

BREAKING BARRIERS: EXPLORING POLITICAL LITERACY AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN CHINESE COMMUNITIES OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The involvement of Chinese women in politics remains low, as evidenced by the number of Chinese women in the State Legislative Assembly, the House of Representatives, and those holding positions in the cabinet, either as ministers or deputy ministers. Political literacy is one indicator influencing Chinese women's political participation in Peninsular Malaysia. Our study examines the political literacy among Chinese female representatives in Peninsular Malaysia and its impact on their political participation. We successfully interviewed seven informants: Chinese female political representatives from the MCA, DAP, and PKR parties in Peninsular Malaysia. The interview results were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed based on the frequency and similarity of the informants' views. We found that political literacy among Chinese women is high, as they recognize the importance of women's involvement in politics. However, the overall political participation of Chinese women in Malaysia remains low due to other indicators influencing their participation in addition to political literacy. We propose strategies to empower Chinese women in the political arena in Malaysia. We emphasize the need for more research on the involvement of Chinese women in politics to ensure they are not marginalized, as their voices are essential for representing and advocating for their needs and interests in Malaysia.

Keywords: Political Literacy, Political Participation, Chinese Women, Political Participation, Peninsular Malaysia

1 Introduction

The appointment of Wan Azizah as the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, albeit for a brief period, has brought new vitality to the political landscape for women in Malaysia, including Chinese women. There has been a development in the political culture among Chinese women in Malaysia, but political participation within the Chinese community remains low. This phenomenon is evident in the increasing number of Chinese women holding positions as Members of Parliament, State Legislative Assembly members, or even ministers in Malaysia.

However, the rate of Chinese women entering politics remains unsustainable. The percentage of Chinese women in the Dewan Rakyat was 4.5 percent in the 14th General Election, which decreased to 3.6 percent in the 15th General Election. Meanwhile, the percentage of Chinese women in the State Legislative Assembly was 3.4 per cent in the 14th General Election, which increased to 4.6 percent in the 15th General Election. These percentages are detailed in Table 1.0. Despite women in the country being more educated than men, their political involvement remains low, including among Chinese women. The 2022 Global Gender Gap (GGG) Report indicates that 48.44 per cent of women entered higher education institutions compared to 37.05 per cent of men (Abdullah, 2023).

Additionally, only one Chinese woman held a cabinet position after the 12th General Election, and this number did not increase after the 13th General Election, when no Chinese women were appointed ministers or deputy ministers. However, two Chinese women were appointed as ministers following the 14th General Election, both from the DAP party, benefiting from the Pakatan Harapan victory in the 14th General Election. Furthermore, the number of Chinese women appointed as deputy ministers after the 12th General Election was two, which decreased to one after the 13th General Election. Two Chinese women were appointed deputy ministers after the 14th General Election. Following the 15th General Election, only one Chinese woman, Hannah Yeoh, was appointed as a minister, serving as the Minister of Youth and Sports. Two Chinese women were appointed as deputy ministers: Teo Nie Ching, who was the deputy minister of communications, and Lim Hui Ying, who was the deputy minister of finance (Ramli, 2021).

Table 1: The Percentage of Ethnic Chinese Women in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies (DUN) from the 12th to the 15th General Elections

	PRU-12	PRU-13	PRU-14	PRU-15
Parliament	4.0	2.3	4.5	3.6
State Legislative Assemblies	2.6	3.8	3.4	4.6

Source: Malaysian Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies, & Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development

This article aims to assess the level of political literacy among Chinese female representatives in Peninsular Malaysia. Political literacy is crucial as it directly influences political participation; higher literacy levels correlate with more active involvement. The article also offers recommendations for empowering Chinese women in the political arena. We assert that this research is vital for enhancing efforts to prevent the marginalization of Chinese women in politics and to empower them effectively- ensuring the inclusion of Chinese women's voices in the political process is essential to represent and address their unique needs and interests in Malaysia.

Furthermore, Malaysia's democratic governance system, which upholds human rights principles, underscores the importance of this study. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Part II, Article 8, enshrines equality rights, opposing discrimination based on religion, race, descent, place of birth, or gender. Ensuring the political empowerment of Chinese women aligns with these constitutional principles and promotes a more inclusive and representative political landscape in Malaysia.

