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Essentialising Ethnic and State Identities: Strategic Adaptations of Ethnic Chinese in Kelantan, Malaysia

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Abstract: *This paper looks at how a heterogeneous minority group sustains its multiple identities in a politically challenging context. Focusing on the Chinese minority (3.4 per cent) residing in Kelantan, the paper highlights strategies used by the group to retain its rights and identity as a separate cultural community. The peculiarity of this group is attributed to its entity as a non-Muslim minority under orthodox Islamic rule, and secondly, as citizens of a state led by the opposition party. The fact that they are born in Kelantan and possess fluency in the Kelantanese Malay dialect has strengthened their identity as orghe Kelantan (dialect referring to people who were born and grew up in the state). These factors create a sense of “oneness” between the Chinese and other Kelantanese beyond ethnic, religious and class boundaries. This paper demonstrates how the Chinese in Kelantan seek to be accepted through behaviours appropriate to the majority and simultaneously build in-group solidarity. The underlying interplay between essentialism and provincialism is showcased when the Chinese strategise linguistically to maintain their orghe Kelantan identification as an exclusive identity. The identity and the distinct dialect spoken have enhanced the “provincial” image of Kelantan in the national political discourse.*

Keywords: *Malaysia, Chinese, minority, Kelantan, Islamic governance, ethnicity*

Introduction

The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front) government of Malaysia lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament for the second consecutive time in the 13th General Elections (GE13) held in May 2013. Despite winning fewer than half (46.7 per cent)

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of the total votes, it won 133 of 222 parliamentary seats and 10 of 13 states. The three-party opposition front, Pakatan Rakyat (PR, or People's Alliance), acquired 50.3 per cent of the popular vote and maintained control of three states it already held – Kelantan, Penang and Selangor – but lost the state of Kedah. GE13 witnessed an overwhelming shift in the national voting pattern towards the PR, particularly in the urban areas, in the process toppling many high-ranking cabinet and state chief ministers. Kelantan, however, has remained securely in the hands of the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS, or Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) since 1990. Since PAS is now part of PR, Kelantan is a fiercely contested state in the political wrestling between the BN and PR. Its people, particularly its non-Muslim minority, have consequently been subjected to intense media attention. They are often portrayed as “victims” of PAS policies that appear to infringe on the rights of the non-Muslims.

The problems of ethnic minorities in Kelantan are of interest both for their own sake, and for Southeast Asia more generally, because the issues raised there resonate throughout the region. For instance, the struggles of ethnic minority groups in southern Thailand, southern Philippines and Myanmar, the political-cultural marginalisation of Chinese in Indonesia and Malays in Singapore, and the agitations of the Indians and Chinese in Malaysia – through the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) and the 17-Point Election Appeal (*Suqiu*) respectively – indicate a systematic pattern of increasing demands from minority groups for recognition of their political and cultural rights. These are part of the larger democratisation and decentralisation wave occurring in many Southeast Asian states, and there is a growing corpus of scholarly works focusing on the intertwining relationship between ethnicity, identity, faith, nationalism and the nation-state (Kamaludeen et al., 2009, p. 3; Hoffstaedter, 2011; Snitwongse and Thompson, 2005; Norani Othman et al., 2008, p. xvi; Syed Husin, 2008; Ting, 2009, p. 31; Loh, 2009, p. 234; Kamaruzzaman, 2007; 2009). The scenarios explored in these works demonstrate both the problems of ethnicity as a potential source of political conflict and the likelihood of such developments contributing to marginalised groups seeking autonomy or separation from the state. The former pathway is often viewed from the prism of domination and the latter through the prism of emancipation (Pieterse, 2009, pp. 272–75). The state is the major agent of domination, instilling “fear of ethnicity” as fodder for conflict, which in turn can result in external intervention. This has been the case in Southeast Asia, where expressions of ethnicity by minority communities have been suppressed in favour of a constructed “national” identity. The case of Chinese minorities in Indonesia under Soeharto's New Order government (Winarta, 2004, pp. 66–79) and non-Tai ethnic minorities (including Chinese and Malays) under Phibun's *rathaniyom* policy in Thailand (Barme, 1993, pp. 144–58) demonstrate the tendencies of political elites and regimes to favour the interests of the dominant majority groups when determining state policies.

Following the results of the GE13 there were widespread claims that the Chinese electorate had swung decisively towards the opposition parties, which was described by Prime Minister Najib Razak as being tantamount to a “tsunami” in Malaysian politics (*The Star*, 7 May 2013; *Utusan Malaysia*, 7 May 2013). Subsequent analysis revealed a clear urban-rural divide in the voting patterns of the electorate that transcended ethnicity. While the Chinese are regarded as a politicised minority in Malaysia, it is erroneous to assume that they are a monolithic community. Intra-Chinese variations based

on factors such as class and the urban-rural divide need to be recognised, and there is further variation from state to state, with Kelantan being one of the more prominent examples (Carstens, 1983, p. 83; Winzeler, 1983, pp. 35–41; Hanapi, 1986, p. 26).

When speaking of internal variations among the Chinese in Malaysia, two main categories are distinctive: (i) the urban/business/elite/middle-class; and (ii) the rural/peasant/agricultural/lower-middle class. Based on a study on rural Chinese in Pulai, Kelantan, and subsequent studies on the Malaysian Chinese in general, Carstens (1983, p. 79; 2005, p. 199) points out that there are four levels of identity construction among the Chinese in Malaysia:

- (1) political constructions of ethnic identity at the national level;
- (2) the influence of transnational and global messages and discourses on local identities;
- (3) identity constructions at more experiential levels that shape personal identities that vary according to gender, generation, social class and situation; and
- (4) the multiple and complex individual responses to identity issues as they are ignored, questioned, resisted, rediscovered, extolled and/or altered.

