Ethnic Boundaries and Class Consciousness within Malaysian Employment Sector

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Abstract: This article seeks to investigate the importance of ethnicity in the Malaysian employment sector and its intersection with social class. This emphasis is important due to the changes in Malaysia's post-independence economic structures and the 'unchangeable' nature of ethnic concentration in the country's new employment sectors. The study is based on fifty-five in-depth interviews conducted among the Malay and Chinese Malaysian ethnic groups residing in Penang, Malaysia and Glasgow, United Kingdom. Data were analysed using thematic analysis and discussions were based on the post-colonialism theory and constructivism. The results suggested that there was a dialectical relationship between ethnicity and class awareness in the respondents' understanding of the present-day Malaysian ethnic segregations of labour. Top-down ethnic bureaucratisation and everyday cultural boundaries emphasise the significance of ethnicity and inter-ethnic group relations in the Malaysian employment sector. On the other hand, social capital was found to address individual and intra-ethnic class relations in this sector.

Keywords: ethnic boundaries; class; employment; post-colonial; multi-ethnic society

Abstrak: Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kepentingan etnik dalam sektor pekerjaan di Malaysia dan pertindihannya dengan kelas sosial. Penekanan ini penting kerana penumpuan etnik dalam sektor pekerjaan masih berlaku, walaupun terdapat perubahan dalam struktur ekonomi pasca-kemerdekaan Malaysia. Kajian ini berdasarkan lima puluh lima temubual secara mendalam yang telah dijalankan bersama responden berbangsa Melayu dan Cina yang

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menetap di Pulau Pinang, Malaysia dan Glasgow, United Kingdom. Data yang diperolehi telah dianalisis melalui analisis tematik, manakala perbincangan adalah berdasarkan teori pasca-kolonialisme dan konstruktivisme. Hasil kajian menunjukkan terdapat hubungan dialektikal antara etnik dan kesedaran tentang kelas dalam pemahaman responden terhadap pengasingan tenaga kerja berdasarkan etnik di Malaysia pada masa kini. Biroaksi etnik atas-ke-bawah dan sempadan budaya seharian menekankan kepentingan etnik dan hubungan antara etnik dalam sektor pekerjaan di Malaysia. Manakala modal sosial didapati menekankan hubungan kelas individu dan intra-etnik dalam sektor ini.

Kata kunci: sempadan etnik; kelas; pekerjaan; pasca-kolonial; masyarakat berbilang etnik

Introduction

Ethnic divisions of labour are perennial in today's world, especially in post-colonial countries. It is one of the colonial legacies, indirectly maintained by the locals due to the embedded and naturalised colonial epistemological and ontological understanding of ethnicity in their everyday experiences. Malaysia is one of the post-colonial countries in Southeast Asia. Its present-day societal structural design is relatively bounded to the consequences of the previous colonial administration, socially, economically and politically. Historically, under British governance, Malaysia experienced a high rate of foreign immigrants coming from China and India. This led to the formation of a multi-ethnic society in the country. Under the British divide-and-rule policy in Peninsular Malaysia, the Malay *rakyat* (locals),[1] Chinese and Indians were occupationally and residentially segregated based on their economic activity domains. The Malay *rakyat* were segregated into their traditional agricultural activities such as paddy planting and fishing, hence were primarily concentrated in the rural areas. The Chinese, on the other hand, dominated the mining and small trading activities. Their residential areas were essentially in the mining areas and urban centres. Meanwhile, the Indians' residential areas were concentrated within the rubber estates where they worked.

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[1] The Malay traditional system was based on the *Kerajaan* system which divided its population into two categories: rulers (aristocrats and elites) and subjects (*rakyat*).

The early years of British implementation of this ethnic labour division in British Malaya[2] had shown minimal conflict between the Malay *rakyat* and other immigrants. At the same time, the Malay *rakyat* rarely saw the immigrants as a threat (Seng, 1961; Hirschman, 1975; Alatas, 1977) because of the latter's nature and purpose of residing in British Malaya were short and temporary. Moreover, the local rulers (Malay Sultans) were still considered as politically powerful by the *rakyat*, despite the implementation of Resident-General and Advisor administrative systems in the Federated and Non-Federated Malay States, respectively.[3] However, at the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s, they were beginning to see the Europeans and immigrants – mainly Chinese – as an economic threat, especially in the light of the great economic achievement of the Chinese in British Malaya in tandem with Malay political awareness. It "sharpened the sense of common experience among the local community – of an 'us' and 'them' attitude" (Milner, 2011, p. 121). In addition to that, the formation of the Malayan Union in 1946 increased the *rakyat*'s fears of Chinese domination and led to their consciousness which shown in a form of ethnic groups. It, nevertheless, preserved economic resonance as its core facet. The British later revised the Malayan Union as the Federation of Malaya in 1948, which gave two most significant political and economic bases for the current Federation of Malaysia: the establishment of a Confederation of Rulers, which made the Malay Sultans part of, and indeed the apex of, the Federation; and the affirmative effect of Article 153.

