The Sino-Native Impacts on the Development of Identity Politics in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

The concept of Sino-Native generally refers to one who is being part Chinese and part Native. Accordingly, the Sino-Native includes those born of mixed-parentage and that with such an identification, they should enjoy special rights analogous to the position of the Malay as they are being conferred bumiputra status enshrined in Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Such an identity, on the contrary, has resulted in the dilution of not only the traditional culture of the local natives, but also the Chinese. Thus, many argued that the Sino-Native identity could contribute significantly to the strengthening of any political party's grips over Malaysian politics by the manipulation of such an identity. Some even suggest that the emergence of Sino-Native has further inclined the politicians towards identity politics in this country. These debates raise hypothetical issues in which this paper interested to address from the lens of Sabah in Malaysia by focusing on the question of a) what exactly are the concept of Sino-Native and identity politics in Sabah, b) how the Sino-Native has impacted the development of identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia, and c) what are the unfavourable impacts of Sino-Native addition into the growing of identity politics activities in Sabah, Malaysia. The paper concluded by recommending some promising strategies to minimize these unfavourable impacts of Sino-Native inclusion into the growing of identity politics activities in Sabah, Malaysia.

Keywords: Identity Politics, Sino-Native, Sabah, Malaysia

Introduction

The interplay between Sino and native (indigenous) communities has profoundly shaped the evolution of identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia. Historically, colonial governance and post-independence political restructuring positioned ethnicity as a central organizing force in Sabah's socio-political landscape. The Sino-Native dynamic, particularly between Chinese and indigenous groups such as the Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, and Murut, has influenced

political alliances, economic hierarchies, and cultural representation. Chinese communities, with their economic prominence and urban networks, have often engaged in pragmatic political participation, while native groups have anchored their politics in indigeneity, autonomy, and cultural preservation. The interaction between these groups has produced both collaboration and competition, influencing the formation of multi-ethnic coalitions like PBS, GRS, and STAR. Ultimately, Sino-Native relations continue to define Sabah's identity politics by balancing ethnic solidarity with aspirations for inclusive statehood and equitable representation within Malaysia's broader federal structure.

Sabah, the easternmost state of Malaysia, is renowned for its rich cultural diversity and complex social dynamics (Appell, 1976; Pugh-Kitingan, 1989; Miyamoto, 2008; Sadiq, 2009). Among its numerous ethnic groups, the community described by Esther Sinirisan Chong (2018) as the "people born from mixed marriages between Chinese immigrants and Sabah natives[1]", have played a pivotal role in shaping the region's identity politics. This intersection of Sino-native identities has significant implications for political engagement, cultural preservation, and social cohesion in Sabah. Thus, understanding the impacts of these interactions is essential to grasp the broader narrative of identity politics in Malaysia, particularly in the context of its multi-ethnic landscape of Sabah.

Scholars such as Lee (1965) suggests that the historical roots of Sino-native relations in Sabah can be traced back to the early 15th century when Chinese traders first arrived in the region. Their migration continued in waves, particularly during the British colonial period, which saw an influx of Chinese laborers and merchants. These communities established themselves in various sectors, contributing significantly to the local economy. Over time, the Chinese identity became intertwined with the indigenous cultures, leading to a unique socio-political environment where ethnic affiliations often influenced political allegiances and social interactions. This in turn made the interplay between the Sino and native communities in Sabah has given rise to a complex matrix of identity politics. On one hand, the Chinese population, primarily from various dialect groups such as Hakka, Cantonese, and Hokkien, has sought to assert its identity and rights within the Malaysian political framework, particularly in Sabah. This pursuit is often contrasted with the indigenous communities' quest for recognition and empowerment, rooted in their historical presence and claims to land and resources. Consequently, just like what Chin (2021) described as the impacts of political Islam and *ketuanan Melayu*, the emergence of Sino-Native made identity politics in Sabah emerges as a dynamic and multifaceted arena (Bromeley & Simon, 2023), where both groups, the Sino and Native, negotiate their positions, often leading to both cooperation and contention.

The post-independence era marked a significant turning point in the development of identity politics in Sabah. The formation of the Malaysian federation in 1963 brought about new political realities that necessitated a re-evaluation of ethnic identities and representation (Ationg, 2020). For the Sino community, scholars and researchers such as Brown (2009), Danny (2012), Goh Chun Sheng (31 January 2023), and Bromeley and Simon (2023) portrays that the challenge was to maintain their cultural heritage while navigating a political landscape dominated by the Malay majority. This led to the emergence of Chinese political parties, such as the United Sabah Chinese Communities Association (USCCA), which aimed to

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[1]Sino-Native' was introduced in 1951 as a label to describe a 'new category' of people in Sabah.

advocate for the rights and interests of the Chinese population within the context of Malaysian politics.

