

## **What do the Chinese really want?**

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COMMENT Following one particular general election, after the BN had suffered a setback at the polls and lost many seats because Chinese voters had withdrawn their support for the BN, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister at the time, raged publicly: "What do the Chinese really want?"

In the past, the Chinese have consistently been described as inscrutable, especially by people from the West. Malaysian Chinese are not an expressive lot, and tend to keep their views to themselves.

Hence the apparently mysterious question of 'what the Chinese want' remains relevant, especially now, shortly before a general election.

In the last general election, the country saw a hefty swing of the Chinese vote to the opposition PKR, DAP and even PAS.

All indications are that the opposition alliance still enjoys significant support from the Chinese today. Given Malaysia's delicate balance of power, the Chinese may find themselves in the unfamiliar position of kingmakers.

The Chinese in Malaysia are a unique community, and want to remain so: they want to be Chinese.

The maintenance of their ethnic identity, their cultural rights, and their linguistic uniqueness, is of foremost importance to them, within the context of a multi-racial Malaysia.

They will make every use of their decisive position in the political equilibrium, to ensure their continued cultural survival.

But most Chinese in Malaysia are not chauvinistic. They are quite prepared to learn the basics of Bahasa Melayu, English, and other languages commonly used in the country.

Their aspiration is to be an integral part of this multi-racial nation, by incorporating elements from all cultures. They have made a conscious effort to work towards national integration in all fields.

Economic, educational opportunities

The strongest suit of the Chinese community lies in their economic achievements, especially in their small and medium-sized industries. After all, they still dominate these, half a century after Merdeka.

The Malaysian Chinese business community has advanced by leaps and bounds, building a strong foundation in the mainstream business world today. Without the Chinese contribution, the economy in Malaysia would be an irredeemably anaemic system. Simply put, a thriving Malaysia without Chinese businessmen would be unthinkable.

The Chinese community derive much of their success through their achievements in educating their young. The priority of all Chinese parents is a sound education for their children, preferably in their own Chinese tongue.

They see education in Chinese as a profound moral imperative for their children. In their eyes, Chinese people must first learn their own language, and then all other languages currently used in Malaysia. They will spare no expense in furthering the education of their youths.

These skills, and a high level of literacy, hold the key to any future hopes of an economic success story, not only among the Chinese, but among all Malaysians.

The spiritual dimension

Many Chinese are, by tradition, also highly spiritual. Some have converted to Christianity and an even larger number have sought solace in Buddhism.

But among most of the ordinary Chinese in Malaysia, there exists a whole host of folk religions, based on commonplace beliefs in various deities handed down to them from China.

hungry ghost festival 070808 03In Malaysia, one of the most revered religious festivals is the Hungry Ghost festival, celebrated on the 15th day of the Seven Month.

Another important celebration occurs on the 15th day of the Eight Month, honouring the Goddess of the Full Moon. These are all fervently observed by the Chinese faithful.

A yearning for freedom of religion is a key part of their lives.

Scattered among the Chinese population are thousands of guilds and Chinese associations. These are crucial grassroots social organisations, where the Chinese people can congregate, according to their clans or their bloodline.

These are primordial social associations, thus concentrating relationships at ground level. All political parties seeking Chinese support must thrive on the strength of this bond, founded upon clan or dialect associations.

What the Chinese long for

People outside the Chinese community may call the Chinese inscrutable out of frustration, because they do not understand the subtlety of the complex interpersonal relationships that exists among the Chinese at many levels.

Actually, it is not terribly hard to understand the Chinese. They are just like any other citizens in the country.

They are prepared to work hard for an honest living. All they pray for is a level playing field, free from favouritism, and racial or religious discrimination.

They ask for no quarters and give none in return. All they want is fair and transparent treatment, as citizens.

There are signs that Malaysia is changing, with each general election. The new, young generation of voters are beginning to make their presence felt.

With every passing general election, we can sense drastic changes on the ground, with the growing participation of these new voters.

It is hard for any political parties to predict what all of these young voters want. But it certainly smells and feels like they want to make some systemic changes, pursuing universal values like civil liberties and natural justice.

In the new thinking of young Chinese voters, as well as young Malays and those from other ethnic backgrounds, lies our uncertainty in politics, as well as the space for hope, for a better common future.

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