The classical Marxist perspective asserts that society consists of two main classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Society is characterised by conflicts for power and resources shaped by these two' economic relationships. A social division is hence essential for maintaining the bourgeoisie's power through weak social ties between communities. The early class discussion in the European countries was addressed during the rise of the industrial revolution and the expansion of capitalism. Notwithstanding, social conflict in post-colonial countries differed from those in European countries because of their other historical conditions

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[2] British Malaya referred to peninsular Malaysia during the British administration.

[3] The Federated Malay States were Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan; the five Unfederated Malay States were Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Johor.

and social forces. According to Meyer (1987, p. 254), "class in such societies clearly had to play second fiddle to ethnicity even if the societal score was originally composed by an imperial bourgeoisie". The reasons presumably because Malaysia's role as merely tin and rubber export hub during the European industrial revolution, and colonial's ethnic labour division had consequently promoted ethnic awareness hence delaying the class consciousness. Although class was never totally absent from Malaysian studies - especially after independence - yet the ethnicity firmly remains dominant within the Malaysian social and structural context. Moreover, the relationship between ethnicity and class has never been easy. Their intricate relationship frequently has a separate discussion under them, although class sometimes were discussed within the ethnicity realm.

Parallel with Malaysia's independence in 1957, a transition of administrative power from the British to the local government occurred. It also signified a bourgeoisie changeover. Nonetheless, the change did not fully make the Malays the sole bourgeoisie in the state. They only managed to achieve political domination while the Chinese maintained their local economic hegemony in Malaysia. In the early years of independence, the relationship between the Malays and Chinese was frequently labelled by academics as a 'majority-majority' relationship, indicating their dominance in their respective areas. With this duality of dominations, the new Malaysian bourgeoisie at the time did not have an immediate power to create an ethnic division of labour. They were, however, capable of creating a 'context' under ethno-political parties which indirectly forced different ethnic groups to compete for their economic survival through the subjective feeling of ethnic groups and consciousness.

Ethnicity, Class Conflict and National Economic Reconstruction

The first ethnic riot in the post-independence Malaysia took place in 1969. It broke out principally between the Malays and the Chinese. The failure of local government to recognise income disparities between these ethnic groups was regarded as the main reason for the tragic events (Sundaram, 2004; Shamsul, 2008). A 1968 labour report stated that the non-Malays dominated the professional services. At the white-collar subordinate level, particularly in clerical grades, the numbers of Chinese and Indian employees were higher than those of Malays.

The Chinese and Indians were employed based on their secondary English education which few Malays had had (Cheah, 2002). By 1970, the income and sectoral disparities between Malays and Chinese were becoming more significant. According to the Second Malaysian Plan, the Malay monthly mean household income in 1970 was RM178.7 (RM34 per capita), whereas the Chinese monthly mean household income was RM387.4 (RM68 per capita). Additionally, in the Third Malaysian Plan (1976) it was stated that the Malay share of corporate equity was 2.4% as compared to the Chinese share of 34.4% and a foreign - mainly British - share of 63.3%. The Malays were also the most extensive group affected by poverty during this time (Government of Malaysia, 1991).

Reflecting on the situation, the post-independence government implemented a new policy, known as the New Economic Plan (NEP), in the 1970s by restructuring the Malaysian socio-economic arrangements into four main divisions: education, public-sector jobs, corporate share ownership, and housing. Under this NEP, a new identification and categorisation of Malaysians emerged: the *Bumiputra* (which means 'the sons of the soil'). The *Bumiputra* consisted of Malays, aboriginal people in the Peninsular Malaysia and natives of Sabah and Sarawak, in East Malaysia. The NEP was an extension of the affirmative action of Article 153, which was derived from the Federation of Malaya Agreement 1948. The Act obligated the High Commissioner "to defend the special position of the Malays and the legitimate interests of the other communities" (Harding, 2012, p. 71). The Act allocated quotas and privileges for the Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak within the public services, economy and education. The allotment within public services, however, was restricted to four sections only: the Malaysian Home and Foreign Services, the Judicial and Legal Services, the Customs Services, and the police force (Suffian, 1972). Additionally, no quotas were set for professional or technical services (Means, 1972; Lim, 1985). At the same time, Article 153 needed to be implemented, but crucially, it had to be implemented in conjunction with the safeguarding of the other communities.