Drawing on Carstens' (1983 and 2005) model, this paper examines the status of the Chinese in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan by (i) locating them as a provincial minority as opposed to Chinese as a national minority; and (ii) examining the strategies of adaptation of a community facing dramatic political change. Hence, Carstens' fourth level of identity construction is particularly relevant.

Kelantan makes an interesting case study for many reasons. It is the only state in Malaysia where the main opposition Islamic party won six consecutive electoral terms – i.e. in 1990, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2008 and 2013. The majority Malay Kelantanese (95 per cent) live side by side with the Chinese (3.4 per cent) and other minority groups in Kelantan. Historically portrayed as a centre for Islamic learning and dissemination through its wide network of *pondok* schools and *ulama* teachers (Roff, 1974; Kessler, 1978), Kelantan is home to a Malay Muslim majority and a diverse group of other ethnic groups such as the Chinese, Thais, *orang Asli* and Indians, albeit in small numbers.¹ There is also a significant presence of Muslims who are not Malays, such as the Pathans, who are of South and Central Asian descent. These ethnic communities have long co-existed with minimal interference from the ruling Malay elite of Kelantan, lending an image of a state with a strong sense of cordiality among diverse ethnic groups. Nonetheless, as Kessler (1978, p. 29) and Roff (1974, p. v) point out, Kelantan is overwhelmingly Malay. The Malay population in Kelantan is among the least ethnically heterogeneous in Malaysia (Winzeler, 1985, pp. 1–2). Migration of ethnic communities from within the archipelago, such as the Minangkabau, Bugis and Javanese, though often observed in other states in the Peninsula, is almost absent in Kelantan, contributing to a rather insulated Malay population. This different historical process tended to distinguish Kelantanese Malay identity as an exclusive identity within Peninsular Malay society, and one that is viewed as traditional/conservative. In more recent times, Kelantan's conservative image, enhanced by its status as a state led by an Islamic opposition party, has given it a unique position in the Malaysian political discourse.

This paper explores the changing notions of Chinese identity in Kelantan by taking into consideration the political changes following the rule of the Islamic PAS in the state since 1990. The first part of this paper argues that the increasing pace of Islamisation within PAS and the fear thereof has prompted the essentialising of Chinese identity. For instance, membership in clan associations and Chinese schools, often regarded as pillars of Chinese identity and culture (Carstens, 2005; Kua, 1998), underwent a revival in Kelantan following the change in state leadership from BN to PAS in 1990. The Chinese in Kelantan also possess an additional cultural orientation that is closely affiliated to the state and people of Kelantan. Raybeck (1980, p. 266) observes that rural Chinese in Kelantan exhibit strongly Malay-oriented cultural patterns in a public context, but preserve Chinese culture in their own homes. Contextual manipulation of ethnic identity is distinctive of Kelantan-born Chinese who demonstrate not only a strong sense of belonging to their state of birth/residence, but also political loyalty towards that state.

The second part of the paper examines Chinese identity in Kelantan as viewed from the “provincial status” of both the state of Kelantan and the Chinese within the national political context of Malaysia. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), though often perceived as representing ethnic Chinese in the BN government, is neither representative nor popular among the Kelantan Chinese. This aberration suggests that Chinese politics and identity in Kelantan are distinct from national Chinese politics in the country.²

Kelantan is also “provincialised” economically. The annual Malaysia Development Plan reports of the federal government portray Kelantan under PAS as an economic backwater that is not progressive. Hence, the state remains the poorest state in Peninsular Malaysia. Projects to develop and improve infrastructure, health and medicine, transport, finance and education in the state are relatively slow and inadequate.

Data for the paper was obtained primarily through interviews with 60 Chinese in four districts in Kelantan – Kota Bharu, Tumpat, Kuala Krai and Pasir Mas – and through visits to 10 districts in the state. The respondents comprised ethnic Chinese from all walks of life. Among these were retailers, retirees from the Malaysian civil service, Peranakan farmers, educators, spokespersons for clan associations, a Chinese Muslim leader of the PAS, a Chinese representative of the PAS Supporters’ Congress, former political leaders of MCA, journalists, and Kelantan-born Chinese youths working in Kuala Lumpur. Religious leaders of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam were also interviewed. The interviews were conducted between 2002 and 2005 with subsequent visits in 2008, 2010 and 2012.

Interviews with Kelantan-born Muslims and non-Muslims indicate that the element of “provincialising” has in turn prompted the essentialisation of a provincial (Malay) political identity (associated with PAS) in contrast to an “urban” national (Malay) identity (represented by the United Malay National Organisation, UMNO). By using the concepts of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1995) and provincialism in the context of ethnic and political minorities, we illustrate the case of the non-Muslim Chinese minorities in Kelantan as the first in the country to face Islamic governance. Their reactions to the policies introduced by PAS in Kelantan have wide-ranging implications for Islamic pursuits in multicultural Malaysia.

Being Chinese in Kelantan: Multiplicity of Identity

Carstens (1983, pp. 83–84) suggests that Malaysian society might be more accurately analysed in terms of class structure, or by adopting a bottom-up approach to understanding a particular community. She believes that

A more dynamic understanding of the multi-ethnic cultures in Southeast Asia must be based not only on observations of large-scale political manoeuvrings between ethnic groups but also on detailed investigations of local perceptions of cultural identities. We need to understand, among other things, what alternative identities are available and how individuals choose among these alternatives in particular situations (Carstens, 1983, p. 82).

