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Malaysia's Ethnic Chinese-Based Political Parties' Attitudes Towards Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSSs) and Unified Examination Certificate (UEC)

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Abstract

This study examines the patterns and changes in the attitudes of three ethnic Chinese-based political parties in Malaysia towards independent Chinese secondary schools (ICSSs) and the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) since the emergence of the schools and the examination. The three parties are the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). ICSSs are Chinese-medium secondary schools that did not switch to Malay-medium to become government-funded secondary schools in the early 1960s. They subsequently became private high schools financed by Chinese Malaysian community since then. The UEC is the unified examination for ICSSs. Only ICSS pupils can sit for the UEC examination. The UEC examination is widely considered a high-quality pre-university examination. Many overseas and local private higher institutions in Malaysia have recognized the UEC qualifications. Some state governments in Malaysia have also recognized the UEC with specific requirements. Many Chinese Malaysian parents with high socioeconomic status (SES) send their children to ICSSs for better education. However, the federal government of Malaysia has not done so due to political reasons. A qualitative case study approach is adopted in this study to examine the attitudes of the three parties towards ICSSs and the UEC. This study shows that these parties were more vocal in calling for a fair treatment for ICSSs and the recognition for the UEC when they were opposition parties. Conversely, when they were part of the ruling regime, they chose to sway away from openly pushing for a fair treatment for ICSSs and UEC recognition and instead fought for the interests of ICSSs through internal channels, as well as settled for irregular or annual financial allocation for ICSSs.

Keywords: independent Chinese secondary schools (ICSSs), Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan), Democratic Action Party (DAP)

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1. Introduction

In comparison with ethnic Chinese minorities in many countries around the world, the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia are considered unique because of three factors. First, the ethnic Chinese constitute a significant portion of the total population in Malaysia. According to the 2020 Census, the ethnic Chinese formed 23.2% of the total population in the country ("Census 2020", 2022). This is much higher than the percentages of ethnic Chinese minorities in neighboring countries such as Indonesia (1.2%) and Thailand (10%–12%) (Mulyanto & Roeslie, 2023; "Chinese in Thailand", 2018). Second, the Chinese form the main base of membership of a few political parties in Malaysia especially the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Third, most of the Chinese in Malaysia are well-versed in Mandarin or other Chinese languages such as Cantonese and Hokkien, and they still preserve most Chinese culture and customs. This is mainly because the government never imposed forced assimilation policy on the Chinese and other ethnic minorities in the country. In fact, as noted in the Minority Rights Group's (1992) report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia, "Malaysia has South East Asia's most comprehensive Chinese-language system of education" (p. 13). Malaysia still has several Chinese-medium primary and secondary schools. Such schools do not even exist in the present-day Singapore although the majority of its population are ethnic Chinese.[1]

However, as the author of this article has noted elsewhere, Malaysia is "an ethnic democracy that institutionalizes Malay dominance and undermines Chinese political power" (Chong, 2025, p. 3). Although the government allows the ethnic Chinese to preserve their languages and culture, they cannot have the same sociopolitical position and rights as the Malay Muslim majority.

In regard to the government's policy on Chinese-medium schools in the country, while Chinese-medium primary schools are funded by the government, Chinese-medium secondary schools do not receive state funding. Instead, they are privately funded by the Chinese Malaysian community. Such schools are also known as independent Chinese secondary schools (ICSSs). ICSSs are Chinese-medium secondary schools that did not switch to Malay-medium to become government-funded secondary schools in the early 1960s. In 1960, the Malaysian government released the Rahman Talib Report that led to the legislation of a new Education Act which allowed Chinese- and Tamil-medium primary schools to coexist with national schools. But all secondary schools must use Malay, namely the national language of the country, as the medium of instruction. The management board of some Chinese-medium secondary schools perceived such a policy