The implementation of the NEP in the 1970s reshaped Malaysia's societal structures, particularly the education and employment sectors. The labour force profile showed a significant increase in the numbers of *Bumiputras* in the managerial and professional sectors (Khong &

Jomo, 2010). However, the increments in professional and technical jobs and administrative and managerial occupations were indeed limited to the low-level professions (Zulkifly & Hazrul, 2014). In 1990, the government discontinued the implementation of the NEP. With its withdrawal, the momentum of change in the Malaysian labour force went into a decline from the mid-1990s onwards (Lee, 2012). *Bumiputra* graduates in the mid-1990s faced intense difficulties in entering the labour market (both public and private), not because of their lack of higher educational qualifications, but because of the static nature of the upper-level occupations and their high concentration in the public sector, which led to increased competition between them.

Moreover, despite the state-coordinated government policy, the Malays consistently faced difficulties in finding employment in "higher level professions and occupations in the private sector, particularly in Chinese-controlled small-scale enterprises" (Khong & Jomo, 2010). Although the momentum of the NEP had started to decline, the *Bumiputra* continued to have higher numbers as skilled workers in the public sector. Meanwhile, the non-*Bumiputras* were more likely to attain such positions in the private sector (Lee, 2012). To this extent, there was a common claim that there were shared predispositions against non-Malays in the Malay-controlled public employment sector, and Malays in the Chinese and foreign-controlled private employment sector (Lee & Khalid, 2016). At the same time, there was the emergence of new categories of Malay elites by the end of the NEP implementation (Chong, 2005; Rahimah, 2012), hence revealing a visible class gap within the ethnic group itself.

Ethnic separations in the post-independence Malaysian employment sectors - public and private sectors - displayed a similar ethnic division of labour to that in pre-independence Malaysia. Nonetheless, the post-independence employment divisions were more multi-faceted and multi-dimensional because of the expansion of class distinctions between the ethnic groups and within the ethnic group itself, in tandem with the development of new and various capital forms in Malaysia's modern industrial society. In this sense, the purpose of this article is to offer a theoretical and empirical discussion of the ethnic and class intersections in the Malaysian employment sectors by focusing on the Malays' (*Bumiputra*) and Chinese's (non-*Bumiputra*) domination within the public and private sectors respectively. To understand the idea behind

the segregation, this article puts an exceptional focus on *bumiputraism* (a top-down authority consequence of the NEP implementation) and the Malays' and Chinese's educational backgrounds (human capital), and how they have influenced their future employment preferences and opportunities in Malaysia's early twenty-first-century workforce.

The Trajectories of the Malay and Chinese Educational Systems

The previous British policy of economic segregation not only served as a foundation for the Malays and Chinese occupancy patterns in the twentieth century but also contributed to their early separated educational system. The pre-independence Malaysian educational system began and evolved along a different trajectory, depending on each group's objective and political interests. They were not merely separated by geographical location, due to the different occupational sections, but also by language and social class. The primary schooling in British Malaya was available in four languages: English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. On the other hand, secondary level education was offered only in two languages, English and Chinese, and tertiary level education was delivered only in English. The English schools were located in urban areas so their student composition consisted primarily of Europeans and Chinese with a small number of Indians and Malays (Gill, 2014; Shamsul, 2005). They offered six years of primary education and five years of secondary school. Those in the English secondary schools could also sit the Cambridge Examination Board's exams and use the qualification to apply for clerical employment in the government service or in private firms. For those who were interested in furthering their study at the tertiary level, they could continue it at the College of Medicine, Raffles College or a university abroad (Purcell, 1951).

The Malay vernacular schools, on the other hand, were built in rural areas, but were limited to the primary level. Their educational provision and teacher training were sponsored by the British (Tan, 2000). Despite that, however, they aimed to produce better Malay peasants than their forebears (Booth, 1999; Lim, 1985). The subjects taught in these schools were limited and English was excluded from the syllabus (Ozóg, 1993). Some of the British officials criticised the early form of the Malay vernacular school (Booth, 1999) because of its potential to stultify Malays' social and economic mobility (Gill, 2014; Kenayathulla, 2015). In the early period of their establishment,

