

Voices Unveiled: Navigating Intersectionality in the Political Landscape of Chinese Women in Peninsular Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the factors influencing Chinese women's involvement in politics in Peninsular Malaysia, using qualitative interviews with ten participants selected via purposive sampling. Key informants include female political representatives, male politicians, academics and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) activists. The research applies intersectionality theory to analyze how internal and external agents of political socialization and various challenges shape women's political engagement and culture. Internal socialization agents encompass education, economic status, family background, religion, ethnicity, and gender. External agents include Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), political parties, and community networks. The study identifies multiple challenges that Chinese women face, such as gender competition, cronyism, low political interest, time management conflicts, racial sentiments, sexist remarks, male dominance, competition from political opponents, and ideological barriers. These agents and challenges are intertwined and impact Chinese women's political culture, which, in turn, influences their empowerment in political, economic, and social spheres. The intersectionality framework reveals how overlapping social identities and systemic barriers shape their political experiences and efforts towards empowerment. This study provides insights into the complex dynamics affecting Chinese women's political participation and highlights the need for comprehensive strategies to enhance their roles in politics and broader societal contexts.

Keywords: *Chinese Women; Political Culture; Agents of Political Socialization; Political Challenges; Intersectionality.*

Introduction

The arrival of multi-ethnic immigrants in Malaya began during the heyday of Melaka. Malaya, previously known as the Malay Archipelago, has become the focus of multi-ethnic communities and is visited by traders from all over the world, including Arabs, Europeans, Persians, Indians, Chinese, and the Malay world (Haniffa, 2012). The diversity of ethnicities that trade in Melaka has made Melaka a multi-ethnic city. Hussin (2006) states that the maritime trade situation in Southeast Asia covers a vast area and has diverse population groups, races, nations, religious beliefs, and spoken languages. Factors such as geographical location and the rotation of monsoon winds have brought this population together. The influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants increased rapidly after British colonization to succeed in British economic policy. This ethnic diversity gave rise to different experiences among the multi-ethnic population in Malaya at that time due to diverse historical factors, cultural practices, language, economy, education, and religious practices.

These different experiences also influenced the early movements and struggles of women in Malaysia, which have gone through various complex processes and are divided into several feminisms. These different understandings have caused the feminist movement in Malaysia to reach often not an agreement on contributing to a woman's voice since the colonial era. Women's thinking systems are tied to and different based on ideological, religious, ethnic, cultural, and class factors. Therefore, the experience of women in Malaysia is different depending on various multidimensional aspects, and this phenomenon has influenced the political involvement of women, including Chinese women, in Peninsular Malaysia.

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The political involvement of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia is still limited. The percentage of Chinese women in the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) in the 14th General Election was 4.5 percent and decreased to 3.6 percent in the 15th General Election. Meanwhile, the percentage of Chinese women in the State Legislative Assemblies (DUN) was 3.4 percent in the 14th General Election. This figure has recorded an increase in the 15th General Election, which is 4.6 percent. The percentage of Chinese women in the Dewan Rakyat and State Legislative Assemblies has been illustrated in Table 1. In this context, although women in this country are more educated than men, women's involvement in politics is still low, including among Chinese women. The Global Gender Gap Report (GGG) 2022 shows that 48.44 percent of women enter higher education institutions compared to 37.05 percent of men (Abdullah, 2023).

Table 1.0. Percentage of Ethnic Chinese Women in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies (DUN) 12th to 15th General Election

	PRU-12	PRU-13	PRU-14	PRU-15
House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat)	4.0	2.3	4.5	3.6
State Legislative Assemblies (DUN)	2.6	3.8	3.4	4.6

Source: Parliament of Malaysia.

The involvement of Chinese women in the political field in Malaysia is still limited. This can be seen in the number of Chinese women in Parliament and the State Assembly. The quota system of 30 percent of women in the highest council by the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), parties has yet to reach its target. This study must see the indicators that may cause this phenomenon in that sequence. Therefore, efforts are needed to empower Chinese women so they are not marginalized in politics. Improvement in empowering Chinese women is essential because the voice of Chinese women is necessary in the political field to represent and care for their needs and interests in Malaysia.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

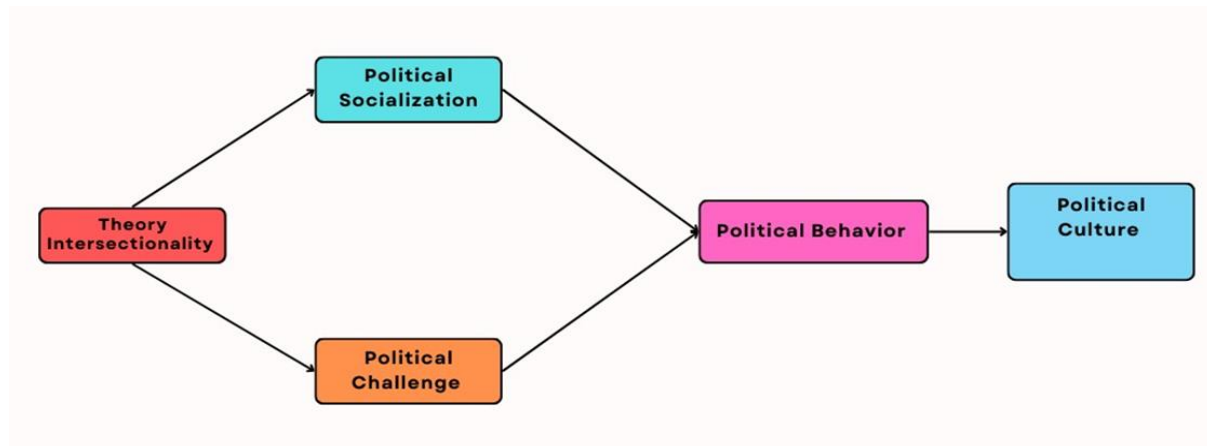


Figure 1 is the theoretical and conceptual framework used in this study. The political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia is influenced by individual and group political behavior due to the political socialization process and political challenges. Group political behavior is meant for individuals based on

the same way of life, religion, and culture. Political socialization and political challenges influence individuals' perceptions and political behavior, which then shape the political behavior of community groups and are translated through political culture among Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. Intersectionality theory is used to identify indicators that may influence Chinese women's political behavior and political culture in Peninsular Malaysia through political socialization and political challenges.

