

# Crazy Rich Malaysians: *Datukship* as Elite Identification

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## Abstract

The study of elites and their existence in society have been of interest to many social scientists but hindered by the lack of available data or identification of individuals in elite circles. Malaysia is one country where elite identification is made salient via the giving of honorary titles or colloquially called the *datukship*. This paper attempts to study systematically the individuals who receive these titles and the evolution of the *datukship* since 1958. We identified individuals in our dataset in the ethnic, gender, professional, and public service dimension. We studied the evolution of descriptive representation of these groups in title recipients. We proposed two hypothesis that can explain the expansion of *datukships* post-1990 – the information and lobbying hypothesis. Our research is the first of its kind in the Malaysian context and shows enormous potential to study elite phenomena in economic growth, business environments, political institutions, and social stratification.

## Keywords

Elite, social stratification, political economy, representation

## Introduction

“Whenever you feel like criticizing any one... just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had”. The quote in the previous sentence came from the *Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, a classic novel where its primary theme is the inability for the main character to rise above the social status he was born in. The study of elites and the upper class is part of a long tradition in social science inquiry, especially with regards to how social hierarchies – a feature in most social organizations – are formed and maintained; especially important is how these social hierarchies affect individual outcomes: well-being, mobility, education, and many others. Yet, a primary gap in the literature is the identification of the individuals who make up these hierarchical distinction. This paper would like to fill that gap by identifying a phenomena in Malaysia where elite identification is made salient via the giving of honorary titles – henceforth called the *datukship* and the individuals receiving them as *datuks*.

Each state\* including the federal government in Malaysia is entitled to award extraordinary individuals an honorary title – the *datukship* – similar to the British knighthood system. However, in contrast to the knighthood, the *datukship* is more prevalent in Malaysian society. In the UK, there is currently around 3,000 knights for a population of 66 million. In Malaysia, there are more than 25,000 *datuks* for a population of 33 million – nearly 1% of the total population [Debretts](#). *Datukships* are given through a series of recommendations by other high-positioned individuals and a screening system by a state bureaucracy of which the federal government has little control over†. Those who receive a *datukship* will then be knighted by the state’s sultan or governor for state awards and the King for the federal award.

The data collected on the *datuks* was obtained from the [istiadat.gov.my](http://istiadat.gov.my) website as part of an effort by the government to clamp down on individuals who use fake titles for economic gain. The data consisted of the name of the person, the state in which they are given, and the title they are awarded. I then constructed a dataset where I used name markers to identify ethnic, gender, elected official, public service experience, and professional roles. For example, I used the connector “Bin” to indicate that the individual is Malay and male. Some individuals with military affiliation will have positions such as “Brigadier Jeneral” and others with a graduate degree will have “Dr.” or “Ir”. After categorizing the individuals in these observables, I analyzed the trends of *datuks* along these lines.

I found that there has been a major expansion of *datukship* in Malaysia especially in the beginning of the 2000s. The *datukship* awards grew steadily throughout the 1990s but under 500 per year. However, there was an exponential growth in awards that peaked in 2015 where 2,000 *datukship* awards were given out. The growth fell sharply after with the greatest drop occurring in 2018 – with the number of awards halved from the previous year. The rise and fall of *datukship* is an interesting phenomena and can be singularly attributed to the state of Pahang as they have began to tighten their awards requirement [Nik Min \(2019\)](#).

As for state trends, the state leading in award-giving is Pahang, where it has given out more than 11,836 *datukships* followed by the federal government with 4,088 *datukships*,

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\*There are 13 states

†Details on process is in the appendix

followed by Melaka with 3,399 awards. Most states award in the 1,000 - 2,000 range and the state with the least number of award is Perlis with 281.

In terms of ethnic representation, the datukship population was predominantly Bumiputera throughout most of post-independent Malaysia until the 2010s where there was exponential growth in the Chinese population receiving them. Today, the ethnic representation has more or less reflected the ethnic composition of the country. As for gender representation, women recipients were virtually non-existent until 2000 where there was a slight growth. Today, women make up about less than 10% of the datuks in the country.

The growth of datukship awards for the government-linked individuals track closely with awards for private citizens. However, starting in 2010, the growth of datuk among private citizens significantly outstrips government-linked individuals. The growth in private citizen datukship declined sharply in 2016 and newer datukship awards are majority government-linked.

In terms of federal recognition, individuals who receive a datukship from the state Kelantan and Perlis are the most recognized by the federal government i.e. more likely to also have a federal datukship. Individuals who receive a datukship from the state of Sabah are the least recognized by the federal government i.e. less likely to also have a federal datukship. These set of observations are the brief overview of findings.

From the findings we observe, we proposed several competing hypotheses to explain the rise and fall of datukship and interpret the trends we observe. We proposed the motivations behind increasing or decreasing the supply of datukship through an *information* hypothesis or *lobbying* hypothesis. The information hypothesis argues that the management of datukship supply comes from the need of the state to distinguish individuals that states can trust to deliver consistent benefits. The lobbying hypothesis comes from the need of the state to expand their influence nationally both among the political and economic elite. Further, we hypothesized on the returns of datukship for individuals receiving them as well as the heterogeneity between different social groups. We then provided a brief explanation of further empirical designs that can be used to show which hypothesis may be a better reflection of the trends we observe.

The organization of the paper is as follows: in section 2, we will be detailing the institutional background of the datukship and the literature review on elite theory; in section 3, we will detail the data generating process; in section 4, we will analyze the descriptive representation of the datuks and the trends of datukship over time; in section 5, we will explore potential explanations and further empirical research; in section 6, we will be presenting the conclusion.

## Related Literature and Institutional Context

### *Honorifics as Institution in Malaysia*

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy comprised of 13 states. In 9 of the states, the head of state is the state's sultan; for the rest of the states, the state is led by the governor (*Yang di-Pertua Negeri*). One of the 9 sultans will be elected as the King of Malaysia – the head of federal government in Malaysia. Every 5 years, the King of Malaysia will change on a rotational basis i.e. each state will at least

be elected once every 45 years. The head of states are given powers to grant an individual an honorary title, similar to a knighthood, for their services to the state; in addition, the King of Malaysia are also given powers to award titles<sup>‡</sup>.