these schools never actually succeeded in gaining the Malays' interests. Also, the Malays were not entirely dependent on the British educational system provided for them. They had another educational alternative grounded in the Islamic educational system. There were two types of Islamic institution established in the system: *pondoks* and madrasahs. The Malays preferred the madrasahs because they offered advanced subjects, were well-organised and had theological, vocational and secular subjects combined (Shamsul, 2005). Malays who graduated from these schools could further their tertiary education in the Middle East, particularly at Al-Azhar University in Egypt (Rosnani, 2008). However, the number of these institutions was limited, and they were located only in the Straits Settlement states and were therefore hardly reachable by many of the Malays, particularly those from the Unfederated Malay States (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
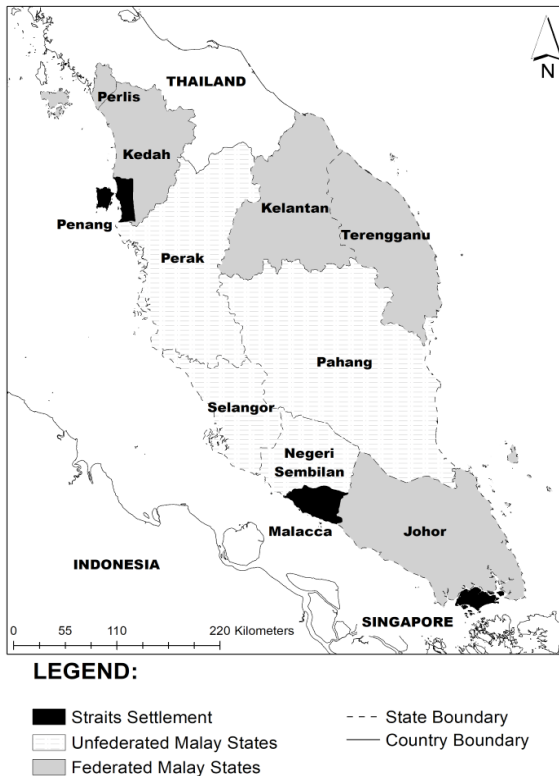
The British educational design was restricted to the Malays (Tan, 2000) because of the Chinese purpose for staying in Malaya. Consequently, this offered the Chinese community autonomy in planning and shaping its own educational system. The first Chinese schools were built in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, but later spread widely in towns and small villages with a Chinese population (Tan, 2000). They received funds from wealthy Chinese merchants and guilds for their maintenance (Asmah, 2007). Additionally, the students from these schools could pursue their secondary and tertiary studies in China (Ozóg, 1993) or Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore (Gill, 2014). Their educational system was oriented with Chinese philosophy and the teachers were directly recruited from China (Purcell, 1951). During the pre-independence period, the educational system in Malaysia, separated the population based on their ethnicity and occupational areas. This separation is understandable because of the Malays' status of the locality and the Chinese residential motive in Malaya.

The educational bifurcation in pre-independence Malaysia offered more educational opportunities and future economic advantages to the urban population due to the easier accessibility of English schools and other higher academic levels beyond primary school. The historical trajectories also suggest that the Chinese were equipped with better future employment opportunities through their educational environment, whilst the Malay *rakyats* in rural areas were educationally disadvantaged under the British paternalistic 'protection'. This consequently led to the development of an intricate condition of social class fault-lines alongside the ethnic separation, which emerged in the early years of independence.

With the onset of Malaysia's independence, there was concern about a separate schooling system which would only reinforce the various groups' boundaries. The 1951 Barnes Report proposed a centralised national primary-school system with Malay and English as the main instructional languages. The aim was to construct Malayan unity and to facilitate and ease the process of nation-building. Chinese educationalists expressed their opposition to the proposal of making Malay and English in primary school the medium of instruction by demanding the maintenance of their mother tongue (Tan & Teoh, 2016). To address this request, the 1956 Razak Report suggested that both Chinese and Indian primary schools would be maintained on the condition that all schools

would use the same academic curriculum and syllabus and would offer the Malay language as a compulsory subject (Tan & Teoh, 2016; Segawa, 2019). Following that, the Malay schools then became national schools whilst the Chinese and Indian vernacular schools became national-type schools. After a few years, the 1960 Rahman Talib Report gradually converted Chinese and English secondary schools into Malay-medium national secondary schools. This policy received further feedback from the Chinese community and caused a separation in their institutions. Subsequently, Chinese secondary schools were divided into two categories. The first category contained those Chinese secondary schools which were willing to be converted into Malay-medium schools and the second comprised the Chinese secondary schools which preferred to be independent of government involvement, and later became known as Malaysian Independent Chinese secondary schools (MICSS).

Malaysian Examination Structures and Academic Qualifications

Malaysian primary-school pupils are required to sit a UPSR (English: Primary School Achievement Test/ Malay: *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah*) at Standard Six (aged twelve). Depending on the result, they will enrol in a Malaysian public or private secondary school. During their third and fifth years in secondary school, students are required to sit another two national examinations: PT3[4] (English: Form 3 Assessment/ Malay: *Penilaian Tingkatan 3*) and SPM (English: Malaysian Certificate of Education/ Malay: *Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia*), respectively. SPM is equivalent to the UK's General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). This examination is one of the compulsory pre-entry requirements for enrolling in the local public tertiary institutions.[5] These two examinations are usually offered in Malaysian national and some of the private secondary schools. The private secondary schools at the same time provide other examination certificates, such as the Unified Examination Certification (UEC) in the MICSS and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) in the international schools.