Ahmad (2005) states that the process of political socialization involves the nurturing, teaching, and transferring of specific political values, symbols, and behaviors from one generation to the next. Furthermore, the process of transferring consists of two agents: the primary agent and the secondary agent. In the early stages, individuals will be exposed to primary agents and strengthened through secondary agents as they grow older. The primary agent consists of the family, the person closest to a person, while the secondary agent consists of the school, work environment, and mass media. Political challenges appear as obstacles and problems for Chinese women politicians attempting to get involved in politics. The study of Chinese women's political culture must be addressed because they play an essential role not only in the family and community but also in socio-economic development and the country's political stability. Intersectionality theory, on the other hand, assumes that behavior towards a decision or action is caused by various factors that overlap, link, and intersect rather than being separate or standing on their own. For example, various intersect and interrelated factors influence the decision to move house. Contributing factors include transportation facilities, location, economic ability, and safety (Ramli & Talib, 2023).

While political behavior is a fundamental question about the political ability of the community, which consists of their level of knowledge, understanding, and interest in matters related to politics (Dalton & Klingemann, 2009), political culture, according to Almond (1956), is political action based on specific patterns that differ between countries. Indicators of history, religion, culture, government, administrative goals, innovative capabilities, widespread involvement in elections, and competition between parties cause differences between countries.

Ethnicity, Gender and Politic

The history of Chinese women's involvement in activism and politics in Malaya is divided into three stages. The first stage began in the early 19th century with the awareness of elite women and intellectuals from the Straits Chinese community who received English education. The second stage started from 1925 to 1940 as a stage of awakening in activism and politics among women from various levels, including women from ordinary people. The third stage began in 1941 and continued until 1957 when Chinese women were active in the national politics of Malaya and were involved in the national political movement demanding independence from the British colonialists (Padzil, 2017).

The involvement of Chinese women is not only decreasing in the political field, but the participation of the Chinese community in the political field in Malaysia has been low since the country achieved independence again (Chin, 2001). The low level of involvement of Chinese women since the beginning of independence can be seen in the number of MCA sub-committee members; no single woman was in the MCA Annual Report in 1961. However, after Ling Leong Sik became MCA President, he was seen to be very concerned about women. Many MCA women have begun to be given places within or outside the party. This is seen as more drastic than that of United Malays National Organization (UMNO) women. For example, Phang Ooi Choo was a former senior official in the Ministry of Public Works who was later transferred to the Ministry of Transport, where his talent was honed and tested by Ling Leong Sik himself as a minister in the ministry. Next, Dr. Ng Yen Yen has been appointed as MCA Vice President. According to him, the appointment of women to high positions is influenced by political power. If there are qualified women, but without political insistence, it is difficult for women to be appointed to important positions due to the existence of a 'glass ceiling' that prevents women from advancing one step further (Karim & Talib, 2016).

Individual political involvement is influenced by the challenge indicators and the process of political socialization (Ramli et al., 2023). The process of political socialization is a process that allows individuals to recognize the political system, which will then influence their perception of politics as well as their reaction

to political symptoms (Omar et al., 2008). According to Rush and Althoff (1971), the process of political socialization is influenced by various agents, such as social agents, the economy, the cultural environment of a society, interaction experiences, and individual personalities. According to Samsu (2007), political socialization agents include family, peers, education, and mass media. According to Abdullah (2008), agents of political socialization consist of gender, religion, marital status, place of residence, spoken language, school, Institute of Higher Education, print media, electronic media, NGOs, history, culture, and political parties.

The percentage of women's involvement in politics is still low. Women face various challenges. Furthermore, the government's efforts to increase women's participation in elections have yet to reach their goal. Therefore, all parties, including the government and political parties, need to immediately pull together the appropriate strategy and approach to increase the involvement of women in politics. This will ensure that the presence of women in the political arena becomes more significant. Finally, they will be ready to compete and get the people's support in elections, further making women's voices more influential in the public policy-making process (Nadzri, 2022).

According to Zakuan (2024), the gendered roles of men and women in the family and social sphere give rise to the primary challenges encountered by women within political parties. These roles, which dictate expectations such as women's responsibilities as mothers, wives, and caretakers, juxtaposed with the perception of men as more fitting leaders, underscore how deeply ingrained gender norms are within the fabric of politics and its institutions. Such norms have solidified into conventions that shape the participation of both men and women within political parties. It is disheartening that these entrenched norms persist unabated despite the country's modernization and development. The hurdles confronting women are exacerbated by a political landscape that reinforces male dominance, perpetuating the marginalization of women in leadership roles and decision-making bodies. This reinforces the necessity for deconstructing these norms, as without such deconstruction, women's political aspirations and ambitions will remain unrealized. The amalgamation of factors such as gender stereotyping, women's agency, party structure, the intersectionality of age and gender, and the limited political efficacy among women collectively contribute to rendering leadership in politics a formidable challenge for women.