Simultaneously, the indigenous communities of Sabah began to organize themselves politically, forming parties like the United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) to address their concerns regarding land rights, cultural preservation, and political representation. This parallel development highlighted the need for both Sino and native communities to articulate their identities and aspirations within a framework that acknowledged their distinct histories and contributions. The influence of Sino-native interactions on identity politics is further exacerbated by socio-economic factors. Scholars such as Danny (2012) suggests that Chinese communities in Sabah have historically been associated with commerce and entrepreneurship. Thus, Though, identity politics has been less significant here in Sabah and far less compared to West Malaysia (Jehom, 2002), it led to economic disparities that sometimes fuel tensions with indigenous populations. The perception of economic advantages held by the Chinese has, at times, resulted in resentment from native groups, who feel marginalized in the economic landscape. This economic disparity has become a focal point in identity politics, where issues of equity, access to resources, and socio-economic rights are passionately debated.

Moreover, the rise of Malaysian nationalism in the late 20th century added another layer to the complexities of identity politics in Sabah. National policies favoring the Malay-Bumiputra majority, such as the New Economic Policy (NEP), were often viewed with suspicion by the Sino community, who felt their rights were being undermined. In response, Chinese political organizations began to emphasize their cultural heritage and the importance of maintaining their identity, which in turn prompted indigenous groups to reaffirm their own cultural narratives and political claims. In the 21st century, the dynamics of Sino-native relations continue to evolve in the face of globalization, migration, and changing socio-political landscapes. The increasing influence of social media and digital platforms has facilitated new forms of political engagement and identity expression. This technological shift has allowed for greater visibility of issues related to ethnic identity, enabling marginalized voices to be heard and fostering dialogues that transcend traditional ethnic boundaries (Ramasubramanian, 2016).

Furthermore, the younger generations of the Sino-Native community are increasingly questioning historical narratives and seeking a more inclusive political discourse that reflects the realities of contemporary Sabah. This generational shift underscores a broader trend toward intersectionality in identity politics, where individuals embrace multiple identities and advocate for a more pluralistic society that values diversity. As Sabah continues to navigate its identity politics, the impacts of Sino-native remain significant. The need for collaborative efforts in addressing shared challenges, such as environmental sustainability, economic development, and social justice, presents opportunities for both communities to forge a new narrative that prioritizes unity while respecting individual identities. Despite that, a question arises by now becomes how exactly the Sino-native has impacted on identity politics in Sabah. This paper presents a discussion on the intricate relationships between ethnic groups within a multi-ethnic framework. The historical context, socio-economic dynamics, and political aspirations of communities in this land have shaped a unique landscape where identity politics is continually negotiated. Accordingly, as Sabah moves forward, understanding these

interactions will be crucial in fostering a harmonious society that celebrates its diversity while addressing the needs and aspirations of all its citizens. The ongoing evolution of identity politics in Sabah serves as a reminder of the importance of inclusive dialogues and collective efforts in creating a shared future, thus it is, by now, become vigorous to scrutinize the relationship between the Sino-Native and the development of identity politics in Sabah.

Problem Statement

The arrival of immigrants in Sabah, Malaysia, has significantly influenced the region's identity politics (Sadiq, 2009; Ationg, 2020), and this includes the emergence of Sino-native communities. This phenomenon raises critical questions regarding the complexities of ethnic identity, social cohesion, and political representation in a multi-ethnic society. As waves of immigrants, particularly from China, settled in Sabah over centuries (Danny, 2012; Kassim, 2009), they brought distinct cultural practices, economic contributions, and social dynamics that have both enriched and challenged the existing indigenous populations. The central problem lies in understanding how the Sino-native communities have shaped identity politics in Sabah, resulting in both cooperation and conflict among ethnic groups. The historical context reveals that while the Sino-native contributed to the economic and social development of Sabah, their presence also led to perceived political manipulation for maintaining power among the political actors. Such an activity led to the firming up of identity politics as it has manifested in the form of feeding and manipulation of inclusive identity to win election.

Sino-native is an inclusive identity and can be grouped into a larger native community as the Article 2(1) Interpretation (Definition of Native) Ordinance (Sabah Cap. 64)[2] has set the conditions to be recognized as a citizen Sabah as; (a) Anyone who is a resident of this state whose parents are both is from the natives of Sabah or; (b) Anyone who is a permanent resident in the state of Sabah and becomes a member indigenous community or at least one of the they his parents or his ancestors are indigenous like in item (a) or; (c) Anyone who is a permanent resident of Sabah who is a tribe Suluk, Kagayan, Simonol, Sibutu or Ubian or residents indigenous to the state of Sarawak, and Brunei who have lived for a long time in the indigenous community of Sabah for a period of three consecutive years prior to claiming rights as indigenous residents, behave well throughout the period and stay permanently at Sabah with no time limit under the provisions of the Immigration Act 1959/1963. Provided that if one of his parents has living in Sabah as well as being alive or dead or presumed dead dies in that state, then the required period is reduced to two years only or; (d) Any permanent resident who is an indigenous resident Sabah for the Republic of Indonesia or Sulu residents from the Islands Sulu and the residents of Malaya and Singapore, have stayed in Sabah and become a member of the Sabah indigenous community continuously for a period of five years prior to the date application to become an indigenous resident, of good behaviour throughout the said period and stay in Sabah for an unlimited period under any provision of the Immigration Act 1959/63[3].