However, this differs from the privileges enjoyed by the indigenous people, which are enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia under Article 153. The advantages the Bumiputera community enjoys result from their status as the original inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak. Consequently, the concept of equality in the Malaysian context is distinct, as non-Bumiputera communities do not benefit from the special rights accorded to Bumiputera. These privileges include quotas for public service positions, scholarships, educational assistance, and business permits (Samsu et al. 2018). Therefore, if there is gender and ethnic discrimination, including in the

political arena, all parties must take corrective measures to address and resolve the issue to ensure the protection of all stakeholders within the democratic framework practiced in Malaysia.

2 Literature overview

2.1 Implications of Political Literacy on Political Engagement

Figure 1: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework



Political literacy is the knowledge and understanding of political processes and issues, which enables every citizen in a country to fulfill their role as a citizen. This role includes what is referred to as political expertise and political awareness, meaning the extent to which a citizen is informed about and understands the current political situation in their country. Political literacy fundamentally consists of a robust combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Crick, 2000). There are four elements of political literacy. First, an awareness of the importance of political activities and institutions, freedom, and their roles. Second, the ability to form autonomous views and positions in the political process to produce political outcomes. Third, knowledge about understanding, planning, and government spending for public development and comfort. Fourth, participation in political activities (Madhok, 2005).

In this context, political literacy means understanding politics, identifying political forms, political patterns, current political thinking, and basic voter rights, and recognizing that their future is in their own hands. Currently, the concept of political literacy is not limited to the ability to read current news materials; it extends to the ability to critically understand, verify information, provide interpretation and perspective, and ultimately interact well through the creation of new meanings in any discourse medium, whether digital or text-mediated, such as comics, pamphlets, or manifestos. This critical evaluation helps to avoid being misled by illogical manifestos, thereby holding manifesto drafters accountable for their promises rather than treating them as mere suggestions (Pawi, 2022). Thus, political literacy involves all these abilities, which are essential for an individual to engage in politics, either directly or indirectly, regardless of their education level, gender, age, or ethnicity (Pawi, 2022).

McClosky (1972) defines political participation as the voluntary activities undertaken by community members to elect leaders and, either directly or indirectly, engage in the

policy-making process- this aligns with Huntington et al. (2014), who describe political participation as the actions of individual citizens aimed at influencing the decisions of those in power. Citizen participation in governance, daily administration, and policy-making is exemplified through general elections. Consequently, elections are seen as the manifestation and culmination of the people's will and authority (Sutisna, 2017).

Political engagement is also defined as the extent to which citizens use their rights to influence or involve themselves in political activities (Munroe, 2002). It is not limited to voting but includes overall political involvement. Political engagement is divided into two types: conventional and non-conventional. Conventional engagement involves activities considered normal, such as behaviors typically practiced and accepted in society. It also refers to routine behaviors that use institutions established by government representatives and occur within a particular country's norms and traditions (Janda et al., 2011). Non-conventional engagement, on the other hand, involves activities deemed inappropriate or seen as non-compliant with regulations. These behaviors challenge or oppose established institutions, often moving outside norms, being more aggressive, and potentially breaking the law (Munroe, 2002). Voting, campaigning, and party membership illustrate conventional political engagement, while demonstrations, revolutions, and political violence represent non-conventional political engagement. However, the types of these engagements may vary by country, depending on societal lifestyles.

This article will examine the extent of political literacy among Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia, which has influenced their political engagement, as indicated by the low number of Chinese women involved in the Dewan Rakyat, State Legislative Assemblies, or holding significant positions in the executive body, including roles as ministers or deputy ministers.

3 Research

In our journey to uncover the political literacy of Chinese female representatives in Peninsular Malaysia, we adopted a qualitative research approach, delving deep into the narratives of our informants through intensive interviews and the gathering of secondary data. These interviews, framed by semi-structured questions, provided a consistent foundation to explore the research questions, allowing for a rich interaction between interviewer and informant. This method enabled us to gain profound insights into our informants' perceptions, feelings, and experiences, as Babbie highlighted (2010).

To ensure their safety and uphold the principle of anonymity, we chose not to disclose the names of the informants. Our primary informants were 10 Chinese female political representatives from the DAP, MCA, and PKR parties in Peninsular Malaysia. Their stories and experiences form the core of this study, offering a glimpse into their unique political journeys.

Table 2: List of Informants and Organizations

Informant	Background	Politic party/Institution
Informant 1	Women's Political Representation	MCA

Informant 2	Women's Political Representation	MCA
Informant 3	Women's Political Representation	PKR
Informant 4	Women's Political Representation	PKR
Informant 5	Women's Political Representation	DAP
Informant 6	Women's Political Representation	DAP
Informant 7	Women's Political Representation	DAP

In our quest to determine the ideal number of primary informants for this study, we turned to several scholarly voices. Charmaz (1990) noted that qualitative research typically involves smaller sample sizes than quantitative research. This smaller size is due to the depth and richness of qualitative methods, allowing researchers to delve deeply into specific issues, processes, conditions, or social interactions.