This study examines the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. This is because previous research on the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia is still limited, and efforts to assess the multidimensional impact by using the framework of political socialization agents through the process of political socialization and political challenges on the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia are still lacking. Limited knowledge of this issue is also one of the factors that has made it difficult for the empowerment of the Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia. Therefore, this study explores and examines the multidimensional impact of intersectionality theory and its influence on Chinese women's political culture in Peninsular Malaysia.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach through a semi-structured interview method and secondary data. Intensive interviews based on semi-structured questions were conducted to ensure the uniformity of the information obtained. The identities of informants who have been interviewed in this study will not be disclosed to maintain the principle of anonymity, which aims to ensure the safety of the informants. A total of 10 informants were interviewed, consisting of Chinese female political representatives, female NGO activists, academics, and male politicians in Peninsular Malaysia, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. List of Informants and Organizations

Informant		Political party/Organization
Informant 1	Female Politician	MCA
Informant 2	Female Politician	MCA

Informant 3	Female Politician	PKR
Informant 4	Female Politician	PKR
Informant 5	Female Politician	DAP
Informant 6	Female Politician	DAP
Informant 7	Female Politician	DAP
Informant 8	Male Politician	PKR
Informant 9	Academician	Universiti Malaya
Informant 10	NGO Activist	(NGO)

The number of informants is determined based on the views of several scholars. Charmaz (1990) states that the sample size used through qualitative methods is smaller than that used through quantitative methods. Through qualitative methods, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of a situation. The informants chosen to participate in this study are political representations of Chinese women. They were interviewed because they are active and have been directly involved in politics, either holding important positions in political parties or being members of the Dewan Rakyat or the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Peninsular Malaysia. They are individuals who understand the actual situation in the political world. Chinese women's political representatives are selected from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the People's Justice Party (PKR). MCA and DAP are parties dominated by ethnic Chinese. While a Malay ethnic group dominates the PKR party, it receives support from multi-ethnic groups.

Female academics were interviewed because they have expertise in the political culture of Chinese society and are actively researching the political culture of Chinese society. Chinese women NGO activists, including Chinese women, were chosen because they are involved in efforts to protect women's rights. NGO activists also collaborate and interact directly with female politicians, political parties, and even the government to empower women. NGO activists can give opinions and views based on their experience in evaluating the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. A small view of the male informant was also included because he was one of the individuals directly involved in working with Chinese female politicians. The interview process was stopped after the data and information obtained reached saturation. The saturation process is reached when the study's results no longer display new findings. When the findings have reached saturation, the interview process can be stopped. The concept of saturation is reached when the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant findings Mason (2010).

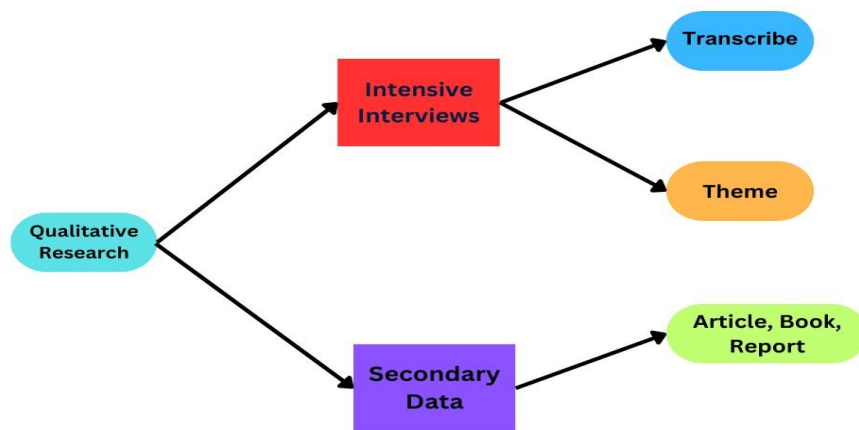
Statements from the interview process with the informants were recorded and transcribed through verbatim copies. The frequency and similarity of views expressed by the informants were themed. Story statements or storylines, such as direct quotations that show the informant's experience and feelings about the subject being studied, are also displayed. A string of direct quotations that have been recorded verbatim, and then there is the use of market language or a mixed language between Malay and English. Informants were coded according to the number of individuals involved in the interview process. This direct quote has been coded with a specific page and line to make it easier to refer to, as in Table 3.

Table 3. Coding process

Informant 5:	“When I studied abroad, I was the President of Malaysian’s student Association lah” (P: 108, L: 3174-3175).
Keywords:	
P:	Page
L:	Line

Secondary data are also being used in this study to obtain information about the history and background and to provide a clearer picture of the phenomenon being studied. The referred secondary data are in the form of articles, books, and reports. This data is obtained from newspapers, libraries, National Archives of Malaysia (ARKIB), the ministry, and political parties. The variety of sources being referred to is called triangulation sources to prevent any bias or injustice in the data collection process (Ahmad, 2022). An overview of the research design used is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Research Design



Research Findings and Discussion

The political behavior and political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia are influenced by political socialization agents through the process of political socialization and political challenges. These indicators are seen to be interconnected and intersect, as highlighted through intersectionality theory. Political socialization agents of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia have been classified into two categories: internal political socialization agents and external political socialization agents. The level of education, economy, family, history, religion, gender, and culture are agents of internal political socialization. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), associations, political parties, and communities are external political socialization agents. Chinese women's political challenges in Peninsular Malaysia consist of gender competition, cronyism, political interests, time issues, racial sentiments, sexist statements, male dominance, political competitors, and political ideologies. The political culture of Chinese women will then influence the empowerment of Chinese women, which includes economic, political, and social aspects.

Political Socialization

Model of political socialization agents through the political socialization process of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia in intersectionality dimension have been developed to describe the intersection and relationship between political socialization agents of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. These socialization agents are interconnected, as highlighted in Intersectionality Theory and further influence the behavior and political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia.

