

This Week in Asia/ Opinion

Malaysia's Chinese retain deep-rooted sense of national belonging despite pride in China's rise

The local Chinese community has forged a cultural identity with traits that are distinctly Malaysian, even as re-Sinicisation becomes a contentious issue



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Students create a long scroll in Kelang, Selangor state, Malaysia, in January to celebrate the Lunar New Year of the Dragon. Photo: Xinhua

China's rise has rekindled civilisational pride among some overseas Chinese communities, including those in Malaysia. However, Malaysian Chinese have also forged a distinctive localised cultural identity, intertwined with an unmistakable sense of national belonging as Malaysians.

Beijing has long recognised overseas Chinese as an essential bridge linking China to the outside world. In recent years, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council has intensified its efforts to strengthen ties with the Chinese diaspora. Some within the Southeast Asian Chinese community have emerged as intermediaries facilitating connections between China and the international community, especially in trade and commerce. More broadly, Beijing's outreach efforts, like the recently launched Global Civilisation Initiative, have sparked a resurgence of cultural connections. Platforms such as CCTV, WeChat and TikTok serve as channels through which overseas Chinese are rekindling their fascination with China's history and traditions.

In Malaysia, the Chinese community, especially among the English-educated, is undergoing a phenomenon some refer to as re-Sinicisation. This is broadly defined as a renewed interest and enthusiasm for embracing their Chinese cultural roots. Mandarin, for example, is gradually replacing English as the predominant working language within the Malaysian Chinese community, alongside Malay, the national language.



A man carries his child under traditional Chinese lanterns during Lunar New Year at a temple in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2018. Photo: AP

The re-Sinicisation process has emerged as a contentious issue, particularly concerning the cultural identity of the Malaysian Chinese. Recently, former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad reignited the discourse by questioning the loyalty of the Chinese community, citing perceived hesitance on their part in fully embracing other cultures. The increasing influence of China adds another layer of complexity to this issue.

Nonetheless, the crisis of Chinese cultural identity in Malaysia is intricately linked to the nation's complicated experiment with multiculturalism. Unlike countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia chose accommodation over assimilation in dealing with its minority population. Chinese in Malaysia, for instance, are allowed to retain their Chinese names, whereas in [Indonesia](#), they are required to adopt Indonesian names. This policy has proved to be a double-edged sword. The celebration of diversity is done at the expense of the country's aspiration for unity. This has led to a lack of a unified Malaysian cultural identity.

The Malaysian education system encapsulates this challenge. In addition to national schools, Malaysia offers minorities the option to attend vernacular schools. However, the perceived shortcomings of the public school system have led most Chinese families to opt for vernacular schools. This has resulted in segregation, undermining efforts to cultivate a shared national identity. The government's efforts to foster a common identity are perceived by minorities as attempts to erode the country's diversity. Thus, Sinicisation is foremost driven by this struggle to safeguard what Malaysian Chinese believe are their constitutional rights.



Malaysian-Chinese children play with firecrackers inside the temple ahead of Lunar New Year celebrations outside Kuala

Lumpur in January 2017 in Pulau Ketam, Malaysia. Photo:

Getty Images

To be sure, the Malaysian Chinese community is a culturally diverse group, encompassing Malay-speaking Peranakans, as well as those educated in English and Chinese. While there is a collective effort to preserve the country's pluralism, it is noteworthy that the Chinese-educated segment takes a leading role in advocating for it, thereby elevating the profile of Mandarin. Nevertheless, the Malaysian Chinese community remains richly diverse, with Peranakans and the English-educated maintaining their multicultural, multilingual way of life.

The culturally diverse Malaysian Chinese also exhibit distinct differences from their counterparts on the mainland. One contributing factor is that the Malaysian Chinese community was spared the Cultural Revolution. Unlike their mainland counterparts, they have preserved many traditional norms, particularly those related to religious beliefs. Furthermore, interaction with the Malay and [Indian](#) community has enriched Malaysian Chinese culture, infusing it with unique Malaysian characteristics. Peranakan cuisine exemplifies how Malay and Indian-style cooking has embellished the Malaysian Chinese culinary tradition. This cultural synergy extends across various domains, including linguistic fusion, architecture designs, fashion, and musical expression.

While Malaysian Chinese acknowledge their ancestral ties to China, their cultural identity has primarily been shaped by domestic influences. This has resulted in the development of traits that are distinctly Malaysian, setting them apart from their fellow Chinese on the mainland.

Undoubtedly, citizenship stands as the defining factor that differentiates Malaysian Chinese from their counterparts in China. In 1955, Premier Zhou Enlai encouraged overseas Chinese to embrace local citizenship and integrate into the societies they found themselves in. However, some have raised concerns that China's present leadership is blurring this distinction, with stronger appeals by Beijing to Chinese overseas to support China.

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A multiracial Malaysia would be unconstitutional, says former PM Mahathir



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The overseas Chinese narrative is but one among numerous migration stories, including those of the Irish and Indian diaspora. Nonetheless, a distinguishing aspect for the Chinese is the geopolitical rivalry between their ancestral homeland, China, and [the United States](#). Consequently, some overseas Chinese find themselves caught in the cross hairs of this great power competition.

The Malaysian government has consistently maintained a neutral stance in the ensuing [Sino-US rivalry](#). However, the Malaysian Chinese media frequently adopts a discernible pro-China perspective in this ongoing geopolitical contestation. That said, Malaysian Chinese support for China is not unconditional. When issues arise that directly affect Malaysia's sovereignty, such as the territorial disputes in the [South China Sea](#), Malaysian Chinese media have taken a clear and unequivocal nationalistic stance in support of Malaysia.

The rise of China has sparked a resurgence of civilisational pride among Chinese communities in Malaysia. Nevertheless, Malaysian Chinese have forged a distinct localised cultural identity, enriched with unique Malaysian characteristics. While they acknowledge and celebrate China's re-emergence, they maintain a deep-rooted sense of belonging to Malaysia. Indeed, their Malaysian nationality is the primary foundation of Malaysian Chinese self-identity.

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