The Native Courts Ordinance (Sabah Cap. 86), Article 5(4) has also stated that "For the purpose of this section the word "native" shall be the meaning assigned thereto in the Interpretation (Definition of Native) Ordinance and shall further include any person within

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[2] Interpretation (Definition of Native) Ordinance (Sabah Cap. 64) 1995. Government Printer: Sabah.
[3] Immigration Act 1959/1963 (Act 155) & Regulations and Orders & Passports Act 1966 (Act 150), 1999. Kuala Lumpur: International Law Book Services

Sabah one at least of whose parents was a member of a people indigenous to Brunei, Sarawak, the States of Malaya, Singapore, the Cocos – Keeling Islands, Indonesia or the Sulu group of the Philippine Islands". Apart from that, Article 161A (6b) of the Federal Constitution[4] also notes that a Bumiputera (indigenous) for the state of Sabah is "a citizen and it is a descendant of someone from an indigenous race in Sabah, and has born (whether or not on or after Malaysia Day) in Sabah or his father, at the time of his birth, was domiciled in Sabah". That it, for this legal reason, Sino-native is certainly can be categorised as the native of Sabah (Herman Luping, 05 December 2010).

While it is by now clear that the Sino-native is referring to one who is being part Chinese and part native, or those who born of mixed-parentage and that with such an identification, they should enjoy special rights analogous to the position of the Malay as they are being conferred bumiputra status enshrined in Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Despite the privilege, however, such an identity has resulted in the dilution of not only the traditional culture of the local natives, but also the Chinese. Also, the Sino-Native identity could contribute significantly to the strengthening of any political actor's grips over Malaysian, particularly in Sabah politics by the manipulation of such an identity. It is also argued that in the milieu of democratic politics has further inclined the politicians towards identity politics in this country for their political mileage. This hypothetical argument is the area in which this paper interested to address from the lens of Sabah in Malaysia by focusing on the question of a) what exactly are the concept of Sino-Native and identity politics in Sabah, b) how the Sino-Native has impacted the development of identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia, and c) what are the unfavourable impacts of Sino-Native addition into the growing of identity politics activities in Sabah, Malaysia. The paper concluded by recommending some promising strategies to minimize these unfavourable impacts of Sino-Native inclusion into the growing of identity politics activities in Sabah, Malaysia.

Objective of the Study

The general objective of this exploratory study is to investigate the relationship between Sino-native identity and the development of identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia since the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Specific objectives of the study are stated as follows:

1. To determine the concept of Sino-Native and identity politics in Sabah,
2. To explore the Sino-Native impact in the development of identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia, and
3. To scrutinize the unfavourable impacts of Sino-Native addition into the growing of identity politics activities in Sabah, Malaysia.

Significance of the Study (Rationale for Choosing the Topic)

The rationale for selecting this topic lies in the complex and evolving relationship between the Sino (Chinese) and native (indigenous) communities in Sabah, which has significantly influenced the development of identity politics in the state. Sabah represents a distinct political and cultural entity within Malaysia, characterized by ethnic plurality, historical marginalization, and regional autonomy. Unlike Peninsular Malaysia, where identity politics is often dominated by the Malay - Chinese - Indian framework, Sabah's political identity is shaped by the intricate interplay between indigenous groups such as the Kadazan-

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[4] *Perlembagaan Persekutuan*, 1983. Kuala Lumpur: International Law Book Services.

Dusun, Bajau, and Murut, and the economically prominent Chinese community. This dynamic makes Sabah a compelling case for understanding how inter-ethnic interactions, shaped by history, economy, and politics, contribute to the evolution of local and national identity.

Historically, the Sino-Native relationship in Sabah has been framed by colonial legacies and the socio-political transformations that accompanied Malaysia's formation in 1963. Under British rule, ethnic categorization and differential access to education and economic opportunities created structural disparities that persisted after independence (Reid, 1988). The indigenous population often identified with land and traditional authority, while the Chinese were associated with commerce and urban development. This historical dichotomy influenced political behavior and shaped the emergence of ethnic-based political parties such as the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO), the Kadazan-based United Pasokmomogun Kadazan Organisation (UPKO), and later multi-ethnic coalitions like Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) (Chin, 2021; 2014). The mutual dependency and competition between these groups have continually defined Sabah's identity politics.

The choice of this topic is also motivated by its contemporary relevance. In the post-2018 political era, Sabah has witnessed renewed attention to issues of regional autonomy, indigenous rights, and economic equity. The Sino-Native collaboration within state-based political coalitions such as Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) highlights ongoing negotiations between ethnicity and governance. However, while ethnic plurality has enriched Sabah's political culture, it has also been a source of contestation and fragmentation, especially when federal policies intersect with local identity concerns. Thus, examining Sino-Native interactions offers insights into how identity politics is continuously reshaped through political alliances, economic interdependence, and cultural negotiation.

Academically, this topic fills a crucial research gap. Much of Malaysia's identity politics scholarship focuses on Peninsular dynamics, often overlooking Sabah's distinct socio-political context. By situating the Sino-Native relationship within theories of ethnicity, multiculturalism, and regional autonomy, this study contributes to understanding how identity politics operates in multi-ethnic, peripheral societies (Shamsul, 1996). The research also holds practical relevance, offering implications for governance, inter-ethnic harmony, and policy formulation in a diverse federal system.

