KAMI ORANG SINI JUGA

Chinese Youths and Democratic Belonging

The Politics of Pragmatism and Fairness

IMAN RESEARCH
SOCIETY • BELIEFS • PERCEPTION

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Foreword

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Executive Summary

This report draws on interviews with 116 Malaysian Chinese youths aged 18 to 35 across Peninsular Malaysia, conducted between August 2025 and April 2026. This study follows how young people made sense of their lives, including where their accounts differed.

Chinese by label, different by experiences.
Language, schooling, religion, family history and where one grows up shape how young people relate to their Chineseness. For some, regional identities like Penangite, Johorean or Orang Ganu matter just as much. There is no single cultural experience that captures them all, nor can their political views be read off their ethnicity. Treating Malaysian Chinese youths as one bloc risks missing what actually shapes their lives.

We want to know one another, why do we remain strangers?
Many interviewees described a strong desire to understand other communities better. Yet friendships often ended with school or work, while familiar social circles, inherited stereotypes and unspoken boundaries kept communities apart. Young people sometimes attributed ethnic tensions to politicians and social media, separating the Malays they knew personally from the politics associated with them. But cordial relations could coexist with limited understanding—and Indians, in particular, remained largely peripheral to how participants understood Malaysian society. Peaceful relations are real; so is the distance between communities. Goodwill alone has not closed it.

Chinese pragmatism helps people get ahead. But at what cost?
Earlier generations pooled resources to build schools, businesses and associations when public support fell short. Today, young people work harder, draw on family networks, pay for alternatives or look overseas when public pathways seem uncertain. But class and geographical proximity make it different for everyone, and inherited warnings can close off opportunities before they are even tried. This report calls this self-cornering: learning to work around a problem rather than challenge the system behind it. When private workarounds replace public accountability, those with the fewest alternatives lose out—and democracy loses pressure for change.

The facts are often blurred, the stakes are not.
Participants understood inequality through personal experiences, anticipated barriers and accounts shared by family or community. These are different kinds of evidence, and the report does not treat every disappointing outcome as proof of discrimination. It also distinguishes the matriculation entry quota from UPU's university selection process, which participants sometimes combined into a single "UPU quota". Yet correcting the terminology does not settle the wider concern. STPM and matriculation differ in duration, assessment and co-curricular opportunities, while family resources determine who can afford an alternative when the public route seems uncertain.

They see the political drama, not always the machinery.
Interviewees experienced politics through housing, education, wages and local services, but did not always see these as political issues. Instead, politics often mean scandals, party manoeuvring and disputes over race and religion. They wanted to understand more how to distinguish political noise from how decisions are made, who holds responsibility and where they can act, but many lacked the civic grounding to connect everyday problems to the institutions and decisions behind them. In its absence, the report's First-to-Door model examines how the first trusted source to make politics intelligible can shape how later information is understood. DAP was a prominent political reference point, though this did not mean unquestioning support.

China's growing presence in everyday life, and the limits of its reach.
For many interviewees, China was not first encountered as a geopolitical power, but through things they used, watched, or bought. Its rise could mean convenience for consumers, at the same time, a competitive challenge for local businesses, or a career advantage for those able to bridge Chinese and Malaysian business cultures. Some admired China's technological and economic achievements; others questioned its regional ambitions, human rights record or impact on Malaysian businesses. Even cultural content that seemed harmless or entertaining raised questions for some about imported language and the circulation of political messages. For most interviewees, greater exposure did not displace their Malaysian identity.

What needs to change?

Civic education should teach students how to identify the agency responsible for a public problem, assess political claims and engage with real institutions. State and local authorities should establish neighbourhood advisory bodies, and fund youth-led community projects. Public spaces should also be made more accessible for community-run food, arts and social activities that bring people together beyond formal integration programmes. The government should publish and communicate clearer university admissions criteria and intake data, review differences in assessment and co-curricular scoring between STPM and matriculation pathways.

1 Background



Following IMAN Research's flagship *Orang Kita* study on Malay youths published in 2025, we expanded the research to Chinese and Indian youths.

Malaysian Chinese youths are often discussed through familiar issues such as Chinese education, voting patterns, economic position and China. But these discussions can easily make the community look more uniform than it really is. A young Chinese person growing up in Penang may have a very different experience from someone growing up in Kelantan, Terengganu or Perlis. Their schools, languages, family backgrounds, social circles, and exposure to other communities also differ.

These differences matter because they shape how young Chinese Malaysians understand their identity, how they see opportunities and inequality, and how they relate to politics, public institutions and other communities.

To understand how young Malaysians see the country and their place in it, we cannot rely only on election results or treat each ethnic community as a single, fixed group. With this study, we wanted to hear directly from Malaysian Chinese youths and understand these differences through their own experiences.

We focused on three broad research questions:

1. How do Malaysian Chinese youths understand their identity and sense of belonging in Malaysia?
2. How do education, socioeconomic background and community networks shape their opportunities and responses to inequality?
3. How do Malaysian Chinese youths understand politics, democracy and their relationship with public institutions?

1.1 Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 116 Malaysian Chinese youths aged 18 to 35 between August 2025 and April 2026. Participants came from across Peninsular Malaysia, and the study also included a small number of Malaysian Chinese youths living overseas. Most interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

The interviews followed a common set of questions, but we did not ask them in a fixed order. We allowed the conversation to develop naturally and asked follow-up questions when participants raised something important or needed more time to explain their views.

Most interviews began with easier questions about personal background, language, education and everyday life before moving into identity, ethnic relations, inequality, politics and governance. This helped participants settle into the conversation before discussing more sensitive or complicated issues.

Most sessions were conducted one-to-one. Some were conducted in groups of two or three participants, usually when the participants already knew one another or came from similar backgrounds. This mattered because discussions about ethnicity, politics, and inequality can be sensitive, and we wanted participants to feel comfortable enough to speak openly.

We selected participants through purposive sampling, aiming to include as wide a range of experiences as possible. We looked for participants from different states, age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, education pathways, occupations, religions, political affiliations and levels of civic or political involvement.

We recruited participants through personal and professional networks, youth and community organisations, political networks, and referrals from earlier interviewees. This helped us gradually reach people outside our initial circles. Recruitment continued throughout the fieldwork. When we found that certain groups or perspectives were missing, we deliberately looked for participants who could fill those gaps.

Malaysian Chinese researchers deliberately conducted all interviews for the Chinese youth study. Sharing similar languages and being familiar with Malaysian Chinese social and cultural references helped us build rapport more quickly. Participants did not always need to stop and explain references already familiar to the researchers, and many moved naturally between Mandarin, Bahasa Malaysia, English, and dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka during the interviews.

Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, that their participation was voluntary, and that their identities would remain confidential. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis.

While the themes remained consistent throughout the study, the interview guide underwent minor refinements after the first phase of data collection. We revised three questions and resequenced two sub-questions to improve clarity, enhance interview flow, and increase the accuracy of the responses collected.

We analysed the interviews using narrative thematic analysis, without starting with a fixed set of conclusions. Instead, the research team coded the interviews and looked for ideas, experiences and patterns that kept appearing across different participants.

We then grouped similar codes into broader themes. We also noted where participants differed from one another, especially across region, class, gender, education, and political involvement. The purpose was not only to identify what participants said repeatedly, but also to understand why the same issue could be experienced very differently by different people.



1.2 Interview Questions

1. Which languages, including dialects, do you use daily?
2. What do you think about inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia? How do you think of yourself as a Malaysian?
3. How important are Malaysian Chinese history and traditions to you?
4. What do you understand or think about Malaysian democracy?
5. Do you feel represented by political parties? How or why?
6. Are you involved in any volunteering, social groups, NGOs or political groups? How involved would you consider yourself?
7. Where do you get your news from, and who do you discuss it with?
8. Have you ever voted?

   If yes, did the political, social and economic outcomes align with your expectations before voting?

   If not, what would affect your voting decisions?
9. What are your thoughts on the rise of China? How do you think it has affected you as a Malaysian Chinese?
10. What do you hope to see change in Malaysia? What improvements do you think are necessary?

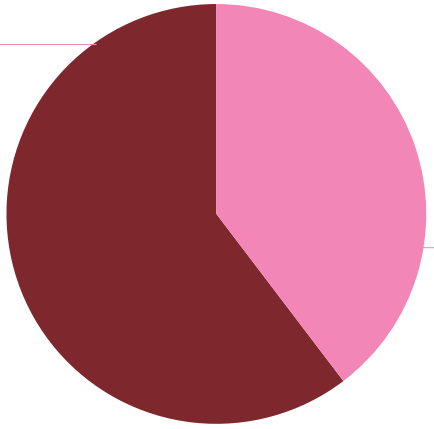
Additional questions

11. What are your thoughts on Bahasa Malaysia?
12. Would you describe yourself as Chinese, Malaysian Chinese or Malaysian?
13. What do you think is needed to succeed in Malaysia?
14. Are there any systemic inequalities that affect or have affected you?
15. Would you consider working or moving overseas?

1.3 Demographic Profile
116 Participants

I. Count of Gender

Recruiting female participants was more difficult during fieldwork. As the study progressed, we therefore made a more deliberate effort to look for and recruit female interviewees. Even with this effort, the final sample remained more heavily male.



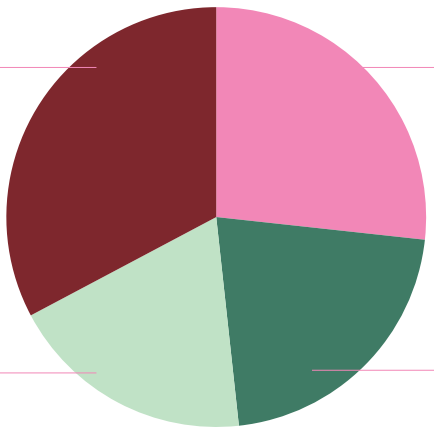
Male
70 participants
60.3%

Female
46 participants
39.7%

II. Age Group

We did not try to make the number of participants from each state match the Chinese population in that state. Instead, we wanted to include different local settings. This was important because being Chinese in places such as Penang or Johor can be very different from being Chinese in states where the community is much smaller.

The demographic breakdown therefore shows who we spoke to in this study. It should not be read as a nationally representative profile of Malaysian Chinese youths.



Age 31+
38 participants
32.8%

Age 22–26
31 participants
26.7%

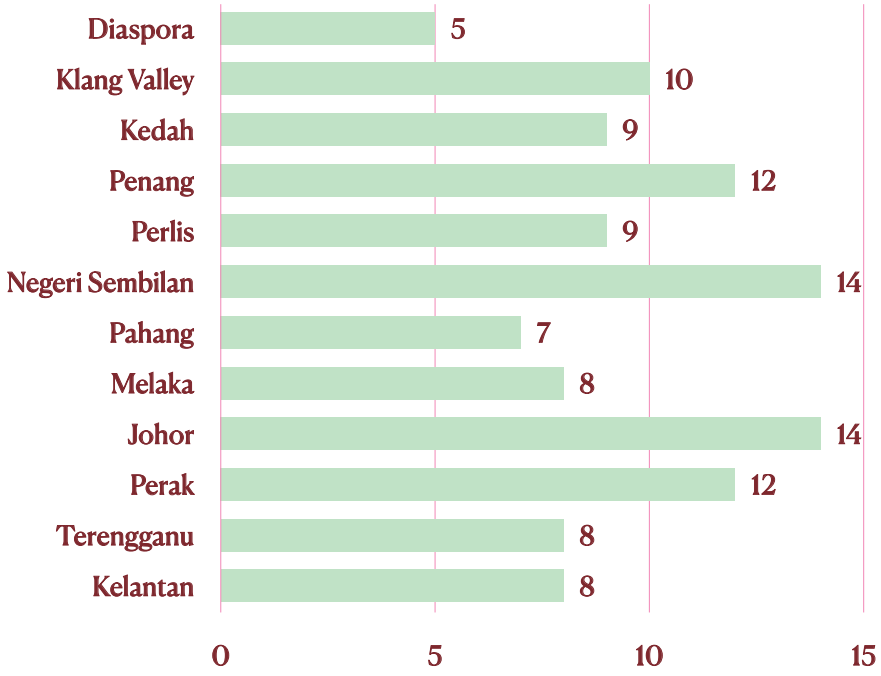
Age 18–22
22 participants
19.0%

Age 26–30
25 participants
21.6%

III. Area

We did not try to make the number of participants from each state match the Chinese population in that state. Instead, we wanted to include different local settings. This was important because being Chinese in places such as Penang or Johor can be very different from being Chinese in states where the community is much smaller.

The demographic breakdown therefore shows who we spoke to in this study. It should not be read as a nationally representative profile of Malaysian Chinese youths.



1.4 Limitations

The findings are not statistically representative of all Malaysian Chinese youths. As a qualitative study, we did not aim to measure how many Chinese youths hold a particular view. We were more interested in understanding why they held certain views, how they arrived at them and how their experiences differed.

Recruitment also depended heavily on community networks and referrals. This meant that young people connected to universities, professional organisations, political groups, NGOs, or community networks were sometimes easier to reach. Those who were more socially isolated, highly disengaged from politics, or simply unwilling to take part in an interview were harder to recruit. We reduced this gap by actively seeking participants from different backgrounds, but we couldn't eliminate it completely.

The number of participants also differed between states. For this reason, do not read differences between regions as direct comparisons between entire state populations. When this report discusses Penang, Johor, Kelantan or other states, it refers to patterns that appeared among the people we interviewed there. The same applies to the five diaspora participants. Their interviews gave us useful points of comparison, especially on how views of Malaysia may change after living overseas, but the number is too small to represent Malaysian Chinese youths abroad more broadly.

Finally, having Malaysian Chinese researchers conduct most of the interviews helped with language, rapport, and cultural familiarity, but it also carried its own risks. Researchers and participants sometimes assumed they already understood each other because of a shared ethnic background. We therefore continued to ask participants to explain their reasoning, rather than treating familiar ideas as self-explanatory.

2 Malaysian Chinese Identity



The boundary of this study was questioned before some interviews even began: a young Perlis Siamese girl asked to be included because she culturally identified as Malaysian Chinese. Her request raised a basic problem: if Malaysian Chinese identity is defined only through ancestry or an official ethnic category, then her claim falls outside it. If identity is also formed through cultural belonging and everyday life, excluding her would disregard how she understood herself.

The same difficulty appeared among participants who fell comfortably within the official category but did not conform to a conventional image of Chineseness. When asked how Chinese he considered himself, one participant who grew up in a Malay village in Terengganu replied:

> *"If there was a competition of who's the most Chinese, I might be at the bottom, I think."*

He does not pray, rejects some customary practices and describes his family as a mixture of Chinese, Thai and Malay backgrounds. Yet he did not see himself as detached from his Chinese identity while maintaining his Anak Ganu identity:

> *"I would say, like, I'm really proud of being Chinese, but I'm not proud of the nonsense… the traditional nonsense."*

Both cases challenge the idea that Malaysian Chinese identity can be measured against a checklist of ancestry, language, customary beliefs, ancestral knowledge and traditional festivals. Participants retained, rejected and reinterpreted different parts of their inheritance while continuing to identify as Chinese. Some spoke Mandarin but knew little about their dialect group; others followed family rituals without strong religious belief, or spoke mainly English or a local Malay dialect while remaining attached to their Chinese family background.

"Chinese" nevertheless remains a consequential category in Malaysia. It is everywhere in everyday life: on official forms, in electoral analysis and in access to institutions. Shamsul A.B.'s two social realities highlight the distinction between authority-defined and everyday-defined identity. It clarifies the difference between the official category of "Chinese" and the many ways Chineseness is lived from below. This difference is important to understand if the official category presents "Chinese" as a stable ethnic label. Participants lived that category through different languages, schools, religions, family histories and local relationships. Their everyday identities did not erase the official category, but neither could the official category explain how Malaysian Chinese youths experienced Chineseness.