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[4] PT3 was formerly known as SRP (Lower Certificate of Education) and PMR (Lower Certificate of Education). In 2014, the examination was renamed PT3.
[5] A student would choose to sit another national examination, the STPM, which is equivalent to A-Level – at Form Six-Upper in their secondary school as another entry qualification for Malaysian public tertiary institutions.

The UEC, however, faced several limitations as it was not accredited by the state and could not be used for admission into local public universities (Segawa, 2007; Ong et al., 2017) or for civil service entry (Public Services Commission of Malaysia, 2020). Since the Malaysian Educational Ministry did not certify the UEC, many private universities were established to fulfil the demand for tertiary education from UEC holders. Private tertiary institutions such as the New Era College (NEC), Southern College and Han Jiang College used Mandarin as the medium of instruction (Segawa, 2007). Additionally, through the endeavours of the United Chinese School Committees' Association (UCSCA), the UEC is finally being recognised for admittance into several higher education institutions located in Singapore, Taiwan, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Segawa, 2007). It was recently reported that more than 300 higher education institutions in Malaysia had recognised the qualification as an entry requirement (Dong Zong, 2018). In some private companies, the UEC can be used as the basic application route for those who have no educational certificate in the Malaysian national examination. The opportunities within private higher education and employment offered through the UEC help the ICSSs to remain attractive to the Malaysian Chinese community (Tan, 2000).

Recently, demand from Malaysia's Chinese political parties for government recognition of the UEC has attracted public attention. The cause of this political demand was based on one of *Pakatan Harapan*'s (PH) manifesto pledges to recognise the examination. The pressure is high, especially after PH managed to win the 14th Malaysian General Election, which caused a significant change in the Malaysian political landscape with PH succeeding in replacing six decades of *Barisan Nasional*'s (BN) political domination in Malaysia. The current status of the UEC, however, remains vague due to the ongoing PH adjournment. Several individuals, political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have opposed the demand. They were under the impression that the recognition would jeopardise the role of national schools in promoting national unity.

Method

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study by carrying out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fifty-five Malaysian students as the primary respondents (see Table 1). At the time of the interviews, they

were students in two tertiary educational institutions located in Penang, Malaysia and Glasgow, Scotland. The research comprised a comparative study between two ethnic groups only: Malays and Chinese. They were chosen as a comparative cohort since Malays are predominant in the Malaysian public employment sector and the Chinese are predominant in the Malaysian private employment sector. At the same time, I gave particular attention to the gender variable in order to avoid missing potentially valuable information and perceptions (see Table 1).

Table 1: Respondents based on location, ethnicity and gender

Location	Penang		Glasgow		Total
Ethnicity	Malays	Chinese	Malays	Chinese	
Male	8	7	7	4	26
Female	7	8	8	6	29
Total	15	15	15	10	55

Their educational background was divided into two categories: undergraduate and post-graduate students. Most of the post-graduate students had work experience as elite-primary workers, and most of the undergraduate students had work experience as temporary, secondary-primary, white-collar workers or as temporary, unskilled secondary workers. Both groups' working preferences were as elite-primary workers in the public or private sectors. The discussion which follows will therefore reflect the respondents' aims to become an elite-primary worker with their experiences as elite-primary workers, temporary secondary-primary white-collar workers and temporary unskilled secondary workers. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using systematic thematic analysis. Additionally, in order to ensure the respondents' privacy, I shall use anonymised names throughout the empirical discussion and analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The initial findings suggest that the Malay and Chinese respondents in both locations believed that there are particular ethnic concentrations in the Malaysian public and private employment sectors. Malays were said to dominate in the public sector, especially in the civil service, whereas Chinese are predominant in the private sector. According to the Malay respondents, the Malay domination is grounded on two factors. First, it is based on job security and financial stability during employment and

after retirement. Second, it is based on the Malay family tradition and expectation as many of their family members have worked in the same sector. Meanwhile, the Chinese respondents justified their domination in the private sector on the grounds of the sector's transparency, higher salaries and better employment contracts. The reasons highlighted by the Chinese respondents, to some extent, supported the findings of Woo and Teng (2019) that job characteristics, especially the external rewards such as salary, long-term financial security and promotion prospects, were the primary consideration of the Chinese for the future employment sector.

The findings of the current study, however, show that there were more than a job's characteristics in the respondents' employment choices and preferences. The influence of a top-down policy, the ethnicisation of the schooling system and its impact on the ethnic boundaries were the other factors which significantly acted as an invisible hand which consistently segregates employment in Malaysia. In order to discuss the relationship between these factors and the concentrations of Malaysian Malays and Chinese in the public and private sectors respectively, the following discussion of the findings is divided into two parts: the top-down policy; and everyday actors' language and religious boundaries in Malaysia's public and private workforces.