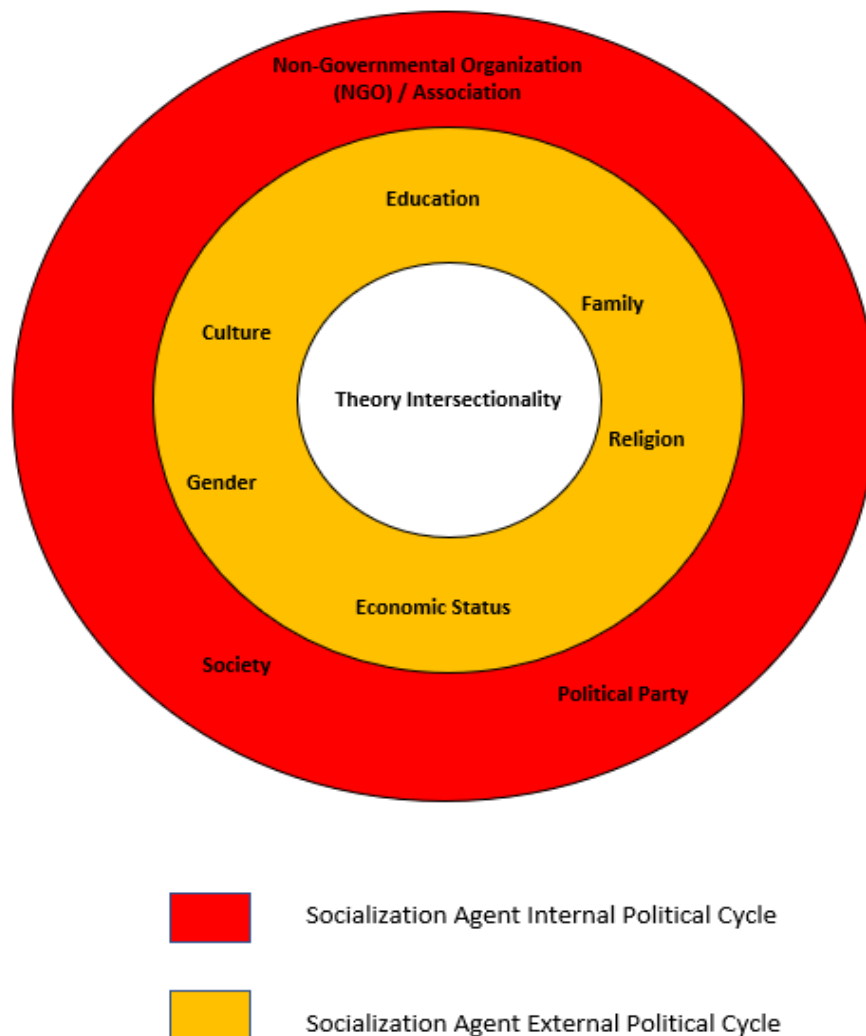


Figure 3. Model of Political Socialization Agents in Intersectionality Theory Dimension among Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia

The level of education is one of the important agents of political socialization. This phenomenon has also influenced them to get involved in the political field because they are sensitive to their rights and have the awareness to fight for their fate in the political field. The informants who were interviewed consisted of individuals with bachelor's degrees and master's degrees. Lecturers, teachers, journalists, entrepreneurs, accountants, and lawyers are among the careers they have held. A high level of education allows informants to have economic independence because they have an economic status with a good amount of income. Economic independence allows women to be involved in public life, including in the political field. Their role is no longer limited to homepicking or homemaking.

“Because of economic independence, so she has financial planning. Not only for her family, but also for herself. So, it is very important. Women also have their own planning, for economic independence and participation among public life. What I mean is you become a member of public. You are not only a member in your home as a home pick, homemaker, just that. Now you can become a teacher, a minister. You can go to election, participate in political party, you can go to campaign and you can vote.” (P:157, L: 4685-4682)

Gender issues are also a part of the political socialization agents. These issues included the differences in mind framework of female and male politicians. Other than that, political field are often labelled as hard, masculine and dirty, which is more suitable to the nature of men. As a matter of fact, men are often considered to be tough and strong compared to women, who are often labelled as weak. According to the informant:

“...for the Chinese, there are still many people who think politics is too masculine lah, no matter what it is, it is indeed masculine, and many people think that it is not suitable for women to get involve.. sometimes there are irrational complainers, usually men handled them because they have the strength, right? That’s why they fear them as a leader” (P: 107, L: 3170-3175)

Other than that, family is among one of the important political socialization agents, because without family supports, it is difficult for women to remain in politics. According to the informants, their involvements in politics are supported by family members. There are also some cases at the initial stage of their involvement in the political field, where they have received opposition from their family members.

“When I showed sign that I wanted to get involved in politics, my mother asked me if I could not join? Because she worried if something might happen to me. So it’s not too supportive la. But since I insisted, they tried to understand la. Still okay, but at first they won’t support la because they are afraid and worried.” (P: 165, L: 4933-4937)

Besides that, culture is also one of the political socialization agents of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. According to Itulua (2014:1) culture refers to the way of life of the community which includes the way of dressing, marriage customs, language, family life, work patterns, religious ceremonies and leisure activities. Most of the informants stated that there are no constraints on cultural practices that prevent them from getting involved in politics. The patriarchal culture still exists but has been eroded by time. According to the informants, Chinese communities can already accept women leaders.

The informant said that female candidates are better because they are labelled as clean, less likely to get involved in dirty politics, less corruption, more loyal and more genuine in carrying out their duties. These are among the statements of informants:

“Nowadays, I think Chinese ethnic community can accept female leadership because it has been common. I think the perception towards women has changed a bit. Maybe 20 or 30 years ago (90/80s), they were a bit skeptical. Pregnant woman need to take care of the family and may didn’t have enough time to take care of the community or the interests of the voters. But now the perceptions are different. They see women as clean, less corrupt, more loyal and more genuine in carrying out the tasks given to them. For me, their performances are good. They didn’t get too involved in dirty politics. So I think this is a good and positive development.” (P: 157, L: 4712-4727)

Most of the informants that have been interviewed are Buddhist and Christian. Buddhism and Christianity do not prevent them from getting involved in politics. According to the informants:

“Buddhism, as a Buddhist we don’t have such err what to us is every human is equal... that’s in terms of religious teaching la, even I think Christian also like that right. Christian also like that err either you are Christian or you because most of us we are Christian or either Buddhist. So both of the religions do not have such teachings” (P:7, L: 192-195)

Religious indicators influence the way of life including politics. If the practiced religion restricts the freedom of women to be involved in politics, it will definitely have an impact on the individuals involved.

While the external political socialization agents are Non-Government Organization (NGOs/Association), the community and political parties. Most of the informants started to get involved in NGOs first before they joined the political field. Their active involvement in NGOs/association is because of their interest in carrying out welfare activities by helping the community and target groups. Their active involvement in the

political field has given them useful experiences in managing NGOs as well as helped to hone their leadership skills.