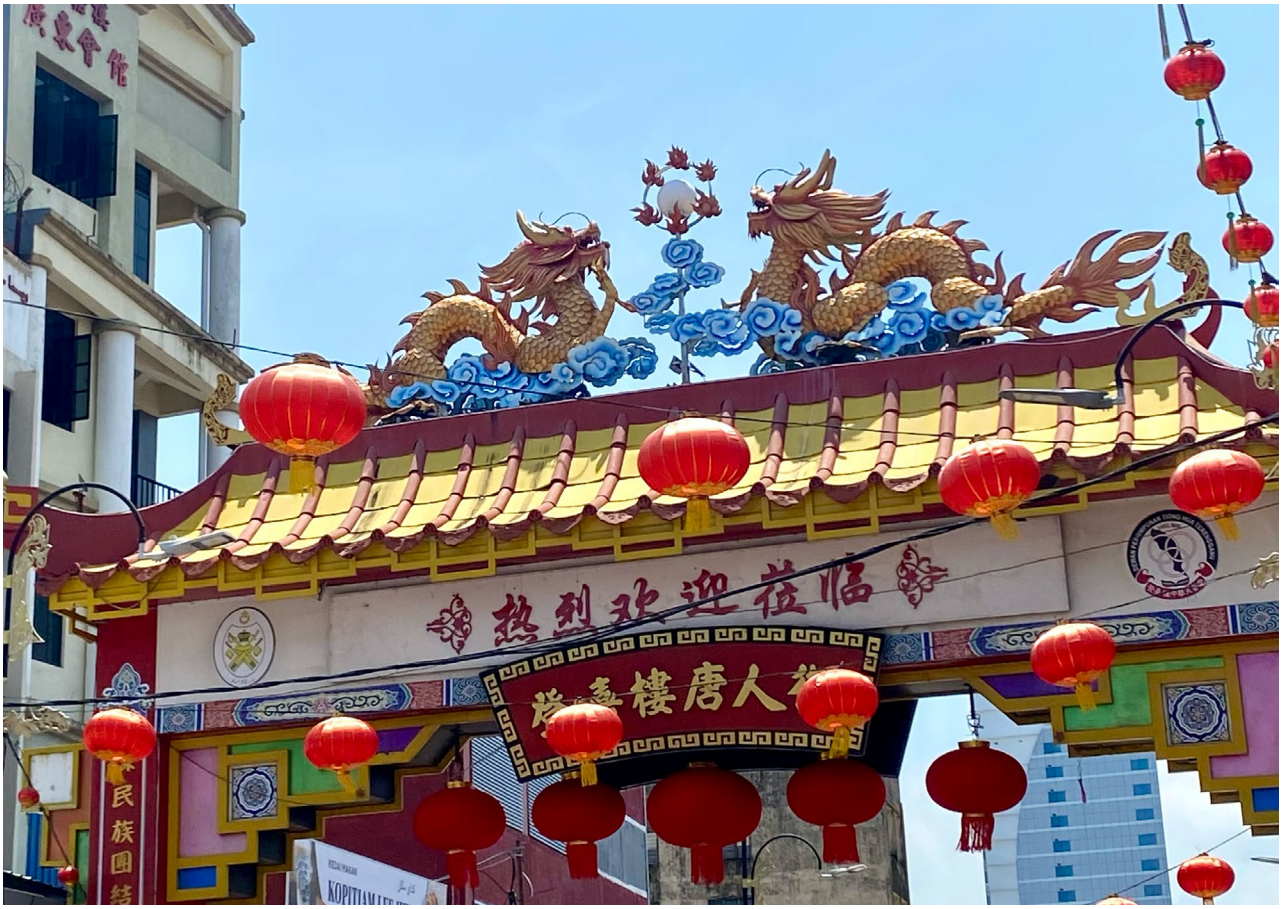
This chapter therefore examines identity as a lived position rather than a fixed cultural type. Region determines which communities and institutions are readily available; language affects access, intimacy, and recognition; schools organise social contact but do not guarantee integration; religion may operate as belief, family practice, or cultural inheritance; class and gender shape who can move, speak, and adapt without bearing the same costs. These differences did not generally displace national belonging. Instead, they produced different ways of being both Chinese and Malaysian.

2.1 Place and Local Recognition

Region was not merely the setting in which identity developed. It was an intermediate scale of belonging between ethnicity and nation: participants encountered Malaysia through the institutions, languages, relationships and opportunities of particular states. This report picked the strongest regional identities to illustrate different forms of being Malaysian Chinese: Orang Ganu, Penangite and Bangsa Johor. Orang Ganu was grounded in locally acquired recognition; Penangite identity emerged from a dense, historically established social environment; and Bangsa Johor provided a public language of state-wide unity. These identities did not replace being Chinese or Malaysian. They shaped how people could live together.

For participants in Terengganu, local belonging was built through long participation in the state's social world. One participant chose "Anak Terengganu" when asked whether he identified as Malaysian, Malaysian Chinese or Chinese:

> *"Anak Terengganu. Terengganu is home. You can see the beach every day after work, and on weekends we go hiking, visiting waterfalls, or picnicking. Whenever my international or KL friends want to visit places like Redang Island or go diving, I play the ultimate host. I let them park their cars at my family shop for free and drive them to the airport."*



His answer located belonging in landscape, work, family resources and obligations to visitors. Terengganu was not a secondary attachment added to an ethnic identity; it was the place through which Malaysia became concrete. Calling oneself Anak Ganu or Orang Ganu could therefore make a claim across ethnicity: a Chinese resident was not simply living among Terengganu Malays, but belonged to the same regional world.



Bahasa Terengganu made that relationship audible. A business owner explained why a Chinese trader who had lived in the state all his life still struggled to gain the trust of Malay restaurants:

"And when you don't speak the language, the Malay know that you are not what we call Orang Ganu. Even though you spend all of your life here, you do not know how to speak, then you're not Orang Ganu. Mu asal ganu, mu wat cara ganu. (You're from Terengganu, you do in Terengganu way.)"

When the participant switched to Bahasa Terengganu with Malay customers, "You can see the face change. They get comfortable. Because they know, this is our people, orang kita." The shift mattered commercially, but its deeper force came from recognition: dialect condensed years of exposure to local humour, manners and expectations. Orang Ganu was thus potentially inclusive across ethnicity, but not proportionately inclusive. Chinese residents demonstrated local competence in ways the Malay majority did not. A person could be native to the state yet remain outside orang kita if others did not recognise the appropriate signs of belonging. Regional identity could cross an ethnic boundary while preserving an unequal power to decide who counted as local.

Penang produced a different relationship between region and ethnicity. Its dense Chinese schools, businesses, temples, media and social networks allowed Chineseness to appear ordinary rather than something that had to be defended or deliberately maintained. As one participant put it:

> *"I think we [Penangites] are probably more like taking this Chinese fortune for granted. Because for most of us, being Chinese is simply the default setting, particularly in Penang, a very Chinese place. We grew up Chinese. We grew up in Chinese communities. We don't spend much time thinking about it."*

Here, being a Penangite did not require participants to move away from Chineseness to become local. The region itself made Chinese institutions part of everyday public life. Hokkien could further signal rootedness in markets and hawker centres, where speaking it produced familiarity and sometimes better treatment. Yet Penangite identity was not simply Chinese identity enlarged to the scale of a state. Participants also described Penang through mobility, multilingualism and encounters across communities. All of them chose "Malaysian" as their primary identification, while recognising that Malaysians of different ethnicities occupied different social worlds.

The same institutions that strengthened belonging could also limit interethnic contact. With Chinese schools, friendships and businesses readily available, participants could remain largely within Chinese networks without seeing themselves as living in a "bubble." Penang therefore shows two realities at once: a strong Chinese community can give young people confidence in their place in Malaysia, but it does not necessarily lead to deeper interaction with other ethnic groups. Diversity may be highly visible, while everyday social lives still run largely in parallel.

Bangsa Johor offers a different way of understanding how Chinese identity can sit within a wider Malaysian belonging. Rather than treating ethnicity and national identity as competing categories, the idea presents Johoreans of different ethnic backgrounds as members of the same state community. For Chinese participants, this creates space to remain culturally Chinese while also seeing themselves as part of a shared local and national society.

Bangsa Johor reflects a more inclusive imagination of Malaysia. Difference does not have to disappear before common belonging becomes possible. Participants could understand themselves as Chinese, Johorean and Malaysian at the same time, with each identity operating at a different level rather than cancelling the others out.



2.2 Language as Access

Language gives participants access to social worlds, and it does not neatly divide interviewees into Mandarin-speaking, English-speaking, and Malay-speaking groups. Most moved among several languages, but frequency, proficiency and emotional attachment did not always align. Its value depended on whom they could approach and what they could access.

I. Access to community

Mandarin gave many participants access to family life, Chinese education, media and community organisations. For many participants, Mandarin was the unmarked language of family and Chinese friendship networks, Chinese education, media and community organisations. It was used without deliberate calculation. Yet it was not equally inherited.

The SPM Mandarin paper revealed a different tension. One interviewee, whose interest in Mandarin led her to pursue Chinese Studies, shared her experiences on Mandarin classes in secondary school:

> *"They are afraid that Chinese will be a burden and they can't get a straight A… Secondly, they think it's better to learn other subjects rather than spending so much time learning Chinese…And then my teacher is like, 'Just do it. Better don't waste energy on these people. If they come in, their result will also lower the average result."*

Community institutions had an interest in maintaining formal literacy, while individual students and schools carried the examination risk. Its declining uptake therefore reflected academic incentives rather than simply weaker cultural interest.

Some interviewees spoke dialects such as Hokkien, Hakka and Teochew, with fluency shaped by exposure at home (mainly parents and grandparents), in the workplace and within their regional surroundings.

II. Access to national and local life

All interviewees viewed Bahasa Malaysia as necessary for national belonging, public institutions and interethnic communication.

Formal Malay enabled participants to sit examinations and deal with officials, while social fluency required familiarity with slang, humour and everyday knowledge. This dietetics student from Ipoh extended this distinction to professional competence, expressing concern that limited exposure to Malay social life would affect her ability to understand her patients:

"I can speak [Malay], but I'm not confident. When I speak, you can hear that I'm Chinese. But the Malay I learned at school is formal. And when I hear native speakers speak fast, I don't understand...

When I go to the government hospital for placement, most patients are Malay. I need to understand their lifestyle, their food during Ramadan, what they eat, what they don't eat. If I haven't been exposed to any of this, I'll be starting from zero. That's a worry."

While many interviewees see Malay as a relatively easier language to master compared to English and Mandarin, the gap lay between classroom competence and everyday use:

"My Malay is okay. I can get by, but it's not very smooth. It gets stuck here and there. I think if you live and interact with Malay people every day, you'd become more fluent naturally. But because my daily circle is mostly Chinese, the language gets rusty. We broadly understand each other, but fluency isn't there."

Loghat added another layer. Standard Malay could make communication possible, but the local dialect signalled a longer relationship with the place. [2] One participant described police officers becoming more relaxed and easygoing when they heard her speaking fluent Bahasa Kelantan during roadblocks. A Chinese content creator who spoke fluent Bahasa Terengganu was repeatedly invited to front official state events:

[2] Pue, Ong, and Loo. "Kelantan Peranakan Chinese Language and Marker of Group Identity." Journal of Language Studies, May 30, 2019.

"I have been the face of official local events in Terengganu for 2 or 3 years now. Malay organisers will ask if I am free to front an event, so I've shot for Chinese New Year, Malaysia Day, Merdeka, and local newspapers."

Language here produced public visibility and institutional recognition. Yet recognition depended on speaking in a form the majority regarded as familiar. Multilingualism was advantageous but also unequally developed and rewarded.

However, the reverse was also true. Two Kelantan participants who lacked fluency in Malay and Bahasa Kelantan recalled being bullied and not treated as Kelantanese despite growing up there. Their experiences were more severe and should not be treated as typical, but they show how language can determine who is recognised as local.

Similar boundaries operated within the Chinese community. In Penang, Hokkien signalled local familiarity and sometimes brought practical advantages. A young lady who speaks fluent Hokkien shared:

"When I go to a hawker centre... Or when I see elders, or buy something from the market, I will speak Hokkien. I will show that I am a local. Because it's more expensive otherwise."

These experiences show that language boundaries do not exist only between ethnic groups. They also operate within the Chinese community, shaping who is recognised as locally rooted and who is treated with greater familiarity.

III. Access to mobility

English appeared in most interviews as a language of tertiary education, professional communication, digital media, and international mobility. This gave it substantial practical value, but the route into English differed. Several participants grew up speaking it, others encountered it most intensively only after leaving Chinese-medium education.

> *"...[S]ometimes I feel USM students are more intellectual.*
>
> *Interviewer: Who are you comparing them to?*
>
> *Matriculation students...Sometimes I feel USM students speak English more comfortably. In Matriculation, many Malays weren't very confident speaking English."*

This USM student account reflected how one found English more intellectual. For several participants, English expanded what they could study, watch, or do professionally, while Mandarin, a Chinese variety, or Malay continued to organise intimacy and local belonging.

English may carry national and global prestige, yet prestige does not guarantee local utility. Many participants view their multilingualism as an advantage, as portrayed by this interviewee who currently lives in Ireland:

> *"Knowing another language is always an advantage. It gives you one more skill and makes you feel like you truly belong in your own country.*
>
> *I think that's one of the strengths of Malaysians. Communication is very flexible."*

Multilingualism allowed participants to move between institutions, labour markets and countries. English opened tertiary and professional settings; Mandarin connected participants to Chinese organisations, clients and China; Malay enabled government work and domestic participation.

2.3 Education
Proximity is not Integration

Schooling shaped whom participants were likely to meet, but physical proximity did not automatically produce social integration. Different school pathways changed the ethnic composition of classrooms, the languages used in everyday interaction and the level of confidence students needed to participate. Yet sharing the same institution was only the starting condition. Whether students built meaningful relationships across ethnic groups depended on what happened after they entered the same space.

For some participants, the most important changes came during transitions between institutions. Moving from an SJKC or SMJK into a more ethnically mixed environment could significantly alter the social world around them. One participant from Seremban described the transition:

> *"In school, when subjects were taught in Malay, my grades were actually quite good, but it was very formal, textbook Malay. Aside from ordering at restaurants, my first immersive contact with the Malay community happened during Matriculation. There were only two Chinese students in my entire class; the other 18 were Malay, and all my roommates were Malay."*
>
> *"That was when I realised that the formal Malay we learn in school isn't how they speak casually in daily life. I had to learn their colloquial way of speaking from scratch."*
>
> —Interviewee from Seremban;
> SJKC, SMJK, followed by Matriculation College



Her experience shows the difference between academic competence and social competence. Her description of learning colloquial Malay "from scratch" is especially revealing. Years of formal language education had given her grammatical and academic knowledge, but not necessarily familiarity with the social codes used among Malay peers. Matriculation changed the conditions under which she used the language. Malay was no longer mainly the language of textbooks, teachers and examinations. Living together required participants to listen, adapt and respond throughout the day.

This suggests that exposure becomes more meaningful when it is sustained and socially necessary. A diverse classroom may create opportunities for interaction, but residential life, group work, shared routines and friendship networks can push students beyond formal contact.

At the same time, even ethnically mixed institutions did not necessarily produce equally mixed social lives.

> *"When you need to cooperate in activities or in your homework, you'll mingle with them. I mean, that's the first instance. But other than that, you'll probably fall back to being comfortable in your circle of friends. But it's not like you don't have Indian friends or Malay friends."*
>
> —Interviewee from Pahang; SJKC followed by SMK

This trend appeared repeatedly. Participants could study together, complete assignments and maintain friendly relations across ethnic groups while still spending most of their informal time with people who shared their language or background. Their schools widened the range of people they encountered, but their closest relationships were not distributed the same way.