In essence, the selection of this topic reflects both a theoretical and empirical necessity to explore the intersection of ethnicity, power, and identity in Sabah. By analyzing how Sino-Native relations shape political participation and representation, the study contributes to broader discussions on the making of Malaysian democracy, emphasizing inclusivity and regional diversity.

Approach to the Study on Identity Politics in Sabah
While the study on the significance relationship between Sino-native and the development of identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia is of necessary for political harmony, understanding what exactly the method is used for the study is crucial. Accordingly, this study employs a qualitative research design to explore how Sino-native communities have shaped identity politics in Sabah. Qualitative research design is a research approach that gathers information from secondary sources and participants' experiences, perceptions, and

behaviours (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, 2024) aim at answering the questions of how and whys instead of how many or how much. This research approach generally be structured as an impartial study, purely relying on qualitative data. Therefore, this study utilizes a case study approach to provide an in-depth understanding of the complex interactions between Sino-natives and the development of identity politics in Sabah. As it aims at providing a comprehensive understanding of the role of Sino-native communities in shaping identity politics in Sabah, the study applies document analysis, which involves analysis of historical records[5] and interviews with key informants[6]. It is also stressed that acknowledging the potential biases in qualitative research and strive for a balanced representation of views. Moreover, conceding that the findings is specific to Sabah and may not be easily generalized to other contexts, all information were gathered from the secondary sources, apart from the historical information gathered from official reports, books, journal and media reports, a total of five key informers who have significant insights or experiences related to Sino-native communities and identity politics were selected using purposive sampling. Prior to the interview, all key informants were fully informed about the study's purpose and provide their consent before participating. All information gleaned was analysed thematically.

Finding 1: The Origin of Sino-Native in Sabah

Before the Sino-native impacts on the development of identity politics can be made any further, it requires an understanding on the origin of Sino-native in in Sabah, Malaysia and ask why political actor has become interested in relying on identity politics for their political mileage in this land? This requires to first an explanation of the origin of Sino-native and identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia. Therefore, to clearly understand the origin of the Sino-native, it required an explanation on how the Chinese community exist in Sabah by looking at the secondary sources. Scholars generally in agreement that the Chinese communities eventually exist in Sabah due to migration. Scholars such as Danny (2012) and Rosdianah (2018) portrays that the migration of Chinese communities into Sabah, formerly known as North Borneo, represents a significant chapter in the region's history. Situated in the northeastern part of Borneo, Sabah has long been a melting pot of cultures and ethnicities (Wan Shawaluddin, Marja & Ramli, 2010). The Chinese migration to Sabah began centuries ago and has left an indelible mark on the region's economy, society, and cultural landscape (Danny, 1999). Danny (1999), thus, stressed that Chinese migration to Sabah has deep historical roots. It began during the imperial periods of Chinese history, particularly during the Tang (618–907 AD) and Song (960–1279 AD) dynasties, when maritime trade between China and Southeast Asia flourished. Over the centuries, Chinese merchants and traders established relationships with local rulers and communities across the region, including those in Borneo. However, it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries, amidst political and economic turmoil in China, that migration surged. The collapse of the Qing Dynasty, civil unrest, famine, and foreign invasions pushed many Chinese to seek better opportunities abroad.

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[5] Refers to reviews of historical texts, government documents, and archives related to Sino-native immigration and settlement patterns in Sabah.
[6] The key informants comprise of with local political leaders, community representatives, and academics specializing in politics studies in Sabah.

Several factors influenced the migration of Chinese to Sabah, including economic opportunities, political instability and poverty in China, and clan and family networks. In the context of economic opportunities, historical documents suggests that in the late 19th century, the British North Borneo Chartered Company, which had established control over Sabah, sought to develop the region's economy. They recognized the potential for agriculture, timber, and mineral extraction. To realize these economic ambitions, they encouraged the migration of labourers and entrepreneurs from China, particularly from southern provinces such as Fujian and Guangdong. Many Chinese migrants were attracted by the prospect of working in plantations, particularly in the rubber industry, and by opportunities in mining and trade. Apart from that, China experienced significant political upheavals in the 19th and early 20th centuries, including the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), the First Opium War (1839–1842), and the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912. These events, coupled with widespread poverty, drove many Chinese to leave their homeland in search of stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia, including Sabah. Moreover, Chinese migration to Sabah, like other parts of Southeast Asia, was also often facilitated by existing clan and family networks. Early migrants who had established themselves in Sabah would often help relatives and fellow villagers emigrate, creating a chain migration effect. These networks provided social and financial support, making the transition to life in Sabah easier for new arrivals.

Historical records, as portrayed by Lee (1965), Lee (1968), and Sin-Fong, H. (1975), appeared that the Chinese who migrated to Sabah were not a monolithic group; they came from various dialect groups, including the Hakka, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, and others. Each group brought with them their own customs, dialects, and traditions, which shaped the development of distinct Chinese sub-communities within Sabah. The Hakka were among the earliest and most prominent Chinese groups to settle in Sabah. They were known for their adaptability and played a crucial role in the agricultural sector, particularly in rubber plantations and later in the timber industry. Many Hakka migrants also became successful entrepreneurs in various trades. The Cantonese and Hokkien migrants were predominantly involved in commerce, establishing businesses in the towns and cities of Sabah. They became prominent in sectors such as retail, hospitality, and trade, and were instrumental in the development of urban centres like Kota Kinabalu (formerly Jesselton) and Sandakan.