[1] Prior to the 1980s, Singapore used to have not only Chinese-medium primary and secondary schools but also a Chinese-medium university known as Nanyang University. In fact, Nanyang University was the only Chinese-medium university which was ever established in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the People's Action Party (PAP) regime perceived the university as a hotbed of communism and decided to merge it with the University of Singapore in 1980 to form the National University of Singapore (NUS) which used English as the medium of instruction ("Nanyang University", 2020). All vernacular schools including Chinese-medium schools were also converted to English-medium schools in the 1980s (Sim, 2016).

as an attempt to eliminate Chinese education in the country and refused to switch to Malay-medium. The schools subsequently became private high schools deprived of state funding (V. Wong, 2017, pp. 39–43). They are under the supervision of the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia or better known as Dong Zong (董总). At present, there are 62 ICSSs in Malaysia ("Duzhong tongxun", n.d.). As in 2023, there were 78,504 pupils studying in ICSSs ("2023nian", 2024).[2]

The Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) is the unified examination for ICSSs. The UEC examination is managed by Dong Zong and the first examination was held in 1975. The UEC is divided into three levels: Junior Middle level (Form 3), Senior Middle Three (Form 6), and Vocational level (*Value & achievements*, 2019, p. 11). Only pupils of ICSSs can sit for the UEC examination.

The UEC examination is widely considered a high-quality pre-university examination. At present, more than 300 private higher institutions in Malaysia and more than 1,000 overseas higher institutions have recognized the UEC qualifications and accepted UEC holders for direct entry into their programs. Therefore, many Chinese Malaysian parents with high socioeconomic status (SES) send their children to ICSSs (Chiang et al., 2022). In fact, Siah et al. (2018) revealed that younger Chinese Malaysian parents are more likely to send their children to ICSSs than national secondary schools due to ICSSs' better educational quality.

Although the state governments of Sarawak, Penang, Selangor, Melaka and Sabah have recognized the UEC with specific requirements, the federal government of Malaysia has not recognized the UEC due to political reasons ("Malacca fourth state", 2018; "Sabah recognizes UEC", 2025; *Value & achievements*, 2019).[3] Several quarters in the federal government, who are mostly Malay, perceive the UEC to be inconsistent with the national educational policy. Hence, its recognition goes against the Federal Constitution. As a result, the UEC is not accepted for entry into most public universities in Malaysia and UEC holders are not able to join the civil service or government agencies at the federal level. Some UEC candidates who intend to enroll into public universities also sit for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination, i.e. Malaysia's national secondary school leaving examination. Such a practice is generally known as double-tracking. These candidates are, no doubt, more stressed as they need to prepare for two examinations at the same time (Leong, 2021).

The status of ICSSs and the UEC has been a main concern of many Chinese Malaysians. Hence, the three main ethnic Chinese-based political parties in the country have to deal with it all these years. However, in general, they were more vocal in standing up for the interests of ICSSs and urging the government to recognize the UEC when they were in opposition. Conversely, when they were part of the ruling regime, they tended to

[2] This is the latest data available at the time of writing.

[3] As a federal state, there is a separation of powers between the federal and state governments in Malaysia. In regard to education, state governments have a certain autonomy. They have the right to recognize the UEC even though the federal government still has not done so.

remain silent on such issues, resulting in disappointment among Chinese Malaysians towards them.

This study examines the patterns and changes in the attitudes of the three ethnic Chinese-based political parties in Malaysia towards independent Chinese secondary schools (ICSSs) and the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) since the emergence of the schools and the examination. A qualitative case study approach is adopted. Data for this study are drawn from news articles, websites of political parties, and secondary sources such as scholarly works on Chinese education in Malaysia, especially ICSSs and the UEC.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The second section reviews the literature on the Chinese education in Malaysia which covers ICSSs and the UEC. The third, fourth and fifth sections examine the attitudes of the MCA, Gerakan and DAP towards ICSSs and the UEC. The discussion focuses on the patterns and changes in the attitudes of three parties towards ICSSs and the UEC as well as the related constraints they encountered within the context of ethnic politics in Malaysia. The last section summarizes the findings of this study.