Another participant recalled seeing this pattern clearly in a multi-ethnic secondary school:

> *"In secondary school, Chinese students sat with Chinese students and Malay students sat with Malay students. You communicate when needed, but deep friendships across races were not so common. Not because of hatred. Just a habit… Language familiarity. When you walk into any cafeteria, you can see the pattern. Chinese at one table, Malays at another, Indians together. It's not hostile. It's just how people naturally cluster."*

The word "naturally" needs careful handling as these patterns may feel natural, but they don't appear out of nowhere. Habit was produced through earlier schooling, neighbourhoods, family networks and language. Students arrived with different levels of familiarity and then reproduced those differences through daily seating and friendship choices. No rule forced them apart, but the social habit repeatedly placed them with people similar to themselves.

This is why proximity should not be confused with integration. Students may share classrooms, corridors and cafeterias without developing the kind of relationships that challenge assumptions about one another. Contact existed, but its depth varied.

I. What Different School Pathways Still Provide

This does not mean vernacular schools prevent integration, nor that national schools automatically produce it. Participants' experiences were more complicated.

Chinese-medium schools remained important spaces for language, cultural familiarity and community continuity. For many participants, these institutions provided confidence in Mandarin and Chinese cultural practices without preventing them from identifying strongly as Malaysian. Their value should therefore not be reduced to whether they produced ethnically mixed friendship networks.

At the same time, participants who later entered SMKs, universities, Matriculation colleges or vocational institutions sometimes described these transitions as their first sustained encounters with peers from other ethnic backgrounds. What mattered was not simply that the institution was officially more diverse. It was that students were placed in situations where they needed to work, live or communicate with one another.

Vocational and tertiary pathways could be especially significant because they reorganised social circles later in life. Students who had spent most of their childhood within relatively homogeneous networks could suddenly find themselves in classrooms, workshops or accommodation where they were no longer part of the majority. These transitions forced some participants to become more linguistically flexible and socially observant.

The comparison therefore should not be reduced to SJKC versus SK, or vernacular versus national schooling. The more useful question is what kinds of interaction each institution actually makes possible. A school may be ethnically diverse but socially segmented. Another may be less diverse but foster stronger forms of cooperation among the students present.

School type allows exposure. It does not determine the outcome.



A Limit Case: Malay Students in SJKC

The growing presence of Malay and other non-Chinese pupils complicates the idea that SJKCs serve only Chinese families. ISEAS data show that non-Chinese enrolment rose from roughly 3–6 per cent in the 1990s to about 20 per cent by 2020, although part of this increase reflects the decline in Chinese pupil numbers.[3]

Malay parents may choose SJKCs for academic quality, discipline or the value of Mandarin rather than cultural reasons. Yet students do not enter these schools with the same linguistic resources.[4] Research on Malay pupils in Chinese primary schools has found that weak Mandarin proficiency, limited parental assistance and Chinese-medium instruction can create learning difficulties.[5]

One trainee teacher described a Malay pupil who transferred into Year 4 without a Mandarin foundation:

> *"He may know that 3 plus 3 equals 6, but if the question is written in Chinese, he can't read it. His grades will suffer across the board not because he lacks ability but because of the language gap."*

Another Mandarin teacher similarly distinguished conversational fluency from academic proficiency. Malay pupils could become comfortable speaking Mandarin yet still struggle with mathematics and other subjects taught through Chinese because written work required stronger language skills.

These accounts show that access to Mandarin education can carry unequal costs. The value of multilingual education therefore depends not only on entry into the school, but also on whether students have the linguistic and material support needed to keep up once they are there.

[3] Chai, James. "2025/34 'Malaysia's Chinese Primary Schools: Saved yet Threatened by Rising Inflows of Malay Students' by James Chai," May 13, 2025. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2025-34-malaysias-chinese-primary-schools-saved-yet-threatened-by-rising-inflows-of-malay-students-by-james-chai/.

[4] Tan, Yao Sua, Kamarudin Ngah, and Sezali Md. Darit. "Parental Choice of Schooling, Learning Processes and Inter-ethnic Friendship Patterns: The Case of Malay Students in Chinese Primary Schools in Malaysia." *International Journal of Educational Development* 33, no. 4 (October 30, 2012): 325–36.

[5] Tan, Ngah, and Sezali. "Parental Choice of Schooling".

II. From Shared Space to Shared Experience

The policy question is therefore not simply how to place more children from different backgrounds in the same institution. Malaysia already has many spaces where students from different ethnic groups study side by side. The harder question is how to turn physical proximity into repeated, meaningful interaction.

Programmes such as RIMUP should be understood in this context. Inter-school activities can create contact across school systems, but occasional events are unlikely to undo years of separate social routines. If interaction is temporary, highly organised and limited to ceremonial activities, students may participate without forming relationships that continue afterwards.

A stronger approach would begin earlier and operate more consistently. Schools from different streams could share recurring activities, competitions, community projects, sports programmes and collaborative learning rather than meeting only during occasional integration events. The objective should be repeated interaction around common tasks, because familiarity develops through routine rather than symbolic contact alone.



The experiences of Malay students entering SJKCs also suggest that earlier exposure deserves more attention. Encouraging more movement across school streams at the primary or preschool level could give children opportunities to become comfortable with different languages and social environments before ethnic friendship patterns become deeply established.

Instead of treating vernacular education itself as the problem, the interviews suggest another problem: students can spend many years physically close to other communities while having little reason to enter one another's social worlds.

The central policy challenge is to create conditions in which students have to do more than coexist. Proximity creates the opportunity for integration, but not integration itself.

2.4 Intersectionality
Class, Gender and Minority

Crenshaw developed intersectionality as a critique of analyses that treat categories such as race and gender as separate and mutually exclusive.[6][7] The point is not simply that one person carries several identities or disadvantages. It is that institutions can position people differently at their intersection. Intersectionality helps explain why Malaysian Chinese youths did not face the same choices or constraints. Family resources shaped their options, while gender and minority status affected their experiences in particular places.

A young business owner in Malacca could draw on the enterprise her parents had built. A participant in Johor Bahru could not afford to retake an exam and began working at nineteen. In Perlis, another observed that friends who stayed often had family businesses to enter. Their ability to try again or remain close to home differed by class.

Gender also appeared in the interviews themselves. This study faced challenges recruiting female participants when they learned it involved politics. Some initially said, "I don't know," yet offered informed answers when probed deeper; men appeared less likely to start this way. This shows a difference in how interviewees presented their knowledge, but does not establish its cause. Moreover, when discussing options with their parents, participants also often referred specifically to their fathers instead of mothers.

On the East Coast, being a Chinese, non-Muslim minority and being a woman could create a second layer of constraint. In Terengganu, a participant said she was stopped from singing at KTCC and replaced by a male student right before the event, due to Terengganu State Entertainment Guidelines.[8] In Kelantan, another participant said her family paid a RM3,000 wedding deposit to the city council and was monitored throughout the wedding to prevent women from performing.[9] Uncertain about the rules, the bride dropped the toasting ceremony.

Some Chinese male interviewees in the same minority communities were surprised when researchers raised them. This is exactly how intersectionality affects one's life. Minority status shaped the community's relationship with local rules, but gender shaped who bore particular limits on public participation. Similarly, family resources could affect how people managed the resulting costs, without removing the restrictions themselves.

[6] Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." Chicago Unbound, 1989.

[7] Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

[8] Refer to Bahagian 1 H1: "Artis/pengamal seni wanita berusia 12 tahun ke atas hanya dibenarkan membuat persembahan nyanyian dan tarian kepada khalayak wanita, kecuali persembahan berunsurkan keagamaan, patriotik atau persembahan berkumpulan seperti koir". See *Discovery Terengganu*. "Garis Panduan Acara Terengganu," https://www.discoveryterengganu.com/garis-panduan-acara-terengganu/#gpat-h1.

[9] Refer to Elemen dan Syarat Hiburan: "Artis/Pengamal seni wanita secara umumnya hanya dibenarkan membuat persembahan kepada khayalak wanita sahaja di tempat yang tertutup." See Kerajaan Negeri Kelantan. "Garis Panduan Hiburan Dan Sukan Negeri Kelantan 2025." *Majlis Daerah Pasir Puteh*, 2025. https://mdpputeh.kelantan.gov.my/images/garis%20panduan%20jbtn%20perlesenan/GP%20HiburanSukan2025.pdf.

2.5 Different Malaysia, Shared Plurality

All interviewees did not give one answer to what it meant to be Malaysian. Almost all prioritised Malaysian or Malaysian Chinese over Chinese alone, but arranged these identities differently. Some treated Malaysian as the national category and Chinese as an ethnic branch; others considered "Malaysian Chinese" indivisible.

A participant from Kedah explained this relationship through different social scales:

> *"For me, Malaysian is the international identity. Malaysian Chinese is the ethnic identity. The big family is Malaysian. Malaysian Chinese is a branch within that. The difference is in ethnic culture. Malaysian culture is things like going to eat mamak together, playing badminton, speaking Bahasa Rojak. Any ethnic group can do this together. That's Malaysian. Malaysian Chinese is more specific, like praying to the ancestors, celebrating the Nine Emperor Gods festival, those things."*

National identity did not require Chinese identity to become less important. The participant assigned them different domains. Religious festivals and ancestor practices located him within a cultural community, while mamak meals, badminton and Bahasa Rojak represented a common social world that different groups could enter.



For East Coast participants, national belonging often passed through a strong state identity. One participant answered the identity question with "Anak Terengganu" and described home through beaches, waterfalls, family business and hosting visiting friends. This local attachment coexisted with awareness of minority restrictions. Another participant summarised the difference clearly: "As a layman I feel I belong, but in politics I feel being restricted, like in Matriculation and fund allocation." Emotional belonging and dissatisfaction with institutions could coexist.

West Coast participants more often described Malaysia through mobility and comparison with other countries. This did not indicate a stronger national identity. Travel simply made previously ordinary Malaysian practices more visible.

Across these differences, participants valued Malaysia's visible plurality through ordinary practices such as eating at a mamak, mixing languages and participating in one another's festivals. A Seremban participant who studied in China, then working in city council, reflected:

> *"I'm proud of something that is easy to overlook. Malaysia has three major races and three major languages, all functioning in one country simultaneously. When I was studying overseas, my Chinese professors pointed this out. In China, there are over 100 nationalities, but the language is unified. Here, we have maintained three distinct linguistic communities, all coexisting. That is genuinely remarkable. Our political climate may be turbulent, but in our social life, in our daily interactions, the friction is muh less than the politics suggests. I feel glad to be Malaysian when I think about this."*

The conventional "three races" formulation excludes other communities, but reveals the expectation beneath it: national unity did not require cultural sameness.

However, this plurality should not be romanticised. Everyday friendliness does not cancel institutional inequality. Participants could feel at home while questioning how education, public resources or local regulations treated them. Their dissatisfaction often focused on how Malaysia managed difference, not on difference itself.

The Siamese woman who asked to join this study therefore raised more than a problem of classification. Her request exposed the limits of treating an ethnic label as a complete account of belonging. "Chinese" remained politically consequential, but participants inhabited it through different localities, languages, schools and material circumstances. Their experiences converged not on one authentic form of Chineseness, but on a plural expectation of Malaysia. Unity did not require cultural sameness. It required different communities to be recognised as part of the country and able to participate on fair terms.

3 Chinese Pragmatism



When participants described an unfair system, their next question was often how to secure an education, income or future within it. One participant who did not have the opportunity to further his studies put the calculation plainly:

> *"For me, the more practical approach is to understand the system you're living in and figure out how to succeed within it. That's simply the reality we have to face."*

Across the interviews, this emerged as one of the most consistent underlying ways participants made sense of insecurity. Whether they were discussing education, work, migration or politics, many returned to the same practical logic. If the wider system could not be relied upon, one should build enough personal or family capacity to manage around it. Most participants focused instead on what they could control: working harder, paying for another route, relying on personal connections, or pursuing opportunities elsewhere. This chapter uses Chinese pragmatism to describe this tendency to seek a private solution when public institutions appear unreliable.

Self-reliance had several sources. Earlier generations built schools, businesses and associations when public provision was limited and political membership was insecure. Families passed on stories about what they had built and warnings about what they could not count on. Today, ethnic distinctions in access to some public programmes give those warnings continuing force. What makes this pattern significant here is the different kinds of evidence young people use to understand inequality, and the family and community narratives that turn adaptation into common sense.

Pragmatism has protected families and created opportunities. Its limit appears when every public problem receives a private answer, allowing the individual to escape while the institution remains unchanged. The central questions are what adaptation enables, who can afford it and what happens to those who cannot.

3.1 A History of Self-Provision

Chinese migration to Malaya was neither a single wave nor a uniform experience. Chinese communities existed before British rule, while larger movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries accompanied the expansion of mining, plantations and commerce.[10] [11] Migrants differed by dialect, locality, occupation and class. Some became merchants and community leaders; many others worked as labourers, artisans and small traders.

Under colonial rule, a newcomer's contacts could affect access to work, housing, credit and protection. Clan and dialect associations connected migrants to employers and accommodation.[12] Temples, mutual-aid bodies and chambers of commerce provided welfare and mediated disputes.[13] Local communities financed Chinese schools to provide education in their languages.[14] These organisations differed in purpose and reach, but they gave families practical resources beyond what an individual household could assemble alone.

Education and enterprise served a similar purpose. A qualification could improve a child's prospects; a business could provide work for relatives and income less dependent on a single employer.[15] Chun's discussion of "pariah capitalism" challenges the assumption that overseas Chinese entrepreneurship arose from an inherent cultural disposition. It locates commercial adaptation within conditions of political insecurity and reliance on minority networks.[16] The concept draws attention to how minorities with limited political security may concentrate on trade, adaptable businesses and private networks.[17] Economic activity becomes a way to manage political vulnerability. Yet this strategy did not benefit everyone equally. The historical Chinese community included poor labourers, rural families and workers with little capital. Community institutions could provide support, but they could also reproduce class, gender and dialect hierarchies.

Economic pragmatism also did not make the Chinese community apolitical. Chinese labour movements, education campaigns, parties and associations pursued collective claims. One historical interpretation links the later prominence of communal bargaining to the defeat and suppression of Chinese-dominated left-wing mobilisation during the colonial and early post-war periods.[18][19] Nonetheless, political approach was frequently mediated through collective institutions such as political parties, chambers of commerce, associations, and elite bargaining, rather than a direct relationship between individual citizens and the state.[20] Chinese organisations defended schools, negotiated citizenship and represented community interests within an emerging political system structured around ethnic categories. [21]

[10] Andaya, Barbara Watson, and Leonard Y. Andaya. *A History of Malaysia*, 1982.

[11] Lafaye de Micheaux, Elsa, "British Malayan Capitalism, 1874–1957: An Economic-Historical Perspective," *Economic History Malaysia*, https://www.ehm.my/publications/articles/british-malayan-capitalism-1874%E2%80%931957-an-economic-historical-perspective

[12] Ching-Hwang, Yen. "Early Chinese Clan Organizations in Singapore and Malaya, 1819–1911." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 1981): 62–91.

[13] 廖文辉. 马来西亚华人史(History of Malaysian Chinese), 2025. 策略资讯研究中心.

[14] 廖文辉. 马来西亚华人史.

[15] Koh, Eric H. Y., "Chinese-ness Legacy? A Study of Ethnic Chinese Entrepreneur-controlled Banks in Malaysia," *International Journal of China Studies* 9, no. 1 (April 2018): 53.

[16] Chun, Allen J. "Pariah Capitalism and the Overseas Chinese of Southeast Asia: Problems in the Definition of the Problem." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 1989): 233–56.

[17] Chun, Allen J. "Pariah Capitalism".