The Malay honorary title – the datukship – is one of many titles in the universe of Malay styles, titles, and honorifics in Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore but it is unique due to the explicit recognition of a sub-national political entity on the national-level. Similar to the British-style knighthood, the datukship entitles a person to change their official name to include their title: an individual named John Smith will now be Datuk John Smith officially like how he would be called Sir John Smith after receiving the British knighthood. And like the British knighthood, rulers can revoke a datukship [Times \(2021\)](#) [Syazmeena \(2024\)](#). However, in contrast to many European nobility systems, datukships are not hereditary which means that they are not exclusive to one noble family.

Different titles exhibit varying levels of prestige. Some titles such as the prestigious *Tun* is only reserved to a limited number of individuals – new members can only become one upon the death of a member. Some titles are only exclusive to elected ministers and prime minister, whilst others are reserved for members of the royalty. Some have explicit age requirements, positional requirements, and connections to the royal family. However, individuals who came to receive the titles are associated with certain degree of excellence and merit especially to the state where they receive them; among them political figures, professors, celebrities, corporate leaders, entrepreneurs, and community organizers [Hickey \(2023\)](#).

Anecdotally, individuals receiving datukship are typically respected by the community they are in and is entitled to preferential treatment in many organizational settings. For example, an employee in a corporate firm may not address a datuk by their first name and must use the correct title to address them. Those who do not use the titles properly are frowned upon in professional settings. A datuk can also receive a special number plate to be attached in their car where it is customary for police officers to salute as one drives past. Most importantly, datuks are frequently invited to corporate and government events as a guest of honor giving them the access to network with other important individuals.

For many states, attaining a datukship requires one to be recommended by a similarly high-positioned individual. For example, to receive a datukship in Melaka, a private citizen requires the recommendation by the CEO of the company they work in. For virtually all states, a public servant must be recommended by the minister of the ministry they work in which is usually a datuk themselves. Then, the recommendation is submitted to the state or federal-level department of honorary status (e.g., *Bahagian Istiadat dan Urusetia Persidangan Antarabangsa* for federal government) where they will receive a decision on their candidature. For the full breakdown of the datukship process for other states, refer to the appendix. After going through the screening process of the bureaucracy, the individual is then invited to the state's palace for state awards or the National Palace for

<sup>‡</sup>See [here](#) for the list of datukships

federal awards where they will be knighted by the sultan or the governor.

For many readers outside of Malaysia, one would ask why would a datukship be a salient title that signifies elite status? After all, if one compares the datukship to other honorary status such as the British knighthood or the United States Presidential Medal of Freedom, there is a certain expectation that the individual who receive them are meritorious and therefore the honorary award is not the one giving them the elite status rather the other way around. This is because the datukship awards are significantly more prevalent in the Malaysian society than the knighthood in British and Presidential Medal of Freedom in America. To give some context, there are about 3,000 living knights in the United Kingdom for a population of 66 million. In the US, approximately fewer than 11 per year receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In Malaysia, there are more than 25,000 datuks for half the population of United Kingdom. This means honorary titles are much more prevalent in Malaysian society than other counterparts – just under 1% of the population have a datuk in their name.

Apart from the prevalence of datukship in Malaysian society, another reason why it is an elite signifier is the amount of connection one needs to have to receive them. The bureaucratic process of receiving one, the recommendation an individual needs, and the recognition from the ruler of the state are all major barriers that not any individual can easily get access to. Although one could argue that it is possible for someone to be elite and not be a datuk, it will take some convincing that a datuk is not part of an elite class. Of course, one could be from an elite class without a datukship. For example, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a major political party most famously restricts their members from a datukship when they serve in office [Rozlin \(2023\)](#). However, the fact that datukships (a signifier of elite belonging) capture nearly 1% of the population enables us to study the elite society in a much more systematic way. And since datukships cut across political, economic, and social lines, there is a much larger variation of elite individuals we can study to derive empirical regularities that have been missing in the elite theory literature.

## Related Literature

The elite theory tradition can be traced back to the works of the Italian school of elitism – Mosca, Michels, and Pareto – and Max Weber [Higley \(2010\)](#). These theories emphasize the role of elites in organized society. Mosca argues that elites are those minorities endowed with higher levels of ability, material wealth, or moral superiority; thus, they are better at organizing collectively over the majority [Field et al. \(1990\)](#). Michels argues that organizations may start in a relatively egalitarian way. However, the need to divide tasks and managerial positions necessitates the creation of elites for efficiency in setting organizational direction – his famous iron law of oligarchy [Higley \(2010\)](#). Pareto stresses that the ideal world should consist of unrestricted social mobility and that the elites should comprised of the best and the brightest in society; there should be a free circulation of elites who come and go based on ability and merit. The source of inefficiency comes from elites who uses coercion, persuasion, and family ties to prevent downward mobility

and upward mobility for newcomers [Higley \(2010\)](#). Weber's contribution to elite theory can be understood through the lens of his more theoretical work on rationalization [Pakulski \(2012\)](#). As societies move away from coercive to a bureaucratic state, elites are increasingly differentiated; their legitimacy are no longer enforced through coercion and control, but rather through a legal-rational framework moving from de facto to de jure recognition. Implicit in the arguments made by early elite theorists is the belief in the natural differences between individuals and that social hierarchies are developed due to organizational needs interacting with individual difference.

Equally as long is the tradition of critiquing elite societies [Mills \(2018\)](#) [Lachmann \(1990\)](#). Theories that can be traced back to Marx argues that the elite have conflicting interests as the non-elite due to their relationship with the means of production. Thus, the elites who manage the resources to produce goods are able to actively create institutions to legitimize their own positions whilst preventing the non-elites from joining them [Bates \(1975\)](#) [Lukacs \(1972\)](#). These theories emphasize the unnatural existence of elites and the lack of consciousness among the masses with regards to the possibility of living in a society without them [Lukacs \(1972\)](#) [Bates \(1975\)](#). Yet, although these two traditions may have different normative prescriptions for elite position in organized society, both recognize the existence of an elite. The central question thus remains: who is an elite?

