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Malaysian Chinese in the New Millennium

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Malaysian Chinese in the New Millennium

By Tey Nai Peng and Lai Siow Li

Population size, rate of growth, distribution and proportionate share in the total population

In the forty years between 1970 and 2010, the Chinese population in Malaysia increased by 83% from 3.7 million to 6.4 million. The population is projected to peak at 7.1 million around 2030-2040, and decline thereafter to 6.9 million in 2050. Owing to the slow and negative rate of population growth resulting from continuing fertility decline and mass out-migration, the proportionate share of the Chinese to the total population has been declining steadily from 36% in 1970, to 23% in 2010, and is projected to fall to 17% in 2050. In 1970, Chinese made up 56-58% of the population in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, but in 2010 this had declined to 43% in Penang and 39% in Kuala Lumpur.

The Chinese are highly urbanized, with 91 percent living in cities and towns. They made up 29% of the urban population in Malaysia. In 2010, one third of the Malaysian Chinese lived in the Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and four adjacent districts in Selangor), and 38% lived in three other states, namely Johor, Perak and Penang.

Age structural shift and dependency burden

The Malaysian Chinese population will be ageing rather rapidly, with the median age rising from 32 years in 2010 to 46 years in 2050. The proportion aged below 15 will decrease from 22% in 2010 to 14% in 2050, while those aged 65 and over will increase from 8% to 21%, with a corresponding rise in the old age dependency burden from 11% to 33%.

Family formation and Fertility

In terms of family formation, the general trend is one of delayed and non-marriage. Among tertiary educated Chinese women, more than one fifth were unmarried at age 35, and one in three were single at age 30, as at 2000. The trend towards delayed marriage and non-marriage is expected to continue, as women out-number men in higher education, and women tend not to marry “downwards”. Intermarriage is still rare, comprising only less than 3 percent of all marriages. An increase in inter-marriage (a possible scenario), along with the influx of foreign workers, will further reduce the relative size of the Chinese population to the total population.

There has been a shift in the family structure. Extended family has given way to nuclear and single member family/household.

The fertility level of the Malaysian Chinese has dipped below replacement level at the turn of the new millennium, and it is expected to decline further, as in the case of other Chinese populations. Childbearing is now more concentrated among women age 25-34, accounting for two-thirds of the births.

Education and Employment

Children's education has always been accorded high priority among the Chinese community. The desire to maintain the linguistics and ethnic identity has prompted most parents to send their children to the vernacular schools for primary education. With the proliferation of institutions of higher learning (with twinning programs), the proportion of the young generation with tertiary education could well reach 50%.

The 2000 population census showed that 58% of Chinese worked in the private sector, 38% were own account workers and only 4 % were in the public sector. Chinese made up only 8% of the civil service. Chinese representation in the civil service is likely to remain low, unless there is a major change in the policy and perception. Chinese have played an important role in the corporate sector, the SMEs, the development of tertiary education, and as professionals such as engineers, architects, doctors, accountants and lawyers. With their human capital, the Chinese will continue to play an important role in the national development.

International migration and brain drain

Malaysia is a country of immigration and emigration. While it has attracted large number of migrant workers from neighboring countries, more than 1 million Malaysians are living overseas, with Singapore and Australia as the main destinations. Chinese made up the bulk of the emigrants, and the majority of emigrants are highly skilled workers. Between 1980 and 1991, there was a migration deficit of about 390,000 persons, but the 2000 population census data indicated that emigration of the Chinese had come to a halt in the 1990s. However, with globalization, the brain-drain is expected to continue.

Political Participation

Malaysian Chinese participate actively in the national politics, both in government and in opposition. In many constituencies, Chinese voters could swing the results of the election in either direction. We await the results of the upcoming election to have a clearer picture of the future direction and roles of Chinese in Malaysian politics.

Discussion

The paper will discuss the causes and consequences of socio-demographic changes of the Malaysian Chinese. Some speculations will also be made on the future of the Chinese community in the country.