[18] Leong, Yee Fong. "Chinese Politics and Political Parties in Colonial Malaya, 1920-1940 : A Study of the Kuomintang and the Malayan Communist Party," 1977.

[19] Leong, Yee Fong, "The Impact of the Cold War on the Development of Trade Unionism in Malaya (1948–57)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (March 1992): 60–73

[20] Ucko, David H. "Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Malaya Case Study." Stabilisation Unit, February 2018.

[21] Chee, Ang Ming. *Institutions and Social Mobilization*. Flipside Digital Content Company Inc., 2016.

Independence made Chinese residents citizens, but ethnicity remained consequential for political representation and resource allocation. After May 1969, the New Economic Policy sought to eradicate poverty and restructure an economy in which ethnicity had become associated with different economic roles.[22]

[22] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*.

For many Chinese families, this reinforced a familiar lesson: government policies might change, but families invested in education and savings; organisations built schools and support networks; political groups made collective demands. For young Malaysian Chinese today, the political position is different. They are citizens and voters with claims on public institutions. However, some institutional conditions that sustain reliance on private and community resources remain. This difference between expanded political membership and continuing limits on access is central to the participants' accounts.



3.2 What Families Passed On

Participants did not receive a single account of Malaysian Chinese history. Some knew detailed family experiences. Others recalled a parent's warning, a story about the struggle for Chinese education or a general distrust of the government. Several knew little of the events behind these views.

History is often multilayered and multidimensional. Halbwachs's account of collective memory is useful here: families preserve and retell experiences that matter to them, rather than handing down a complete historical record.[23] The interviews show how the meaning attached to an event could travel further than its details, because family memory is selective by nature.

[23] Halbwachs, Maurice, and Lewis A. Coser. *On Collective Memory*, 1992. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226774497.001.0001.



When asked about their understanding of Malaysian Chinese history, this participant's father deliberately spoke to him about 13 May because his grandfather's livelihood had been affected:

> *"My dad actually reminded me about May 13. He told me about it, what happened, why it matters. Good thing we weren't born then. You'd be beaten to death."*

The family connection gave this account force. Another participant referred to the event less directly or had encountered different accounts in school and later education. She described reconsidering it at university:

> *"When I was in university, my perspective on May 13 changed. Was it the Chinese who killed the Malays, or the Malays who killed the Chinese? You slowly look into it and realise there were victims on both sides. You learn bit by bit."*

These interviews show different ways participants had come to understand the event. Show's discussion of 13 May as an event sustained in social memory amid contested historical accounts provides context for the significance participants gave to family testimony.[24]

[24] Show, Ying Xin. "Narrating the Racial Riots of 13 May 1969: Gender and Postmemory in Malaysian Literature." *South East Asia Research* 29, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 214–30.

Beyond interpreting history, family accounts focused more directly on education and opportunity. An interviewee who cared about the Matriculation quota system described how a disappointing admission outcome might be explained to the next generation:

> *"Edward will tell his kid about how he couldn't get his first choice because he is Chinese.*[25] *He will say this. I don't know if Edward will say this exactly, but he thinks it's because he is Chinese that he got STPM, couldn't get Matriculation, couldn't get his preferred course at public university. So he will tell his kid this story. His kid will hear this. Step by step, the feeling is passed down through the family."*

[25] Edward is a top STPM student rejected by 6 local universities through the UPU pathway. See San, Khoo Gek. "Top STPM Scorer Denied UM Accounting Course Despite Near-perfect Results." *The Star*, September 8, 2025. https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/09/08/top-stpm-scorer-denied-um-accounting-course-despite-near-perfect-results.

The speaker described a process, not the verified cause of either person's admission outcome. A student misses a desired route; the family interprets the result; the explanation becomes part of the advice offered to a child. Family accounts can carry a strong practical lesson even when those passing them on do not know every detail of the original decision.

Several participants had grown up hearing the phrase "second-class citizen." One connected it to an immediate course of action:

> *"At home, I've always heard the phrase, second-class citizen. Family members say it. It's just something you hear growing up. You can't change it. So instead of talking about why things are unfair, why not put that energy into working hard to go overseas?"*

The phrase expressed how the participant understood his position as a citizen. It names a deep frustration: citizens are formally equal, yet some public programmes distribute access by ethnicity. But it can also make inequality appear permanent and all-encompassing. Once "you can't change it" becomes part of the story, adaptation replaces any attempt to identify which policy to challenge.

Families were not the only sources of such advice, and their influence was neither fixed nor identical. Participants also encountered friends, political memory and social media (See Chapter 3.4.2 Points of Influence). The following section turns to another source of support that earlier generations built: Chinese associations. Their changing roles show what happens when young people seek community beyond the household.

3.3 What Community Institutions Provide Now

Historically, Chinese associations helped members find work, obtain assistance, educate children and represent shared interests.[26][27] They were a collective response to needs that households could not easily meet alone. Their authority came partly from what members could do through them.

The needs and available alternatives have changed. Public agencies, schools, employers, professional bodies and informal networks now perform certain functions once associated with clan or dialect organisations. Participants also formed relationships through work, online groups and shared interests. Instead of discussing the value of Chinese culture, the question becomes more practical: which needs are particular associations equipped to meet now?

A Penang young Hokkien association committee member joined after her father said too few women and young people were involved. She described her aim as:

> *"My goal is not to let this association die in my hands. That's it."*

Her commitment was genuine, but it also showed the difficulty of leading an organisation that recruits people to preserve its existence without offering a clear account of the work it wants the next generation to carry forward. Younger membership alone would not answer that question.

A similar problem appeared in a participant's description of a Malacca temple committee as "more like a banquet committee than a genuine inter-temple coordination body." Its annual dinner continued, but sustained collaboration and the transmission of religious knowledge were limited. The committee remained active enough to organise an event, yet the event no longer carried a larger programme of work.

Some participants found useful relationships in other organisations. Junior Chamber International (JCI), which is not a Chinese association, offered projects, leadership experience and professional contacts. One participant valued "the connections and the opportunities to meet people" and described turning to someone he knew through the organisation for help with a project. The example shows why he remained involved: a relationship formed through membership was useful beyond an event itself. Research on youth associations also links sustained participation with supportive relationships, personal development and influence over organisational decisions.[28]

An association can have a different purpose and still serve its members. In Perlis, a Buddhist association worked with five other NGOs to hold a Mid-Autumn Festival aimed mainly at non-Chinese audiences. One participant enthusiastically described a full house that included Malay and Indian guests:

> *"They came because they genuinely wanted to know more about us…We invited them."*

[26] Ching-Hwang, "Early Chinese Clan Organizations in Singapore and Malaya, 1819–1911."

[27] Tang, Ying Ying, Kartini Aboo Talib@Khalid, and Rachel Suet Kay Chan. "Sustaining 'Chineseness' via Chinese Clan Associations: Youth and the Reproduction of Social Capital." *Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS)* 11, no. 1 (February 28, 2026): 155–73.

[28] Tang, Talib@Khalid, and Chan, "Sustaining 'Chineseness' via Chinese Clan Associations: Youth and the Reproduction of Social Capital."

The organisers used a familiar cultural occasion and their relationships with local groups to bring people together. The association had a cultural purpose and found a way to share it with its neighbours.

A Terengganu participant proposed that associations take greater responsibility for Chinese customs and cultural knowledge if children attended a single-stream school. This would require sustained teaching, funding and volunteers, which associations have in unequal measure. His proposal is useful because it asks what these organisations could provide beyond maintaining their existing activities.

Earlier communities pooled resources to build schools and associations when public provision did not meet their needs. Young people now have other places to form relationships and find support, so associations must offer a purpose that matters to them today. The examples from Perlis and Terengganu suggest different possibilities; they do not point to one role for every association.

Interviewees differed on what Chinese associations should do and which interests they should represent. Education, however, remained a recurring concern across their accounts. Earlier communities built and sustained Chinese schools; today, participants also questioned how young people gain access to public education. The next section examines the rules they encountered and the choices they made around them.



3.4 Three Ways Participants Understood Inequality

Participants understood structural inequality through barriers they encountered, treatment they anticipated, and experiences others shared. These accounts differ in evidential weight: a rejection is not the same as a decision not to apply or a story heard from a friend. Yet each could shape a young person's choices, particularly where visible ethnic rules made unequal treatment seem plausible.

I. Inequality personally experienced

Participants who took the STPM route could speak directly about its demands. One said:

> *"I went through STPM. The pressure of STPM is real. You work very hard, and still the placement system is not equal. That is something I lived... [T]he quota system in university placement has always felt like the ceiling is lower for Chinese students regardless of how hard they study."*

Two parts of this account need to be distinguished. The participant personally experienced the demands of STPM and the uncertainty of applying for a preferred university course. The conclusion that the racial "ceiling is lower" was his interpretation of how the wider admission system worked.

Matriculation Quota and UPU Merit Ranking

Interviewees often referred to a "UPU quota," but the 90% Bumiputera quota applies to **entry into matriculation**, not to UPU's university selection formula. UPU ranks STPM and matriculation and other equivalent graduates, using 90% academic and 10% co-curricular marks. Candidates are ranked according to merit, programme requirements, available places and their order of preference.[29]

The UPU pathway to enrol on public institutions has no quota system. However, the misalignment in difficulty levels between these two pathways is concerning. STPM generally takes one and a half years; the main matriculation programme takes one. The two use different assessments, but UPU accepts their grade points at face value. Field discussions also raised a noticeable difference in co-curricular scoring: matriculation colleges are organised at a state level; hence competing against another college receives at least state-level recognition, while an STPM student may have to progress through school, zone, district, state and national rounds to reach that level.[30]

UPU accepts applicants' academic results at face value despite differences in programme duration, curriculum and assessment. Consequently, 16% of matriculation students achieved a CGPA of 4.0 while 3.09% of STPM students did the same.[31] For popular courses like Medicine, Pharmacy and Dentistry in IPTA, matriculation students made up more than 97% and STPM students less than 3% in 2023.[32]

For 2026/27, applicants who obtained at least 10As in SPM 2025 and applied to matriculation were guaranteed places regardless of ethnicity. The ministry stated that the 90% Bumiputera quota remained. This gives top scorers another route in, while qualified applicants below that threshold remain subject to the existing allocation.

One STPM graduate interviewee accepted the purpose of supporting historically disadvantaged Bumiputera communities but questioned whether the present allocation was sufficiently tied to need:

> *"The Bumiputera community, which is the majority but has historically had fewer economic advantages in certain sectors, does need some support. I accept that in principle. But the implementation has to be calibrated and honest. Right now, the system isn't purely about need. It's also about political maintenance."*

The interviewee who did not continue to university explained:

> *"At that time, the biggest reason was financial. My family wasn't well off. But I don't think being poor should become an excuse not to study. Even if you're poor, it doesn't mean you shouldn't want an education. Those are two separate things."*

When asked whether equal access to matriculation and public universities would have changed his decision, he replied:

> *"Definitely. If I had been given equal opportunities, I would have wanted to continue studying. Without question."*

[29] Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, *Pekeliling Kemasukan ke Program Pengajian Ijazah Sarjana Muda di Universiti Awam (UA) bagi Program Pengajian Lepasan STPM/Setaraf (Kategori STPM, Matrikulasi/ Asasi dan STAM), Sesi Akademik 2026/2027* (2026)

[30] Data and insights are derived from closed-door sessions with relevant government ministries and agencies on the UPU pathway and Matriculation quota system in 2023 & 2024.

[31] Lee, Benjamin, Rahimy Rahim, and Allison Lai. "Fix Disparity Between STPM, Matriculation Students, Says Bayan Baru MP." *The Star*, August 14, 2025. https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/08/14/fix-disparity-between-stpm-matriculation-students-says-bayan-baru-mp.

[32] Lee, Rahim, and Lai. "Fix Disparity Between STPM, Matriculation Students, Says Bayan Baru MP."

His financial constraint was clearly lived. The racial explanation was less certain because it was raised through a hypothetical question about what might have happened under a different system. His account instead shows how class and ethnicity can overlap. A wealthier non-Bumiputera family may be able to pay for private education or local Chinese college when public options appear limited. But a poorer family cannot adapt as easily.

III. Inequality anticipated

Other participants chose a route before receiving a public admissions decision. One UTAR student followed his brother into a private university after hearing family concerns and stories about applicants who missed their preferred courses:

> *"I didn't even apply to UPU. Just came straight. My sister also joined after me."*

Anticipated inequality shaped choices before an institution made a decision. Visible ethnic rules, family experience and stories from older students gave participants reasons to expect a difficult route. One student went straight to a private university without applying through UPU. His family chose a route they knew, avoiding the time and uncertainty of an application. Yet, it also meant that his belief about public university access could never be tested against an actual application.

The problem emerges when a probable difficulty becomes an assumed impossibility. A student may move from "non-Bumiputera access is more restricted in parts of the system" to "there is no point applying because Chinese students will not be accepted." The first statement identifies a structural concern, while the second closes off an option before the institution decides.

This is where structural inequality and *self-cornering* can reinforce each other. The system creates enough unequal treatment to make the fear credible. The community then turns that fear into general advice: do not waste time, choose a private institution, or look overseas. When young people follow that advice, fewer of them test the public route. Their withdrawal can then be read as further proof that the route was never available to them, which is reflected by a participant who holds a state NGO leadership position:

> *"Many Chinese don't even know what government policies and grants are available to them… due to information and social circle limitations. It's actually the Malay counterparts who will come and tell us."*

His account suggests that access is shaped not only by formal eligibility, but also by social networks. If someone involved in state-level civil society depends on Malay counterparts for information about government support, a young person without those connections may not know that such opportunities exist at all. They may interpret their lack of access as evidence that the programmes are unavailable to Chinese Malaysians, even when they are formally eligible to apply.

The result is a vicious cycle: past inequalities make distrust reasonable; distrust discourages engagement; and disengagement reduces access to information and institutional relationships. The resulting absence of Chinese applicants may then be taken as further proof that public programmes were never meant for them.



3.5 When the Workaround Becomes the Answer

Participants made education and career decisions within deadlines they could not control. When a preferred public route seemed uncertain, another university or country offered a way to keep moving. These choices deserve to be understood on their own terms: they could help someone study the course they wanted, earn more or support a family.

A university student interviewee described a friend who wanted to study medicine but received an offer for biotechnology. The friend declined it and went to China. Reflecting on the uncertainty surrounding medical admissions, he asked:

> *"If my friend can't get UM Medic, can't get UPM Medic, can't get USM Medic, then why get hurt so many times by this system? Why don't you just go? Don't need to get hurt. Just go."*

His account shows why an overseas offer could become more attractive than waiting or applying again. "Don't need to get hurt" refers to the time and emotional cost of pursuing an uncertain outcome. For the student, going to China answered an immediate question: how to continue towards medicine.

It left a separate question for the public universities: whether applicants from different pre-university routes could understand their prospects and trust how places were allocated. The student did not have to settle that question before deciding about his life. His departure did not settle it either. This is where a workaround can secure an opportunity for someone without explaining or changing the process they chose to leave.

This is important because self-reliance has often produced more than individual success. Earlier generations pooled resources to establish schools and associations. Those institutions answered needs across households. Participants today also worked in political parties, civil society and community organisations. Their choices show that earning a living, helping family and taking part in public life can happen together.

One participant described adaptation with both pride and concern:

> *"Even within that unfair system, Chinese Malaysians have found ways to thrive. … That doesn't mean the system is okay. It isn't. But it does mean we haven't been destroyed by it. We've adapted. And I think that's both a tribute to the community and a coping mechanism that sometimes lets the injustice be overlooked for too long."*

Her concern is about how success is *interpreted*. A family's ability to pay for another route may be taken as evidence that the existing one causes little harm. Yet the workaround tells us what that family managed to do; it does not tell us whether the public route treated applicants fairly. The two questions require different evidence.