Higley argues that an elite are those "who are able, by virtue of their strategic positions in powerful organizations, to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially". One of the main issues with elite theory lies in the various typologies of those who belong in an elite group. Scholars employ varieties of definition of elite groups such as families [Naidu et al. \(2021\)](#), landowners [Baland and Robinson \(2008\)](#), tribal chiefs [Acemoglu et al. \(2014\)](#), military officers [Ferraz et al. \(2024\)](#), those with the rights to vote prior to mass enfranchisement [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2000\)](#) [Lizzeri and Persico \(2004\)](#), and those who hold political office [Cruz et al. \(2017\)](#) [Querubin \(2012\)](#) [Cruz et al. \(2020\)](#). Although these works no doubt shed important light on the effect of a narrowly-defined elite (e.g., political families) on various outcomes – such as strengthening political dynasties, voting, social capital, and institutions – a large gap in the literature concerns the relationship between different groups of elite: the political elite, the economic elite, and many others. Seminal works by sociologists especially by C Wright Mills explored the relationship between the political, economic, and the military elite in shaping American institutions [Mills \(2018\)](#). As mentioned in the previous section, the datukship captures a variation of elite individuals due to the lack of well-defined stately contribution needed to achieve one. Those who receive datukship includes private citizens, public servants, political officials, and community organizers which fits well with the more expansive definition provided by Higley [Higley \(2010\)](#). The large variation of elite individuals in the dataset allow us to study the relationship between elite individuals if there is an active circulation of elites between political, economic, and other types of institutions. This paper contributes to the efforts of identifying elite individuals in a given society from a variety of institutions.



Another contribution to the literature concerns the descriptive representation of elites. We know that elites occupy high levels of leadership, but are there systematic datukship composition we can identify across time? As countries undertake social and economic transformation from rural to urban societies, traditional social norms regarding leadership representation break down. For example, male and Malay leadership in the public sector and male and Chinese in the private sector may be much more prominent in the 1980s but has it changed in the 21st century? The datukship dataset enables us to identify the types of leaders emerging from changing social norms since the country's independence. Of particular interest to Malaysia is ethnic representation. Since Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with a history of ethnic conflict and coalitions, how does datukship play a role in identifying elite minorities and are they influential in conveying minority interest to the state? Another area of growing interest to scholars is the representation of women. Since datukship is an award primarily given by male rulers, to leaders who are predominantly male, what can we infer about women who receive them and are they different by states? More importantly, the datukship dataset provides us with an understanding of the evolution of leadership and elite identification across different periods in the country's history. The paper would like to contribute to the literature of descriptive representation and identify the empirical questions we can explore. Increasing number of papers have shown the empirical regularity of descriptive representation in delivering substantive representation [Lowande et al. \(2019\)](#) [Gay \(2002\)](#) [Pande \(2003\)](#).

Another type of descriptive representation but closely related to substantive representation is on the relationship between regime type and elite composition. As previous scholars and writers have noted, Malaysia is a flawed democracy and was effectively a one-party state between 1957 – 2018 [Slater \(2003\)](#) [Case \(1995\)](#) [Case \(2010\)](#) [Gomez \(2016\)](#). Due to the high degree of centralization of power in the federal government as well as their capacity to curb opposition, pivotal political choices are decided by individuals at the highest level of government. Thus, many such as [Gomez and Jomo \(1999\)](#) have argued that elite composition is primarily determined on political connections. Theoretically, models of autocratic rule have produced predictions of personalized reward schemes to regime supporters [Padró i Miquel \(2007\)](#) [Mesquita et al. \(2002\)](#) [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2008\)](#). In many empirical literature, autocratic regimes have been shown to be linked with favored public goods provision and high degrees of preferential treatment [Burgess et al. \(2015\)](#) [Bandiera and Levy \(2011\)](#) [Cansunar \(2022\)](#). However, since public goods provision or pecuniary rewards are more obvious to observers as well as illegal in certain contexts, datukship awards may serve as an alternative to material rewards provision. Datukship may serve to be an effective method of awarding regime supporters as it is individualized and depend on social norms for the full realization of rewards. Since Malaysia's independence, there have been democratic transitions and leadership changes we can exploit to study whether elite membership have changed across time; of particular importance to indicate regime type awards is public service alignment, occupation, and elected officials.

Our work here will add on the literature of flawed democratic regimes and elite composition.

Next, we also would like to contribute towards the literature on the state-federal relationship. Previous literature on Malaysia have emphasized the high degree of centrality of power of the federal government [Slater \(2012\)](#) [Loh \(2010\)](#) [Pepinsky \(2007\)](#). However, little quantitative research have explored how states express their autonomy in Malaysia. Since datukship awards almost exclusively fall under the domain of state rulers as opposed to the federal government, studying the datukship awards enables us to identify elite society on a subnational level. We are also able to identify title-giving trends among rulers and to distinguish different giving behaviors even during a period of time where state power was thought to be subordinate with federal power. And the variation across time on the federal capacity to maintain political alignment with states is an interesting area where we can explore further. Our paper here adds on the state relationship with federal government whether elite recognition differs from one state to another.

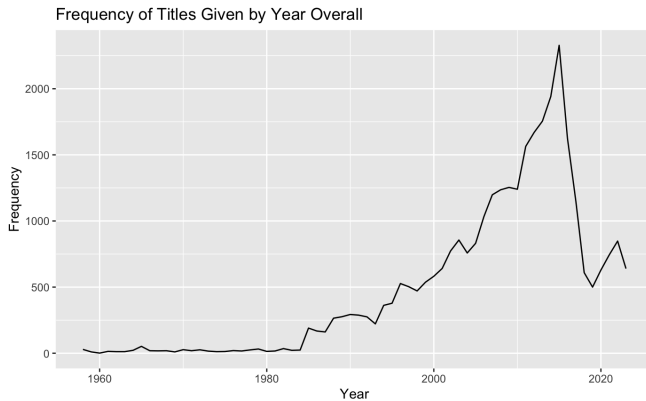
As for previous literature in the study of datukship, there is not much writing of the phenomenon apart from a doctoral thesis written by [Lee \(2013\)](#) where she explored how an individual with datukship can bring value to the board of a firm and improve firm performance. Literature on elites in Malaysia tend to focus on political connectedness and its impact on firm and business, defining firms with political connection as firms with at least one board member as a political office-holder [Faccio et al. \(2001\)](#) [Faccio \(2006\)](#) [Phan et al. \(2020\)](#) [Johnson and Mitton \(2003\)](#). Thus, like we explained in the previous paragraphs the datukship title includes a more expansive definition of elites beyond the political class. Our work hopes to shed light on a prevalent institution in the country as there are still major gaps in understanding the dynamics of datukship: in terms of who gets them and how states differ in their datukship giving and how it has changed across time.

