinese women in the Dewan Rakyat during the 14th General Election was 4.5 percent, which declined to 3.6 percent in the 15th General Election. Meanwhile, the percentage of Chinese women in the State Legislative Assembly was 3.4 percent in the 14th General Election, rising to 4.6 percent in the 15th General Election (Table 1). Despite women in this country being generally more educated than men, their political involvement remains low, including among Chinese women. The 2022 Global Gender Gap (GGG) report indicates that 48.44 percent of women entered higher education institutions compared to 37.05 percent of men (Abdullah, 2023). Therefore, this study sheds light on how historical, religious, and cultural factors influence Chinese women's behavior and political culture in Peninsular Malaysia. We aim to expand the body of knowledge on the political culture of Chinese women in Malaysia. Since studies on Chinese women and politics in Malaysia are still limited, we assert it will utilize the findings of research to observe the differences and developmental stages of the political culture

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of Chinese women in Malaysia over time, as well as the differences in political culture among Malaysia's various ethnic communities.

### **History, Culture, Religion and Politics Involvement**

The process of political socialization is fundamental in shaping political behavior from childhood. Thus, any discussion on women and politics must consider this process, as it influences the formation of perceptions, behaviors, and political culture throughout an individual's life, starting from childhood (Ramli & Talib, 2023). According to Omar et al., 2008 political socialization enables individuals to understand the political system, subsequently affecting their political perceptions and responses to political phenomena. Diverse agents influence the process, including social, economic, and cultural environments, interactive experiences, and individual personalities. These agents encompass gender, religion, marital status, residence, language, schools, higher education institutions, print media, electronic media, NGOs, history, culture, and political parties (Abdullah, 2008).

We perceive culture as a way of life, as articulated by Deraman, 1975 encompassing all aspects of life, whether simple or complex, depending on the level of development and changes experienced in society. On the one hand, culture can be associated with the living heritage of a community, as defined by Kling, 1985 encompassing everything present in the society, including ideas, material artifacts, and forms of expression. Culture encompasses knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, laws, customs, and other practices humans acquire as community members (Edward, 1958). From this scholarly perspective, it could be concluded that culture constitutes a society's living legacy spanning various domains, whether in simple or complex forms.

Culture emerges from the interpretation of rational roles that interact with the surrounding environment to meet the needs and desires of the community. Communities rise to culture because when humans live within a group, they become more creative and innovative in meeting their daily life requirements. They generate culture, whether in material or non-material forms. However, culture varies among societies based on their specific needs. Malaysian society comprises diverse ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, and Indians- each ethnic group practices distinct cultural norms and beliefs. Consequently, each group views the role of women through different lenses, shaped by their cultural practices and individual beliefs.

The traditional culture of the Chinese community in Malaysia, inherited from mainland China (Lok, 1998; Oong, 1996), also affects their political involvement. We can classify the traditional family culture of the Chinese from mainland China into several key aspects: patriarchal, patrimonial, patrilineal, and patrilocal. Patrilineal refers to the inheritance of names from fathers and husbands- patriarchal denotes the rules, laws, and culture privileging men; patrimonial refers to the inheritance of property passed from and to men; and patrilocal refers to women living in homes or locations determined by men. Consequently, traditional Chinese culture confers privileges to men over women, encompassing inheritance of property, ancestral names, and male influence and power within the household, including determining the place of residence after marriage. Studies on gender in Malaysia reinforce the phenomenon by finding that Malay parents do not prefer the gender of their children, unlike Chinese parents, who prefer sons over daughters (Pong, 1994).

The Chinese community emphasizes cultural aspects through family history and the development of the Chinese education system in Malaya, which began with the influx of Chinese immigrants in the early 19th century. These Chinese immigrants brought their customs, beliefs, religion, family culture, and educational system to Malaya (Abdullah, 2008). According to Sia, 2005 the Chinese community places great importance on education, and historical evidence shows that they established Chinese schools through individual efforts and associations to preserve their cultural heritage and language- evident in the construction of Chinese schools in Chinese settlements.