2. Review of Related Literature

There have been a few scholarly works on the Chinese education in Malaysia which covers ICSSs and the UEC. For instance, Ang Ming Chee (2015) explores how structural and relational institutions have contributed to the persistence of Malaysia's Chinese education movement. Vivien Wong (2017) examines the implementation of the language medium policy and its impact on the development of ICSSs. Danny Tze Ken Wong and Vivien Wong (2021) discuss the challenges which Chinese primary schools and ICSSs have been encountering all this while. Tan Liok Ee (2000) examines the political, social and cultural factors that influenced the development of Chinese-medium primary schools and ICSSs. Santhiram R. Raman and Tan Yao Sua (2015) discuss the challenges posed by government policies and the rise of international schools in Malaysia to ICSSs. Tan Yao Sua (2021) explores the role of Chinese educationists in maintaining the survival and promoting the development of ICSSs. Siah et al. (2018) explore factors that motivate Chinese Malaysian parents to send their children to ICSSs. Chiang et al. (2022) examine factors that influence ICSS pupils' academic achievements. The author of this article has discussed elsewhere the patterns and changes in the DAP's attitudes towards ICSSs and the UEC since the first change of government in 2018 which made the party part of the national ruling regime (Chong, 2025).

Nevertheless, none of these works examine in detail the attitudes of the three ethnic Chinese-based political parties towards ICSSs and the UEC. Hence, this study will fill this lacuna.

3. Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)

Among the three parties, the MCA has the longest experience as a member in the ruling regime. After independence, the MCA was part of the then ruling coalition, Alliance Party (Parti Perikatan), which was later renamed the National Front (BN- Barisan Nasional) in 1973. The BN only lost its power in the 2018 general election, making it the longest serving ruling coalition in Malaysia. However, the BN managed to become part of the ruling regime after the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, which won the highest number but less than half of the parliamentary seats in the 2022 general election, formed a unity government with it.[4] But with only two parliamentary seats won in the election, the MCA was no longer the main ethnic Chinese-based party in the ruling regime. Instead, the DAP, which won 40 parliamentary seats, became the main ethnic Chinese-based party in the unity government ("GE 15", 2023).

During the BN's rule, the MCA needed to take into consideration not only the Chinese community's demands for a better and fairer treatment for the Chinese education, but also the sensitivity and sentiments of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which was the biggest and most dominant member in the BN regime, towards this issue. In order not to upset the Malay political leaders and Malay population, the MCA chose to sway away from openly pushing for a fair treatment for ICSSs and the recognition of the UEC. Instead, it fought for the interests of ICSSs through internal channels.

Apart from settling for irregular financial allocation to ICSSs, the MCA also founded two non-profit private universities that recognize the UEC qualifications and accept UEC holders for direct entry into their programs (*Value & achievements*, 2019, pp. 22–23). These universities are the Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT) and the University of Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR). TAR UMT was established in 1969 as the Tunku Abdul Rahman College (TAR College). The establishment of TAR College was a "counter-offer" of the MCA in response to the demand of Chinese educationists for opening up a Chinese-medium university known as the Merdeka University (Ho, 2003, p. 136). In the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese educationists in Malaysia proposed to establish the Merdeka University "to fulfill their grand vision of establishing a complete system of Chinese education in Malaysia" (Raman & Tan, 2015, p. 3). But the proposal was rejected by the government on the ground that it had gone against the national educational and language policy (Raman & Tan, 2015, p. 17). Hence, the proposal was never materialized.

TAR College was an English-medium college and most of its programs were science- and business-based (W. B. Wong, 2003, p. 246). It did not offer any Chinese studies

[4] Apart from the PH and BN, the Perikatan Nasional (PN), which was dominated by Malay Muslim-based parties, was another main coalition contesting in the 2022 general election. None of them managed to reach the minimum 112 seats needed to control the 222-seat parliament. The PH, BN and PN respectively won 82, 30 and 74 seats. Eventually, the PH and BN, both with a more multiethnic outlook compared to the PN, agreed to form a unity government (Chin, 2023).

program. In 2013, it was upgraded to a university college under the name Tunku Abdul Rahman University College (TAR UC) (H'ng, 2021, p. 163). Later in 2022, it became a full-fledged university and was renamed TAR UMT ("TAR UC", 2022).