## Data

### Data Description

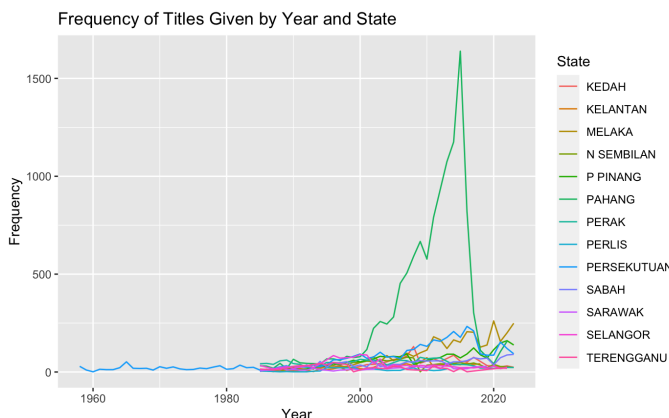
We obtained the data from [istiadat.gov.my](http://istiadat.gov.my), a database that contains the list of all the individuals who receive a datukship from the state-level and the federal-level. The database contain all states except for Johor – each state's datukship reporting begin in 1985, whereas the federal-level awards begin in 1958. Although the datukship awards reporting from states do not begin earlier, the vast majority of awards are given out after the 1990s and especially at the turn of the new century. The database existed primarily as a way for the government to clamp down on individuals who use fake titles for economic gain. Fake datuks are featured heavily in the press and they usually conduct elaborate scams for individuals who have no information to verify their title. In 2017, the government introduced a federal law to punish these individuals and part of that effort includes the building of the database [Gimino \(2023\)](#).

The database contains a total of 31,783 awards for 25,419 unique individuals<sup>§</sup>. The data contains the name of the individual, the prize they receive, the year that they receive the award, the shortened award name, the state where the award was given, and the prefix they ascribed to their official name. Below is the graph of the trends of datukship over time:



**Figure 1.** Overall Trends in Datukship over Time

As one can observed, the period between 1985 – 2000 show steady linear growth of datukship awards but beginning in the early 2000s, the datukship awards grew exponentially. The exponential growth of datukships can primarily be attributed to the state of Pahang – where they expanded the datukship to as high as above 1500 awards in 2015. The growth of datukships did not last long however as we saw a sharp decline beginning in 2016. The two major events that coincided with this decline is the introduction of federal law in 2017 – which includes vast provisions to restrict monetary transfers for titles – and age requirements introduced to Pahang [Nik Min \(2019\)](#) [Government \(2017\)](#). Below is the trends for each state:



**Figure 2.** Overall Trends Among State Datukships Over Time

## Data Generating Process

The data we received did not include other covariates, therefore we expanded the list of observables that can be identified by name. We first identified unique individuals in our dataset since it is common for individuals to receive more than one datukship. Since individuals are not uniquely

identified, we automate the process by clustering the string distance of similar names. The string distance metric we use is Jaro-Winkler distance [Jaro \(1989\)](#) [Winkler \(1990\)](#) and we use a tree to perform hierarchical clustering. The method is an approximation given the amount of time we have to spend to identify unique individuals. In our dataset, the individual with the most datukship is Ali bin Hamsa, the chief secretary of Malaysia between 2012 – 2018 who amassed a datukship from every state. The easiest covariate where we can start to generate is ethnicity. The name markers to identify ethnicity is attached in the appendix.

For names where we cannot find markers, we manually impute the ethnicity – out of 31,783 names we manually impute 4,133 names where the vast majority are either Chinese or foreign recipients. Next, we generated gender. We first used male or female prefixes such as *Encik* for male and *Puan or Cik* as female. We also used Mr and Mrs or Ms to identify gender. For the remainder of the individuals, we used ethnicity markers e.g., *Bin* for male Malay and *Binti* for female Malay. The name markers will be attached in the appendix.

From the name marker gender identification, we obtained gender identification for 83% of the individuals in our dataset. The vast majority of individuals where we cannot find the genders is Chinese due to the lack of systematic way of identifying gender through name. As for government link identification, we used a government manual of honorifics to identify top civil servants and elected officials [Malaysia](#). As for professional certifications, we used identification such as *Prof. or Dr., or Ir.* For the analysis of the trends of covariates, we elaborate them in the next section.

## Descriptive Representation in Title Recipients

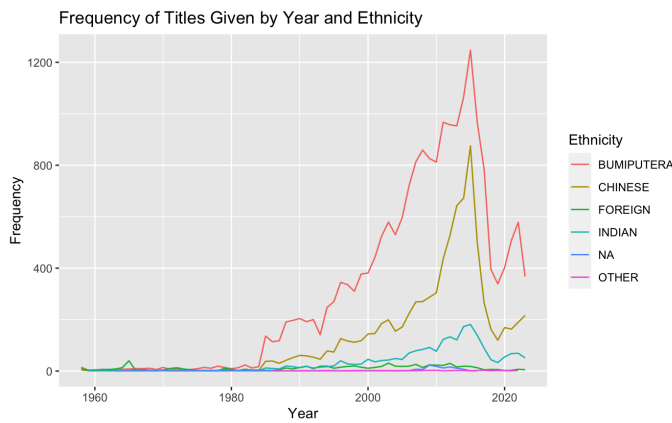
### Ethnic Representation

In terms of ethnic representation, we categorized the individuals along the lines of Bumiputera, Chinese, Indian, Others, and Foreign Recipients according to the government categorization<sup>¶</sup>. Below is the overall datukship for each ethnic groups across time:

As one can observe, the ethnic representation for federal datukships were more or less equal between different ethnic groups. In this period, foreign recipients are much more prominent consistent with many government honorary awards for other countries. State leader's awards to foreign dignitaries serve as a role to signal diplomatic relations [Hickey \(2023\)](#). The role of datukships for diplomacy changed in the 1980s onwards as more local individuals are included in the list of recipients. Once we include state-level datukships in 1985, ethnic representation of datuks are more skewed towards the Bumiputera population. The rate of growth of datukships between the Bumiputera is consistently higher throughout the period between 1985 – 2010. In fact, the Bumiputera representation is consistently highest both

<sup>§</sup>This number is an approximation due to the clustering algorithm used.