Patriarchal culture is a cultural practice that significantly influences societal life. Patriarchal culture constitutes a social structure and practice in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby, 1990). Patriarchal culture shapes the relationship between men and women, with the impact of this cultural practice varying among individuals based on cultural norms, country, and other factors. Millett, 1977 asserts that patriarchal cultural practices position men in a dominant role compared to women due to biological differences.

Institutions such as academia, churches, and families reinforce patriarchal culture, perpetuating these practices- biological factors influence the construction of gender roles.

According to Talib, 2014 no scientific evidence explains that physical or biological factors influence gender roles- because tasks such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and other traditional roles are often associated with women. As women increasingly participate in the workforce, these traditional roles have transformed into janitorial, clerical, and receptionist positions. Non-professional jobs are typically relevant to women, requiring lower levels of education and involving simple tasks with low wages. On the other hand, men often have a dedicated space for complex jobs demanding expertise and higher salaries. Consequently, the stereotype of women as weaker than men, coupled with prejudiced attitudes frequently linked to gossip, is used to argue that women are unfit for effective leadership compared to men. Women interested in politics must assert themselves to gain acceptance as political members, while men easily engage in politics regardless of their educational status or integrity. Firestone, 1974 argues that the biological factor of childbirth places significant constraints on women, as their responsibilities as mothers are used to limit their roles, abilities, energy, and freedom.

Therefore, the social construction based on patriarchal culture also impacts the lives of both women and men, particularly in the realm of politics- the situation is evident in the significant gender gap within the political sector, where women remain loyal to supportive roles compared to men who dominate decision-making positions and electoral candidates.

Religion significantly influences ethnic-based political participation in Malaysia (Nan Xia et al., 2018. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society that practices diverse cultures and religions, resulting in an ethnicity-based political structure. According to Xia et al., 2018 ethnic-based politics in Malaysia have its roots in the British colonial era and are closely related to religious factors.

The new political wave following the 2008 election highlighted a decline in UMNO's performance and amplified vocal dissatisfaction from BN component parties, particularly the MCA and Gerakan- this shift is evident in the MCA's stance on the issue of 'Ketuanan Melayu' or Malay dominance. Former MCA President Ong Ka Ting publicly disagreed with Malay political dominance. During the first parliamentary session, Ong Ka Ting urged the government to ensure greater religious freedom for non-Muslims and to build new Chinese schools systematically. The newly elected MCA President, Ong Tee Keat, also criticized the relevance of Malay dominance in the current context, arguing that Malay politicians should not manipulate it. He contended that Malay dominance has resulted in unequal relationships between the Malay and non-Malay communities (Lee, 2010).

Religion is a source of ideas and individual behavior (Atran, 2002; Boyer, 2001). Consequently, religion constitutes a crucial element that guides an individual's life. Suppose religion prohibits active female participation in politics. In that case, the phenomenon undoubtedly affects women's involvement in the political arena- through the stance of the Islamic party, PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia), which previously allowed women's participation in politics but restricted them from holding any positions within the party. However, the position has evolved, as after the PAS Muzakarah (consultation) in 1953, PAS now maintains that female candidates are permissible under certain conditions (Azmi, 2019),

## Conceptual Framework: Political Socialization Process And Political Culture



**Figure 1:** Theoretical and Conceptual Framework.

In this research, we examine how political socialization, through agents such as history, religion, and culture, influences and shapes Chinese women's political culture (refer to Figure 1) and behavior in Peninsular Malaysia. Hyman, 1959 defines the process of political socialization as an informal learning process about politics that nearly everyone undergoes throughout their lives due to interactions with parents, family, friends, neighbors, peers, colleagues, and others. Neundorf & Smets, 2017 describe political socialization as the process through which individuals continuously form their political identity, values, and behavior throughout their lives.