This is the more precise meaning of **self-cornering** in these interviews. It describes moments when a participant can explain how to navigate a difficulty more readily than how the institution might be made accountable for it. It is an observation about the options visible in those accounts, rather than a claim that Malaysian Chinese youths have stopped demanding change.

Pragmatism remains useful, but the deeper concern is what role young people see for themselves in decisions that shape their lives. Participants could describe how to navigate an admissions rule, pay for another route or seek opportunities elsewhere. Some were less certain how they could question the rule itself or influence those responsible for it. That distance from decision-making is politically consequential, even when people continue to vote and follow public affairs.

4 Ethnic Relations



Chinese youth generally describe everyday ethnic relations as peaceful and relatively comfortable. Yet the interviews also show that getting along with other communities does not necessarily mean entering one another's social worlds. Three modes of inter-ethnic engagement emerge from the interviews: **transactional engagement**, where interaction takes place through shared institutions, workplaces and everyday activities; **situational rapport**, where familiarity and comfort develop within particular social settings; and **deep bridging**, where relationships extend beyond immediate settings into sustained cultural exchange and participation in each other's social worlds. These are not necessarily stages of progression. Contact may remain transactional, develop into rapport in particular settings, or deepen into sustained relationships depending on social networks and opportunities for interaction.

There is also relatively little evidence of post-communal civic bonding, where familiarity develops into engagement with shared public concerns across communal boundaries. This suggests that Chinese youth can experience peaceful, even positive, ethnic relations while remaining socially separate. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether integration exists, but how far it extends: from sharing spaces to developing rapport to entering one another's social worlds and, potentially, developing a shared civic space.

4.1 The Odyssey of "Chinese-self"

The interviews suggest that Chinese youth do not describe their community through one fixed set of characteristics. Their accounts combine positive and critical views. Chinese people are often seen as hardworking, efficient, practical, business-minded and self-reliant, but also as individualistic, selfish, or less willing to support one another. These tensions show that Chinese identity is understood not simply through achievement, but also through awareness of perceived weaknesses within the community.

A recurring image is that Chinese students and workers place strong importance on efficiency and achievement. As one educator explained:

> *"Chinese students require high efficiency and quality; my friends and I would get incredibly anxious if a deadline approached and the work wasn't finalised. We catch details tightly to meet a certain benchmark."*

Yet these qualities are not always viewed positively. The emphasis on individual achievement can also be understood as a lack of collective solidarity. One business owner described this bluntly: "We Chinese just look after ourselves only" and are "more selfish." The same qualities can therefore be valued as independence and responsibility while criticised as individualism.

This self-image becomes clearer when Chinese youth compare themselves with other ethnic groups. In this sense, "Chinese-ness" is relational: respondents understand their own community partly by noticing how Chinese behaviour differs from that of Malays and Indians. One respondent, for example, described Chinese clients as "very business-minded and reasonable" but inclined to bargain, while Malays were "more relationship-driven." Here, "business-minded" becomes meaningful through comparison with a different way of conducting social and economic relationships. The self and the other are understood together.

Such comparisons can also turn Chinese values into standards for judging other groups. Hard work, efficiency, practicality and self-reliance may become measures against which other communities are evaluated. One respondent from a Chinese-educated background recognised this tendency:

> *"You subconsciously use other people's cultures as a benchmark lower than your own."*

This observation points to a tension within Chinese pragmatism. Confidence in one's own educational values, work ethic or cultural practices can provide a strong sense of identity, but it can also make differences appear as deficiencies. Importantly, the respondent's reflection turns the analysis back towards the Chinese community itself: stereotyping is not simply something done by others, but something that Chinese people may also reproduce.

Greater exposure can, however, disrupt this process. One respondent reflected on the common stereotype of Malays as conservative or "backward." Through conversations with Malay classmates in Form 6, he found their views to be more diverse than expected:

> *"Most of the time we use stereotypes to judge people, and they use stereotypes to judge us."*

The significance of this encounter lies not only in correcting a stereotype about Malays, but in recognising the process of stereotyping itself. A similar process appears in a respondent's experience at IPG. Having previously encountered stereotypes about Malays through social media, closer interaction with Malay classmates challenged these assumptions:

> *"When you actually do, you realise the stereotypes you might have had from social media are not accurate. My Malay classmates are hardworking. They do their assignments seriously. In some cases they do them earlier than the Chinese students."*

This encounter directly unsettles one of the strongest elements of the Chinese self-image: hard work. Meeting Malay students who display the same quality makes it harder to treat hard work as something distinctive to the Chinese community. Interaction therefore changes not only perceptions of the other, but also the meaning of the self.

The "Odyssey of Chinese-self" is therefore better understood as a process of self-description, comparison and reconsideration. Chinese youth begin with ideas of their community as hardworking, practical and self-reliant, while also recognising tendencies towards individualism. These characteristics then become reference points through which they understand and sometimes judge other ethnic groups. Yet greater exposure can challenge those judgements and return attention to the assumptions underlying Chinese self-understanding.

4.2 Perceptions of Malay and Indian Communities

The extent and nature of direct interaction shapes Chinese youth's perceptions of other ethnic communities. Malays occupy a much more prominent place in respondents' accounts, reflecting their majority status and more frequent contact with Chinese youth. Indians, despite regular contact in schools and workplaces, are often less prominent in respondents' social and political imagination. This imbalance is itself significant as it shows that ethnic relations are often understood through a Malay–Chinese lens.

I. Malay: Familiarity without full understanding

At the interpersonal level, interviewees generally described Malays as approachable, helpful and willing to build relationships. Experiences in workplaces, universities and local communities often challenged distant assumptions about ethnic differences. One respondent contrasted Malay warmth and communal support with what he saw as more competitive or individualistic Chinese social circles:

> *"When I struggled to retrieve my spare tyre from the chassis under the hot sun, they [Malay] pulled over, and helped me change it without expecting anything in return...If a Chinese driver passes by a broken-down car, their first thought is usually to drive away to avoid trouble."*

Direct exposure also challenged assumptions about Malay socioeconomic behaviour, as respondents encountered a growing Malay middle class, young professionals and entrepreneurs. Yet these positive perceptions do not necessarily amount to deeper cultural familiarity. Malays were sometimes praised for qualities perceived as unlike Chinese norms—warmth, generosity, communalism and a less calculative approach to everyday life. In this sense, positive perceptions could still be relational: Malay difference was appreciated partly because it contrasted with Chinese self-understandings.

This distinction is also visible in the tendency to separate ordinary Malays from political or institutional conflict. Some respondents expressed concerns about Malay political dominance or religious conservatism while simultaneously emphasising that Malays they personally knew were friendly and reasonable. As one respondent from Kedah explained:

> *"Chinese and Malay have no real problems with each other. The tensions you see are mostly stirred up by politicians or on social media."*

Thus, everyday goodwill can coexist with perceptions of structural difference. Much of this interaction may therefore be understood as situational rapport: respondents can develop genuine comfort with individual Malays in particular settings without necessarily extending those relationships into wider social worlds.

II. Indian: The "Transparent Minority"

Perceptions of Indians are markedly thinner. Although many respondents had Indian classmates, colleagues or acquaintances, Indians were rarely discussed spontaneously and often required prompting. Where contact was limited, perceptions could rely on inherited stereotypes or broad assumptions about language and socioeconomic status. In contrast, sustained interaction could weaken these assumptions, as one respondent from an SMK background noted:

> *"I had a friend in secondary school, she was with an Indian, like a couple… because of her, we became better with the Indian group."*

When interviewees spoke more expressively about Indians, their accounts sometimes took the form of "ghost stories": negative experiences and cautionary tales circulated as urban folklore, often without clear verification.

The more significant finding is social transparency. Indians are physically present in many of the same spaces as Chinese youth, yet occupy a much smaller place in their broader social and political imagination. Interviewees frequently understand Malaysian ethnic relations through a Malay–Chinese binary, with Indians treated as a peripheral minority. Chinese youth therefore rarely see an urgent need to understand, amplify or advocate for Indian grievances actively. In this dynamic, Indians function as a muted group. The Chinese community is not necessarily an active oppressor, but its larger numbers, concerns and media presence can be loud enough to drown out Indian voices without consciously intending to do so.

The distance between communities is therefore produced not only by negative perceptions, but also by unequal attention. A community may be regarded positively yet remain socially and politically peripheral because it is rarely incorporated into the frameworks through which young people understand Malaysia's ethnic landscape.

4.3 Why the Bubble Persists

The persistence of the ethnic "bubble" cannot be explained simply by hostility. Across the interviews, Chinese youth generally expressed comfort with peaceful coexistence and often held positive views of other communities. Yet this goodwill rarely translated into sustained cross-ethnic relationships. The bubble is reproduced through familiar networks, social boundaries, inherited perceptions and the tendency to locate ethnic conflict outside everyday life.

I. The Bubble is Convenient

For many respondents, remaining within one's own community is not an active rejection of other ethnic groups, but the path of least resistance. Language, schooling, friendship networks and familiar social spaces make interaction with one's own community easier. Chinese youth may share classrooms, workplaces, and public spaces with Malays and Indians, but once the immediate context disappears, they often have little incentive to maintain these relationships.

One respondent from the west coast described the difference between school and adult life:

> *"All my classmates in that class were very good…Malays and Indians were all very friendly. But once we enter society, if you ask me to go back and find my Malay classmates and Indian classmates, no, it's a complete break."*

Language reinforces this tendency. Mandarin provides an effortless social environment among Chinese peers, while limited Malay proficiency can make deeper conversations with Malay speakers more difficult. Digital spaces can reproduce similar boundaries, as one politically aware respondent in Johor observed:

> *"Chinese readers will stick to Chinese comments, and Malays will stick to Malay spaces. We rarely read what the Malay community is actually writing."*

The result is an "uncanny bubble": not a space of active hostility, but one in which cordial, limited interaction can become sufficient. Much of this interaction therefore remains transactional, ending when the immediate setting ends.

II. Respect as Boundary

Respect can also maintain boundaries rather than cross them. Respondents described learning which topics, behaviours and cultural practices might cause discomfort in mixed settings, particularly around religious sensitivities. Such awareness helps prevent friction, but it can also establish an implicit rule: do not offend the other community, but do not necessarily enter deeply into its world either.

This can be reduced to a simple logic: "Don't insult them; don't bother them; they don't bother us." Such an arrangement is peaceful, but integration in the fuller sense remains limited. Maintaining cordial relations without developing deeper familiarity can make social separation feel unproblematic. Harmony therefore does not automatically reduce social distance; it can also allow that distance to persist comfortably.

III. Inherited Narratives and Stereotypes

The bubble is further reinforced by inherited narratives about each community. Several respondents described how older generations pass down cautionary stereotypes about Malays and Indians, while some young Chinese Malaysians also inherit a broader sense of collective grievance—that Chinese people are politically constrained, that their community must defend its interests, or that Chinese culture represents a particular form of achievement.

One respondent from Johor who grew up in the Chinese education system reflected on this:

> *"I am a student who grew up under the Chinese education system... and when I was growing up within that system, I really felt like the Chinese were suppressed... And the school community would always remind you: 'Look how difficult it's been for our schools to survive. Look how hard our community has fought.'"*

The same respondent identified a double standard in how cultural exchange can be viewed:

> *"But then why is it that today, when a Chinese person wants to learn Malay, or wants to understand their culture, they think it's self-deprecating? Isn't that a double standard?"*

This suggests that a community can understand itself as marginalised while simultaneously evaluating other cultures against its own perceived standards. Such inherited narratives can persist even among young people who consciously reject overt prejudice. As one respondent who had mixed extensively with other ethnic groups in SMK recalled of older generations:

> *"Like, maybe 'Indians will catch you'... I think we shouldn't put these labels on them, because everyone is equal, right?... Sometimes when I see older generations say such things, I feel it's very impolite to these people of different races."*

IV. Good People, Bad Politics

Finally, many respondents locate ethnic conflict outside ordinary social relationships. Politicians, media outlets, elections and online discourse are frequently identified as sources that turn otherwise peaceful communities against one another. One respondent in Kedah explained:

> *"I genuinely believe that without racial incitement from outside… When I step away from the screen and look at my actual daily life, that tension doesn't exist."*

This separation between "good people" and "bad politics" helps respondents preserve positive relationships with individual Malays while treating ethnic conflict as external to their own social lives. Yet it also has an unintended consequence. The absence of interpersonal hostility can become evidence that ethnic relations are already healthy, even when communities continue to live largely within separate social worlds.

The bubble is therefore sustained less by open hostility than by the convenience of familiar networks, respectful boundary-keeping, inherited narratives and the externalisation of ethnic conflict. The result is peaceful coexistence, but often without the deeper familiarity required for deep bridging.



V. From Passive Harmony to Active Interaction

Chinese youth generally do not seek ethnic homogenisation. Rather, they want to preserve their own cultural identities while having more organic opportunities to encounter other communities. Several respondents described this as the need for greater "cultural collisions"—not forced integration, but opportunities to experience how other communities live, communicate, celebrate and understand the world.

These encounters need not begin with formal programmes. Shared interests can provide more natural entry points. Concerts and other popular cultural events, for example, can bring young Malaysians of different backgrounds into the same spaces without requiring them to engage through ethnic or political identities. Respondents also expressed interest in learning about other communities' customs, festivals, food and cultural sensitivities through everyday interaction rather than abstract education.

Shared physical spaces were similarly important. Some respondents recalled the traditional kopitiam as a space where people of different backgrounds could eat together and interact casually. Others pointed to Sabah and Sarawak as examples of communities maintaining distinct identities while sharing everyday social spaces. These examples suggest that integration does not require cultural sameness; it requires greater overlap between social worlds.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply an absence of goodwill, but the gap between goodwill and sustained interaction. Much everyday contact remains transactional, while some encounters develop into situational rapport. Less common is movement toward deep bridging, where relationships extend beyond the immediate setting and involve sustained cultural exchange. Even less evidence exists for post-communal civic bonding across shared public concerns.

Moving beyond the "uncanny bubble" therefore does not require Chinese youth to abandon their communal identities. It requires more opportunities for transactional contact to develop into rapport, and for rapport, where circumstances allow, to become deeper relationships across communal boundaries. In this sense, integration is not the disappearance of difference, but the gradual expansion of the social worlds that different communities share.

5 Politics


BERSIH4
Bersihkan Pilihanraya
Kerajaan Bersih
Hak Membantah
Kukuhkan Demokrasi Parlimen
Selamatkan Ekonomi Malaysia

Across the interviews, participants often had plenty to say about politics, but the level of detail varied. National politics tended to be associated with elections, scandals, political arguments and disputes over race and religion. On education, wages, housing and local services, however, participants were often more specific about the problems they faced and what should change. This raised a more basic question: how well did they understand the institutions and decision-making processes behind these issues?

Civic education became an important part of that question. Most of the interviewees could not clearly recall what they had learnt from it. Much of their political understanding instead came from family, social media, commentators, political parties, representatives and major events. Looking across these accounts revealed how certain sources did more than pass on information: they gave participants a way to make sense of politics. The First-to-Door model captures this process, describing how a trusted source can shape the interpretation of later information. The first door is not necessarily the earliest source encountered, but the one that first makes politics meaningful or understandable.

The analysis also distinguishes political knowledge from political proximity. Understanding how institutions work is different from joining a party, campaigning or having direct contact with a representative. Neither necessarily determines whether someone believes their participation can make a difference. These distinctions provide the basis for examining how participants understand politics, where their views come from, and how they engage with political actors and institutions.

5.1 Civic Education

Participants were not insulated from politics. Elections, scandals, education policies, changes of government and cost-of-living pressures reached them through family, news and social media. Yet political exposure did not necessarily equip them to interpret what they saw. Participants could know that something had happened, or feel strongly about it, without knowing which institution was responsible, what powers an elected representative actually held, or what citizens could realistically do next.