<sup>¶</sup>Malays, indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak, and Orang Asli falls under Bumiputera. Sikhs fall under Indian. Foreign includes all non-Malaysians.



**Figure 3.** Overall Trends of Ethnic Representation of Datukships Over Time

in terms of frequency and percentage in all states for all years. Starting from 2010, the growth of datukships among the Chinese grew exponentially far outstripping other groups. In 2015, the Chinese representation reached its highest at 38.1%.

States with the highest Bumiputera representation (percentage of recipients) in decreasing order are Perlis (90%), Kelantan (89%), and Terengganu (83%). For Chinese representation in decreasing order are Pulau Pinang (39%), Pahang (33%), and Sabah (29%). For Indian representation in decreasing order are Pulau Pinang (10%), Perak (9%), and Federal (8%).

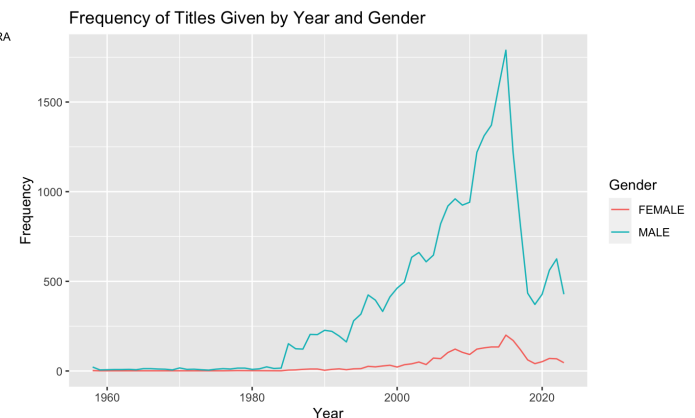
The overall representation of datukships among ethnic groups today is 63.7% Bumiputera, 26.4% Chinese, 7.1% Indians, and 2.3% foreign recipients. In 2019, the demographic composition of Bumiputera 62.5% (Malays and indigenous peoples, including Orang Asli, Dayak, Anak Negeri), Chinese 20.6%, Indian 6.2%, other 0.9%, non-citizens 9.8%.

Thus, although the datukship used to have a disproportionate representation of Bumiputera people, there has been a convergence of datukship to the overall demographic composition of the country starting in 2010. There is a slight under-representation datuks among the Bumiputera but over-representation for Chinese and Indians. The bulk of the growth in ethnic minority datukships have been the result of the expansion of datukship awards in Pahang. In 2010, there is only 180 datukships awarded to Chinese people in Pahang but in 2015, the number grew to 694 – a growth rate of 285%. The growth rate for Indians across the same period is 266%. At the same time, the growth rate for Bumiputera datukships in Pahang between 2010 and 2015 is 70%. The shift from overwhelmingly Bumiputera datukship composition in the 1980s towards including ethnic minorities in the 21st century remains an interesting question for future research to answer.

### Gender Representation

By far the most striking observation in the datukship awards have been the persistence of under-representation of women. As seen below, women representation was virtually non-existent throughout the 1960s and 1970s. However, one must note that women's representation was the highest in 1959 at 14.3% of recipients and even today that record still stands.

Apart from 1978, women will not achieve a representation of above 10% until 2005. After that, there seemed to be a consistent representation of above 10% until today.



**Figure 4.** Overall Trends of Gender Representation of Datukships Over Time

Given that the awards are primarily directed to individuals occupying leadership positions which are predominantly men and awarded by the head of state which are men, it is no surprise that women's representation is persistently low.

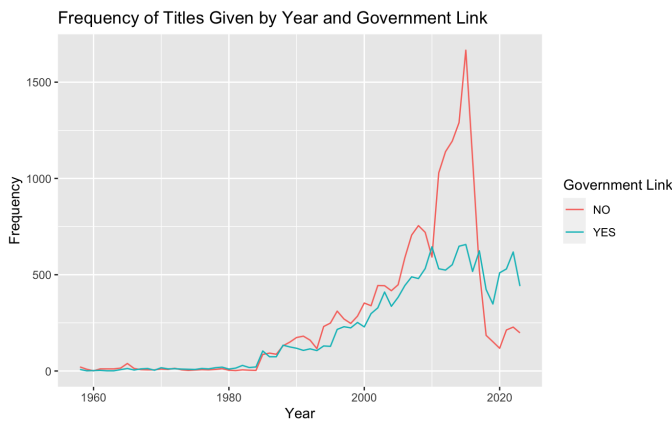
The states with the highest women's representation is Perlis (13.6%), Sabah (11.1%), and Sarawak (11.1%). Although women's representation in Pahang is not among the highest in the country, it gives out the most among all states. 40% of all women who ever received a datukship comes from Pahang, more than twice the number of women awarded a datukship from the second highest award giver – the Federal government.

The two main mechanisms driving under-representation – either differential costs of attaining a datukship for women (driven by access) or gender discrimination (driven by biases of datukship award givers) will imply qualitatively different types of women who receive these awards [Ashworth et al. \(2024\)](#). The trends in datukship recipients gives us an interesting area to study gender mobility among the elite – in a world where women are not assumed to take up leadership roles or occupy positions of power. Especially important is the effect of women's datukship on their individual outcomes and the people around them such as exposure or organizational responses such as those documented in other prominent studies [Beaman et al. \(2009\)](#) [Chattopadhyay and Duflo \(2004\)](#).