Hyman, 1959, Rush et al., 1972, and Samsu, 2007 emphasize how the process of political socialization is not static but occurs continuously- the process extends throughout an individual's life because children's political beliefs may change as they mature. During childhood, individuals may accept whatever they are taught or exposed to by those close to them, such as family members, teachers, or peers. However, circumstances may change as they reach adulthood or attain cognitive maturity, where various political socialization agents also influence their perceptions and political behavior. Socialization agents emerge from natural, unplanned learning processes (nature) and deliberate nurturing processes (nurture). Natural learning occurs spontaneously, independent of biological inheritance and physical environment. In contrast, nurtured learning involves deliberate educational methods, such as schooling involvement in political parties, NGOs, and other organized activities.

Political culture refers to community members' behaviors, actions, involvement, perceptions, beliefs, expectations, and hopes within their political environment. It encompasses attitudes, values, orientations, opinions, perceptions, and feelings toward politics. According to Sulaiman, 2002 political culture guides practical political actions for individuals. For groups, it provides a systematic structure of values and rational considerations that determine the effectiveness of actions taken by political institutions and organizations. While political socialization focuses on the process, political culture emphasizes behavior. These two concepts are mutually influential. The process of political socialization is a crucial factor in shaping political culture. The agents of political socialization history, religion, and culture significantly impact the formation and evolution of political culture.

Political culture is an element that is not static and can change based on circumstances, time, technological advancements, and the environment (Ismail, 2018). The political culture of the Malay society has undergone significant changes. In its early stages, Malay political culture was characterized as 'deferential-narrow,' particularly during the feudal era, colonial period, and early independence. However, the impact of the modernization process has led to changes that have shaped a 'participatory-neo-feudal' political culture.

The emergence of civil society ideas has influenced the development and transformation of Malay political culture. The clash between neo-feudal values and civil society ideas has further contributed to changes in Malay

political culture. Contemporary Malay political culture has two main categories- a neo-feudal participatory orientation for those residing in rural areas and more civil society-oriented participation for those living in urban areas. The settlement environment also plays a crucial role in shaping Malay political culture in Malaysia, as it closely relates to the long-standing process of modernization within the country (Ismail, 2018)

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

We employed a qualitative approach utilizing intensive interviewing techniques and library research. We delved deeper, particularly exploring the perspectives and emotions of informants regarding the issues raised based on the study objectives. Silverman, 2007 states that qualitative research methods are objective and report real-life situations. Schutt, 2009 emphasizes that interviewing techniques enable researchers to confront rich data with narratives and factual events that need to be interconnected. Figure 2 illustrates the data collection process through the interview method utilized in this study.

To conduct intensive interviews, we formulated semi-structured questions to ensure consistency in the information obtained and address the research questions. We chose not to disclose the names of the informants to preserve sensitivity, and we believe this step is in line with the principle of anonymity, which aims to ensure the safety of the informants. By adhering to the principle of anonymity, we indirectly provide informants with the freedom to share their experiences, opinions, and emotions without restraint, even though there is potential for controversy.

We had the privilege to interview ten primary informants. They comprised female Chinese political representatives, NGO activists, academics, and male political figures serving in Peninsular Malaysia. We had an opportunity to interview female Chinese political representatives because they actively engage in politics, hold key positions in political parties, or serve as members of the Parliament or State Legislative Assembly in Peninsular Malaysia. Therefore, they possess a better understanding of the actual political landscape. Meanwhile, academics are individuals with expertise in Chinese societal and political culture who actively research Chinese society and political culture. Female Chinese NGO activists were selected since they safeguard women's rights, including those of Chinese women. Moreover, NGO activists also collaborate and interact directly with female political figures, political parties, and government agencies to empower women, covering economic, political, and social aspects.

We prepared interview invitation letters, questions, and consent forms before conducting the interviews. The content of the interview letters includes the title, informant's name, proposed date, suggested time, and questions to be asked (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These interview support documents are essential for preparing the research report.