In terms of primary identity, the Kelantan Chinese are no different from the Chinese of the diaspora, reflecting an (overt) attachment to and practice of Chinese culture, demonstrated variously through language, education, religion and ancestral worship. The second layer of identity, however – and one that is peculiar to the Kelantan Chinese – is their strong sense of belonging to their local state, Kelantan. *Orghe Kelantan* (or born in Kelantan) remains a distinct identity, and one that distinguishes them from the rest of the Chinese residing in Malaysia (i.e. the “national” or urban Chinese identity).

Writing on Kelantan, Winzeler (1985, pp. 91–92) rightly pointed out that rules on land ownership in that state are determined by “not only ethnic status but also native status”. The state’s stringent land policy prohibits the purchase and transfer of land rights, particularly Malay Reserve Land to non-Kelantanese.³ This prohibitive rule of land and property ownership also applies to all Malay Muslims born outside Kelantan, despite their status as native Malays. This in turn has created a sense of “exclusiveness” among Kelantanese since the policy allows only Kelantan-born people designated as natives of the state (*Orghe Kelantan* or *Anak Kelantan*) to transfer, buy and sell land gazetted as Malay Reserve Land. The Kelantan Chinese are designated as “non-Malay natives of Kelantan” and are also able to purchase land in the state, giving them a sense of privilege for being born and bred in Kelantan. This restriction, however, has had a negative impact on businesses operated by non-native Chinese in Kelantan. Some respondents claimed that they have had to operate from rented property, with leasehold status of 99 years or, in the worst case scenario, to buy factory or retail space using the name of a trusted Malay counterpart.

In the past, most Chinese in Kelantan were engaged in niche economic activities such as mining and trading that had little appeal to the indigenous Malays. As such there was little competition for economic resources, specifically land ownership, between the two ethnic groups, thus reducing the likelihood of conflict. This is a common practice among ethnic minority trading groups. In an edited book on ethnicity and trade, Evers and Schrader (1994) noted that Chinese and, to some extent, Chettiar (Indian) traders in Southeast Asia tended to engage in non-agricultural activities, a strategy that they claimed prevented conflicts with the indigenous farming communities of the region. Apart from acceptance by host communities, the capacity of the Kelantan Chinese traders to demonstrate native speaker competence in the Kelantan dialect has enhanced their access to local markets. This advantage is particularly important in the

case of urban Chinese businessmen, who find it vital to befriend their Malay Muslim customers as part of an effort to create business opportunities.

In the early 1900s, Graham (1908) noted that Chinese groups in Kelantan avoided conflict and competition through involvement in separate categories of economic activity. There was, for example, the element of “othering”, specifically by the Hokkiens who were the earliest group of Chinese to settle in the state vis-à-vis other Chinese dialect groups. According to Graham (1908, p. 20),

...in former years the Chinese element was purely Hokien [*sic*], individuals of which family settled in Kelantan long years ago, and, in spite of various kinds and degrees of oppression, persisted there, joining with the Malays in rigid exclusion of all other Chinese. Within the last two or three years, however, many Singapore Chinese and Hailams have come in, either as shopkeepers or as labourers, and the Chinese population is rapidly increasing.

In the post-independence period, of all the dialect groups, the pioneer Hokkiens who resided in Kelantan were the better assimilated group into Kelantanese society. Members of this group did not, however, identify themselves as Peranakan Chinese (Teo, 2003, p. 2). In its popular local context, they referred to themselves as *Cina Kampung* (Rural Chinese). Most are still involved in farming and live in the *kampung* with Malay folks. The Hakkas, the second largest dialect group after the Hokkiens, settled in the inland areas of Ulu Kelantan and worked in the gold mines there in the early nineteenth century. When the gold supply was depleted, Hakka villagers switched to rice farming and rubber planting (Carstens, 2012, p. 7, p. 67).⁴ In the 1970s, Chinese who settled in Kelantan, irrespective of dialect group, moved into logging, retail and other commercial sectors.

As of 2010, the urban-rural divide remained significant among the Kelantan Chinese population. Almost half of the Chinese population resided in urban areas such as Kota Bharu (47.2 per cent) and Tumpat (13.1 per cent), while a small number lived in sub-urban areas such as Tanah Merah (8.5 per cent), Kuala Krai (8.4 per cent), Gua Musang (8.1 per cent) and Pasir Mas (7.5 per cent), and even fewer lived in remote areas such as Jeli (0.2 per cent), Bachok (1.7 per cent), Pasir Puteh (1.8 per cent) and Machang (3.6 per cent).⁵ The identity of urban and rural Chinese in Kelantan is further reinforced by occupation and class.

There is a distinct gap between the rural Chinese (*Cina Kampung*) and the urban Chinese (*Cina Bandar*). The rural Chinese appear to experience a dilemma about expressing their “indigenous” identity. Unlike the urban Chinese, their long history of integration with the Malays of Kelantan has created ambiguity in defining their Chinese identity. Ngeow (2006) revealed the problems faced by the rural Chinese with regard to Chineseness. One of her respondents, Ah Soon, a self-employed farmer, and his wife, Chew Peng, who live in a rural village in the district of Pasir Puteh, disclosed why they chose to send the younger two of their four school-age children to a Chinese school, while the two older children attended a Malay-medium national school. According to Ah Soon,

...a political talk (*ceramah*) organised by the Peranakan Association of Kelantan changed my mind about children’s education. I was convinced by the speaker that

one should master one's own mother tongue despite unfavourable circumstances. Culturally I practise Chinese customs and follow most rituals in the Chinese lunar calendar, but to be a *real* Chinese, you must be able to speak Mandarin. If you can't, you will be sidelined by other Chinese. That is for sure.