UTAR, on the other hand, was established in 2002 (H'ng, 2021, p. 164). Although it is generally an English-medium university, it offers Chinese studies programs at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels which use Mandarin as the medium of instruction.

It is worth noting that TAR College/TAR UC/TAR UMT, which never offers any Chinese studies program, is partially financed by the government and has been receiving annual financial aid from the government ("Government's financial support", 2025). Hence, its tuition fees are more affordable compared to other private higher institutions. Conversely, UTAR, which offers Chinese studies programs, is not funded by the government. Instead, it depends on student tuition fees and donations from the public and external organizations to support its operations ("Donations and funding", 2022). But the Malaysian government recognizes the programs of both TAR UMT and UTAR. According to Wee Ka Siong, current president of the MCA, TAR UMT and UTAR have produced more than 400,000 graduates since their founding ("Mahua dahui", 2025).

After the BN lost in the general election for the first time in 2018, the MCA became more vocal in urging the government to recognize the UEC and provide regular financial support to ICSSs. In fact, after becoming part of the unity government in 2022, the MCA frequently accused the DAP, which has become the main ethnic Chinese-based party in the ruling regime, for failing to secure state recognition of the UEC.[5]

4. Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan)

In regard to Gerakan, it also has a very long experience as part of the ruling regime. Gerakan was founded in 1968 by a group of scholars and professionals. It contested in the 1969 general election and managed to defeat the ruling Alliance Party in the state of Penang by winning the majority of seats in the state legislature. In 1972, Gerakan joined the Alliance Party, which was renamed the National Front (BN- Barisan Nasional) one year later ("History", n.d.).

However, in comparison with the MCA, Gerakan was willing to collaborate with Dong Zong and promise to defend the interests of the Chinese education movement within the BN regime, although only for a short period of time. In 1982, four Chinese educationists from Dong Zong joined Gerakan and contested in the general election either in the same year or in 1986 or 1990. They used the slogan "Join BN, Rectify BN" (打进国阵, 纠正国阵) in their campaign (Ang, 2015, p. 106; Hu [Foo], 2012). Although they were elected either as members of parliament or state legislators, the strong resistance of

[5] For examples, see the public statements made by different MCA politicians in "Stop debating" (2018), "MCA wants definitive" (2019), T. C. Tan (2019), "Tuiguang Tai Yueyu" (2025) and "Zhong Zhen Hong" (2025).

UMNO and the Malay majority towards fairer treatment of Chinese education as well as their desire to accumulate individual political capital had made them failed to prioritize and defend the interests of the Chinese education movement within the BN regime (Ang, 2015, p. 107). Just like the MCA, in order to not upset the Malay political leaders and Malay population, Gerakan avoided openly pushing for the recognition of the UEC and instead fought for a fairer treatment for ICSSs through internal channels.

In addition, just like the MCA, Gerakan also founded a non-profit private university which recognized the UEC in 2006. The university is known as the Wawasan Open University (WOU). It is funded by the Wawasan Education Foundation, which was established by Gerakan. The WOU offers open distance learning programs to working adults ("History & milestones", n.d.; *Value & achievements*, 2019, p. 23). Its programs are recognized by the Malaysian government.

Gerakan became an opposition party again after the BN lost power in the 2018 general election. Later, it left the BN and joined the PN in 2021 ("Gerakan joins PN", 2021). In other words, unlike the MCA that managed to become part of the ruling regime again in 2022, Gerakan has been an opposition party after the 2018 election.