### Private and Government-Linked Citizens

Another important distinction of elites in Malaysia is related to the individual's link to government <sup>¶</sup>. The public service bureaucracy in Malaysia is one of the largest in the region in terms of numbers and expenditures – 1 civil servant for every 20 Malaysians accounting for more than half of government spending [Beh \(2014\)](#). Most importantly, civil servants have a dedicated route towards a datukship and their closeness in working on government matters facilitate the recommendation procedures needed for a datukship.

<sup>¶</sup> See the appendix for definition.



**Figure 5.** Overall Datukship Trends of Government Linked Individuals

As one can observe above, datukships between private and government-linked citizens track each other from as early as the 1960s until the 2010. We see a clear break in 2010 where private citizens outnumber government-linked citizens significantly. The break is primarily driven by the sharp increase in datukship awards to private citizens by Pahang. In terms of private citizen representation, Negeri Sembilan, Sabah, and Pahang has the highest among all states which is 74%, 73%, and 71% of all recipients respectively. For most states, the proportion of government and private citizens are more or less balanced i.e. approximately 50-50. States with significantly higher government linked citizens are the Federal government (74%), Pulau Pinang (68%), and Melaka (54%).

The sharp inclusion of private citizens into the datukship award in 2010 coincides closely with Pahang's datukship expansion. Not only has Pahang's expansion brought the inclusion of ethnic minorities and women, it has also brought sharp increases in giving datukship awards to private citizens.

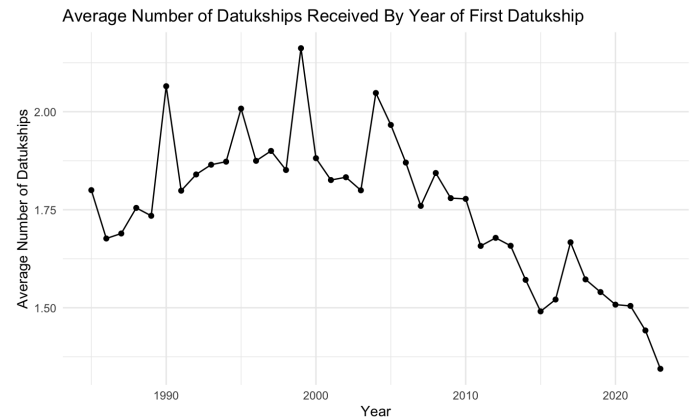
### Professional and Occupation

For professionals, we are able to identify them primarily by the title they receive as a result of having a professional degree – the two most common are Dr. and Ir. Also included in the list is Ar., Ts., and Sr. Although there are professionals beyond the list included such as accountants or lawyers, our list can be expanded for further research by cross-checking the list for the Malaysian Bar or doctors registry. The states with the highest representation of professionals as defined is Perlis (25%), Perak (21%), and Pulau Pinang (20.5%). The lowest are Sabah (8%), Pahang (8%), and Melaka (10%).

As for occupation, we are only able to identify police officers, military, and academics by the nature of the title used\*\*. The states with the highest representation of police is Kelantan (6%), Pahang (3%), and Kedah (3%). The states with the highest representation of military is Kelantan (15%), Perak (11%), and Kedah (11%). The states with the highest representation of academics is Perlis (6%), Selangor (6%), and Kelantan (5%).

### State and Federal Recognition

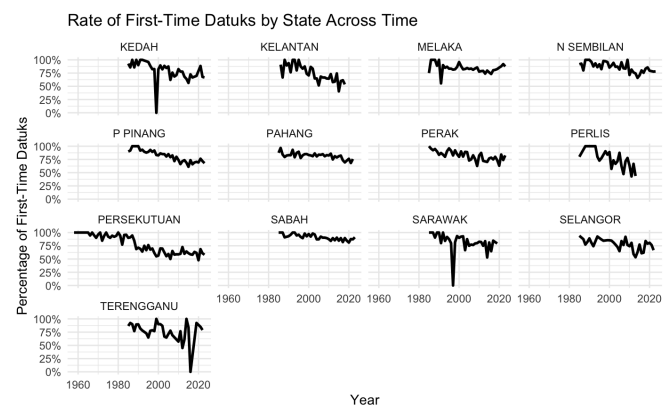
The last interesting piece of data is the individuals who receive more than one datukship i.e. a recognition from another state or federal government. These individuals account for 15.8% of individuals who receive a datukship. The graph below represents the average number of datukships received by an individual given their first year of receiving a title:



**Figure 6.** Average Number of Datukship by Year of First Received

The interpretation here is that given the year that the individual first receive the datukship, what is the average datukships they will obtain until 2023. The average number of datukships received rose from 1985 to around 2004 for individuals who first receive a datukship during this period. Newer datuks who first receive them after 2004 are much more likely to be first-time recipients as well as not pursuing other datukships after already receiving one. While individuals in the 1990s to the early 2000s are those who are more likely to collect datukships, individuals post-2004 are single-state datuks i.e. less recognized by other states.

Another interesting data is the rate of first-timers of each state by year (see figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Rate of First-Time Datuks By State Over Time

Although the rate of datuk collectors have dropped since 2004, the rate of first-time datuks have not increased but decreased in all except for the state of Melaka which

\*\*Refer to the appendix



means that there is a higher likelihood for rulers to award those individuals who already have a datukship. This means that after 2004, the proportion of people who are already datuks receiving new datukships have increased although the majority of new datukships are still new entrants except for the federal government awards. As federal and state governments move towards restricting datukship expansion, we will more likely see much lower rates of first-time datukships.

Last but not least, which states have the greatest recognition by the federal government i.e. given that their first datukship was not by the federal government, what is the likelihood they will receive a datukship from the federal government? We found that states with the greatest federal recognition are Kelantan (31%), Perlis (29%), and Kedah (25%). This means 31% of individuals who receive their datukship from Kelantan would also receive a federal datukship. The states with the least federal recognition are Perak (17%), Negeri Sembilan (14%), and Sabah (10%). This means that only 10% Sabah datuks would receive a federal datukship. Although one could interpret the number as the state with the least federal recognition, one should also note that the last time Perak's sultan became a king was in 1989 and Negeri Sembilan's sultan became a king was in 1994 – the period where datukships are not as prominent as the 2000 – 2010s so they may not use the full extent of their powers to grant federal recognition.