(Ah Soon [pseudonym], aged 46, Pasir Puteh, fieldwork interview, 2002)

Ah Soon claimed that he could not speak or write Chinese because his father had decided to send him to a Malay national school. Not wanting to repeat the same "mistake", Ah Soon sent his younger children to a Chinese school so that they could "stand tall amongst other Chinese". This response indicates that the rural Chinese community tends to react to local and national politics and make conscious decisions to assert their identity as people of Chinese ancestry with the ability to speak Chinese.⁶ While Graham noted in the early 1900s the tendency among the rural Chinese to "join the Malays and exclude all other Chinese", by the late 1990s the community had made overt and conscious attempts to assert their Chinese identity, namely through their ability to speak the language, similar to other urban Chinese in the state.

Being literate in Mandarin also meant that the Peranakan would be equal and not "sidelined" within the Chinese community. The tendency among the Peranakan to embrace Chineseness by demonstrating their fluency in Mandarin can be viewed as a shift towards "becoming", in a truer sense, a Chinese, thus going beyond an assumption that being a Chinese is based merely on descent. In other words, the change was, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, "of becoming as well as of being" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Teo (2003, p. 65) observes that "the role of language has been taken as a salient characteristic of the Peranakan identity", referring to the community's fluent command and use of the Malay language in their daily lives. Apart from the Malay language, which they speak fluently, Peranakan Chinese also demonstrate other "Malay traits" particularly through their bodily gestures, eating habits, attire and cultural ethos, thus portraying more "Malayness" than "Chineseness" in their daily lived experience. Some have adopted Malay names and are able to read and write in Jawi (Malay written in Arabic script) and even recite Quranic verses while remaining devout Buddhists. Inter-marriages between the rural Chinese and Kelantanese Thai are also quite common, as both communities share the same faith and many live in neighbouring villages in the rural parts of north-eastern Kelantan such as Wakaf Baru, in the district of Tumpat. In these rural parts of Kelantan, a common lingua franca and a shared religious space – the Kelantan Malay dialect and Thai Buddhist temples respectively – have contributed to a greater sense of co-existence. For the Thais and the Chinese in rural Kelantan, the Thai temples serve as shared "non-national" spaces that allow for cultural and religious expression (Johnson, 2012, p. 110).

Generally, the Chinese-Malay relationship remains strong at the village level in Kelantan (Raybeck, 1980; 1983). Despite their overt "Malayness", the rural community observes Chinese traditions, rituals and customary practices during celebrations (Teo, 2003; Tan, 1983). In terms of religion, the Chinese in Kelantan have embraced Buddhism (94 per cent), Taoism (2.4 per cent), Christianity (2.4 per cent), Islam (0.7 per cent) and other folk religions (0.02 per cent).⁷ The rural Chinese remain devotees of Theravada Buddhism and attend rituals and prayers at both Thai *wats* and Chinese Buddhist or Taoist temples. The religious leaders of the Buddhist Association of Kelantan who were

interviewed in this study confirmed that the state government did not impose restrictions on the religious practices of non-Muslims. Johnson (2012, p. 112) made a similar observation, stating that “acts of religious intolerance are unimaginable in Kelantan”. Christianity is slowly gaining followers among the urban Chinese in the state, with a few new churches constructed in the urban vicinity of Kota Bharu and other major towns of Kelantan, but such inclination towards Christianity was hardly noticeable in the rural areas, where Buddhism remains predominant. Yet with the rule of PAS in Kelantan, the Chinese have had to gradually adapt to state policies, such as opting to attend church services on Fridays (state rest day) instead of Sundays. Besides, there are numerous other restrictions imposed on them and aspects of their ways of life that the state government deems to be inappropriate in an Islamic society. For example, they have had to accept a ban on lottery and gambling activities as well as restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol. They have, to some extent, also conformed to the unofficial hegemony of Jawi (Malay written in Arabic script), even to the point of displaying signboards written in Jawi above their shops. While the Chinese appear to tolerate the restrictions imposed on the community on matters deemed *haram* and inappropriate to Islamic governance, collectively they have shown a clear dissatisfaction towards any attempt to introduce and subject non-Muslims to Islamic law. In fact, over the years, aggressive Islamic governance and the threat of *Hudud* (Islamic Criminal Law) have prompted the Chinese to assert their rights and identity.

Relevance of *Hudud* to the Chinese in Kelantan

The Chinese have reacted adversely to the proposal to introduce *Hudud* in Kelantan, viewing this law as pre-modern, subversive and incomprehensible.⁸ For as long as Islamic governance was confined to the Muslims, non-Muslims felt they had no reason to react or object, but the debate over the implementation of *Hudud* that has bubbled since the late 1990s and the seasonal references to the subject just before national elections have drawn mixed responses from non-Muslims.

The *Hudud* law outlines harsh penalties for criminal wrongdoers. Although non-Muslims are exempt from this law (PAS, 2004, p. 24), talk of the imposition of *Hudud* in multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia has tended to polarise and complicate inter-ethnic relations. The proposal to implement *Hudud* has faced opposition from Muslims and non-Muslims alike, in particular from legal practitioners who claim that the policy will create two sets of law in the country and is inappropriate for multicultural Malaysia (Kamaruzzaman, 2009, p. 24). In fact, Farish (*The Star*, 21 July 2011) claims that the attempt to implement an Islamic state in “practically every contemporary case has led to the strengthening of religious and cultural boundaries”. In other words, fear of the Islamic state project has in turn prompted non-Muslims to draw clear boundaries of engagement and interaction with the Muslims. On its part, PAS has repeatedly maintained that non-Muslims “will continue to enjoy freedom of religious beliefs and rituals and are at liberty to practise their own way of life without any inhibitions or obstructions by the Islamic state” (PAS, 2004). Despite this assurance, attempts by PAS to introduce *Hudud* in Kelantan have further sensitised the Chinese in Kelantan to the new political reality of the state.