The top-down policy and the everyday understanding in Malaysia's public and private workforces

The Chinese respondents interviewed in Penang believed that quota-based recruitment was the main factor for Malay employability in the public sector. Although Article 153 allocated quota-based recruitment to the Malays and natives of Borneo within four employment sections only (with exclusion from the professional and technical services), the idea of quota-based admission seemed to be applicable to other sections in the government sector. For example, a Chinese respondent interviewed in Penang claimed that despite his interest in working in the government sector, the quota system was a barrier to his employment:

> I am interested in working in the government sector. But I think for Chinese in Malaysia … errmm … it is quite hard for us to get into the public sector […] because the government had already set a quota. That's the point. (Ah Man, Chinese male interviewed in Penang)

The idea of the quota-based recruitment and employment in the public sector became a recurrent topic of discussion for the Malaysian people, political actors and academics. It is somewhat surprising that the Chinese respondents interviewed in Glasgow had a different understanding of quota-based employment within the public sector. Most of them were confident about the government's transparency in civil service recruitment and employment. The majority of the Chinese respondents in Glasgow were in receipt of a Malaysian national scholarship. They had therefore indirectly secured a position in the government sector and would consequently possibly have less hardship in their future employment in comparison with the self-sponsored Chinese students in Penang. Even so, the Chinese respondents in Glasgow were a little bit sceptical about the prospect of career promotion in the government sector. One of them thought that the priority for promotion would probably be given to the *bumiputra*:

> In terms of job promotion, I think that there are quotas allocated for Malays. It is an unfair competition between *bumiputra* and non-*bumiputra*. The government has a policy of reserving … let's say there are ten places; they reserve five for Malays, so I don't think that is fair. I don't mind if I don't get a promotion if I am not good enough, but I don't really like the prospect of not getting a promotion because the post is being reserved for some people. (Alicia, Chinese female interviewed in Glasgow)

To this extent, the quota-based recruitment in the public sector was considered to be an important issue by the Chinese respondents in both Glasgow and Penang. However, their understanding varies at different levels. The majority of the Chinese in Penang thought that it was an immediate obstacle to them getting into the public sector, whereas the majority of the Chinese in Glasgow thought that the quota-based employment system was not really a barrier to getting into the public sector, but a potential barrier to promotion in a job. For the Malay respondents, the high number of them relying on the government sector had eventually created and increased competition between the *bumiputra* and the non-*bumiputra*, and within the *bumiputra* category itself. Hence, the *bumiputra* must prove themselves eligible for the positions and occupations offered in the sector. One of Malay respondents claimed that the 'privilege' might be useful for applying for

a lower-level position, but that additional assistance would be needed for a high-level position regardless of the sector. He said:

> The *bumiputra* status is useful if you apply for a job at a lower rank. But if you apply for a high rank, I think it will be difficult. What you need right now is a 'cable' [a 'string to pull'] to help you to get the job. Today, everything is about having a 'cable' regardless of the sector [public or private] you want to apply to; it is the same. (Ahmad, Malay male interviewed in Penang)

He believed that it is easier for a *bumiputra* such as a Malay with no connections to get a job in lower-rank positions (particularly secondary-primary, white-collar work), but that the possibility for a *bumiputra* with internal influence to land a job in a higher position is better than for the others, both *bumiputra* and non-*bumiputra*, who have no internal influence. In his view, therefore, social capital is important. If that is the case, then employment in the public sector is no longer centred around ethnicity, but rather on class and status hidden behind a façade of ethnicity. The idea behind the situation also suggests that social capital in terms of a social network has been just as important as physical capital and human capital (a university qualification) in securing a job position for economic survival. The idea of class existence within the ethnic group was supported by another Chinese respondent who stated:

> Malays always get the advantage over the Chinese in the public sector, but I think the Malays still need to prove themselves. I believe that if you are good enough, you can always get the position. The problem is (pause) sometimes it is not transparent. How many Malays benefit from this policy? (Timmy, Chinese male interviewed in Glasgow)

According to Ali (2008), the main beneficiaries of political and economic privileges in post-independent Malaysia were mainly the upper class – regardless of their ethnicity. Meanwhile Ravallion (2020, p. 3) stated that "there were concerns that the NEP would mainly help the Malay elites, evident in higher income inequality among the *Bumiputera*". Although the implementation of the NEP in one way or another had caused expansion of the Malay middle class, it was not without struggle and hard work from them. Nevertheless, the observed class struggle and awareness among the Malay respondents seemed to be applicable only to the public sector. When referring to the private sector, most of the Malay

respondents expressed their dissatisfaction and disappointment with the treatment they had experienced in terms of salary and job promotion in the private sector as a form of ethnic discrimination. One of the forms of discrimination in employment is when one person is favoured over another, even though the former has less skill in comparison with the latter (Harlida & Nik Ahmad Kamal, 2020). Nevertheless, Malaysia has no unequivocal legal arrangements or anti-discrimination laws which prohibit work and employment discrimination (Harlida & Nik Ahmad Kamal, 2020).