The Chinese migrants and their descendants have played a critical role in the development of Sabah's economy and society (Danny, 1998; Ung-Ho, 2000).). The Chinese in Sabah have been pivotal in the region's economic growth, particularly in the agricultural and commercial sectors. Their involvement in the rubber industry in the early 20th century helped drive the expansion of plantations in Sabah. Over time, Chinese entrepreneurs diversified into other sectors such as timber, real estate, banking, and retail, contributing to the modernization of Sabah's economy. The Chinese traders and entrepreneurs have also contributed to the urbanization of Sabah by establishing businesses in key towns and cities. They were also involved in building infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals, often in partnership with colonial authorities or through their own communal efforts. Chinese-majority towns like Sandakan became important commercial hubs in the region. In addition, the Chinese migrants placed a high value on education, and this is reflected in the many Chinese-medium schools established in Sabah. These schools have provided generations of Chinese and non-Chinese Sabahan children with access to education. Additionally, Chinese

community associations have played a significant role in supporting the welfare and social needs of their communities, fostering a strong sense of identity and mutual support.

Today, the Chinese community in Sabah remains an influential and vibrant part of the state's multi-ethnic fabric. While Chinese-Sabahan identity has evolved over time, particularly through intermarriage and interaction with other ethnic groups, the community continues to maintain its cultural distinctiveness. Many Chinese-Sabahans are bilingual or trilingual, speaking their ancestral dialects as well as Bahasa Malaysia and English. Politically, the Chinese in Sabah have also played a significant role, participating in both state and national politics. Although a minority in terms of population, they have been active in advocating for the rights and interests of their community within the broader framework of Sabah's multi-ethnic society. Most importantly, the advent of Chines in Sabah, Malaysia has contributed to the emergence of Sino-native communities. The question now became, what exactly is the definition of both Sino-Native and identity politics? The following presents a discussion the concept of Sino-Native and identity politics.

The Concept of Sino-Native

As explained, the Sino-Native is an inclusive identity and can be grouped into a larger native community as pronounced by the Article 2(1) Interpretation (Definition of Native) Ordinance (Sabah Cap. 64) and The Native Courts Ordinance (Sabah Cap. 86), Article 5(4). Historically, Danny further explained that "*In the 1951 census, the Colonial Government of North Borneo introduced a new category of people,* Sino-Native. In the census, a total of 6,468 persons were classified under that category. The same category was maintained in future censuses, except for 1981. These figures, though marginal compared to the more established categories such as Kadazan, Dusun, Bajau, Murut and Chinese, are crucial in trying to understand the interrelations between hybridity and ethnic identity in Sabah. Of late, the question of hybrid community has come in play with the question of native rights, especially in matters pertaining to inheritance of landholdings that are classified under Native Title. These land titles, issued by the Lands Office since the introduction of the Land Ordinance of 1903, were aimed at alienating lands and preserve them solely for the usage of natives. Foreigners, including non-native (or indigenous) local population such as Chinese, were prohibited from purchasing such land.

However, the law also if offspring of a mixed marriage between a native and a nonnative, including a Chinese, would be automatically accepted as native - hence the categorization of Sino-Native. As Native Land titles could only be transacted between natives, they were not valued at open market price and therefore were considered much cheaper - hence the attraction of wanting to be categorized as a native to qualify for such perks. However, by the 1980s, many who were categorized under this group faced problems in having their Native Title properties being transferred to their subsequent generation. Especially affected were some offspring of a Chinese ancestor and a native female (in many cases, retaining Chinese surnames), whose native status being questioned and challenged, were not considered as natives by the state administration, and therefore not eligible to inherit properties reserved under Native Title. Under such conditions, it is obvious that the Sino-Native identity was being challenged, if not threatened, thus becoming a contested issue" (2012: 110). Accordingly, Mat Zin Mat Kib (2002), stressed that, as being half Chinese and half indigenous can be accorded special rights, just like the real indigenous, there are claims that

it exists fraud simply to get the status of a Native. What makes such a status unique and manipulable its contribution in the consolidation of identity politics activities in Sabah, Malaysia. The following explains the concept of identity politics.

The Concept of Identity Politics

Identity politics refers to a political approach where individuals or groups advocate for political agendas, policies, and rights based on their identities, such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or other social categories (Kauffman, 2001; Miller, 2021; Yancey, 2023). The core idea is that people who share certain characteristics may have distinct experiences of marginalization, discrimination, or privilege, and therefore require specific representation and policies that address their unique concerns. In identity politics, the emphasis is often placed on collective identity as a source of strength and empowerment. Supporters argue that focusing on identity helps highlight injustices faced by marginalized groups and promotes greater equality. However, critics argue[7] that identity politics can sometimes be divisive, leading to fragmentation of society by focusing on group differences rather than shared commonalities.