It can be argued that the *Hudud* issue is not central to the survival of the Chinese in Kelantan because *Hudud* simply does not apply to non-Muslims. In fact, some Chinese

in Kelantan have been able to negotiate strategically with the PAS leadership because the Islamic party is eager to prove that non-Muslims can thrive under Islamic rule. In the process, the Chinese have gained some bargaining power with the PAS government. This has enabled Chinese in Kelantan, both rural and urban, to “express” their Chinese identity facilitated by strong group solidarity as non-Muslims. At the state level, they have the freedom to follow their religion and customary or cultural practices. At the national level, they gain special attention from Chinese in other states and the media when Islamic policies are suggested for implementation, serving as an effective “watch-dog” for their welfare and interests under PAS in Kelantan.

Our observation of the last two general elections in Malaysia shows that, for Kelantan, the link between the *Hudud* issue and election results is still obscure. In GE13, PAS secured 33 of 45 seats contested at the state level, enabling it to form a legitimate state government, with UMNO winning the other 12 seats. It is worth noting that an MCA candidate contested only one state seat – Kota Lama – which has 34 per cent Chinese living primarily in an urban setting. The incumbent PAS candidate for Kota Lama, Anuar Tan Abdullah, won the seat with a huge majority of more than 6,618 votes, indicating that both Malays and Chinese voted for him. Elsewhere in the state, where the Chinese population comprises less than 8 per cent, it is difficult to determine the extent to which their voting pattern influenced the outcome. Suffice to say that it appears that *Hudud* did not persuade the electorate to reject PAS.

At the parliamentary level, Chinese voters constituted less than 5 per cent of eligible voters in 12 of the 14 seats contested.⁹ The exceptions were the constituencies of Kota Bharu and Gua Musang. PAS won with a large majority in Kota Bharu, the capital city of Kelantan, which has 15.8 per cent urban Chinese voters, but was defeated by UMNO in Gua Musang, an inland constituency with 6.9 per cent rural Chinese voters. The ruling party BN (and in particular its major constituent parties UMNO and MCA) has made *Hudud* an “election campaign issue” in the past general elections, hoping that they would win over the non-Muslims. In fact, the voting pattern in GE13 suggests that the *Hudud* issue might have been overexploited by BN and proved counter-productive. This record stands in contrast to that in Kedah, where PAS has led the state government since the party won in 2008. Prior to GE13, the MCA Youth alleged that the cultural rights of the Chinese in Kedah had been neglected by PAS.¹⁰ This may have been a factor in PAS’s loss of the state to BN in GE13.

Essentialising Ethnicity via Religion

The concept of strategic essentialism seeks to provide a perspective on how minorities strategise through solidarity to influence mainstream society (Spivak, 1995). Eide (2010, p. 76) claims that strategic essentialism “entails that members of groups, while being highly differentiated internally, may engage in an essentialising and to some extent a standardising of their public image, thus advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivised way to achieve certain objectives”. The concept articulated by Spivak and Eide resonates accurately with the social actions taken by ethnic Chinese in Kelantan in order to sustain and advance their group identity within an overtly Islamic environment.

For each non-Muslim group in Kelantan, maintaining their religion, language and customs has become a fundamental and effective way to essentialise their distinctive culture. Generally, the non-Muslim communities are heterogeneous by nature, with variations within their respective religious groups. Denominations and sects add another layer of group solidarity, but due to the hegemony of state Islamic policies, these communities have come together based on a common identity as non-Muslim minorities to defend their political and human rights. The increasing pace of Islamisation and the fear thereof has triggered the unity of non-Muslims in facing the “other”. Yet most people in Kelantan, both Muslims and non-Muslims, are aware of the “use” of Islam as a political strategy. A non-Muslim respondent stated that:

PAS has enhanced the process of Islamisation in Kelantan. If you asked the people here 30 years ago, no policemen or officers in the hospitals would say they wished to go for pilgrimage (*hajj*). PAS is very good at using Islam as (political) propaganda. Also, last time UMNO did not think PAS could be so powerful (influential). At that time, UMNO did not stress on Islam, because PAS was not strong. Even Mahathir declared that Malaysia is an Islamic State. The stronger PAS becomes, the more Islamic UMNO would be. If UMNO neglects religion, it will collapse.

(Ching Li, Buddhist, aged 60, Kota Bharu)

The above comment serves to underscore the expedient use of Islam as a political tool by both the ruling and opposition Malay parties in the country, as observed by Farish Noor (2004). More recently, when commenting on the 2011 *Muktamar* (PAS annual general assembly), Farish Noor noted that the party’s status is “fundamentally that of a political party”:

The welfare state concept in PAS’s agenda is a response to create a new political niche for the party and in lieu of the “saturation of Islam in its discourse”. The welfare state concept cuts across ethnicity and could win support of the international community... PAS has to fight to out-Islamise UMNO and to organise itself as a modern party (cited in Saravanamuthu, 2011).

For the Chinese in Kelantan, the above scenario is seen to have weakened their position in the country, contributing to a sense of “neither here nor there”. This may have prompted a tendency to hold on to their cultural rights and assert their identity as non-Muslim citizens of the country, protected by the Malaysian constitution. They seem apprehensive of both PAS and UMNO in defending their rights.