The interview process begins with our self-introduction and the research objectives. Subsequently, we inquire about their full name, age, level of education, and relevant personal information. Following that, we pose more in-depth questions about the subject under study. We ensure the confidentiality of the informants and establish a good rapport with them to ensure they feel comfortable and safe to share their views (Glesne, 1999).

## **Data Analysis**

We recorded and transcribed the findings from interviews with informants verbatim. We developed themes based on the interviews to present the conclusions of the transcription of interviews with informants. According to Taylor & Bogdan, 1998 an essential aspect of the research discovery process is identifying themes and developing concepts and general statements. We conducted coding activities to create and interpret the findings from intensive interviews. We performed analysis through transcription by analyzing the frequency and similarity of views expressed by primary informants and themes identified. We also presented narrative statements or storylines, such as direct quotations illustrating the informant's narrative on the subject under study. We coded each informant according to the number of individuals involved in the interview process.

## Library Research

We also prioritized secondary data collection to gather information regarding the history, background, and a clearer picture of the phenomena under study. We utilized several primary and secondary data sources obtained from libraries and archives. We also referenced publications from government agencies, including materials from the Election Commission of Malaysia, the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the Malaysian Parliament, and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. Additionally, we utilized materials from political parties and NGOs. We obtained these secondary data through articles, reports, books, newspapers, and working papers.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews, we untangle that political socialization agents through historical, cultural, and religious indicators have influenced Chinese women's political behavior and political culture in Peninsular Malaysia.

### History

The political culture of immigrant Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia is a dynamic element that evolves. Political socialization agents influence the political culture of Chinese women through historical indicators. Through the historical context of the Chinese community in Malaysia, the British colonizers brought in laborers from mainland China and India to support their economic policies in Malaya. Initially, the political culture of Chinese women or the Chinese immigrant community was oriented towards their homeland, mainland China, as most Chinese immigrants came to Malaya to earn income and intended to return to mainland China. According to the views of informants:

*So when they come, they want to earn money to make some money, but they have no intention of settling down in Malaysia. Then, when they come, they make money and go back.”*(P: 133, L: 3925-3927).

Initially, the spirit of nationalism among Chinese immigrants, including Chinese women, was oriented towards mainland China. The education system among Chinese immigrant children in Malaya was based on mainland China. The political culture of Chinese women based in mainland China can also be seen through the anti-Japanese movement joined by Chinese women in Malaya at that time- a sign of support for the people in mainland China who suffered from the Japanese invasion (Fan, 2005). Chinese women in mainland China demonstrate their involvement in the Malayan Communist Party (PKM), reflecting the political culture. The PKM had close ties with the Communist Party in mainland China. The PKM successfully attracted support from Chinese immigrant women in Malaya through issues raised by them, including labor problems, oppression of women through the framework of traditional Chinese society, and current issues in mainland China. Chinese women who played essential roles in the PKM were Lee Meng, Lee Jhen, Jhen Yin Fen, and Suriani Abdullah (Eng Ming Ching).

The political culture of Chinese immigrant women based in mainland China changed to Malaya after the government in mainland China did not allow Chinese citizens to have dual nationality, forcing them to choose only one nationality. In addition, changes in government policies in mainland China that previously prohibited women from migrating abroad allowed mass migration of women. The Chinese community could now establish stable family institutions in Malaya- which led to the interest of the Chinese community in settling in Malaya and changed their political ideology and culture.

In the effort to achieve independence, the British imposed conditions for cooperation among the multi-ethnic communities in Malaya if Malaya wanted to gain independence (Ho Hui Ling, 2009). Therefore, the effort to achieve independence required the formation of cooperation between the Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups- which led to the formation of the Alliance Party. The Alliance Party consisted of UMNO, MCA, and MIC. The MCA received support from the Chinese community in Malaya and played a role in safeguarding the interests of the Chinese community at that time. Therefore, history is a political socialization agent that has influenced the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia.