In fact, Weeks and Allen (2022) found that political actors often inclined in using identity politics for their political mileage and such a decision resulted in the growing of what Sheets, Rowling, Gilmore and Melcher (2022) calls 'Us versus Them' a situation where a state of antagonism between two groups, generally grounded on group affiliation noticeable. Apart from that, Yancey found that the "promotion of identity politics may lead to the potentially problematic psychological tendencies" (2023, p. 1245), as it let to the growing of desire for higher government spending, issue that Yancey described as one that "are consistently negatively related to lower well-being and mediate the ability of progressive political ideology to predict lower levels of well-being" (2023, p. 1245). Moreover, Hashemi (2014) argued that identity politics often led to the emergence of significant economic imbalance between the populations as the political elites made it as their tool for a divide and rule agenda. Overall, identity politics plays a significant role in shaping modern political movements and debates, particularly in the context of civil rights, social justice, and representation.

Finding 2: Sino-Native and the development of identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia

Sabah, a state in East Malaysia located on the northern tip of Borneo, is home to a unique and complex mosaic of ethnic groups, including Malays, indigenous peoples (collectively known as Bumiputera), and a significant population of Chinese origin (Shireen, 2021; King, 2017; Schulz, 2017; Alen Kee, July 25, 2011). Among the ethnic groups that have emerged from intermarriage between the indigenous people and the Chinese migrants is the Sino-Native community. The Sino-Native community in Sabah primarily originated from intermarriages between Chinese immigrants and indigenous peoples, particularly the Kadazan-Dusun, Murut, and Bajau communities (Irfan Ullah, Mokhtar Saidin & Bobby Anderson, 2018; Wong, 2000). These marriages, which became more prevalent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were largely facilitated by the migration of Chinese men who arrived in Sabah as labourers, traders, and entrepreneurs. During this time, local scholars such

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[7] See Ationg, R. (2020). Political Elites and Ethnic Politics. United Kingdom: Scholar Publishing; Hashmi, R.S. (2014). Ethnic Politics: An Issue to National Integration (The Case of Pakistan). South Asian Studies: A Research Journal of South Asian Studies, 29(1, January – July), 345-361.

as Danny (2012) portrays that it was common for Chinese male migrants to marry local indigenous women, as there were fewer Chinese women in the region.

In 1997, Rosnah Ismail published her articles on marital relationship among Kadazan Dusun couples and Sino Kadazan couples, where she found that intermarriages between the Chinese and the natives becomes increasingly prevalent since the past decades of the 20th century. The offspring of these intermarriages formed a distinct community known as the Sino-Native, which represents a fusion of Chinese and indigenous cultures. Over the years, the Sino-Native community has grown to be an integral part of Sabah's social fabric. This blending of identities has created a hybrid cultural space, where both Chinese and indigenous heritage are valued, leading to a unique set of traditions, languages, and beliefs (Staal, 1923). This, among other, led to the development of identity politics in this land. In general, in Sabah, identity politics, as described by the key informer of the study, refers to the way in which different ethnic and cultural groups, including the Sino-Native community, engage in political discourse and action to assert their unique identity, demand representation, and protect their interests. Such an argument is relevant given that Sabah's political landscape is characterized by the negotiation of power and resources between its diverse ethnic communities, each vying for recognition, development, and equity within the framework of Malaysia's multicultural society (Puyok, 16 September 2024).

Scholars such as Mukminin (2023) generally explained that for the Sino-Native community, questions of identity and political representation are complex, and the complexity is applicable to the Sino-Native in Sabah. When ask, the key informer[8] of the study opined that as descendants of both Chinese and indigenous heritage, they straddle two worlds, often identifying with both the Chinese and indigenous sides of their ancestry. This dual identity creates a dynamic that is both empowering and challenging in terms of political and social participation. Furthermore, the Sino-Native also encountering the issue of dual identity and political challenges as they are often confusing whether they are Chinese or indigenous. This aruis due to the concept of Bumiputra. In Malaysia, the Bumiputera (literally "sons of the soil") are accorded special privileges and rights under the Malaysian constitution, including land ownership, education, and economic opportunities (Mohamed, Ghazalli & Mohamed, 2022; Hwok-Aun, 4 February 2021; Floyd, 2019; Balasubramaniam, 2007).

Indigenous people of Sabah are classified as Bumiputera, enjoying these benefits, while the Chinese, who are classified as non-Bumiputera, do not. Sino-Natives, depending on how they identify themselves, may fall into either category. In many cases, the key informer[9] of the study suggest that they identify as Bumiputera by emphasizing their indigenous ancestry, thereby benefiting from state privileges. However, those who lean more towards their Chinese heritage may not receive these benefits, raising questions about the role of personal and collective identity in determining one's social and political status. This ambiguity in identity also means that the Sino-Native community must navigate the tension between being part of both indigenous and Chinese political agendas.