I have never believed in PAS. When PAS faces the Chinese community they stress that PAS constitution has no issue of Islamic State, but when they face the Muslims, they say Islamic State is their ultimate aim... We Chinese have no choice; UMNO uses ethnic [differentiation] and PAS uses religion [for differentiation].

(Ching Li)

For those who live in a stronghold Muslim state such as Kelantan, the pressure to conform to the Islamic policies of the PAS-led government is immense, leading to an imposed or “imagined” sense of victimisation and suffering amongst non-Muslim minorities. Mainstream media controlled by the ruling federal coalition are quick to capture these anxieties through their depiction of non-Muslims as victims of PAS and its Islamisation policies. *The Star*, a mainstream English newspaper owned by the MCA, and *Sin Chew Daily*, the most widely circulated Chinese daily in the country, provide frequent and comprehensive coverage about Chinese under the PAS in Kelantan, and in particular news relating to *Hudud*.¹¹

Despite media portrayals that showcase the marginalisation of non-Muslims in Kelantan, the findings of our study reveal that this depiction may be exaggerated. The state government is aware of the sensitive nature of the issue and that its policies towards minorities are closely scrutinised by the secular UMNO/BN. In fact, it has given the non-Muslim community the freedom to decide on matters related to religion, language, education and culture. The PAS government has also been generous in meeting the demands and needs of ethnic Chinese in the state. Apart from granting land for Chinese schools and places of worship, the PAS leadership led by Nik Aziz, the former *ulama* Chief Minister, has often graced and officiated at functions and festivals organised by the Chinese community. However, in terms of economic performance, the *ulama*-led state government has failed to improve the living standards of its people. This is a sore point with the majority of the Chinese interviewed in this study. According to the Kelantan Development Strategic Plan 1999, the state has a high poverty rate, relatively low household incomes, a high unemployment rate and unbalanced economic development and infrastructure. This has in turn led to out-migration of Kelantanese elites and middle class.

In responding to the Islamic resurgence in the state, non-Islamic religious groups, NGOs, clan or dialect groups, alumni of the Chinese vernacular schools and their respective parent-teacher associations have participated actively in establishing strong bonding between their members through regular meetings and events. Conversion to Islam is still rare, particularly among the urban Chinese, and some non-Muslims in Kelantan are in fact becoming more devoted to their beliefs, be they Buddhist, Christian, Tao or folk beliefs, seemingly in reaction to Islamisation. The maintenance of Chinese culture over time can be seen as a strong reification of their moral authority, values and beliefs while co-existing harmoniously with Malay Muslims. This is part of the community’s strategic essentialism that has not been fully understood by communal political parties such as the MCA. In sum, the BN has failed to alleviate the anxiety and frustrations of the Chinese in Kelantan through a futile attempt to highlight the threat of *Hudud* as the main issue of concern, but has not succeeded in addressing the more pressing concerns of the community – e.g. scarcity of job opportunities, restrictions on cultural practices, ban on entertainment outlets, and gender segregation in the public sphere.

Essentialising State Identity through the Image of the “Provincial”

The Kelantan Chinese identity, specifically in the last 30 years, has in many ways been shaped by the perceived threat of Islamic governance, and what we refer to as the

“provincialisation” of the state of Kelantan in national political discourse. This provincialisation, we argue, has been conducive to the creation of a strong sense of belonging and loyalty towards the state of Kelantan, among all people born in Kelantan irrespective of ethnicity and religion. As a result of provincialisation, national identity or identification with the central/federal government is secondary to the essentialist position of state identity for all Kelantanese.

The term “provincialism” is used in this paper to draw attention to the state of Kelantan’s peripheral rather than central status in relation to the states located on the west coast of the country or the central administrative seat. Kelantan’s peripheral status in relation to other Malay states in Peninsular Malaysia has had an undeniable impact on the identity of the people of the state. For instance, the *orghe Kelantan* identity that is reflected in the distinct Kelantan dialect is viewed as a language of the “provincial”, one that is different from the standard/national Malay language.

There are numerous other factors that make Kelantan unique among the Malay states, thus contributing to its provincialism. First, the Kelantan dialect and the use of Jawi writing make it different. The latter tradition (use of Jawi script) is a particular point of pride since it has been in place since the early arrival of Islam in Kelantan. Through its long tradition of religious schools and the connections of its *ulama* network with Mecca and Aligarh, Kelantan has acquired a religious puritanist image. The impact of the Middle East and Islamic India is greater in Kelantan than elsewhere in Malaysia due to travelling *ulama*, scholars/teachers, and students. Apparently, this is a tradition that is still very much observed in the state especially through the Tabligh Jamaat movement. Kelantan’s isolation and remoteness from the federal capital was partly rooted in the administrative categories created by the British in the late nineteenth century, grouping Kelantan and other less developed northern Malay states together as the Unfederated Malay States (UMS). In contrast, the more developed west coast states were collectively called the Federated Malay States (FMS) and had better port, rail and road connections. Consequently, the UMS appeared isolated and remote from the federal capital located in the FMS. Its people too had frequent and close connections to the Malay states on the north-eastern side of the peninsula – such as Pattani (in south Thailand) – and with the Middle East. This has had the long-term impact of establishing Kelantan as a distinct Malay state with a strong and traditional Islamic character in comparison to all other Malay states in the peninsula (Kessler, 1974, p. 275).