## Religion

Most of the Chinese community in Malaysia predominantly follow the Buddhist religion. Buddhism was introduced to Malaysia by Chinese immigrants from Mainland China, with its origins traced back to Gautama Buddha in India. The principles of Buddhism revolve around the concept that suffering in worldly life is caused by ignorance and wrong actions, and the ultimate goal is to achieve Nirvana. Buddhism also emphasizes the idea of the "cycle of life," wherein individuals continuously undergo birth, death, and rebirth. Most of the interviewed informants are Chinese women who practice Buddhism and Christianity. According to them, the religions they follow, Buddhism and Christianity, do not hinder women from engaging in politics. The following are statements issued by informants regarding the role of religion in assessing the participation of women in politics:

Informant	Theme Religion
Informant 1	"Yes, as Buddhists, we do not have such distinctions in Buddhism. To us, every human is equal- this is part of our religious teachings. I think Christianity is also like that. Christians believe in equality, too, whether you are a Christian or not. Most of us are either Christians or Buddhists. So, both religions do not teach such distinctions" (P:7, L: 192-195)
Informant 4	"that is not an obstacle because perhaps our religion teaches us how to be low-profile and how to help the community, that is all" (P: 88, L: 2555-2561)
Informant 9	"actually, the main teaching of Buddha is that every life is equal, not only between men and women. Every life is the same. It means that everything, every being, has the same weight as a person. If you kill an ant, it is the same as killing a person- this is the belief in Buddhism because it holds that all souls are equal. Of course, no one can fully achieve this level. For example, if a mosquito bites me, I might hit and kill it. But I think, in some way, this belief is correct. If we look down on insects, we might forget that mosquitoes can transmit dengue fever and cause death. A mosquito can kill a person. So, it is the same concept. In Buddhism, there is a strong emphasis on equality. This principle leads to a balanced lifestyle for the Chinese community influenced by Buddhism. Everything should be in moderation. If a woman is strong, it is acceptable for a man to be gentle as long as there is balance in the family. You cannot have both partners being equally dominant, as this would lead to conflict within the family. Therefore, balance is essential for family harmony."(P: 173, L: 5140-5152).

Berger, 1967 defines religion as a set of beliefs that binds individuals to a community, transcending individual rights and boundaries. Examining informant statements, Buddhism and Christianity emphasize equality for all beings, including men and women, enabling their participation in politics. However, informants note that men often dominate religious institutions, which is evident in those overseeing Chinese community temples. Women deemed impure during menstruation are prohibited from entering temples or praying during this time. Confucianism and Taoism also hold significance for the Chinese community. Nevertheless, elements of these beliefs that demeaned women were criticized during China's modernization movement, The New Culture Movement, which peaked between 1915 and 1922, influencing the Chinese community in Malaya today.

Religion and belief systems play pivotal roles in political socialization, shaping individuals' minds and influencing their lives, including political engagement. The separation between religion and politics in Malaysia does not exist, as Islam is the official religion; however, Malaysian citizens are free to practice any religion. Religious matters are sensitive issues in Malaysia, and any perceived threat to religion triggers a strong defense. Moreover, the Chinese community in Malaysia has opposed the introduction of the Jawi script in vernacular schools due to concerns about Islamicization among non-Muslim students. To address this, the United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (Dong Zong) submitted a memorandum rejecting the teaching of the Jawi script in vernacular schools to the Ministry of Education- was led by Dong Zong Chairman Tan Tai Kim, along with two Tamil organizations, CHILD Information, the Learning and Development Centre, and the Tamil Foundation (Ramli, 2012). Religion is a significant indicator of Malaysian society, profoundly impacting its cultural and political landscapes. The religious indicators followed by informants do not impede Chinese women's political participation. However, religion remains a sensitive issue for the Chinese community, particularly concerning Islamicization movements .