The difficulty entering the public sector and the glass ceiling had been experienced both directly and indirectly by the Chinese respondents, and the different payment rates and glass ceiling experienced (directly and indirectly) by the Malay respondents in the private sector was perceived as discrimination towards their ethnic categories. Thus, they were ignoring another potential factor of class or class-related social capital. They considered these 'discriminations' as a problem which they were obligated to face and to solve together as a group. So, in this part of the analysis, the respondents maintained a circle of understanding that ethnicity is important in the Malaysian employment sector and possibly causes mutual bias within the public and private sectors which would be difficult to break. It also appears that the respondents continually used ethnicity as a 'rational' justification for their direct and indirect frustration, and for the perceived discrimination in their working experiences. In other words, ethnicity is an easier explanation for their working experiences and expectations. In the next section, I shall address the importance of ethnic boundaries which have contributed to the importance of ethnicity in the Malaysian workforce as understood by the respondents in this study.

Ethnic boundaries in Malaysia's public and private workforces

Language and religion are the two main indicators of Malay and Chinese identification and categorisation. Malaysian Malays are culturally defined by the constitution of Malaysia (Article 160) as Muslim, speaking the Malay language and practising Malay customs. Religion, in particular, is the locus of their everyday activities and decisions. Meanwhile the Chinese educators - as historically proven - strongly preserve the maintenance of their mother tongue through their educational institutions as a part of their identity as Malaysian Chinese.

The majority of the respondents in this study graduated from a variety of national schools: national boarding schools, national religious schools, national-type Chinese schools. Only a few of them had graduated from a private school: private religious schools (for Muslims) and MICSSs. Graduates from the national schools (regardless of the type) and the private religious schools had been exposed to the Malay language, albeit at different levels. Graduates from MICSSs, on the other hand, were not really exposed to the Malay language as much as graduates from the national or national-type schools. Moreover, with the long-running controversy surrounding the status of the UEC qualification in the local public tertiary educational administration, the ICSS graduates usually continue their tertiary studies in Mandarin-speaking countries or in private local institutions. Due to their educational background and qualification, the more preferred employment for the MICSS graduates is in the private sector. This would put them even further apart from other Malaysians working in the public sector. The respondents in Glasgow were particularly aware of issues surrounding language among the Chinese in Malaysia. Tan, for example, believed that the reason for the small number of Chinese employed in the government sector is related to their educational background and language. He stated that:

> I think one of the reasons for the Chinese to get fewer chances of securing a place in the public sector is because they [Chinese from ICSSs] were born outside the system, they are not in the system. They aim for Taiwan [as the place] for study after their high school graduation. So, they are not really used to this system and it will be difficult for them to get a job in the public sector. Those who went to these schools speak Chinese all the way […] They were born in their own system because for them, it is like, you went to a Chinese primary school, a Chinese independent high school, and then after that you will go to Chinese universities maybe in Taiwan or China, and then they come back and the only place that they can work is in the private sector. And I think in some [parts of the] private sector, they just need to acquire a B or C grade in Malay for the SPM requirement. (Tan, Chinese male interviewed in Glasgow)

There are two critical issues highlighted here. First, the type of schooling system plays an essential role in the Malaysian working sector. Second, language and educational background are related to one another. A

Chinese student who attended an MICSS and later a Mandarin-speaking university might face difficulty securing a job in the government sector where the official language is Malay. Chinese graduates with this educational background would have limited choice but to work in the private sector especially in Chinese companies. Moreover, the UEC qualification is considered a valid requirement equivalent to the SPM qualification, which can be used in some Malaysian private companies. Additionally, according to one Chinese respondent, Mandarin speakers are essential in the private sector for two reasons. First, a shared language creates more accessible communication between the workers, especially when the Chinese monopolise the private sector. Second, it creates easier communication between Chinese dealers or investors from China and other Mandarin-speaking countries. He added that Mandarin is not an obstacle only for the Malays, but should also be regarded as a barrier for those Chinese who cannot speak it:

> Because most of the workers in the private sector are Chinese, or [the businesses] are owned by Chinese, they [employers] want their employees to be able to speak Mandarin. Maybe because they deal with Chinese people as many Chinese have factories which are involved in the import and export business. They travel a lot to China, and they need employees who can speak proper Chinese. Even for Chinese, some of us cannot speak Chinese so it is not limited to Malays only. I don't think race is a problem. It is a language issue. (Timmy, Chinese male interviewed in Glasgow)

