

EQUITY AND INTEGRATION

*The Impact of Malaysia's Affirmative Actions:
Ethnic Chinese Parents' School Choice*



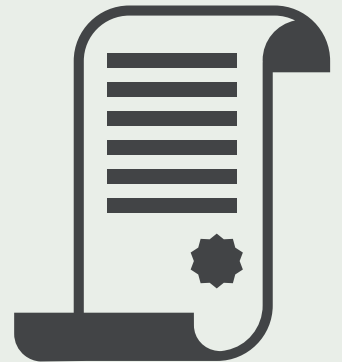
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Introduction

Malaysia's affirmative action policies, including the New Economic Policy (NEP), have been implemented to address economic disparities and promote the advancement of the Bumiputera (indigenous Malay) community. While these policies have contributed to the progress of the Bumiputera community, they have also raised concerns about their impact on non-Bumiputera communities, particularly the ethnic Chinese population. This policy brief examines the impact of Malaysia's affirmative action policies on the school choices made by ethnic Chinese parents and provides recommendations for policy makers to address the issues raised.

Affirmative Actions

- Affirmative actions in Malaysia were designed to improve the economic position of Bumiputras[1].
- Affirmative actions give special advantages to Bumiputras in different areas, including education, job opportunities, starting businesses, possessing wealth, and owning land[2].
- However, the economically advantaged but politically disadvantaged minorities, ethnic Chinese and Indians, have felt victimized by the affirmative actions policies. Therefore, the NEP has constantly faced pushback[3].



Methodology

This policy brief reviews existing literature to investigate how affirmative actions evolved in Malaysia and how they have impacted ethnic Chinese parents' school choices. Sources include a meta-analysis, quantitative studies, qualitative case studies and interviews, and policy analysis articles. The analysis was based on Cheng's Policy Life Cycle framework [4].

[1] Mah, H. (1985). Affirmative action, ethnicity and integration: The case of Malaysia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 8(2), 250–276.

[2] Choong, C. (2022). Race-based affirmative action in Malaysia: Misrecognised subjectivities, enduring inequalities. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 50(2).

[3] Lee, H.-A. (2022). Malaysia's New Economic Policy: Fifty Years of Polarization and Impasse. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 11(2), 299–329.

Key Issue

With the prevalence of affirmative actions in public education institutions and the compromise in the private sector, different ethnic groups become even more segregated.

Ethnic Chinese want to guard their ethnic identity via education and regard the government's stated nation-building goal as "a thinly veiled state project to assimilate minorities" [5].

Ethnic Chinese School Choice: How and Why

An increasing number of ethnic Chinese parents choose to enroll their children in Chinese primary schools. The percentage of Chinese students in government Chinese primary schools has risen from 82.4% in 1973 to 94.7% in 2005 [5].

Reasons for Attending Chinese Schools

- **Language, culture, & religion:** In a study that interviewed 30 Malays and 25 ethnic Chinese students born between the 1970s and the 1990s, the researcher found that language and religion were the most important factors influencing parents' school choices. Most Chinese students in the study enrolled in national type Chinese secondary schools because the "internal culture remains identifiably Chinese and the schools have retained close links with the local Chinese community" [6].
- **Academic Aspiration:** Some parents choose to enroll their children in Chinese schools because of their conducive learning environment. Chinese schools have successfully produced excellent students, especially in mathematics and the sciences, and thus have good reputations [6].
- **Career Aspiration:** As the United Examinations Certificate (UEC) of private Chinese schools is not recognized by the Malaysian government, those who enrolled in private Chinese schools were deprived of the opportunity to enroll in public tertiary institutions [5]. Some parents enroll their children in national secondary schools so they would have the opportunity to work in the public sector; the researcher proposes offering Mandarin as an alternative language and subject in a national school, which may attract more non-Malay parents to the school [6]

[4] Cheng, Y. (2002). Educational Reforms in the Asia-Pacific Region: Trends and Implications for Research.

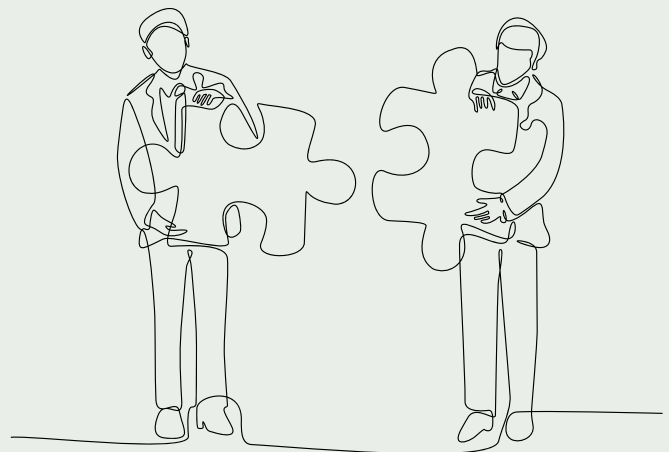
[5] Cheong, K.-C., Hill, C., & Leong, Y.-C. (2016). Malaysia's Education Policies and The Law of Unintended Consequences.