It is worth noting that just like the MCA, Gerakan became more vocal in issues related to UEC recognition and state funding to ICSSs when it was no longer part of the ruling regime. Gerakan president Dominic Lau had repeatedly openly called upon the government to recognize the UEC and to institutionalize financial allocation to ICSSs ("Gerakan", 2019; "Chichi", 2025; "Zanyang shouxiang", 2025). He also rejected the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS- Parti Islam Se-Malaysia)'s contention that recognition of the UEC would disrupt integration and national unity (Muhammad, 2024).

Therefore, it can be concluded that when they were part of the ruling regime, instead of openly pushing for a fairer treatment for ICSSs and the recognition of the UEC, due to the resistance of the Malay politicians and Malay population, the MCA and Gerakan chose to fight for the interests of ICSSs through internal channels. As a compromise, they preferred to settle for irregular financial allocation to ICSSs and accept the UEC as one of the admission requirements for their non-profit private universities rather than openly fight for the government's recognition of the UEC. Both parties were also more vocal in urging the government to recognize the UEC and provide regular financial support to ICSSs when they were no longer either part of the ruling regime (the case of Gerakan and the MCA after the 2018 change of government) or a major member party in the ruling regime (the case of the MCA in the unity government formed after the 2022 general election).

5. Democratic Action Party (DAP)

The DAP shows the most dramatic and contrasting change in their attitudes towards ICSSs and the UEC. The party was founded in 1965 and only became part of the ruling

regime in 2018 ("About DAP", n.d.). Hence, it can be said that the DAP has a very long experience as an opposition party. As the author has pointed out elsewhere, prior to 2018, the DAP was perceived as the most vocal party on issues related to the interests of Chinese Malaysians including ICSSs and the UEC (Chong, 2025, p. 11). It had also been criticizing the MCA and Gerakan for failing to secure government's fair treatment for ICSSs and recognition for the UEC (Nambiar, 2018; Chong, 2025, p. 11). In fact, during the 2018 general election, the manifesto of the PH coalition, which the DAP was a member party, stated that the coalition would recognize the UEC should it get elected (Pakatan Harapan, 2018, p. 107).

However, after getting elected, the PH regime never honoured the promise and DAP politicians were unable to deal with this issue effectively. For instance, not long after the DAP became part of the PH ruling regime in 2018, then-deputy minister of education cum DAP member of parliament (MP) Teo Nie Ching (hereafter Teo) promised that she would try her best to push for the government's recognition of the UEC. As she emphasized,

> I hope I can finish this job [UEC recognition] before this year end, that is my aim...It may take time to build a school, but this (UEC recognition) can be done as soon as possible. I don't like to do things sloppily. (as cited in Yap, 2018)

Nga Kor Ming (hereafter Nga), another DAP MP and then-deputy secretary-general of the DAP, also emphasized that the DAP ministers were never silent on the issue of UEC recognition. Just that they "chose to fight for it through the cabinet" without elaborating on the discussion in the media ("Nga", 2020). He even claimed that "if [the] UEC is not recognised, [the] DAP will go even to the extent of not hesitating to withdraw itself from the government" ("Nga", 2020).

In addition, the DAP's veteran politician Lim Kit Siang (hereafter Lim) frankly stated that UEC recognition needed time because the PH government had to take the sentiments of the Malays into consideration and make sure that the Malays agree with UEC recognition ("Lin Ji Xiang", 2019).

The PH lost its power in February 2020 after a number of MPs defected from the ruling coalition and joined a group of Malay Muslim opposition politicians to form the PN coalition, which later became the new government (Tayeb, 2021). After the PH came to power for the second time in November 2022, Teo and Nga were respectively appointed deputy minister of communications and minister of housing and local government. But when the minister of education Fadhlina Sidek announced in 2023 that the ministry did not have plans to recognize the UEC because it was not consistent with the national educational policy, they remained silent ("No plans", 2023).