## Discussion

### *The Rise (and Fall) of Title-Giving in Malaysia*

From the empirical observation of trends we highlighted in the paper, we proposed several hypothesis behind the drivers for the rise and fall in datukship over time. Datukships in the earlier periods before the 1980s were more symbolic and carries a much more diplomatic purpose. We know that the diplomatic purpose changed sometime after the late 1980s. The sharp increase in datukships in the post-2000s period can be singularly attributed to the expansion of datukships by the state of Pahang. Yet, fully focusing on Pahang's datukship expansion ignores the rise and fall of datukships in different states. For example, Selangor, Perlis, and Terengganu saw the expansion of datukships beginning in the 1990s before falling in the 2000s. Kedah, Pulau Pinang, and Melaka only started their datukship expansion beginning in the 2000s. We hypothesize on the causes of expansion and contraction of datukships.

The first hypothesis is the *information* hypothesis. This hypothesis argues that states manage the production of datukship as a way to distinguish between individuals they can trust to deliver consistent benefits to their states. Although many individuals beyond the datukship have contributed to the state, the datukship is a signaling mechanism for states to use for relying on the individual for returns [Spence \(1978\)](#). As such, this hypothesis works if states give the datukship after they have observed credible evidence that the person is worth the datukship i.e. ex-post award. Thus, the amount of datukships given by a state will be a function of a threshold value set by the state – if an individual's contribution satisfies a certain level of selection criteria by the state, then they will

receive a datukship. The hypothesis finds its support due to the coincidence of datukship expansion and the period of economic growth. As Malaysia and its state's economy expands, states are incentivized to search for high-quality individuals to deliver consistent growth returns for state and the federal government. Due to the lack of formal education in the overall population in the 1990s and reliable indicators of merit for elites without education, datukships become a suitable informational device for individuals without credentials beyond a high-school diploma [Lillard and Willis \(1994\)](#).

The second hypothesis that we propose is the *lobbying* hypothesis. This hypothesis argues that states expand their datukship as a way to spread their political or economic influence beyond the state i.e. ex-ante award. This hypothesis is inspired by the observation of local governments in the United States hiring lobby firms to influence state spendings to their locality [Payson \(2020\)](#). Since the datukship gives an unrecognized politically-active individual some form of prestige over their counterparts, they are happy to reward the title-giver with political returns. Another type of elites targeted in this hypothesis is the economic elite. Datukships are a way for the state to send a strong signal for potential individual investors to invest in their state. This hypothesis finds its support in due to the coincidence between the sharp rise of datukships in 2000 and the end of the 23-year leadership of Mahathir Mohamed. As Mahathir is notorious for the high-degree of power centralization in the federal government, the end of his leadership enable greater freedoms for state to pursue influence independent of the federal government. Another source of support is also the correlation between the rapid increase of private citizen datukships and foreign direct investments starting in 2010 [Yean \(2018\)](#). As states compete for foreign investments to their states, the datukship awards to a local partner for foreign firms may serve as a strong signal to support their business activities.

These two hypotheses are in conflict because states that see datukships as a tool to lobby are more likely to expand the datukship to increase their lobbying capacity. States that see datukship as information devices are more likely to restrict the datukship because of the information it carries – the more datuks they are in the world, the less information they convey regarding the ability of the individual. However, there are empirical designs that can find which hypothesis plays a more prominent role over the other. For example, within the political elite, states that see datukships as an informational device will reward policymakers who hold office for a higher number of terms as opposed to first-term policymakers. Within the economic elite, information-leaning states will award datukships to those who has a proven investment or business record in the state as opposed to prospective investors who have not set up a firm prior to the award.

The two hypotheses also informs the reason why datukships were restricted beginning in 2016. Although we know that federal law was passed in 2017 that punishes individuals who use fake datuks, the competing hypotheses offers a different interpretation as to the causes for resistance against datukship expansion.



On the one hand, if the information hypothesis is correct, the expansion of datukship has decreased the informational value of datukships overall for existing datuks. As states expand their datukship program, the distinction between elite and non-elite has reduced and the returns to datukship for individuals have declined as the number of datuks increase. We would expect to find that resistance in the datukship expansion comes from the existing datuks who will see decreasing returns in their titles. In addition, the proliferation of datukship scams have tarnished the reputation of the title, further reducing the credibility of their merit. The information hypothesis may explain the existence of datukship organizations such as the Council of Datuk Dato' Malaysia who have repeatedly highlight the phenomenon of individuals who use unrecognized titles for political gains.

On the other hand, if the lobbying hypothesis is correct, the expansion of datukship have increased the influence of Pahang among the political and economic elite. As states observe the lobbying benefits accrued through the giving of datukships, states may partake in a competition to award datukships further distorting policy or investments to inefficient destinations. In this framework, we would expect to find resistance from the federal government or other state governments to limit the lobbying influence of Pahang. Thus, this hypothesis explains the fall of datukship as resulting from the need to limit state rivalry, limit unfair lobbying advantage in policy and investments, and limit state influence in federal government.

The two clashing hypotheses would inevitably affect the problem of elite identification. Specifically, if a state views datukship from the information hypothesis, then individuals receiving them will most likely share similar preferences with those giving them the title. If a state views datukship from the lobbying hypothesis, they will be reaching out to the elite regardless of preference to entice them of joining. Thus, elite individuals who receive datukships on the merits of their credibility will be more homogenous in terms of preference whereas elite individuals who receive datukships on the merits of their influence will be more heterogenous and varied in terms of preference. Datukships where the main objective is to spread influence captures a more representative sample of elites as per Higley and thus more suitable for elite identification. Datukships where the main objective is to identify credible individuals are not suitable for elite identification as there will be strong selection bias and may lose other elites who are not as credible to the individual states. However, given that there is limited recognition of datuks between states, our dataset captures an expansive list of subnational-level elites even if all 13 states see datukships as an informational mechanism. Thus, elite identification will be much more limited in numbers but it will capture variation between states and subnational-level elites.