This points to a deeper weakness in civic education. *Pendidikan Sivik dan Kewarganegaraan* was once taught in primary and secondary schools, yet none of the 116 participants could clearly recall what they had learned or carried into adulthood. Some remembered civic classes being replaced by subjects seen as more important. As one participant described what was missing:

> *"[We should improve] civic and political education. We should be learning about how the democratic system works from a young age. Not just memorising that Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy or that Parliament has two houses. But really understanding what voting means, what representation means, why it matters."*





Since 2019, civic education has been integrated into subjects such as History, Bahasa Melayu, English, Pendidikan Islam and Pendidikan Moral.[33] Its long-term effectiveness remains unclear, but participants aged 18 to 35 consistently felt that their civic education had been inadequate.

This report therefore distinguishes two capacities.

The first is **institutional literacy**[34]: knowing where authority sits, how institutions relate to one another, what elected representatives can and cannot deliver, and where citizens can act when something goes wrong.

The second is **political efficacy**[35]: whether citizens feel capable of understanding political matters, forming their own judgement and participating with confidence. Internal efficacy concerns this confidence in one's own political ability while external efficacy concerns whether institutions and political actors are perceived as willing to listen and respond.

The distinction matters because the two do not necessarily move together. Some participants who had studied STPM, particularly *Pengajian Am*, appeared more confident discussing institutions and political issues, while simultaneously being highly critical of those institutions. Greater understanding did not automatically create greater trust; in some cases, it gave participants stronger grounds on which to question the system.

This also brings us back to the pragmatism discussed earlier. Where institutions are difficult to understand or appear unresponsive, private adaptation becomes more dependable than public action. The outcome is therefore not a generation without political information, but one with uneven access to the knowledge and confidence needed to interpret politics independently.

When that civic foundation is weak, political education moves elsewhere.

[33] *Pelaksanaan Pendidikan Sivik oleh Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia*. (n.d.). https://www.moe.gov.my/pelaksanaan-pendidikan-sivik-oleh-kementerian-pendidikan-malaysia

[34] This understanding of institutional literacy draws from Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter concept of political knowledge, which includes an understanding of government institutions and processes, public issues and positions of political actors, that allows citizens to participate more effectively. See Michael X. Delli Carpini, & Keeter, S. (1993). Measuring Political Knowledge: Putting First Things First. *American Journal of Political Science, 37*(4), 1179–1206.

[35] Campbell, A., Gurin, G., & Miller, W. E. (1954). *The voter decides*. Row, Peterson.

5.2 What is Politics to Chinese Youth

Politics was rarely described in terms of institutions or political theory. Instead, respondents talked about politicians, Parliament, elections, political parties, local representatives, and issues that directly affect their lives. Their understanding of politics therefore appears divided between two different worlds. Capital-P "Politics" is largely associated with partisan conflict, racial and religious confrontation, and political drama. Small-p "politics", by contrast, is understood through tangible, material impact, whether policies and decisions directly affect their livelihood, financial security, and immediate community. Beyond these two levels is a partisan landscape where DAP remains highly visible, even as respondents often express limited or conditional attachment to political parties themselves.

I. Capital-P "Politics"

At the national level, politics is understood mainly through the mainstream political narratives surrounding national leaders, Parliament, parties, race and religion, elections, and major controversies. Respondents were generally aware that these debates existed, but their impressions were often broad and fragmented. Compared with the details they could provide about issues closer to their own lives, they more often described national politics through arguments, scandals, controversial statements, and political drama.

Parliament itself may have contributed to this impression. One respondent who regularly watched parliamentary livestreams compared parliamentary debates to university students having petty arguments :

> *"Watching the politicians bicker, refute each other's policies, and display absurdity is entertaining... It reads exactly like university students having petty arguments."*

Another respondent drew a similarly negative distinction between the national and local levels. While describing his local representative positively, he felt that national politics was much more chaotic:

> *"Nationally I think everyone is scattered like a box of sand. No cohesion... Locally, I think they do a good job... But when you look at the macro national level... the politicians at the top are always just arguing."*

The impression of Capital-P Politics is therefore not necessarily that respondents know nothing about it. They recognise the major controversies and narratives circulating them, but these often remain vague and disconnected from their own experience. National politics appears as a distant arena filled with confrontation, accusations, racial and religious

controversies, and politicians arguing over the "big picture". Respondents can therefore form strong impressions of national politics without necessarily having equally detailed views about the policies or institutions behind these debates.

II. Small-p "politics"

In contrast, respondents became much more specific when politics moved closer to their everyday lives. Small-p politics refers to immediate issues such as housing costs, education opportunities, local development, land disputes, public facilities, restrictions affecting everyday behaviour, or whether something in their neighbourhood gets fixed. These issues may appear small compared with national debates, but they are often the level at which respondents experience politics most directly.

One interviewee explained this distinction particularly clearly. National indicators such as GDP, unemployment, or economic growth may be understood as important, but they often feel too far removed from everyday experience:

> *"National economic growth…that is important. But it becomes too monotonous. They are more interested in asking, what benefits can I get? What benefits did I get today?"*

He used housing as an example: announcing that the national economy had grown might mean very little if a person's salary remained unchanged, whereas a direct housing discount would immediately attract attention.

This pattern appears throughout the interviews. A respondent working in Singapore moved quickly from discussing government performance to the price of buying a house in Johor and his inability to access government housing. Others spoke in considerably greater detail about durian farmers facing land and market problems, restrictions affecting public behaviour, or access to education. Once politics entered their own workplace, neighbourhood, household, or plans, respondents usually had much clearer opinions about what was wrong and what they wanted changed.

Respondents therefore articulated small-p politics in considerably greater detail than Capital-P Politics. This does not necessarily mean Chinese youth are uninterested in national affairs. Rather, political issues become easier to understand, evaluate, and respond to when their consequences are visible. Capital-P Politics provides the background noise of national debate; small-p politics is where politics becomes personal.

III. DAP Dominating the Political Narrative Sphere

Respondents often approach parties through issues that are already meaningful to them. When these concerns are translated back into the national political landscape, DAP occupies a particularly visible position. Its dominance appears less through unconditional partisan loyalty than through the political narratives respondents themselves frequently use when discussing equality, religion, minority rights, and governance.

Several respondents who did not claim strong party identification nevertheless expressed similar preferences for non-discrimination and secular governance, alongside concerns about greater religious intervention in public life. One respondent who felt politically unrepresented reduced his expectations of government to two basic conditions: no corruption and "don't Islamize". He framed the issue primarily around governmental neutrality, arguing that the state should not lean too heavily towards religious governance.

Another respondent from Kelantan described his ideal Malaysia explicitly as a "secular, inclusive nation", where religion should not dictate civil laws or institutional policies. For him, the issue became political when religious rules produced different treatment between Muslims and non-Muslims. Equality and freedom from discrimination therefore mattered more than the policy's religious identity.

These concerns strongly overlap with themes that DAP formally places within its political objectives, including equal and equitable rights, a secular constitutional framework, freedom of religion, non-discrimination, and multiracial national integration.[36] This does not mean respondents simply reproduce DAP positions, nor does it establish that the party caused them to hold these views. Many of these attitudes can develop independently from minority experience or everyday encounters with public institutions. The more important point is that DAP already occupies a political space that closely resembles the concerns respondents themselves repeatedly raise.

[36] Democratic Action Party, "Our Objectives," DAP Malaysia, accessed September 28, 2026, https://dapmalaysia.org/en/about-us/vision-mission/our-objectives/.

This asymmetry becomes clearer when respondents discuss other Chinese-majority parties. One participant could criticise DAP very specifically, including questioning the competence of an individual officeholder, yet described Gerakan and MCA much more simply:

> *"Gerakan, I don't even see them in the news. MCA, same."*

DAP is therefore visible enough to attract both support and criticism. MCA and Gerakan still have politically committed supporters, but among less partisan respondents they appear much less present as everyday political reference points. DAP's dominance in this sense is better understood as narrative visibility rather than unquestioned party loyalty.

Evidently, DAP's narrative visibility should not be confused with strong party attachment. Several respondents said that no party fully represented them, while others preferred to judge individual candidates rather than party labels. One respondent summarised this as "choose the person, not the party." Yet openness to alternatives also faces practical limits. When discussing MUDA, another respondent questioned the value of supporting a party that was unlikely to win: "I vote for you, but you can't win." This illustrates how dissatisfaction with established parties does not necessarily translate into support for newer alternatives. Respondents may remain critical, flexible, and willing to cross party lines while still operating within a political landscape dominated by familiar parties.

5.3 Points of Influence

Formal civic education did not provide a consistent political foundation. Across the interviews, family, media environments, online commentators, major political events, political parties, and representatives repeatedly shaped political understanding. These influences did more than transmit information. They supplied interpretations of what was happening, why it mattered and who was responsible.

This study describes this through a **First-to-Door model**. The model does not assume that young people are blank slates or permanently determined by the first political message they encounter. Instead, where institutional knowledge is weak or uneven, the first trusted source that makes politics coherent and personally relevant gains greater influence over how people understand later information.

The "first" door is therefore not necessarily the earliest in chronological terms. It is the first source that becomes credible, familiar, or useful enough to provide a framework for interpretation.

I. Family

Family could become the first door even when politics was rarely discussed. One young Undi-18 cohort participant recalled her first election:

> *"I voted for the first time and made a mistake. I was going to vote for DAP, and I saw the wrong logo and voted wrong. I was so embarrassed. I didn't fully understand what I was doing. My family does not talk about politics at all."*

The significance is not simply the mistake. Voting had become an expected act of citizenship before she had developed a clear understanding of what she was doing.

Other participants grew up in highly political households. Parents transmitted experiences of education policy, ethnic insecurity, political exclusion and distrust towards government. These narratives often overlap with the pragmatism discussed earlier: participate when necessary, but protect the family's livelihood and do not assume that public institutions will provide the solution.

Family influence therefore worked through both speech and silence. Political families supplied interpretations early; politically quiet families might shape how "dirty" they see politics, and sometimes leave more space for later actors to become the first convincing political guide.

Neither pathway was permanent. University, work, friendships and later political experiences could reinforce or revise what participants inherited.

II. Social media

Social media became one of the main environments through which participants encountered politics. Yet they did not all enter the same information environment, because most were aware that language shaped which political conversations reached them.

One participant deliberately followed *China Press, Oriental Daily, Berita Harian* and *Malaysiakini* because:

> *"If I only consumed Chinese-language media, I would miss entire waves of discourse happening in the Malay public sphere."*

Different language markets did not simply emphasise different stories; they attached different meanings to the same event. One participant described a Chinese mother who temporarily sent her child to PASTI. Chinese-language discussion framed the decision as exposing the child to an extreme religious environment, while Malay-language responses interpreted it as openness towards another community. The event was identical, but the social meaning surrounding it was not.

This does not mean Chinese-language media automatically produces communal thinking, nor that multilingual consumption automatically produces stronger political understanding. Some multilingual participants still consumed politics as passing headlines. Others mainly followed Chinese sources but read deeply and compared competing arguments.

One participant described the first pattern:

> *"On Facebook, if a news headline pops up in Chinese, I'll click and read the headline, but I don't read the contents and comments deeply."*

She was familiar with major political figures, but familiarity did not necessarily translate into an understanding of how decisions were made or which institution was responsible. Language therefore shaped what entered the political field of vision, while political knowledge affected how far participants could interrogate what they encountered.

III. Comment sections

Comment sections could reinforce an ethnic interpretation. Many were disheartened reading discriminatory or provoking comment sections, be it inter- or within the ethnic community. During the KK Mart controversy, one media-trained interviewee initially encountered strong Chinese anger online but then checked Malay responses:

> *"It wasn't one-sided. Some criticised KK Mart, but others said, 'Just choose not to go.'"*

Other participants described Facebook feeds filled with Chinese users attacking Malays while TikTok showed Malays attacking Chinese. When the loudest comments were treated as representative, both communities appeared internally united and hostile. However, that certainty weakened when they deliberately explored deeper.

IV. Political influencers and channels

Political commentators became influential because they did something that headlines often could not: they explained events. Several participants deliberately compared commentators with different positions. One Perlis interviewee, who had previously supported DAP and attended Bersih rallies, compared BBK Network and Lawyer Ang[37]:

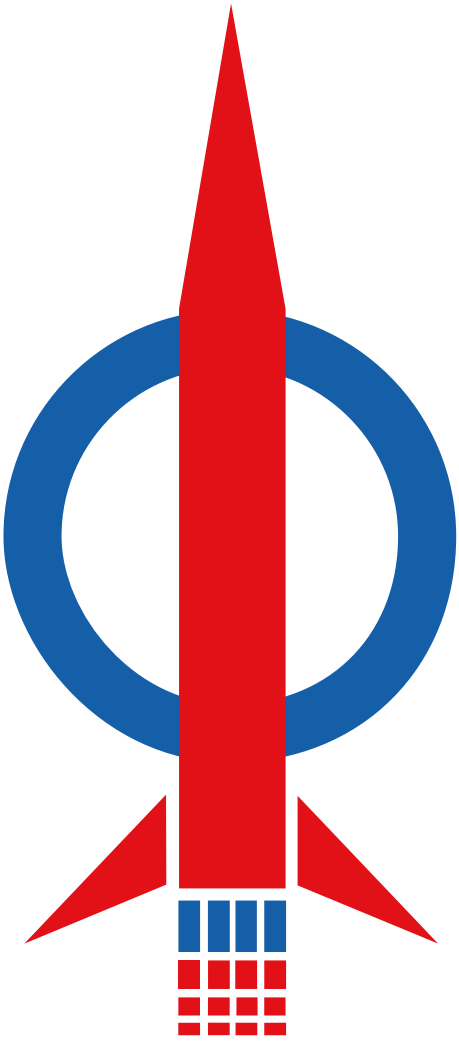
> *"What I do is combine their points of view. I use my own brain to process the information and decide which perspective is more reliable."*

He recognised that political channels had positions and developed personal methods of triangulation.

Yet their behaviour also shows why civic education matters. A person without a strong baseline of institutional knowledge still needs someone to make a complicated political event legible before comparison can begin. Political channels therefore compete not only over facts, but over the framework through which those facts are interpreted.

As participants developed stronger knowledge and greater confidence in their own judgement, they could become less dependent on any single interpreter. The first door remained influential, but it was no longer the only door.

[37] BBK Network is a Malaysian Mandarin-language Youtube channel discussing news and public affairs. "Lawyer Ang" refers to Ang Woei Shang (洪伟翔), a Malaysian lawyer who publishes political commentary through his 翱翔天際 channels.



V. Social memory: Bersih and the Sheraton Move



Political learning also took place through major political events. Among participants now in their thirties, Bersih formed a particularly strong political memory, particularly in the older cohort in this study. Those who grew up with the movement encountered politics at a time when collective action appeared capable of changing national politics.

One 33-year-old participant recalled:

"I went to Bersih, and back during the historic 2008 general election, I was 14 years old. That was my very first taste of politics… I was completely captivated listening to the speeches…

Seeing the administration collapse after just a year and a half, I felt completely disillusioned."

This is where external political efficacy becomes relevant. The participant had not lost the ability to understand politics. Rather, the relationship he perceived between participation and political response had weakened.

The Sheraton Move produced a similar political lesson for another participant who had voted and followed developments closely. During the MCO, he consumed political news intensively, but eventually described politics as an "old movie playing again" and as "all just acting" or *wayang*. His political attention declined after repeated elite manoeuvring made following politics feel increasingly disconnected from his ability to affect its outcome.

Bersih and the Sheraton Move therefore mattered not because they automatically produced a particular political attitude, but because they became reference points through which participants understood what participation could achieve.

VI. Political parties and representatives

Political parties could become First-to-Door actors because they combined political explanation with an immediate route into participation.