Islam has had a strong influence in the development of provincial politics in the state. Kessler (1974, p. 275) alludes to a “Malay political awakening” in Kelantan prompted by a widening class distinction between the elite and peasant groups during the colonial period. Consequently, Kelantanese society rejected parties that seemed to be representing elite interests (including the Malay aristocrats) and preferred instead a kind of representation that was led by *ulama* who championed the welfare of the Malay peasant. It is no surprise then that Kelantan politics is intimately intertwined with the growth of PAS as a political party in Malaysia. To the large rural and peasant society of Kelantan, PAS represented their interests best. The party also retained its appeal in part because of the growing disenchantment with UMNO, which in the 1980s was fast becoming a party for middle-class entrepreneurs, serving the needs of an elite category of “UMNOputras” (Lian and Appudurai, 2011, pp. 71–72).

The less urban landscape of the state compared to other states in modern-day Malaysia also enhances Kelantan’s provincialism. In this regard, the media, as

mentioned earlier, plays a crucial role in reifying the provincial status of Kelantan and of all those who live there. Within this scenario, the Chinese in Kelantan are also presented as provincial and less urbanised than Chinese elsewhere in the country. Even the colloquial Chinese spoken in the state is peculiar to Kelantan Chinese. The provincialised who are “othered” by the centre (federal government) demonstrate strong group solidarity. This group resists “the urban-modern metropolitan” by holding on to a strong sense of belonging to the Kelantan state rather than the nation-state (which seems to be representing the urban metropolis, or in this case the federal state anchored in the capital city). For the provincialised Muslims and non-Muslims in Kelantan, state identity and loyalty supersede national identity. Therefore, provincial politics rather than national politics via national political coalitions constitute a common political feature of this state.

A Kelantan Chinese youth who was interviewed spoke fondly of the brotherhood of Kelantan-born people irrespective of ethnicity. While riding his bike along the highways on a trip back to Kota Bharu, Heng Ann was stranded on the road due to a tyre puncture. He recalls that the only people who stopped to help him were a group of young Malay men, all Kelantanese. He says they stopped upon noticing the number-plate of his bike, which was prefixed with the letter “D”, indicating a Kelantan-registered vehicle. Heng Ann went on to say that it is only among Kelantanese that one can find such solidarity irrespective of ethnic or religious identification. Here the sense of belonging to the state of Kelantan is a premium categorisation, one that is above national identifications (Heng Ann, aged 27, self-employed, Kuala Lumpur).

Heng Ann’s wife, who left Kelantan to work in Kuala Lumpur, insisted on returning to Kelantan to deliver her baby. When asked why, she was quick to point out that she wanted to make sure her child’s birth was registered in the state of Kelantan, and that the identification card would carry the number allocated to the Kelantan born (i.e. “03” on their Malaysian identity card). Whereas most people would choose to have their babies delivered in a modern hospital in the city, the scenario above illustrates an alternative sense of “leaning”. The provincial label attached to Kelantan has not stigmatised its people; rather, it has strengthened their strong sense of parochial belonging to that “provincial world”, irrespective of ethnicity or religion. The more the federal state discriminates against Kelantan, the more the Kelantanese demonstrate a strong sense of belonging to that state. Withholding federal funding for development programs for Kelantan, for instance, is one of the many overt ways of discriminating against the opposition-led state and ensuring it remains provincial and underdeveloped. For the Chinese in Kelantan, who are “a minority within a minority”, being provincial also implies a degree of “marginalisation” in the socio-politics of the country.

Both state and national politics have crucial implications on the identity construction of the Chinese in Kelantan. While Chinese in other parts of Peninsular Malaysia make political choices based on national politics, for the Chinese in Kelantan, the state and PAS politics exerts equal importance. In fact, politically, Kelantan Chinese are “marginal” on both counts, national and state (subnational). They are seen as politically marginalised at the state level, given their small population. They do not constitute a significant number of voters in any specific constituency in Kelantan, with the exception of Kota Lama state constituency in Kota Bharu, the capital city of Kelantan. In past general elections, Chinese voters in Kelantan often had to choose between PAS and UMNO candidates (both ethnic Malays), as there were very few Chinese

representatives, given that the political scene was dominated by Muslims. Yet socially, the acceptance of Chinese, who are fondly referred to as *orghe Cino kito* (our Chinese people) by Malay Muslims in Kelantan, shows elements of integration and acculturation of the former within the socio-cultural space of the larger Kelantan society. The term *orghe Cino kito* itself is a rural/provincial category, used commonly in reference to the Peranakan Chinese who reside in the *kampung* (or rural) areas. For the urban Chinese in Kelantan who are not *orghe Cino kito*, but are included as *orghe Kelantan*, a similar sense of belonging – i.e. to the state where they were born – is invoked. This sub-national identity of belonging to a “provincial” state that is reified through the inclusive *orghe Kelantan* identity is both functional and strategic for a non-Muslim minority community such as the Chinese residing in a state governed by Islamic policies. Apart from a (i) global Chinese diaspora identity and (ii) Chinese national identities, the present case study of the Chinese minority in Kelantan showcases a strong sense of provincial identity.

Just as the idea of belonging to a large Chinese global diaspora is viewed as liberating for Chinese disempowered by “dominant national cultures” (Ang, 2004, p. 181), the idea of belonging to a small sub-unit is viewed as empowering. This sense of belonging has the potential to “deterritorialise” the Malaysian Chinese identity, from one that is bound to the nation-state (i.e. a unitary Malaysian Chinese as a nation-state category) to one that is provincial and parochial. In the end, this identity enables the Chinese as a minority in the state of Kelantan to negotiate their rights and to survive within the challenging environment of being governed by an Islamic party, particularly in the provincial and rural areas. At the same time, even though Islamic governance in Kelantan has made ethnicity more salient through an exaggeration of the Muslim/non-Muslim divide, provincialisation has consolidated state identity and made loyalty to Kelantan more salient.