### *Returns to Datukship and Heterogeneity Among Social Groups*

Equally important aside from the choices of states to expand datukship is the choice made by individual elites to accept the datukship. Of course, the more obvious pursuit of prestige

and benefits as mentioned in section 2 no doubt play a major role for elites to accept datukships once offered. However, the two hypotheses of datukship supply enables us to distinguish between reward systems and efforts needed by elite individuals that are more information-leaning and lobbying-leaning.

If information hypothesis is correct, this means the elite must perform a targeted and visible action that the state recognize aligned with the threshold set by the state – individual must be objective-driven to empower the state. The elite will allocate a certain level of effort that meets the criteria set by the state. In addition, if the state disapproves of the individual in pursuing an alternative title, then the returns will most likely be sourced from one state. Thus, elite choice given the assumption of targeted effort and exclusivity will be the opportunity cost of forgoing potential rewards from multiple sources in favor of one singular source. Elites who are captured by the state in this manner will be more ring-fenced into performing exclusive service and they are incentivized by the anticipated returns that the state will give in return for their loyalty. The reward system is most similar to the feudal relationship between lord and king – kings grant the nobility land and titles in return for service to the king [Alatas \(1968\)](#). The incentive to receive a datukship is higher the more they trust the state to provide returns for their service.

If the lobbying hypothesis is correct, this means the elite individual is already assumed to be capable of exercising a large degree of effect towards political and economic outcomes. In this framework, states are competing with each other to give datukships for elite individuals that they believe will influence policy or investment decisions to their own states. Elite choice will be constrained by how much they have to allocate resources to the state but the obligation to serve exclusively to one state as we expected in the other hypothesis is no longer there. Thus, elite choice to accept the datukship will be a function of the returns they receive to their title and the cost they will have to allocate to receive them. The returns to datukships such as potential board roles in firms or legitimacy in national-level politics or ease of dealing with government agencies become primary motivators to datukship balancing with the costs such as state investment to potentially inefficient destinations or advocating for policies they do not normatively agree with.

Another driver of elite individual preference is the social groups the elites belong to. As we have seen in the previous section, minority recipients to datukship only became prominent after 2010. Women are barely represented in the composition of recipients while datukship popularity among civil servants are seeing steady growth. The motivations or perceptions of rewards and costs for different elite individuals will be correlated to the main economic activity they do or the social norms of the community they are a part of. For example, datukships may not be as important to Chinese firms in the past, but since they have grown immensely in the 2010s, they may signify an indicator of social status recognized by the state. Minorities in the past may suffer negative perceptions from their own community for accepting a title from the ruling class, but today it is welcomed. The understanding of the reward specific to the major social groups – especially ethnicity and gender –

is important to understand why datukships are demanded beyond the obvious economic and political gain one will get as a datuk.

### Further Work

Further work on understanding the returns of datukship is especially important to clarify which hypothesis of datukship expansion is more apt. Some areas where datukship play a role in society is in commerce and finance as the seminal work by [Johnson and Mitton \(2003\)](#) has done on political connections. The estimate for returns to having a datuk in a board for firms is still unknown so this is an area we will explore further. In addition, the role of datuks in economic growth and innovation is another area to explore. In both datukship hypothesis, elite individuals must allocate some resources for the state that gave them the title. Taking stock of the aggregate gain and losses to consumer welfare as a result of this economic distortion remains an open question. The reason why the returns to datukship is important is because the existence of such groups introduce a barrier of entry for social mobility. High-performing individuals may only exert great changes once they become a datuk.

In terms of political returns, there is a great deal of interest in political science literature on political dynasties and networks in shaping electoral outcomes [Dal Bó et al. \(2009\)](#). Although datukships are anecdotally known to increase the chances of winning an election, the evidence of the effect of datukship on electoral returns is still limited. Another question of interest is in the effect of holding office on the probability of having a datukship. If we can show that those who win an election are significantly more likely to also receive a datukship, then we will be uncovering the effect of political victories and elite recognition.

A potential social group that is still unexplored in this paper is the educated class. As mentioned previously, elite individuals who are not college-educated may use the datukship as a substitute for social status. As Malaysia become more educated, does the datukship become less relevant or appropriated by the educated class? Another type of elite network that is prevalent in Malaysia is boarding schools and international education. Are datukships more prominent among the elite school networks?

The large extent of elite society captured by the datukship system enables us to recover the effect of elites on a host of economic, social, and political outcomes.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the study seek to describe the datukship phenomenon – a fairly unique institutional arrangement in Malaysia where elites are recognized and identified. Datukship begins as a diplomatic award to recognize foreign dignitaries serving a similar function to other forms of honorary titles around the world. However, the function of datukship has transformed away from its diplomatic roots sometime beginning in the late 1980s as it is expanded to domestic recipients. By 2023, over 25,000 individuals were honored with a datukship – accounting for nearly 1% of the population.

The datukship increased linearly between 1985 – 2000 and then grew exponentially sometime in 2010. This increase is singularly attributed to the expansion of datukship in Pahang.

The paper then studies the descriptive representation of the individuals who receive these titles. Bumiputera population used to dominate the datukships up until the 2010s where minority population – Chinese and Indian – begin to catch up. Women's representation is persistently low over time with only 10% of the recipients. Private citizens and government-linked (defined by occupation related to the government) used to track each other in terms of growth before a clear break in 2010 where private citizens vastly outnumber government-linked citizens. The individuals who receive datukships are also increasingly less likely to collect more than one datukship today than before and less likely to be first-time datuks. And finally, states with the least federal recognition are also the states where the sultans have not been in the Kingship since the 1990s.

We then proposed two hypothesis to explain the rise fall of datukship. The first hypothesis is that states expand datukships to distinguish individuals that can deliver consistent benefits to the state – the information hypothesis. The second hypothesis is that datukships expand to increase the state's influence both in the national politics and economic development – the lobbying hypothesis. Both sets of hypothesis yields different sets of interpretation to explain why datukship expansions are opposed and the groups posing opposition. Both sets of hypothesis would also yield different implications for the types of elites who self-identify themselves as datuks.

Our work contributes to the elite literature by demystifying a major aspect of elite life in Malaysia, especially with regards to the individuals who receive a datukship. We hope that scholars utilize this phenomenon to understand the effects of elites for a host of political, economic, and social outcomes.

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