Some party members acknowledged that personal recruitment mattered. They might have joined a different organisation if another party approached them first, treated them well, and offered them a meaningful role.

Once inside, the party could also provide a framework for understanding political conflict: which policies threatened the community, who was responsible and which organisation could provide protection. When broader civic foundations were weak, a party could therefore become both the place where young people learned how politics worked and the main source against which they tested that understanding.

Party involvement could increase procedural knowledge, networks and confidence. It did not automatically create independent political judgement. Some interviewees working inside political organisations clearly separated their own beliefs from the party line; others entered through relationships rather than ideology. Organisational access and political understanding were therefore related but distinct.

Representatives exerted influence through a different route: visible performance. Participants remembered repaired fields, housing problems, drains, complaint letters and accessible service centres. A young party member described representation in straightforward terms:

> *"If the leader is doing good work, you feel represented. If the leader is just occupying a position, it doesn't matter what party it is."*

These encounters could make the government feel responsive because citizens could see a connection between a complaint and a result.



At the same time, responsiveness could conceal institutional responsibility. If an MP, ADUN, or service centre became the person to approach for every problem, citizens could learn **who was useful** without necessarily learning **whose responsibility it was**. The representative became the door to the state itself.

Across these different points of influence, participants were not short of political information. The bigger differences concerned who made that information meaningful, and through which language or platform. Given the lack of civic education, it is crucial to see whether participants had enough institutional knowledge and confidence to examine that interpretation independently.

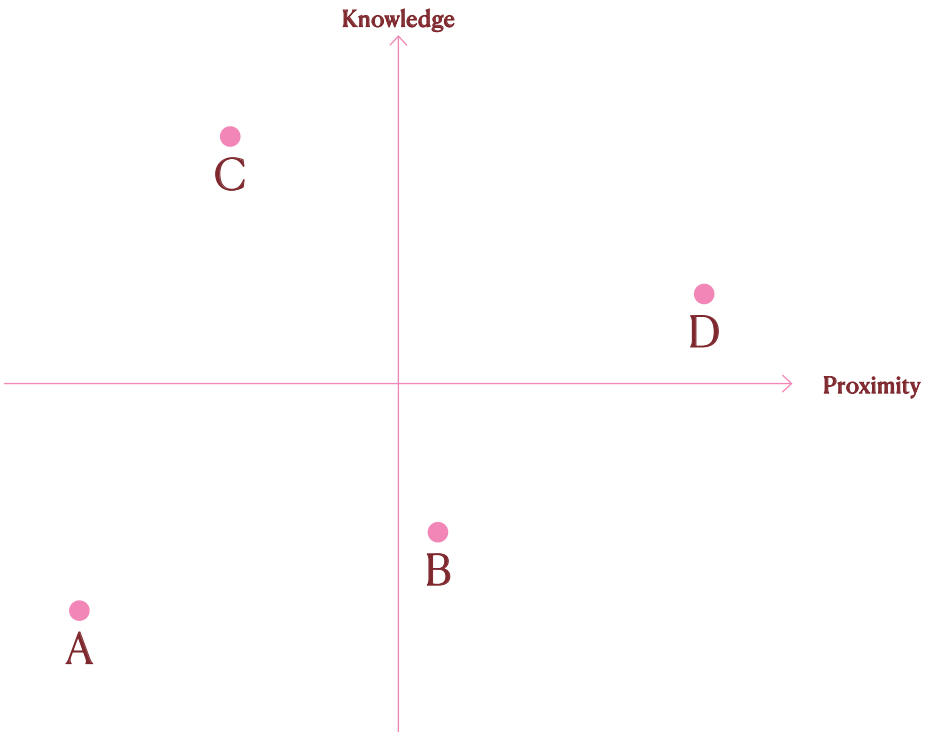
The First-to-Door model therefore describes dependency rather than permanent capture. Family interpretations can be revised. Media frames can be compared. Political channels can be challenged. Parties can be joined without full embrace, while political experience can alter earlier expectations.

But where civic foundations remain weak, intermediaries carry greater weight because citizens still need someone to explain how politics fits together. These uneven pathways of political learning help explain why participants arrived at different understandings of politics and government, which the following section examines. Civic education does not aim to remove these influences, nor should it attempt to produce politically neutral citizens. But it can provide the institutional baseline needed to question a political claim, identify the interests behind it and decide whether the proposed action addresses the actual source of the problem.

5.4 Matrix of Political Engagement

After analysing what and how youths understand politics, this section explores how close participants were to the people and institutions making decisions. While it's tempting to categorise youths as either politically apathetic or passionate, the interviews revealed different dimensions that impact their political engagement.

Matrix of Political Engagement



In this exploratory matrix of political engagement, the vertical axis is **political knowledge**: understanding institutions, responsibilities and public issues, rather than simply recognising politicians or following controversies. The horizontal axis is **political proximity**: how directly someone encounters political work, actors and decision-making. Proximity may grow through community organising, campaigning, party work or regular contact with a representative. These are broad dimensions, not scores assigned to interviewees.

The positions marked A to D illustrate possible combinations, not four types of Chinese youth. A has little institutional knowledge and remains distant from political work. B has moved closer, perhaps through an invitation to help a party or representative, but has not yet developed a clear understanding of how institutions work. C follows politics closely and understands it well, yet remains outside political organisations or direct action. D combines knowledge with close involvement and can draw on both to act and assess what political actors tell them.

The matrix makes two weaknesses visible. Civic education can leave a willing participant dependent on others to explain the system. The distance between C and D appears when a knowledgeable participant may step back after concluding that involvement will achieve little. Repeated disappointment can leave a capable participant unconvinced that the system will respond. This is where political efficacy matters: confidence in one's own judgement and confidence in institutions are different, and either can change through experience.

The First-to-Door model helps explain how someone might move across this matrix. A trusted commentator may deepen understanding without bringing a participant closer to political work. A party invitation may bring someone closer before they know much about institutions. Later experience may strengthen their knowledge, change their expectations or cause them to withdraw.

These combinations recur in the interviews, not as fixed types of Malaysian Chinese youths. People may move between them as they learn, join organisations, encounter a responsive representative or lose trust after a political setback. Further research could define indicators for each dimension and test whether these patterns hold beyond this qualitative sample.

6 Expectation of Governance



Chinese youth generally evaluate governance through practical standards rather than abstract institutional ideals. Across the interviews, respondents focused on whether people can maintain a decent quality of life, whether public institutions function effectively, whether opportunities are distributed fairly, and whether the state respects personal and communal autonomy. Their expectations are therefore pragmatic. They may adapt to imperfect policies in daily life, yet still judge the government by whether it delivers, treats people fairly and avoids unnecessary intrusion.

6.1 Material Security and Quality of Life



Economic security remains a central concern. Respondents linked good governance to whether wages, living costs and housing allow young people to build a stable life. Respondents therefore judged inflation, the Ringgit, and business costs by their impact on purchasing power and everyday planning.

This also shaped how respondents viewed government assistance. Cash handouts were not necessarily rejected, but were often seen as short-term relief rather than a solution to structural problems. The transition from BR1M to BSH, BKM and STR was cited as an example of policies being repeatedly renamed while underlying pressures remained.[38] The concern was less about assistance itself than whether wages and affordability were actually improving.

Migration to Singapore adds another layer to this expectation. Some respondents saw overseas work as a response to limited local opportunities. A respondent in Perlis argued that ambitious young people leave because "there are fewer opportunities, so they can't earn as much." For cross-border workers, however, higher income often comes with high personal costs. One technician working in Singapore said that his salary of around SGD4,000 would be difficult to earn in Malaysia, but described the motorcycle commute as dangerous and life in Singapore as lacking freedom. He stressed that he did not want to remain there permanently and hoped Malaysian wages and industries could improve enough for him to work locally instead.

This suggests that the *Ma Lao* phenomenon is not simply about chasing a stronger currency.[39] Respondents weigh income against safety, convenience, family ties and belonging. Singapore therefore functions as a regional benchmark against which Malaysian wages and opportunities are compared. Economic governance is judged not only by whether people can survive locally, but whether working in Malaysia can provide a quality of life that makes staying worthwhile.

[38] These are all different names for Malaysia's cash aid program. Over the years, each new government renamed it and increased the payouts to help families handle daily expenses.

[39] Ma Lao (马劳) is a colloquial Malaysian Chinese term for Malaysians who work in Singapore. Although the term is Chinese, the phenomenon is not limited to ethnic Chinese workers. It reflects a broader pattern of Malaysian labour migration driven by Singapore's higher wages and stronger currency, while also involving trade-offs such as long commutes, safety risks, family separation, and reduced quality of life.

6.2 Effective and Responsible Institutions

Respondents also judged governance by whether public systems actually work on the ground. Healthcare and education showed this most clearly.

Healthcare concerns went beyond access. Respondents with experience inside the health system raised questions about sustainability, patient behaviour and professional pressure. One pharmacist described large amounts of unused medicine being returned for disposal:

> *"We have a good system that provides free medicine, but if we don't teach them properly, it all goes to waste."*

A doctor in Perlis criticised how extremely cheap public treatment could be taken for granted, with patients collecting medicine but failing to follow medical advice. Their criticism was not that public healthcare should be reduced, but that service provision alone is insufficient if the system is poorly used or placed under avoidable pressure.

Education revealed a similar implementation problem. Trainee teachers offered stronger criticism, describing a gap between policy design and classroom reality. IPG respondents noted that they were trained under one curriculum while preparing to enter schools under another, and that some trainees were specialising in subjects expected to be removed. They also raised concerns about new teaching models being introduced without sufficient preparation and practicum students paying for teaching materials themselves. The issue was therefore not resistance to reform, but whether policy was coherent, properly prepared and workable in practice.

This reflects a broader frustration with "rebranding without change". Across policy areas, respondents cared less about new names or announcements than about whether reforms produced visible improvements.

6.3 Fairness, Trust and Predictability

Fairness was another important standard. Some respondents distinguished between peaceful everyday ethnic relations and their experiences of public institutions. As one undergraduate student put it, “Being Malay or being Chinese comes with different benefits, different realities.” One Chinese association secretary argued that racial barriers were felt more strongly in government departments than among ordinary people.

This was especially visible in discussions of quotas and education. Some respondents preferred merit-based allocation and questioned whether ethnic identity should continue to shape access to public opportunities. IPG respondents gave a more specific example: Chinese teacher trainees saw it as unfair that students with stronger Chinese backgrounds could face limited course placements. At the same time, other candidates were placed into Chinese-language programmes to address teacher shortages. At the same time, respondents recognised that reform would be politically difficult, particularly when it could be perceived as removing Bumiputera protections. Their expectation was therefore not simply identical treatment, but rules that are transparent, predictable and seen as fair.

Political stability fits into the same concern with predictability. Respondents generally preferred a stable environment where the government could focus on economic and administrative issues rather than prolonged political conflict. Corruption, however, was not a dominant concern when respondents were directly asked about governance. It was explicitly raised only once, by a Malaysian working in Singapore, who summarised the expectation as “no corruption, no decay.” It appeared more often in broader political discussions, including references to 1MDB when respondents explained why the government in office should be given more time to recover from past scandals. Corruption therefore appeared more as part of wider political trust than as a standalone governance demand.



6.4 Personal Autonomy and Limits of Authority

A final expectation concerns the boundary between public authority and private life. This appeared most clearly in discussions of religion and gender.

Concerns about religious influence were raised across regions, including the East Coast. Respondents generally did not frame this as opposition to Islam itself, but questioned when religious considerations were perceived to shape shared public administration, including alcohol restrictions, dress codes, gender-segregated facilities and Ramadan-related restrictions.[40] Their concern was practical: where should religious rules apply, and who should be subject to them?

[40] Muslim-majority states on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Kelantan, Terengganu, and parts of Pahang) enforce specific regulations, primarily focusing on daytime dining, public consumption, and entertainment during the month of Ramadhan.

One respondent from Terengganu explained that restrictions applying to Muslims did not necessarily affect Chinese customers, while describing the broader boundary as, "We have our temples; they have theirs." Respondents may therefore accommodate restrictions or find practical workarounds rather than openly oppose them. The concern is less about theology than jurisdiction: whether rules governing one community should also determine the choices of others.

Gender revealed another side of this expectation. Female respondents described precautions that male respondents may not encounter or need to consider. On public transport, one respondent contrasted Singapore's visible enforcement against harassment with Malaysia's women-only coaches, where she felt boundaries were poorly enforced. In workplaces, women similarly described managing unwanted attention through distance, avoidance and greater personal vigilance when formal protection appeared insufficient.

This difference became more visible in conservative environments. One respondent in Terengganu described how his female partner repeatedly worried about whether it was safe to sit with friends in public or travel in a car at night. In contrast, he was more comfortable remaining in Terengganu because his business and daily routines were less affected by these concerns. Their different experiences show how the same social and regulatory environment can impose a heavier psychological burden on women, who may have to think more carefully about how rules and social expectations could affect their behaviour.

Gender and religious governance therefore point to the same broader expectation from different directions. Respondents want institutions to respect personal autonomy while also providing enough protection that individuals do not have to manage risks entirely on their own. Good governance means knowing both when the state should intervene and when it should leave private life alone.

Chinese youth therefore judge governance through practical but consistent standards. They want a state that supports a viable quality of life, delivers functioning institutions, applies rules fairly and recognises the limits of its authority. Their willingness to compromise with imperfect governance should not be mistaken for the absence of expectations. They continue to judge the state by whether it works, treats citizens fairly, and knows where its authority should end.

7 China Factor



China's rise has become increasingly visible in Malaysia, including in the everyday lives of Malaysian Chinese youth. Our interviews found that China is increasingly present through economic, technological and cultural exposure, but this has not led to a corresponding shift in national identity. The pragmatism of Malaysian Chinese shapes how youth respond to China's rise, with economic opportunities, consumer benefits and technological progress receiving more immediate attention, while geopolitical concerns are often seen as more distant or secondary. However, more politically aware respondents expressed stronger concerns about sovereignty, human rights, and China's regional ambitions.

7.1 Varied but Pragmatic Views of China's Rise

Malaysian Chinese youth hold no single view of China. Most interviewees expressed a relatively neutral or pragmatic view, while others admired China's economic and technological development. A smaller segment was more sceptical, particularly about China's geopolitical influence and its implications for Malaysia.

Among more neutral respondents, China is often seen simply as another country that has achieved significant economic and technological progress. Some pointed to high-speed rail, modern infrastructure, manufacturing capabilities and education as examples of China's development. A vocational student, for example, was impressed by the scale of drone laboratories in Chinese schools and considered studying in China. However, this acknowledgement did not lead to a stronger emotional connection with the country. One interviewee who had studied in China described it as a good place for education and travel, but not somewhere he would want to settle permanently. The vocational student also emphasised the importance of Malaysia maintaining relations with all major powers:

> *"Malaysia shouldn't take sides; we have so many global superpowers that we can befriend. We must maintain diplomatic ties with all countries to guarantee our own economic security and stability."*

This reflects a pragmatic approach in which China's economic importance is recognised without assuming that Malaysia should align itself with China.

For some respondents, China's development is a source of admiration and pride. They pointed to China's manufacturing capacity, large domestic market and rapid economic growth as evidence of its ability to compete with established Western powers. Some also admired its ability to lift large numbers of people out of poverty and develop into a global power within a relatively short period.[41] More importantly, some admired China's governance and social structure because they believed its relatively homogeneous society and the absence of racial politics provided a stronger foundation for merit and competition.

In their view, this allowed Chinese people to compete and realise their potential without the same ethnic constraints they associate with Malaysia. Admiration for China therefore also functions as an implicit comparison with the position of Malaysian Chinese: China's ability to mobilise Chinese talent and achieve national development becomes a reference point through which some respondents reflect on the opportunities and limitations of being Chinese in Malaysia.