Furthermore, the emergence of Sino-Native in Sabah also be associated with the issues of political representation and identity. The shared view among the key informants of

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[8] Interview with the key informer at her age of 51 years old in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah on 1 June 2024.
[9] Interview with the key informer at her age of 47 years old in Penampang, Sabah on 13 August 2024.

this study suggests that Sini-Native cannot be discounted in the context of political representation and identity politics. In Sabah, identity politics is driven by the state's multi-ethnic composition. Political parties in Sabah have traditionally drawn support along ethnic lines, with specific parties representing the interests of indigenous groups, Malays, or Chinese (Hazis, 2018; Ibrahim, 2013; Lim, 2013; Lim, 2008; Ismail Yusoff, 1997; Appell & Harrison, 1968). For the Sino-Native community, political affiliation and representation can be complicated. While they may share concerns with the indigenous community over Bumiputera rights and regional autonomy, they are also connected to the Chinese community, which historically has focused on issues of economic equality, education, and citizenship. Thus, some Sino-Natives find themselves politically aligned with indigenous political movements, such as the Kadazan-Dusun-based parties, while others are drawn to the Chinese-dominated parties that advocate for business interests and minority rights in the broader Malaysian context. However, their mixed heritage allows them to play a bridging role between these groups, contributing to a more inclusive and integrated form of politics in Sabah. This has, thus, characterises the development of identity politics activity in Sabah. The broader context of identity politics in Sabah has been shaped by the interaction between indigenous rights, national identity, and regional autonomy (Loh, 2010). Sabah has a long history of advocating for greater autonomy within the Malaysian Federation, which has in turn influenced the development of identity-based political movements in the state.

In line with the development of identity-based movement, all key-informers of this study of the opinion that Sabah politics is also has never been estranged to the issues of indigenous rights and regional autonomy. Indigenous groups in Sabah have historically advocated for greater recognition of their rights and autonomy, both from the federal government in Kuala Lumpur and from the state government. Since Sabah's inclusion in Malaysia in 1963, indigenous communities have fought to maintain control over their land, resources, and cultural practices. This has been formalized in the concept of Bumiputera rights, which aim to protect indigenous people from economic and political marginalization (Thillainathan & Cheong, 2024; Chin, 2014; Ongkili, 2003; Mason & Omar, 2003). The Sino-Native community, particularly those identifying with their indigenous heritage, has aligned with these political movements, supporting calls for land rights, cultural preservation, and equitable development. At the same time, they maintain ties with the Chinese community, which advocates for fairer economic policies and more inclusive governance.

But what exactly is the role of Chinese communities or the Sino-Native communities in identity politics activities in this land. Majority of the key informers of this study explained that the Chinese migrants and their descendants have played a crucial role in Sabah's economic development, particularly in trade, commerce, and agriculture. However, their classification as non-Bumiputera has often placed them at a disadvantage in terms of political representation and access to state benefits. As a result, Chinese communities in Sabah have focused their political activism on issues such as citizenship, business rights, education (including Chinese-language schools), and equal opportunities. They, the key informers of this study, explained that the Sino-Native community's connection to the Chinese identity makes them part of these broader movements for equality, while simultaneously benefiting from their status as indigenous. In this sense, Sino-Natives are uniquely positioned to mediate between indigenous and Chinese political concerns, advocating for a more balanced and inclusive form of identity politics in Sabah.

In explaining such an argument, the key informer at his age of 70[10] years old said, "political parties in Sabah have historically drawn their support from specific ethnic communities. The Kadazan-Dusun-dominated Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and United Pasokmomogun Kadazan Organization (UPKO), for example, have long championed indigenous rights and greater autonomy for Sabah. Chinese-based parties, on the other hand, such as the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) and the local branches of national Chinese parties, have focused on issues affecting the Chinese community". What this, now, hinted is that the Sino-Native politicians and leaders often find themselves navigating between these political camps, advocating for a balance between indigenous rights and the broader concerns of Chinese-Sabahans. Their involvement in both sides of the political spectrum underscores the fluidity of identity politics in Sabah, where ethnic and cultural identities are not rigid but overlap and interact in complex ways.

Therefore, it is relevance to portrays that the Sino-Native community in Sabah embodies the complexity and dynamism of identity politics in the state. With roots in both indigenous and Chinese cultures, Sino-Natives navigate a hybrid identity that straddles the political concerns of both groups. This duality gives them a unique perspective in the ongoing negotiations around indigenous rights, economic equity, and regional autonomy that characterize Sabah's political landscape. As Sabah continues to develop within the framework of the Malaysian Federation, the Sino-Native community's ability to bridge the gap between its indigenous and Chinese components highlights the potential for a more inclusive and multifaceted approach to identity politics. This ongoing interplay of identities, driven by the need for political representation and social equity, will continue to shape the future of Sabah and its diverse communities.

Finding 3: The unfavourable impacts of Sino-Native addition into the growing of identity politics activities in Sabah, Malaysia

As portrayed, the Sino-Native has impacted the development of identity politics activity in Sabah, Malaysia. In general, the emergence of a Sino-native identity has led to the enrichment of demographic looks in Sabah. On the contrary, however, the existence of Sino-Native has also had an unwanted effect, especially in the context of manipulation of social identity for political interests among political actors. It has not only have diluted both traditional native cultures and Chinese cultural practices, but it also resulted in the contested cultural landscape. In explaining such an unfavourable impacts, the key informers aged 47 from Tawau who was interviewed in Tuaran on September 10, 2024, stressed that, "the assimilation of Sino-Native identities led to the erosion of traditional practices among indigenous groups. As intermarriage and cultural exchanges occur, younger generations may prioritize a hybrid identity over the preservation of distinct native customs, rituals, and languages. Similarly, the influence of local customs can lead to the dilution of Chinese traditions. As Sino-Natives adopt elements from indigenous cultures, certain Chinese practices may diminish, resulting in a blended culture that may not fully represent either group. For that reason, many individuals identifying as Sino-Native, there can be a struggle to reconcile their dual heritage. This can lead to feelings of alienation from both the local communities and the broader Chinese diaspora, complicating cultural identity and belonging".