## Culture

Culture refers to a group of individuals within a society who develop and share a way of life inherited from generation to generation. It encompasses various elements, including religion, politics, customs, language, attire, architecture, and artistic creations (Santoso, 2017). Meanwhile, Itulua, 2014 suggests that culture refers to the lifestyle practices of members of a society or group within society, including clothing, marriage customs, language, family life, occupational patterns, religious ceremonies, and recreational activities. Therefore, we can conclude that culture involves inherited ways of life encompassing social, economic, political, and religious activities, with political culture being one of its elements.

### Traditional Cultural Structure of Chinese Society

Culture serves as one of the agents of political socialization that influences the political behavior of Chinese women because each ethnic group practices a way of life guided by religious teachings and cultural traditions, which includes the Chinese community in Malaysia. Therefore, culture is a significant indicator of individual behavior, including women's. The following are some perspectives on Chinese culture's influence on Chinese female informants' behavior.

Informant	Theme Traditional Culture of Chinese Society
Informant 4	"In the past, Chinese women were not allowed to come forward; they were looked down upon. In the 1970s, if a wife had a daughter, her mother-in-law would look down on her and scold her. Back then, sons were favored, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, when women in Chinese society had no status. However, in the 21st century, we can see that women can now step forward. It was not like this before" (P: 96, L: 2835-2841)
Informant 5	"However, this issue might still exist to some extent, although not significantly. There are still some remnants of this mindset because the Chinese community is traditionally patriarchal. For example, lineage and family names are typically passed down through males. Some people still hold this mindset. When we talk about equal gender rights, most people nowadays accept it to a certain extent. More people recognize that daughters, like sons, should attend school, receive higher education, secure good jobs, and live independently. It is no longer the case that a girl should only receive secondary education and then get married. This generation believes daughters should be treated like sons" (P: 108, L: 3187-3198).
Informant 8	"Traditional Chinese culture inevitably impacts everyone, not just women. For instance, consider the role of women in the family. I believe that today, most people still expect women to play a more significant role in the family than men. The role of the mother is also crucial. Expectations of women within the family remain high; people still hold high expectations for women in the family- this is one impact on women regarding how much they engage with broader life topics, which significantly impacts them. The effect may vary depending on the family, whether they are more traditional or less traditional. Of course, in cities like Kuala Lumpur, I think most parents today—this likely applies to other ethnic groups as well—prefer their children to be active, regardless of whether they are boys or girls. They want their sons and daughters to be active and smart, excel in education, secure good jobs, and earn high salaries- this is the expectation." (P: 154, L: 4575-4587)
Informant 9	"of course, you can see some positive development in the culture part. People are slowly accepting females in all aspects, whether in education, soft cultures, or entertainment, and they are now beginning to accept females. These are distractions the Chinese woman has, but generally, I see some positive development in accepting females"(P: 138, L: 4092-4097)

Most of the informants we interviewed also acknowledged that the Chinese community's cultural practices in Malaysia are those brought by Chinese immigrants from Mainland China. According to Thornton and Lin (1994), Chinese society's culture is influenced by patriarchal, patrimonial, patrilineal, and patrilocal elements, as discussed in the previous chapter. According to the informants, the patrilocal element is gradually diminishing, and parents can now accept if their sons do not live with them. Informants report that parents now respect their children's privacy and adapt to city life (Metropolitan). They also indicate that the patrimonial element persists today, with sons still receiving a larger share of inheritance than daughters. Additionally, informants note that the eldest son, in particular, tends to receive a larger share of the inheritance. Furthermore, they mention that patrilineal inheritance, where the family name is inherited from the father, continues to hitherto.

Additionally, as per the informants, traditional Chinese culture grants men considerable influence compared to women. Within this framework, women are marginalized- discouraged from seeking education or employment and are expected to remain home before or after marriage.

Furthermore, women faced strict limitations on leaving their homes; any departure was viewed as indecorous and improper, prompting the widespread adoption of foot binding in Mainland China to curtail women's



mobility. Additionally, Confucianism reinforces the portrayal of women as subordinate and emphasizes their obligation to obey men (Wei-an Yang, 2014). The main theme in Confucian teachings is the "preservation of the state and the preservation of the family" or "Hao." Confucianism emphasizes Hao, where having children is crucial and serves to continue the family legacy. Thus, marriage is encouraged to have children legitimately. Children can maintain the family by continuing the family inheritance through the family name inherited from the father.