In fact, according to the informants, their involvement in politics is to solve the financial constraints that hinder their efforts to help targeted groups through NGOs. According to the informant:

“...I am being visited by more and more poor people especially the Indians, and indeed our funds are limited. Then the committee members said to me, this is how it is. Since I have the experience, because I ran a business with my husband right, So I can appear in the front, then try to take a position as a member of council. I don't think I want that, I really don't want to, I don't want to be bound to, right. But, in that situation, lack of funds, my friend said just go and try..” (P: 84, L: 2407-2417)

Most of the informants have altruism, which symbolizes that the Chinese community is independent and ready to help the members of society who need help without government subsidies. This phenomenon enabled the Chinese community to help their community, and politics is one of the pillars in order to succeed the empowerment efforts of the Chinese ethnics consistently.

Moreover, community is one of the important political socialization agents. The attitude of wanting to help the community, including women, drives them to become a politician.

“...what drives me to be involved in politics is actually the vision and mission to help more people especially women, that's why I joined politic for and until today lah for this position, because to me for women, there are only women who can understand the needs of women. There are so many you know in terms of policy, act and legislation that are not fair to women and the vulnerable groups such as the elderly and our children, how to say it was outdated...” (P:2, L: 58-62)

Next, the political behavior of women is also influenced by political parties. The opportunities and spaces given to women in the party allow them to show their competencies and further develop their careers in politics. According to the informant, women are given space and opportunities to be election candidates at DUN and Dewan Rakyat levels. They also have the opportunities to hold important positions in the party. But it is necessary to prove that they are more capable and more qualified than male politicians. This phenomenon gives a great challenge to women, and shows that the glass ceiling factor subtly still affects the male-dominated political parties. The 30 percent quota target for women at the party leadership level has been set by MCA, DAP and PKR. According to the informant:

“...the 30 percent quota will be a glass ceiling, it is not to meet the 30 percent but to encourage more women to participate in politics in the decision-making process, that is not just to meet the quota but to encourage promoting...”(P:121, L: 3560-3564).

The targeted quota is to increase the involvement of women in politics at the party leadership level. However according to the informants, this quota target has not yet reached the target due to the lack of capable and qualified women.

Table 4. Percentage of Female Highest Council Members in DAP, MCA and PKR parties in Malaysia 2016 to 2018

Political party	2016	2017	2018
DAP	10.0	15.6	16.1
MCA	7.1	9.8	11.5
PKR	25.0	15.6	27.8

Source: The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Parliament of Malaysia and Malaysian Election Commission)

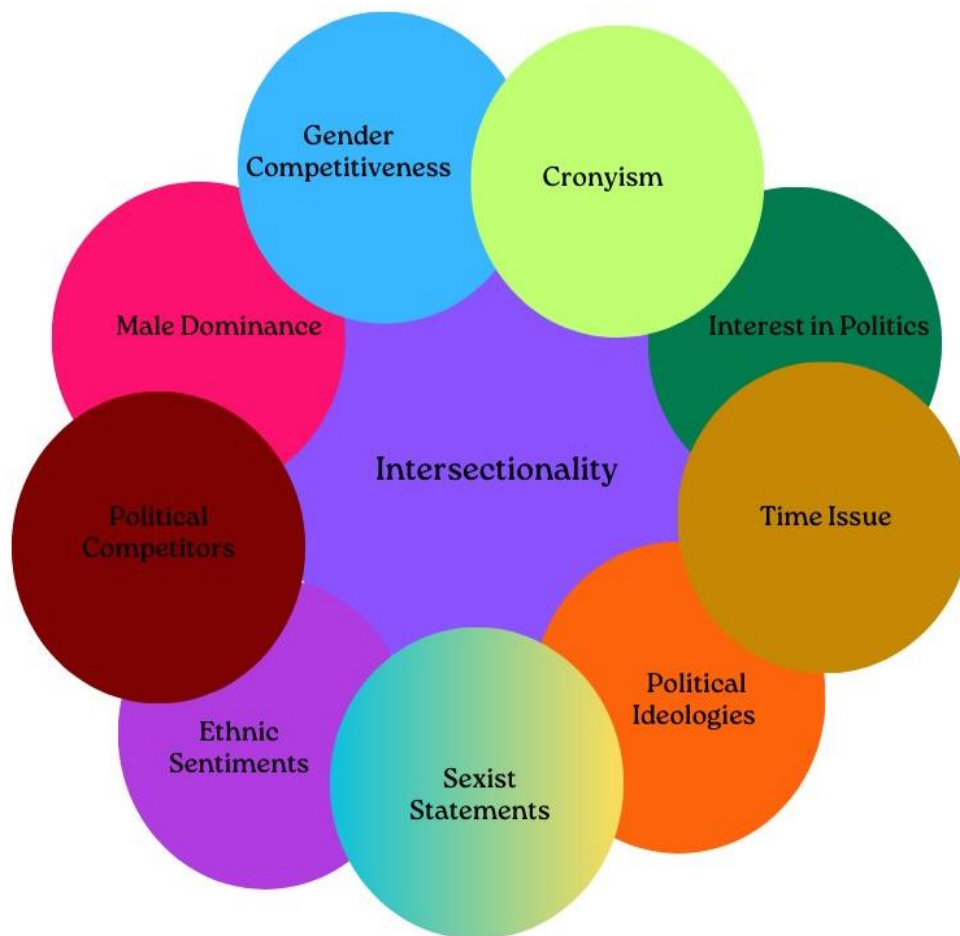
Based on Table 4, the percentage of women who are in the highest council of MCA, DAP and PKR parties are still not reached the quota target that has been set. The PKR party recorded the highest percentage of female leaders with 27.8 percent in 2018, followed by the DAP party with 16.1 percent and the MCA party

with 11.5 percent. There are efforts to empower women at political party level, but these efforts will not be effective if women do not seize these golden opportunities.

Political Challenges

Gender competitiveness, cronyism, interest in politics, political competitors, male dominance, time issues, ethnic sentiments, sexist statements and political ideology are the political challenges that have been faced by Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. The model of Chinese women's political challenges through an intersectionality dimension has been developed to describe the political challenges faced by Chinese women that intersect, overlap and interconnected with each other, as been highlighted by Intersectionality Theory.