[6] Ismail, K. (2018). Ethnic boundaries and everyday understanding: The case of Malay and Chinese parental choice of national and national type school in peninsular Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 14(4).

Gaps between Intended and Unintended Consequences

- **Intraethnic disparity:** With the emergence of a small, politically powerful, and disproportionately wealthy Bumiputera elite, there have been raising complaints associated with increasing intraethnic Bumiputera income disparities [7].
- **Unequal access to higher education:** Pathways from grade school to higher education are also ethnically segregated. Because of affirmative actions, the Matriculation program of public higher education institutions (HEIs) is largely the preserve of Bumiputera, and completion of the program almost always resulted in admission to public HEIs [5]. There has been an effort to establish a complete system of Chinese, linking Chinese primary schools and Chinese universities. The first private Chinese university, the New Era College, was established in 1998. With the privatization of higher education, private HEIs transformed from a peripheral role to an alternative to public HEIs. In 2005, private HEIs enrolled 113,105 students, outnumbering the 80,885 students enrolling in public HEIs. However, these changes resulted in **ethnic segregation at the tertiary level** between public and private academic institutions [8].
- **Increased racial tension:** Affirmative action has the potential of promoting interaction and facilitating the inclusion of designated groups [9], but can also reinforce the idea of “us versus them”, the politics of racial preference, therefore, heightened racial tensions [10].

Reform and alternatives to the affirmative action program has been selective, slow, and inconsistent [3].



[7] White, N. (2005). The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative action, ethnic inequalities and social justice.

[8] Raman, S. R., & Tan, Y. (2010). Ethnic segregation in Malaysia's education system: enrolment choices, preferential policies and desegregation. *International Journal of the History of Education*, 26(1-2).

[9] Lee, H.-A. (2017). Majority Affirmative Action in Malaysia: Imperatives, Compromises and Challenges. Global Centre for Pluralism, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies.

[10] Schotte, S., Gisselquist, R., & Leone, T. (2023). Does affirmative action address ethnic inequality? A systematic review of the literature. Working Paper, United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research.

Recommendations

1. Making Research-Informed Decisions

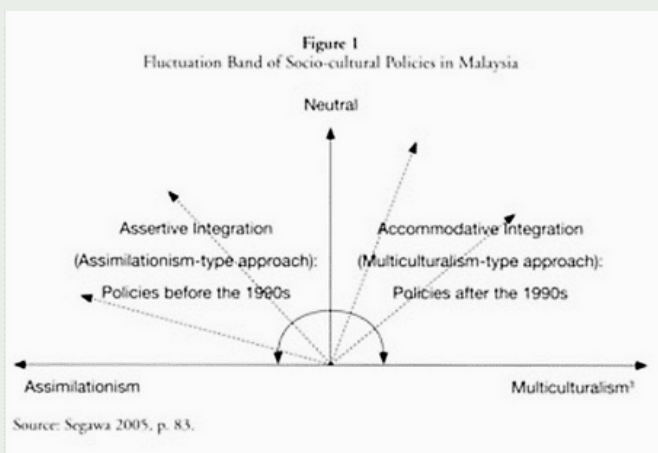
“ Breaking out of the prevailing polarization and impasse requires a systematic and constructive rethink [3]. ”

Critique points out that the NEP was plagued by gaps and shortcomings, particularly a lack of clarity on policy mechanisms and long-term effects, and a disproportionate emphasis on Bumiputera equity ownership [3].

Though a literature review of affirmative actions globally has found mostly positive results of Malaysia's affirmative actions, there is still relatively little research about the country, compared to the United States and India [10].

As studies about ethnic segregation present valuable results, and as affirmative actions keep facing pushback and resistance, it is crucial for policymakers to reconsider their decisions and be guided by imperative research. Questions should be asked, for example, have the policymakers engaged all stakeholders in the early stage of policy development?

2. Adopting Multiculturalism for Better National Integration



Some policies were apparently well received by the Chinese. For example, Vision 2020 gave non-Malays the hope that they would in time be treated as full citizens and have full cultural autonomy [11]. Adopting multiculturalism is a plausible approach for national integration, as it shows the potential to achieve "unity in diversity" [11].

[11] Segawa, N. (2007). Malaysia's 1996 Education Act: the impact of a multiculturalism-type approach on national integration. *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 22(1).