Through Chinese philosophy, phrases and symbols representing Yin and Yang are distinguished and depicted through the characteristics of men and women. Although Yin and Yang possess contrasting traits, they complement each other. Yang symbolizes heaven, the sun, brightness, strength, heat, power, and positive energy. Conversely, Yin represents the earth, the moon, darkness, passivity, femininity, coldness, gentleness, death, odd numbers, and negativity. Men are portrayed as Yang, while women are depicted as Yin. Men are symbolized as strong individuals, whereas women are seen as weak and passive- the framework places women in the lowest position compared to men due to their inherent nature (Lok, 1998).

However, after the Chinese government's defeat in the First Opium War, Second Opium War, and the Sino-Japanese War, the educated class began to criticize the beliefs that the Chinese society, including Confucianism, had supported. As a result of this phenomenon, the New Culture Movement emerged, rejecting any form of oppression against Chinese women (Tan, 2014). The phenomenon opened up opportunities for women to receive education on par with men, which also affects the Chinese community in Malaysia today. According to most informants, the Chinese community can now accept the role of women in society, and the traditional cultural framework that oppressed them is gradually eroding in today's modern world. However, some individuals are still traditional and strongly support these traditional cultural practices. Among them, according to informants, there are still perceptions and beliefs among some Chinese communities in Malaysia, especially in rural areas, that once women marry, they have left their families. They are discouraged from returning to their family fold as it is believed to jeopardize the family's well-being. Moreover, during the Ching Meng festival, they are prohibited from paying homage to their ancestors.

According to informants, in urban areas like Kuala Lumpur, the Chinese community practices less of these traditional customs than their rural counterparts because parents prefer their children, regardless of gender, to be active. They hope their children, both boys and girls, are active and smart, achieve straight A's in education, secure good jobs, and earn high salaries. Education is also crucial in influencing parents' and young people's perceptions of these traditional cultural practices that restrain women. The educated class mostly rejects any form of cultural practices that oppress women. Informants also link societal awareness of women to "astute impact."

Furthermore, parents who fail to send their children to receive six years of primary education will face penalties. Moreover, the government is committed to assisting families who cannot afford to finance their children's education. Education is one of the significant socialization agents influencing women in all aspects of life, including politics- successful socialization agents influence individuals' perceptions and behavior, including political matters.

### **Modern Cultural Structure of Chinese Society**

In delineating the structure of modern culture, most informants assert that there are no constraints from cultural practices hindering their involvement in the political sphere. The following are several factual viewpoints shared by most informants regarding cultural practices:

Informant	Theme The Structure of Modern Culture
Informant 3	"We do not face the same issues as Muslim women, who often encounter many religious restrictions dictated by scholars saying this or that is not allowed. For Chinese women, there is more freedom" (P: 61, L: 1756-1757)
Informant 4	"No, for the Chinese community, no restrictions are saying that Chinese people cannot be involved in a particular party" (P: 88, L: 2555-2561)
Informant 5	"Chinese women do not face serious issues like other ethnic groups" (P: 108, L: 3187-3198).