Concluding Remarks

Kelantan stands out as a political and cultural entity distinct from the other states in Malaysia. In this paper, we have provided the various reasons for this phenomenon, specifically referring to an exclusive state identity of being born in Kelantan (namely, the *orghe Kelantan* identity), strengthened by the distinct dialect spoken by the people there (the Kelantan Malay dialect). The Kelantan Malay dialect is spoken fluently by people born in Kelantan irrespective of their ethnic origin. It serves as a functional tool that creates solidarity among the peoples of the state. Through this common dialect, non-Malay minority communities such as the Chinese also feel a strong sense of belonging to the state of Kelantan, a scenario that is not found among the Chinese living elsewhere in Peninsular Malaysia. In this sense, we argue that Chinese identity in Kelantan is peculiar to the place – i.e. Kelantan – and in contrast to the identity of the rest of the Chinese people in the country.

Drawing partly on the concept of strategic essentialism, we have shown that the Chinese non-Muslims in Kelantan have been able to assert their rights and their space as a religious minority in the PAS-led state of Kelantan through the essentialisation of their identity as Chinese, sending their children to Chinese schools and increasingly speaking Chinese/Mandarin. At the same time, they have been able to draw upon the unifying

“provincial” identity of *orghe Kelantan* along with Kelantan-born Muslims, a factor that seems to favour their acceptance among Malay Muslims there. In addition, we have alluded to the process of provincialising by the federal government led by UMNO and its component parties which prompted greater signs of solidarity, affection and loyalty to the local state. To the Kelantanese, state identity is positioned as a primary identification compared to national identity. In a similar vein, we have illustrated that Kelantan constitutes a strong case of provincial politics vis-à-vis national politics at work, and this may be the future of Malaysian politics. A similar trend may also be found in the case of the Chinese in parts of Sabah and Sarawak, where provincial politics is strongly evident.

Revisiting Carstens’ (2005, p. 199) hierarchy of identity construction among the Chinese in Malaysia, we note that the first level – i.e. political constructions of ethnic identity at the national level – is largely derived from an “authority-defined” perspective. In other words, accounts of ethnic identity formation in the country are often reflective of the official perspective as endorsed by the state through its varied official and media representations. The perspective of the people or their lived experience (i.e. the personal level) associated with “everyday realities” (Shamsul, 1996) is rarely depicted. Steering away from that norm, we have attempted in this paper to demonstrate the identities of the Chinese minority in Kelantan mostly through their lived experience, rather than the identities defined by the authorities, capturing in the process the multiple and complex responses to their identity crisis as they face challenges within their political and socio-religious environment.

Indeed, Chinese identity politics in Kelantan reflects Kelantan’s particular historical and political experience vis-à-vis other states in Peninsular Malaysia. Relevant to this, it can be argued that PAS and the Chinese as well as other minorities in Kelantan are “fellow marginals” in the context of national politics. Their shared history and language is a potent factor in the promotion of shared co-existence and alternative political choices.

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Notes

1. In 2010, Malay Muslims comprised 95.2 per cent or 1.47 million of Kelantan’s total population of 1.54 million; Chinese constituted 3.4 per cent; Thais and Indians constituted 0.9 per cent. The statistics for religion were Muslims (95.2 per cent); Buddhists (3.8 per cent); Christians (0.3 per cent); Hindus (0.2 per cent) (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2010, pp. 11–13, pp. 47–49).

2. A similar scenario is observed among Chinese in Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia, who tend to be aligned to local political parties and communities, indicating that there is an active element of provincial politics in the country vis-à-vis national politics.
3. Similarly, in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, land cannot be purchased by non-natives born outside the state.
4. The Hakka in Ulu Kelantan were regrouped into settlements called the Chinese New Villages during the Malayan Emergency period (1948–60). The resettlement policy was introduced by the British to curb the spread of communist activities and ideology in rural and remote villages, viewed as most susceptible to the communist threat.
5. Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2010, pp. 47–49).
6. There is a similar and wider movement by Peranakan Chinese elsewhere in the Southeast Asia region, such as among Indonesian Chinese and Singapore Straits Chinese, to increasingly identify with mainstream Chinese (those who are not assimilated to the local people and culture) through identity markers such as ability to speak Chinese and adherence to Chinese cultural practices.
7. Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2000).
8. Interviews conducted in Kelantan, 2002–05, 2008, 2010 and 2012.
9. In GE13, PAS won 9 of 14 parliamentary seats – Tumpat, Pengkalan Chepa, Kota Bharu, Pasir Mas, Rantau Panjang, Kubang Kerian, Bachok, Pasir Puteh and Kuala Krai. UMNO won 5 seats – Ketereh, Tanah Merah, Machang, Jeli and Gua Musang (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 7 May 2013).
10. The MCA launched a short video clip showing Chinese voters in Kedah venting their frustration at the state government's policies, which they perceived as unfair and not progressive. Other issues included the 50 per cent *bumiputera* housing quota, guidelines forbidding women from performing on stage during Chinese New Year, and non-renewal of entertainment licences during the fasting month of Ramadan. See www.youtube.com/mcahq.
11. See, for example, *The Star*, 29 August 2012, p. 1; *Sin Chew Daily*, 29 August 2012, p. 1, pp. 3–4, pp. 6–8 and p. 34. Other Chinese vernacular newspapers such as *Oriental Daily News*, *China Press* and *Nanyang Siang Pau* also carried reports on the issue, albeit less prominently.

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