A smaller group of interviewees expressed scepticism. These respondents were from different backgrounds and generally more politically aware. Rather than viewing China as a model for solving Malaysia's problems, they saw it as a foreign power pursuing its own interests. One interviewee argued that China's engagement with Malaysia should not be understood through ethnic affinity:

[41] World Bank and Development Research Center of the State Council, People's Republic of China, *Four Decades of Poverty Reduction in China: Drivers, Insights for the World, and the Way Ahead* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022).

"For Malaysian Chinese, I don't think it's entirely the question of good or bad... A foreign superpower operates strictly on national interest and capital accumulation."

Concerns were particularly visible around the South China Sea, China's territorial claims, human rights and Chinese-led investments. Some respondents questioned whether large projects such as Forest City and the East Coast Rail Link would deliver benefits proportionate to their scale. Others questioned whether China's economic success could be separated from state support and subsidies.

The differences therefore appear to be shaped less by a consistent demographic background than by how individuals encounter and interpret China. Those with greater exposure to political news or stronger concerns about sovereignty tended to respond more critically. In contrast, others engaged with China mainly through its economic opportunities, products and technological development.



7.2 China's Rise Has Not Displaced Local Identity

Despite China's growing visibility, most interviewees did not feel that China's rise had changed their national identity. Only one respondent—who practised Chinese folk religion—prioritised a transnational Chinese identity over his local one, citing a deeper sense of historical connection.

Instead, many were conscious of a clear distinction between being Chinese and being Malaysian Chinese. While they recognised shared ancestry, language and cultural traditions, they also emphasised that Malaysian Chinese culture has developed within Malaysia's own multicultural environment.

One interviewee from China-related business described this as a localised identity:

> *"Our values are anchored by Chinese roots, but we have adapted to Malaysia's multicultural environment. Our local languages are completely different."*

This distinction was also visible in language. Malaysian Chinese may speak Mandarin, Cantonese or other Chinese varieties, but these languages have developed through generations of life in Malaysia and are influenced by Malay and English.[42] For some youth, this localised language itself distinguishes them from Chinese nationals and other Chinese communities.

[42] Xiaomei Wang and Cheng Hai Chew, "A Study of Characteristic Lexicon in Malaysian Chinese: Based on the Dictionary of Malaysian Chinese (Huayu)," *Global Chinese* 8, no. 1 (2022): 127–141.

Their Chinese cultural heritage remains meaningful, but it does not determine their national belonging. One respondent who studied and worked in China put it:

> *"Personally, I would never refer to China as my motherland. Just my ancestors were from China. Motherland is the country where you were born, raised, and nurtured. For us, that is Malaysia."*

The discussion around "motherland" shows that some respondents were uncomfortable with the idea that shared ethnicity should create a political or national connection with China. Some also perceived a generational difference, believing that older Malaysian Chinese were more likely to consume China-focused media and connect China's rise with a broader sense of cultural pride. Younger respondents were more likely to distinguish cultural affinity from national identity, with some actively challenging family members who suggested closer political or emotional ties to China.

Overall, greater exposure to China does not necessarily make Malaysian Chinese youth feel more Chinese in a national sense. Instead, it can make them more conscious of the distinction between Chinese cultural heritage and a Malaysian national identity.

7.3 China is Becoming Part of Everyday Economic Life

China's economic presence is increasingly tangible in everyday life, creating both opportunities for people who can bridge Chinese and Malaysian business environments and pressure on local businesses.[43] Mandarin proficiency is increasingly useful, but several respondents with relevant experience argued that language alone is not enough. The more valuable skill is understanding both sides and translating between Chinese business expectations and Malaysian realities. As one lawyer who serves Chinese clients explained:

> *"The reality is that Chinese entities coming here prefer dealing with those who speak their language."*

This reflects a broader trend. China's economic presence is becoming increasingly tangible in everyday life. Most interviewees noticed the growing presence of Chinese brands, businesses, products and digital platforms in Malaysia. Their responses were mixed, but the main divide was between the benefits consumers experience and the competitive pressure local businesses face.



[43] China's economic importance to Malaysia is also reflected in bilateral trade, with China remaining one of Malaysia's largest trading partners. Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry, "Malaysia's Trade Performance for 2025," Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), January 20, 2026.

For consumers, Chinese platforms such as *Taobao* provide greater access to affordable products. Online shopping has reduced the need to travel to major cities to find certain goods, while lower prices and consumer-friendly services make Chinese platforms attractive. For many young people, this interaction with China is therefore practical rather than political.

For businesses, however, Chinese competition creates a more complicated situation. One business owner described a "catfish effect", arguing that Malaysian businesses had become too comfortable and that stronger competition from Chinese companies could force local businesses to improve. Others saw Chinese brands as useful examples for Malaysian entrepreneurs. The arrival of Chinese beverage and lifestyle brands, for example, demonstrated that consumers outside major cities could be willing to pay for premium products when the concept and quality were strong.

At the same time, several urban respondents were concerned about increasing competition and what they described as *neijuan*, or excessive competition.[44] Businesses may struggle to compete with inexpensive Chinese imports and large retailers, while Chinese platforms let consumers buy products directly from suppliers. This can weaken the traditional role of Malaysian intermediaries who relied on importing and reselling products.

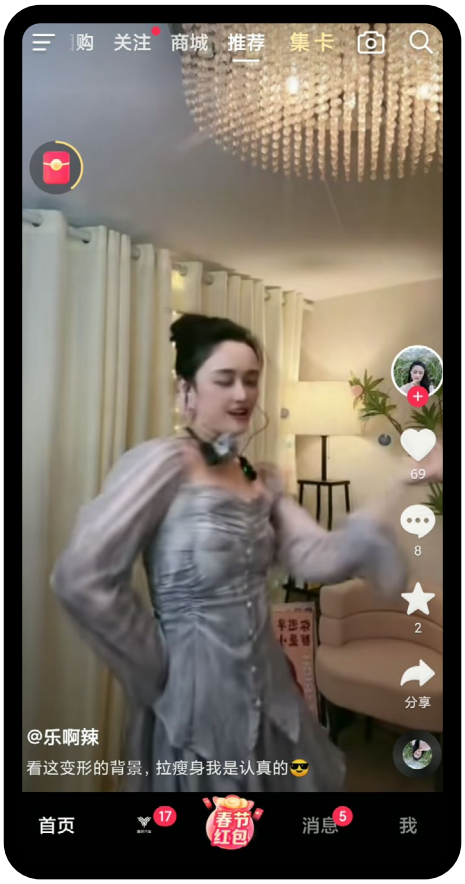
Some local businesses have therefore begun adapting their business models. One example was a car workshop that shifted away from relying primarily on selling automotive parts and instead focused on installation and other services. As Chinese suppliers make products increasingly accessible to consumers, local businesses may have to compete through services and local expertise rather than simply acting as intermediaries.

This suggests that the China factor is creating both pressure and opportunity. For Malaysian Chinese youth, China's economic rise is therefore experienced less as an abstract geopolitical development and more through the products they buy, the businesses they encounter, and the skills they can use in the labour market.

[44] *Neijuan* (内卷), literally "involution," is a popular Chinese term describing a situation in which competition becomes increasingly intense without producing meaningful additional gains. It is commonly used to describe environments where individuals or businesses are pushed to work harder, lower prices, or invest more resources simply to avoid falling behind, creating a cycle of escalating effort with diminishing returns.







7.4 Cultural Influence Through Digital Media and Language

China's cultural influence is most visible through digital platforms and language. Malaysian Chinese youth commonly use Chinese platforms such as *Xiaohongshu* and *Douyin*, particularly for lifestyle, travel, food, education, business, and entertainment content.[45] Many users distinguish these platforms from TikTok, which they use more for Malaysian or international content.

The appeal of Chinese digital content is not necessarily political. Some interviewees preferred the longer, more detailed content on Chinese platforms, especially compared with the shorter content they encountered from local creators. This shows that China's cultural influence is not driven solely by political messaging. Much of it comes through ordinary content that users find useful or entertaining.

However, the shared language creates a particularly porous cultural boundary. As one Interviewee who consumes pop music and often browses Chinese fan pages described, unlike Korean or Japanese entertainment, which is usually recognised as foreign, Chinese content can enter Malaysian Chinese everyday life through a language that already feels familiar. Several interviewees therefore noticed Chinese vocabulary, slang and accents entering local speech.

[45] *Xiaohongshu* has developed a sizeable presence in Malaysia. A 2026 study on Malaysian Chinese users cites official data from February 2023 indicating that Malaysia had more than 2.5 million *Xiaohongshu* users. Comparable publicly available official figures for *Douyin* users in Malaysia remain unavailable, although its use was reported occasionally by participants in this study. Hui Yan Chew, "Re-negotiating National Identity in a Global Sinophone Space: A Study of Malaysian Chinese Users on *Xiaohongshu* (Rednote)," *Online Media and Global Communication* 5, no. 2 (2026): 325–343.

One educator observed that primary school students had begun using Chinese internet slang and vocabulary in their writing. Other respondents pointed to everyday examples where Malaysian terms, such as *da bao* (take away) and *ma ling shu* (potato), were increasingly replaced by *dai zou* and *tu dou*, expressions commonly used in China. For most interviewees, this was not considered a major problem, but a small number with higher political exposure were concerned that repeated exposure could gradually influence how Malaysian Chinese communicate and understand their own cultural environment.

Some respondents were also concerned about political messages appearing indirectly in commercial or cultural content. One interviewee who follows international news pointed to maps containing the nine-dash line on products sold through Chinese platforms and argued that such exposure could normalise China's territorial claims.[46] Others, however, did not see such cultural exposure as particularly threatening.

This difference is important. The growing presence of Chinese media does not produce a uniform response. For most youth, Chinese digital content is simply another source of entertainment, information and cultural consumption. For a smaller group with higher political awareness, it raises questions about how much cultural influence Malaysia is absorbing while maintaining its own identity.

Evidently, China is becoming increasingly embedded in the environment of Malaysian Chinese youth. Yet greater exposure has not translated into a corresponding shift in how they understand their identity. Instead, China's influence is filtered through an already established Malaysian Chinese identity, as well as the different values, experiences and social positions of individual youth. The result is not a simple process of becoming "more Chinese", but a growing familiarity with China within an identity that remains locally rooted.

[46] The "nine-dash line" refers to China's expansive maritime claim in the South China Sea. In the 2016 South China Sea arbitration, the tribunal found that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the areas encompassed by the line beyond the rights provided under UNCLOS. Permanent Court of Arbitration, *The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China), Award*, PCA Case No. 2013-19, July 12, 2016.


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Recommendations

The findings point to three broad challenges. First, Chinese youth have greater formal political rights but limited opportunities to develop practical political and civic literacy. Second, long-standing institutional uncertainties, particularly in education, continue to shape perceptions of fairness and trust in public institutions. Third, while youth generally express openness to cross-ethnic interaction, they often lack meaningful opportunities to participate in local institutions and interact beyond their existing social circles. The policy response should therefore focus on making civic participation more accessible, institutions more transparent, and cross-ethnic interaction more organic.

I. Strengthen Practical Civic Education

The transition to voting at eighteen has given young Malaysians greater formal political rights, but this has not necessarily been matched by systematic preparation for political participation. Civic education should therefore move beyond scattered lessons on government structures and electoral procedures towards practical civic literacy.

There is already a useful local example that can be studied and adapted. Pay Fong Middle School in Melaka has a Civics and Social Studies programme that includes practical activities such as visiting local heritage sites, documenting historical places, and interviewing residents from different ethnic backgrounds.[47] Rather than designing civic education entirely from scratch, the Ministry of Education could evaluate existing programmes like this and identify practices to adapt across school systems.

A national civic curriculum should cover basic political and media literacy and connect classroom learning to real communities. Students should have opportunities to engage with local institutions, conduct community research, understand how public decisions are made, and interact with communities outside their immediate social environment. This would make civic education less about memorising institutions and more about developing the confidence and knowledge to participate in public life.

II. Reduce Institutional Uncertainty

Some of the strongest frustrations among Chinese youth are not necessarily about the existence of a particular policy, but about uncertainty over how institutions work and whether different groups are being treated fairly. Greater transparency can therefore address some long-standing grievances without turning them into permanent communal political disputes.

[47] Dong Zong's latest curriculum framework has incorporated elements of civic education at the level of overall curriculum design, particularly through its emphasis on students' core competencies, including "social participation." However, not all Chinese independent high schools currently offer a standardised civic education subject. In practice, civic learning is still unevenly embedded across subjects and school-based initiatives, and Dong Zong has yet to establish a unified civic education curriculum. Several schools, including Pay Fong Middle School, Confucian Private Secondary School, Hin Hua High School, and Chinese High School Batu Pahat, have developed their own related programmes or school-based curricula, although the number of schools doing so has not been systematically documented.

In higher education, the government should make university admissions criteria, selection mechanisms and intake data more transparent and accessible. Students choosing between different pre-university pathways should clearly understand how each qualification is assessed and how it affects their university options. The government should also review differences in co-curricular opportunities between STPM and Matriculation students. As identified in this study, STPM students may progress through zone, district, and state-level competitions, while Matriculation students follow a different structure centred on inter-college competition. Ensuring comparable opportunities across both pathways would be a more targeted intervention than redesigning the entire pre-university system.

The same principle applies to the UEC. Rather than allowing recognition of the qualification to remain a recurring political dispute, the government should clarify and streamline existing pathways for UEC holders seeking entry into public universities. Clear, consistent administrative requirements would reduce uncertainty for students and allow the issue to be treated primarily as an education and talent-retention matter.

III. Give Youth Meaningful Democratic Participation

Young people are unlikely to develop a strong sense of civic ownership if political participation remains something they encounter only during elections. Democratic participation therefore needs to become a more normal part of young people's everyday institutional experience.

The government should set clearer boundaries for legitimate political discussion, particularly where young people remain uncertain about how 3R-related regulations are applied. The objective should be to distinguish genuine hate speech or harmful content from legitimate criticism and public discussion, so that young people can participate without unnecessary uncertainty.

At the university level, the legislation replacing AUKU should give elected student unions meaningful authority over student activities, budgets and welfare matters. Student participation becomes more meaningful when students have real responsibilities, not just formal platforms to express opinions. Managing resources, organising activities and negotiating differences with students from different backgrounds can provide practical experience in democratic participation and accountability.

Government and local authorities can also provide small, independent funding schemes for youth-led community projects, including local history, oral history and community research. This allows young people to participate through practical projects rather than requiring them to first identify with a particular political or communal organisation.

IV. Strengthen Local Participation and Everyday Integration

Chinese youth often experience government most directly at the local level, through everyday issues such as unlit streets, broken drainage, potholes, neglected public spaces and town-centre development. Yet because local councils lack electoral accountability, residents may feel their concerns are hard to influence unless they have personal connections to elected representatives or their assistants.

State governments should therefore create more structured opportunities for residents and youth groups to participate in local decision-making. Where full local council elections remain politically difficult, representative neighbourhood advisory bodies could provide a formal channel for residents, youth groups and local businesses to participate in municipal consultations and budget discussions. Local councils should also introduce transparent digital grievance systems that allow residents to track complaints and receive clear response timelines. This can reduce reliance on personal political connections and make local government more responsive to everyday concerns.

At the same time, authorities should encourage cross-ethnic integration through spaces where young people already interact naturally. Local authorities can make it easier for young entrepreneurs, cultural groups and community organisations to use public spaces for food, arts, creative and social activities. Night markets, food bazaars and creative pop-ups can create opportunities for interaction without requiring participants to enter an explicitly "integration" programme. The state's role should be to create the conditions for these spaces to develop rather than trying to engineer every interaction from above.

Taken together, these recommendations do not seek to make Chinese youth more communal or more politically partisan. They aim to create institutions in which young Malaysians can understand, question and participate in public life on their own terms. The objective is not to manufacture engagement, but to make meaningful engagement easier and more predictable.