<p><b>Informant 8</b></p>	<p>“Today, I believe the Chinese ethnic community can accept female leadership because it is becoming increasingly common. If we look at it now, Members of Parliament or State Assemblypersons, I feel they have a main job. Most of them, and what is more important, are young. In traditional communities, they tend to respect those with more senior experience. But now, if you are young, professional, and energetic, people will feel this is what people want to support. And more importantly, I think there has been a slight change in perception towards women. In the past, maybe 20 or 30 years ago (in the 90s or 80s), they might have been hesitant. Women were expected to care for the family and might not have had time to attend to community or voter interests. But now, the perception is different. They see women as clean, less corrupt, more loyal, and more genuine in their assigned tasks. In my opinion, their performance is good. They do not get too involved in dirty politics. I think this is a good and positive development. I can see that most of them are young. For me, it is exciting. So, from what I see, I feel that the Members of Parliament in Johor are very young; many are very young. They are all energetic. Their marital status seems like it is not an issue anymore” (P: 157, L: 4712-4727)</p>
<p><b>Informant 10</b></p>	<p>“In the Chinese community, we do not have issues; whoever can step forward, we give them opportunities. Even the voters allow women aged 20 or 26 to win at the state assembly and parliamentary levels. So, I think the Chinese community is more open-minded. For example, in the case of youth, in the People's Justice Party (PKR), we have Chua Wei Kiat, who became the Assemblyman for Rawang at age 26. Now, if you look at DAP, there are women like Jamalia, YB Yeo Bee Yin, and Michelle Ng in Subang Jaya.” (P: 175, L: 5231-5238)</p>

Most informants assert that although patriarchal elements of Chinese culture persist in society, they are gradually waning over time. The Chinese community's increasing openness to women's political participation is evident in the rising number of women elected to state legislative assemblies (ADUN) and Parliament. For instance, Chua Wei Kiat, appointed as an ADUN for Rawang at 26 years old from the People's Justice Party (PKR), exemplifies this trend. Young female leaders from the Democratic Action Party (DAP), like Jamaliah Jamaluddin, Yeo Bee Yin, and Michelle Ng, contribute to this shift. Moreover, informants highlight that the community emphasizes performance rather than seniority.

According to informants, female candidates are perceived to perform better because they are cleaner, less involved in unethical practices, less prone to corruption, more loyal, and more genuine in fulfilling their duties. The perception contributes to their acceptance as political leaders, regardless of gender or marital status. Nicole Wong Siaw Ting serves as a notable example, being the first young woman to successfully challenge and defeat male dominance by becoming the Youth Chief of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). Previously serving as the Deputy Youth Chief, she secured 136 votes, triumphing over her opponent, Ng Kian Nam, in the Youth Central Committee Election from 2018 to 2021- the development signifies a growing acceptance of women as leaders within ethnically based Chinese political party through the electoral process. Furthermore, Nicole Wong Siaw Ting's victory over male counterparts like Ng Kian Nam marks a significant milestone in her career as she assumes this leadership role for the first time.

## CONCLUSION

In Malaysia, religion plays a significant role in shaping the ethno-political landscape that forms the basis of the Malaysian state. The divide-and-rule policy implemented by the British administration created a plural society where groups are not integrated due to limited interactions. Therefore, religion, considered one of the primordial elements according to Geertz, 1963, becomes a determinant of the political culture of ethnic groups in Malaysia. Consequently, we cannot separate ethnicity and religion- this idea receives further support from Huntington (1997), who asserts that religion forms the basis of culture, which lies at the core of the existence of a civilization. Moreover, if the clash of civilizations model is applied, Malaysia is the site of the clash of several world civilizations, namely Islamic, Hindu, and Western civilizations. Thus, it explains the position of religion in Malaysian politics, including in the context of society's political culture, including women.

The dynamism and evolution of the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia are characterized by political socialization processes involving cultural agents, history, and religion. These socialization agents also experience changes over time and circumstances. As a result, the evolving nature of political socialization agents contributes to the dynamic aspect of Chinese women's political culture. Additionally, historical factors play a significant role in shaping the political culture of Chinese society- evident in the initial immigrant status of Chinese women, which deprived them of the privileges enjoyed by the Bumiputera community. As a result, the status of the Chinese community, which initially began as immigrant groups, undoubtedly provides a different political experience compared to the political culture of Malay women, who are the indigenous people. Women from Malay and Chinese backgrounds confront patriarchal cultural structures, but assessing the

political culture of women from various ethnic groups in Malaysia, including in the context of history, requires taking into account other indicators.

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