Figure 4. Model of Chinese Womens' Political Challenges Through Intersectionality Dimension in Peninsular Malaysia



Among the challenges faced by Chinese female politicians are sexist statements. The use of words with elements of sexist remarks can degrade the dignity of female politicians and reduce self-esteem. Moreover, single female politicians are often made fun of by some male politicians. According to the informant:

“...I am often mocked by some male members of Parliament. He said that I am not married so you dont have the right to talk about single mothers...” (P: 63, L: 1826-1828)

Although the rules of Parliament have been set by prohibiting the use of sexist statements in Parliament (The Regulation of the Dewan Rakyat Meeting Council Rule 51). However, sexist statements are still being used by a few male politicians in Dewan Rakyat.

Working as a politician is not limited to office hours. The role as a female politician encourages them to be prepared all the time because the problems that are being faced by the public are happening regardless of time. Commitment of time is a challenge to female politicians, especially among married female politicians. They need to ensure that their responsibilities as politicians do not neglect their husbands and children. Moreover, the safety factor have also become an important issue because their working hours are not limited to office hours only. According to the informant, weekends are the busiest time because some people used their time off to meet the politicians who serve in their areas, and attend any events organized by politicians.

“...because to be involve in politics, time for us to move, such as the weekend. Weekend is actually time for family. But for politicians, weekend is the busiest time. Sometimes, we reached home in the midnight, 2 to 3 am.” (P: 35, L: 1006-1009)

The political structure that is dominated by male politicians has created gender competitiveness and this situation causes a challenge to the informants. Men are seen as more capable than women in the political field. This stigma has challenged female politicians to work harder to prove their credibility, including being selected as a candidate in the election or being listed as a member of the party's highest council. According to the informant:

“...if the candidate is a woman, reegardless the race, if the candidate is a woman, there must be someone who says oh, this woman is okay, but she must fulfill the conditions a b c d to z, but why don't men have to fulfill them? Why don't men need all these conditions? This must be the same because they don't believe in the ability of women, that's why they say can but need to fill in a b c d all of this conditions. But usually when they choose a man there are no conditions because they naturally believe that the man is capable...” (P: 109, L: 3206-3217)

Male dominance in politics is rooted in patriarchal cultural practices that still have an impact on the community to this day. The roles of men and women are differentiated based on their physical and biological abilities. Physical and biological abilities cause the society's mind to be constructed and have an impact on the roles of men and women in life, including politics. The men's strong physical cause them to be said to be more qualified to be the leader to women. Thus, this stigma is causing male dominance in politics. Men use every advantage they had in political parties to maintain their power. Male dominance in politics can be seen through the important positions they hold in political parties. This is a glass ceiling phenomenon that is quite difficult to destroy.

According to the informant, a political party structure that has been dominated by men caused women to work harder to demolish this structure. The position of women in political parties is just a gift from men. So to overcome this phenomenon, women are recommended to compete at the grassroots levels, which is at the branch and division levels.

“For now, regardless of parties, woman's position is a gift from men. So we just accept is without constesting. But later he can not stop us if we started to compete in grassroots levels.” (P:32, L: 924-927)

Ethnic sentiments are among sentiments that often used by some politicians to gain voter supports. The race-based political system is still strong in the Malaysian community, hence the phenomenon causes people to tend to choose a leader who can protect the interests of their people over the credibility of politicians. Thus, this situation has also become a challenge to female politicians. According to the informants:

“...but nowadays the issue of racism is always being talked about right? But for me, the issue of racism has been existed since ancient time right? The one and only reason why this issue is being manipulated is to bring you down. But, for me that is not a challenge. I am holding to the belief your ability, your sincerity to help the society, how you want to channel the help. That's all. There's no denying that after the party election there are racial issues. Why we chose Chinese, why we didn't choose the Malays, why we didn't choose the Indians. But for me, that is the challenge. But I can accept that because I understand in a multi-racial community, there are certain thoughts that still existed, we can't deny that but for me the biggest

challenge is the issues of racism that always being manipulated, this issue should not be manipulated...” (P: 89, L: 2581- 2595)

The informant stated that the issue of racism is always being manipulated by some politicians in countries that consist of multi-ethnic communities. Hence, this situation causes the informants not only to need to prove their abilities to the Chinese community. In fact, they also need to convince the multi-ethnic communities in Malaysia about their abilities.

Other than that political competitors are also one of the political challenges faced by the informants. Political competitors can cause a big impact on women’s career in the political field. They will try to destroy the reputation of their rivals in order to gain a position in the political field which is limited in number. In fact, there are political rivals who are willing to make their own family members the target of attacks. Among the attacks carried out by political competitors is through the spread of defamation by using social media. According to the informant:

“Because you see in politic sometimes your have enemy ah...you sure you have your own enemy...and that enemy sometimes didn’t know them you at all. Just because you know if you are good, if you are extremely good that also can create enemy because to them you are the threats to them. So in politics it’s very funny you know it’s different from outside you know outside if we be kind to people, do good deeds to people, we are hardworking and all then people appreciate you right? not in politic. Politic because it concerns about you know power, position and because all there are limited and there are plenty of people that aimed for that. So if you are good, you are too good, if you excel yourself and you could be you know a threats to other, impose as a threats and that one also you create enemy for no reasons.” (P: 22-23, L: 659-668)

Besides, cronyism is also one of the political challenges faced by several informants. This practice of cronyism can prevent the qualified individual because the preference to hold important positions in the party or to compete in an election is based on the practice of cronyism. This practice of cronyism can paralyze the unity among members of a political party and hinder the development of the party. This is because the appointments of candidates are not based on the excellence in performance but are chosen based on cronyism practices. According to the informant:

“Cronyism culture is a big problem no matter what they said we are united as one lah but you know in practical it might not be the same, you see? They have favoritism and all. So let’s say he has team A, team B, team C. Ok team A or team B have their own group of women, youth and induk? (The main component), each team has their own group of women, youth and induk. So let’s say for team A, the group of youth and induk win, but the group of women lose. Team B win for the group of women. Yes, so if we follow the healthy political culture, after that everybody must combine right? but what usually happen is even we win like this they combined but they will always also you know they will always separated as this is team B, this is not our team. That kind of mentality that’s why I said the clannish culture.. I would say lah it affects the unity in the party. Yes it is not choosing or appointing someone based on their ability but based on cronyism. That’s damaging... even you know, some who can’t speak fluent Bahasa Malaysia are also being appointed you know. So how are we going to perform in ceremony you see this the problems, actually it’s not a problem now it has been a problem for long.” (P: 21, L: 630-650)

Political ideology based on the thoughts that political fields are dirty and unreliable are among the political challenges that may constraint Chinese women from being active in politics. Moreover, there are many cases that involve politicians who are being prosecuted in court. In fact, court is a place that need to be avoided and called as ‘taboo’ in Chinese community culture.

“For the Chinese, they will think that politics is dirty. So when you meet with the Chinese youth, talk about politics, they will reject politics directly. They don’t want to waste their time by getting involve in politics. So when they don’t have the interest, so no involvement.” (P: 38, L:1090- 1094)

Political socialization agents as well as indicators of political challenges have had an impact on the political culture of Chinese women in Malaysia, which is still passive due to the low number of involvement among

women in politics. This can be seen through the percentage of Chinese women in Parliament and Dewan Undangan Negeri, which is still low. In fact, the quota target has been targeted at 30 percent for women to hold important positions at political party level. However, the percentage nowadays has not yet reached the 30 percent target.

Chinese women's political culture is not static, but changes over time based on political socialization agents and their challenges in politics. In the historical context, the political culture in the Chinese community, including Chinese women before independence is based on the Mainland of China. This is because the arrival of Chinese immigrants to Malaya in the beginning was only temporary, which is to earn a living. In addition, the government policy of Mainland China initially didn't allow women to migrate abroad. This phenomenon causes only men being allowed to migrate abroad. This situation then hinders the opportunity of the people from Mainland China to form a complete family institution outside of Mainland China.

The political culture of Chinese immigrants, including women are based on the Mainland of China can be seen through actions that support Chinese community such as the Malayan Anti-Imperialist League movement, boycotting Japanese goods, collecting donation to help China in resisting Japanese aggression by forming China Relief Fund (China War Relief Fund), supporting the Nanyang National Salvation Movement and organizing anti-Japanese demonstrations (Ho, 2009). These movements are a sign of support for their relatives who have suffered as a result of the Japanese invasion in Mainland China (Fan 2005:264-272). This phenomenon has caused the Japanese to be dissatisfied with the Chinese immigrants in Malaya and tortured them during the Japanese invasion in Malaya. The educational system of Chinese immigrants in the beginning is based on Mainland China by applying the spirit of nationalism to Mainland China.

Malayan Communist Party (PKM) also plays a role in strengthening the spirit of nationalism towards Mainland China among Chinese women immigrants. Some issues that have been raised by PKM include labor issues, oppression of women through traditional cultural framework as well as issues that occurred in Mainland China. Among the women who played an important role in PKM include Lee Meng, Lee Jhen, Jhen Yin Fen and Suriani Abdullah (Eng Ming Ching). IN the beginning, the British had banned PKM because of the chaos that occurred due to the Chinese labor issue and anti-Japanese demonstrations. However, after Japan had invaded and controlled part of the British colony's land in Malaya, the British then established relations with PKM. This relationship formed Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) and Malayan People Anti Japanese Union (MPJU) to remove Japan from Malaya. Chinese women also joined MPAJA due to Japanese brutality against the Chinese community at that time. Chinese female immigrants were also tortured and raped (Yang, 2014).

After the Japanese are kicked from Malaya, PKM are allowed to operate. However, some demands from the PKM were disagreed by the British, hence this situation has caused the PKM to rebel and resulted in the declaration of emergency in Malaya by the British. The violence of PKM has caused injuries, death and also property damage. The target of PKM is not only the Malay ethnic group but also includes all ethnics in Malaya that can threaten their positions.

Dato Onn Jaafar has collaborated with MCA in an effort to overcome this problem. This collaboration not only helped to overcome the communist problem in Malaya but also helped to restore the broken relationship among races that had been previously caused by the policy of division and order practiced by British, Japanese colonialism and the rebellion of PKM. The alliance of UMNO-MCA-MIC is a political collaboration towards self-government because the British have set some conditions for the independence of Malaya, which must there be a cooperation among multi-ethnic community in Malaya at that time. Initially, the formation of MCA acted as a welfare association to take care of the welfare of Chinese society. During the declaration of emergency in Malaya, MCA helped a lot of Chinese affected by the emergency situation and communist threat at that time, until MCA successfully became a political party and joined the Alliance Party (Ramli, 2023).

The political culture of Chinese female immigrants was initially based on Mainland China, but has changed to be based on Malaya. There are various indicators that intersect and linked with each other as highlighted

in Intersectionality Theory. The indicators which influenced the political culture of Chinese female immigrants at that time can be divided into internal and external factors. The internal factors include the British administration and the actions of Malaya people, who did not prevent the migration of people from abroad to Malaya.

While the external factors are related to the policy of the Mainland China government which previously did not allow the migration of Chinese women abroad. This policy has changed, and Chinese women are allowed to migrate to other countries, including Malaya. This situation has caused the entry of Chinese women into Malaya and succeeded in increasing the ratio of Chinese female immigrants in Malaya. This is because previously the ratio of Chinese female immigrants and Chinese male immigrants was unbalanced. Due to this imbalanced ratio, many Chinese women have been smuggled to Malaya illegally for prostitution. The increase of Chinese women in the middle of the 19th century allowed them to build a complete family and reside in Malaya (Ramli, 2023). In addition, the government of Mainland China no longer allows people to have two citizenships and Chinese female immigrants are forced to choose only one citizenship. Therefore, all these indicators have intersected and linked with each other as stated in Intersectionality Theory and has influenced the political culture of Chinese female immigrants in Peninsular Malaysia which from based on Mainland of China to be based on Malaya.