In his understanding, this difficulty is not based on ethnic category, but more on language proficiency. However, the language requirement in the private sector was considered by the Malay respondents to be an issue related to their ethnic identity. Two Malay respondents stated that:

> I think they [Chinese employers] want to employ Chinese workers and use language as a requirement. They never state 'for Chinese only', but they state 'someone with Mandarin proficiency'. From that, we can know who this advertisement is targeting and what race it actually prefers. (Norman, Malay male interviewed in Penang)

> If you read any job advertisements in Penang, they will state something like 'prefer Chinese only'. That is for a job vacancy. And we then can see that in terms of house renting too, they will state 'prefer Chinese'. This statement

> of priority should not happen in a multi-racial country. If
> they don't state something like 'prefer Chinese only', they
> state 'prefer someone who can speak and write in Mandarin'.
> There are many job advertisements in Penang that give the
> same criterion, except for jobs in factories […] Mostly in
> private companies. (Fiona, Malay female interviewed in
> Penang)

In Norman's understanding, there is the possibility that some Chinese
companies indirectly discriminate against Malay applicants by
stipulating a language requirement. However, if Malays can speak
Mandarin, then there is supposed to be no reason for them to be excluded
from this advertisement. In addition to language, cultural elements are
also important concerns of some Chinese employers. According to
Timmy, some private Chinese companies will prefer Chinese applicants
because of Malay/Chinese cultural differences. He stated:

> I think some Chinese companies prefer Chinese because
> of the cultural problem, so they just prefer to have Chinese
> employees. (Timmy, Chinese male interviewed in Glasgow)

Malay identity and Islam are intricately related to one another. Malay
culture and custom are related to Islamic teaching regarding traditions
such as food, male/female social conduct, dress code (particularly the
hijab), daily prayers and one month of fasting during Ramadhan. These
social and religious codes can be challenging for non-Muslim employers.
Religious duties such as five daily prayers and gender expectations
regarding attire and the dress code could have reduced the potential for
Muslims to be recruited by non-Malay employers as stated by Zuhaini
(a Malay respondent), who claimed that some of female Malays' job
applications were rejected because of their religious dress code.

As was discussed in the first finding, there were predispositions
for the majority of Malay and Chinese respondents to justify their
frustration at direct and indirect assumed-discrimination in Malaysia's
private and public work sectors as an ethnic issue resulting from top-
down implications and *bumiputraism*, despite their awareness of the
social class and capital struggle. The finding discussed in this section
does, however, show that language and religious boundaries have had
an impact on the respondents' future employment in ways which are
closely related to their educational background. Language and cultural
boundaries create a tendency for Malays to apply for jobs within the

government sector, where Malay is the official language and where their cultural and religious beliefs can be observed appropriately. The Chinese are expected to have no religious or cultural barriers to working in the public or private sectors. However, Chinese who graduated from MICSSs and tertiary institutions located in Mandarin-speaking countries may have difficulty getting a job in the public sector, which requires practical proficiency in the Malay language.

Conclusion

At the individual level, ethnicity was not necessarily the main reason for the respondents to want to work in the private or the public sectors. The main reasons for them to work in either of these sectors depended on their interests, such as those expressed through financial motivation, family tradition and job security. However, as a part of an ethnic group, the impacts of the NEP, *bumiputraism* and ethnic boundaries had made the respondents' working expectations and experiences (direct or indirect) an ethnic issue. The *bumiputraism* gives the impression that there is a bias - in the form of quota-based employment - within the Malaysian public workforce (the macro-structure) whereas language and religious boundaries (the micro-level) have inevitably created barriers for the Malay respondents in the private sector. The dialectical relationship between the state and everyday actors establishes an understanding of the importance of ethnicity, even though there is an awareness of the importance of class struggle and social capital in the Malaysian labour force. It also promotes Malay and Chinese concentrations in the public and private employment sectors respectively. With this understanding, a mutual expectation - that there is a possibility of discrimination - circulates in the system and could potentially encourage current and further mutual bias and anticipation in the Malaysian workforce. In sum, ethnicity has been assumed as and remains the focus at both top-down management and everyday actors' understanding of Malaysian employment affairs. This understanding is rooted in the historical background of the colonial ethnic division of labour. Postcolonial Malaysia, nonetheless, is facing a rather complicated relationship between the importance of ethnicity and the rise of class awareness. The overlapping and synthesising epistemological understanding of ethnicity and class is becoming complicated in Malaysian ethnic studies. Despite their intricate relationship, the exploitation of these relations - the juggling act between ethnicity and class - acts as the base for the

ethnic segregation in the twentieth-first-century Malaysian employment sector.

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