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[10] Interview with the key informer in Tamparuli, Sabah on 29 September 2024.

Most importantly, the addition of Sino-Native in the social identification consortia has led to manipulation of social groupings among the political actors. The key informer of the study aged 51 who works as an academic in a local university, when asked of whether the Sino-native have brought about unfavourable impacts, he said "*political parties often exploit the Sino-Native identity to form strategic alliances. By appealing to this demographic, parties can garner support from a broader base, thus strengthening their political position. This can lead to the prioritization of policies that favor the interests of Sino-Native communities. This certainly suggests that the manipulation of Sino-Native identity can become a tool in identity politics, where parties capitalize on ethnic sentiments to rally support. This can reinforce divisions within Sabah society, as parties may frame political issues in terms of ethnic identities, leading to increased polarization. Political entities may also seek to represent Sino-Native interests in governance. This can manifest in the promotion of policies that celebrate this identity, but it may also risk marginalizing more traditional narratives of both the indigenous groups and the Chinese community, thereby further complicating cultural dynamics*".

Furthermore, Jason Loh Seong Wei (13/04/2021) opined that political actors' tendency in using social identity for their political tool has resulted in the growing of national disunity in this country. Just like in the case with the findings of a study by Yancey (2023), in Sabah, the development of identity politics generally led to the promotion of potentially problematic psychological tendencies, when the desire for higher government spending grew due to the need to ensure demands from certain parties are fulfilled. Thus, it resulted in the emergence of significant economic imbalance between the populations as the political elites made it as their tool for a divide and rule agenda.

That's it, given the unfavourable impact's inclination among the politicians in identity politics manipulation, ending such an inclination is crucial. Ending politicians' manipulation of social identity involves a multifaceted approach that fosters accountability, transparency, and community engagement. Among the strategies to consider is by promoting political education (awareness campaigns - educate the public about identity politics and manipulation tactics through workshops, seminars, and social media campaigns; Critical thinking - encourage critical thinking in schools and communities, enabling individuals to analyze political rhetoric and recognize manipulation), enhance transparency (open data initiatives - advocate for transparency in political funding and decision-making processes to reduce opportunities for manipulation; public access - ensure that information regarding political agendas, affiliations, and community engagement is readily accessible to citizens), encourage inclusive policies (diversity representation - push for policies that promote diversity and inclusion within political parties, ensuring that all voices are represented and not just those that can be manipulated; civic engagement - create platforms for genuine civic engagement where communities can voice their concerns and needs without political interference); strengthen accountability mechanisms (regulatory bodies - establish or empower independent bodies to monitor political activities and hold politicians accountable for their actions; whistleblower protections - provide protections for individuals who expose unethical practices within political parties), foster community building (cross community dialogues - organize discussions between different social groups to build understanding and counter divisive narratives; grassroots movements - support grassroots movements that emphasize unity and shared goals over identity-based divisions), media literacy (training programs - develop media

literacy programs that help citizens critically evaluate news sources and political messaging; fact checking initiatives - encourage independent fact-checking organizations to combat misinformation and provide accurate information to the public), and empower local leadership (local candidates - support local candidates who prioritize community needs over identity manipulation; community leaders - encourage community leaders to advocate for unity and discourage divisive tactics used by politicians). It is hoped that by fostering a politically educated and engaged citizenry, promoting transparency, and encouraging inclusive practices, communities can reduce the impact of social identity manipulation by politicians. It's essential to create a culture of accountability and civic responsibility, empowering individuals to recognize and resist divisive tactics.

Conclusion

Overall, the study has made an essential finding on the unique relationship between Sino-native and the development of identity politics in Sabah, Malaysia, particularly with regards to the survival of politicians there. It shows how the political actors by either directly or indirectly intensifying identity politics influence by concentrating on the way the 'rakyat' express their social identification and subsidize to political contestation in this land. At the core, it portrays that the arrival of Chinese immigrants in Sabah, Malaysia creates opportunities for cultural fusion and new forms of identity namely Sino-Native. This certainly should have provided opportunity for consolidation of local economic area measured through elements of cultures and populations size. Having said that, however, it appeared that the emergence of Sino-Native identity poses challenges as it not only diluted the traditional practices but is also provides room for political manipulation of social identity. For that reason, the study proposed that a multifaceted approach of fostering accountability, transparency, and community engagement aimed at averting political actors from operating social identities for their political interests is crucial. Accordingly, there is latent for further investigation in this area. One further research is a more thorough and systematic examination of how exactly such an approach can be effectively operated within the framework of modern democracy, a political system described by Welzel (2021) as a system that focuses on freedom, a freedom that entitle society to control their own private lives and to have a voice and a vote in the civic domain.

Acknowledgement

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