It was only after the DAP lost all seats it contested in the Sabah state elections held in November 2025 that Nga revealed in a social media post that the DAP would meet with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (hereafter Anwar) to seek recognition for the examination (Kamarulzaman, 2025). In fact, the DAP's wipeout in the state election is seen as a sign the party is losing core Chinese Malaysian support ("DAP's wipeout", 2025; Chai, 2025).

But Anwar, in response to Nga's remarks, emphasized that the recognition of the UEC can only be put forward if the mastery of the Malay language has been strengthened among the people in Malaysia ("Anwar", 2025).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that although the PH government refused to recognize the UEC, it has been offering financial allocation to all ICSSs on a yearly basis since 2019. After the PH regime collapsed in February 2020 and was replaced by the PN, the latter continued to provide annual financial allocation to all ICSSs in 2021 and 2022. After the PH came to power again in 2022, its financial allocation to ICSSs has been increased every year. Table 1 shows the amounts of financial allocations offered by PH and PN governments to ICSSs from 2019 to 2025.

Table 1: PH and PN Governments' Financial Allocations to ICSSs, 2019–2025 (MYR Million)

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Amount	12	15	15	15	15.75	18.9	20.16

Source: "Maguo duzhong" (2025).

Hence, it can be said that just like the MCA and Gerakan when they were part of the BN regime, in order not to upset the Malay majority, the DAP prefers to fight for the interests of ICSSs through internal channels and settles for annual financial allocation to ICSSs rather than actively fighting for UEC recognition.

6. Conclusion

It is undeniable that the UEC is widely considered a high-quality pre-university examination as many overseas and local private higher institutions in Malaysia have recognized the UEC qualifications and accepted UEC holders for direct entry into their programs. Some state governments in Malaysia have also recognized the UEC with specific requirements. Therefore, it is a preferred school choice for many high SES and younger Chinese Malaysian parents. Nevertheless, based on the above discussion on the attitudes of three ethnic Chinese-based parties towards ICSSs and the UEC, it can be concluded that no matter how many parliamentary seats these parties win in general elections, they are unable to alter or fight against the status of Malaysia as a pro-Malay ethnic democracy that privileges the Malay majority and prioritizes Malay language, culture and religion (Islam). The federal government of Malaysia still refuses to recognize the UEC due to political reasons. The government perceives the UEC as inconsistent with the national educational and language policy because it adopts Mandarin as its main medium.

In order not to upset the Malay Muslim majority, the MCA, Gerakan and DAP preferred to fight for the interests of ICSSs through internal channels and settled for

irregular or annual financial allocation to the schools rather than openly and actively fight for UEC recognition when they were part of the ruling regime. In addition, the MCA and Gerakan accept the UEC as one of the admission requirements for their non-profit private universities. However, the tuition fees of these universities are still much more expensive than that of public universities.[6] Therefore, UEC candidates who intend to enroll into public universities also have to sit for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination. This has made them more stressed because they need to prepare for two examinations at the same time.

As mentioned by Lim, who is the DAP's veteran politician, when dealing with UEC recognition issue, the PH government needs to take the sentiments of the Malays into consideration and make sure that the Malays agree with such a policy ("Lin Ji Xiang", 2019). Hence, until the Malay Muslim majority is open to equal sociopolitical rights for all ethnic groups, the status of Malaysia as a pro-Malay state will remain unchanged and there will not be significant improvements in the status of ICSSs as well as the UEC.

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[6] In general, there are two channels for Chinese Malaysian students to enroll into public universities in Malaysia. They can either apply for the programs through the Unit Pengambilan Universiti (UPU), the state's centralized platform that manages the application process for public universities, or through the direct entry route of individual public universities. The applications through the UPU are usually very competitive and applicants might not get a place in the programs they prefer. But about 90% of their tuition fees are subsidized by the government. Hence, they only need to pay a small amount of the fees. Conversely, direct entry route is much less competitive but students who enroll public universities through this channel must pay much expensive tuition fees because they government does not subsidize them. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the direct entry channel does not include the UEC as one of the entry requirements. Hence, this channel does not benefit UEC holders who do not sit for the SPM examination.

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