After independence, the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia is not static but undergoes evolution from time to time and is influenced by the indicators of political socialization agents and political challenges. This political culture, then has given an impact on the empowerment efforts of Chinese women in Malaysia. The efforts to empower Chinese women in Malaya through political parties can be seen in three aspects, which are the economy, political and social as shown in Figure 5 below:

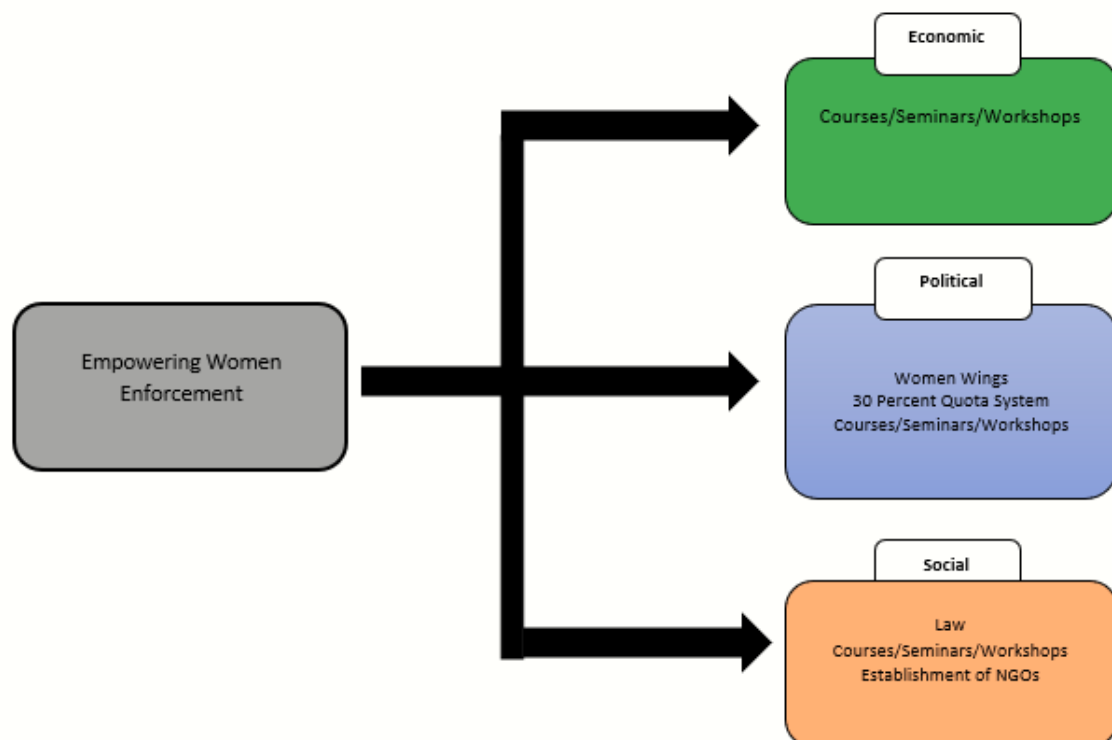


Figure 5. Model of Women's Empowerment Effort by Political Parties

MCA is the party that carries out a lot of Chinese women's empowerment activities in Malaysia compared to DAP and PKR. This is due to the collaboration between MCA and the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in Barisan Nasional (BN), which has given them advantages such as financial support because Barisan Nasional governed the federal government for more than 60 years. The activities implemented by MCA to empower women politically include automatically appointing the MCA Women's Leader as one of the MCA Deputy Presidents, forming women's wings, establishing Beliawanis for young women, creating The Malaysian Chinese Women Blueprint Lab, and allocating a 30 percent quota for women in the party's highest council. In the economic sphere, the programs carried out include a seminar titled "Women as the Catalyst for Economic Revitalisation," a recognition and appreciation program for women entrepreneurs known as the Women Entrepreneur Award, a Post Natal Confinement Services Training course, a dialogue session for Chinese female entrepreneurs with the Minister of Finance, a seminar titled "e-Trade-Global Fortune," and a convention titled "Change Women Entrepreneurship Convention."

Besides, the efforts carried out by MCA women in the social sphere include renewing the Law of Marriage and Divorce Act 1976, holding a dialogue session with the Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development, and submitting a memorandum on gender discrimination. Additionally, MCA women have made efforts to improve the status of women across all ethnicities in Malaysia, including the formation of a Legal Advisory & Women's Aid Centre (L.A.W.A) and amendments to the Women and Girls Protection Act 1973, Guardianship Act 1961, and Drug Dependents (Treatment and Rehabilitation) Act 1983. The MCA party has organized many programs and activities aimed directly at Chinese women. They also organized activities for women of other ethnicities but on a smaller scale. This may be because the MCA party is primarily reserved for the Chinese community, and therefore most of the programs and activities are targeted at Chinese women.

There are also efforts by the DAP and PKR parties to empower women, including the formation of women's wings and the allocation of a 30 percent quota for women in the party's highest council. This quota set by DAP and PKR is not limited to Chinese women but extends across all ethnic groups in Malaysia. This is because DAP and PKR are multi-ethnic parties. Therefore, any efforts made by DAP and PKR encompass all ethnic groups and do not focus solely on Chinese women. This approach differs from the MCA party, which was established with the goal of safeguarding the interests of the Chinese community.

Conclusion

Political culture is not static and evolves over time. Initially, the political culture of Chinese immigrants, including women, was based on Mainland China. However, the political culture of Chinese women has shifted to align more with Malaya. Their previous status as immigrants has certainly given them a different experience compared to other ethnic groups, especially the Malay ethnics like the Bumiputera community. These different experiences are influenced by the indicators of political socialization agents and political challenges, which intersect and are linked, as highlighted by Intersectionality Theory. These experiences shape individual political behavior, which in turn shapes group political behavior, ultimately forming the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. This political culture of Chinese women impacts efforts to empower them in Malaysia through economic, political, and social contexts.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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