Charmaz (1990) emphasized that, although intensive interviews involve fewer participants, they can generate broad generalizations and are inherently inductive rather than reliant on hypothesis testing. With this guidance, we continued our interviews until we reached the saturation point the juncture at which no new data emerged. Mason (2010) affirmed that reaching saturation is critical in determining sample size in qualitative research, signaling that it is time to conclude data collection when no new insights are found.

We recorded and transcribed the informants' statements verbatim throughout the interview process. We then analyzed these transcriptions, focusing on the frequency and similarity of views expressed, and organized them into themes. We also highlighted direct quotations that vividly reflected the informants' experiences and feelings. Given the nature of verbatim quotations, the transcripts included colloquial language and a mix of Malay and English.

To maintain clarity and ensure anonymity, we coded the informants according to their position in the interview process. Direct quotations were meticulously coded with specific page and line references for easy reference, as illustrated in Table 3. This method allowed us to capture the authentic voices of the Chinese female political representatives, preserving the integrity of their stories while providing a clear framework for analysis.

Table 3: Code Processing

Informant 5:	“When I studied abroad, I served as the President of the Malaysian Students' Association” (P: 108, L: 3174-3175).	
Indication:		
P:		<i>Page</i>
L:		<i>Line</i>

We also embarked on a journey to gather secondary data to paint a fuller picture of the phenomenon we were studying. This part of our research took us to various sources, allowing us to delve into the history and background that framed our study. We scoured

libraries and archives, where the past whispered its secrets through old documents and records. We consulted ministries and political parties, tapping into their wealth of information. These sources provided us with the context and clarity needed to understand the intricate tapestry of our subject.

4 Discussion

Results from interviews with most informants indicate that women need to be involved in politics. Various arguments and opinions were expressed regarding women's need to engage in the political field. Most informants acknowledged the need for women to participate in politics, although some were disinterested due to the perception of politics being dirty and unpleasant. Through these interviews, informants linked the need for women to engage in politics to the perception that only women genuinely understand women's needs. The following are opinions shared by most informants regarding the necessity for women to involve themselves in politics:

Informant	Theme: Women Should be Involved in Politics
Informant 1	<p>“But we have our strength which men cannot match, such as maternal instincts, especially in politics. Now, we know that people's expectations have changed. They want representatives who understand them, are patient, willing to listen to their complaints, and are compassionate. All these are natural traits of women. That is why I said people now always say that the 21st century is the age of women. It makes sense because of the people's expectations.” (P:7, L: 209-217).</p>
	<p>“...only women understand other women better; women know women better, right? We understand their needs, know the problems we are facing, and know how to address them. There is no point if all the representatives for women's affairs are men...” (P:10, L: 306-309)</p> <p>“...secondly, it is about recognition in terms of being given equal opportunities so that we can compete on the same ground. I hope for women, as I have full confidence in our Malaysian women. Do you know why? Since 2003, every year, enrollment in public universities (IPTA) has been over 60% for women. For 12 years, this has accumulated, and last year it was the highest at 68%, with only 32% men. So, with this high rate of women in IPTA, I would say that Malaysian women are now mostly highly educated. We have no problems with quality or quantity, right?” (P: 20, L: 571-582)</p>
Informant 2	<p>“...because, if we follow the reasoning, women in politics are more transparent, whereas men are not? Women tend to adhere to rules more strictly, are more transparent, and are, how should I put it, trustworthy. That is the most important aspect; men lack the qualities that women possess. Thus, one can observe that women demonstrate a certain refinement and are more attuned to societal issues...” (P30, L: 869-871).</p> <p>“There are indeed certain tasks that only women can perform. For</p>

	example, engaging with female voters; only women can establish close connections with female voters.” (P30, L: 863-865).
Informant 3	<p>“Because, without the involvement of women in politics, many women-related policies are not given adequate attention. For instance, issues such as maternity leave and marriage, among many other women's issues, require their decisions. Men should not be the ones making decisions for women. Only women understand their own needs.” (P: 177, L: 5282-5286).</p> <p>“If we want to advocate for women's rights, considering that there are more women than men at the university, if women themselves do not feel the need for this advocacy, then who will champion issues related to women and women's human rights?” (P: 53, L: 1541-1547).</p>
Informant 4	<p>“She can understand the developmental stages of children, and similarly, she can comprehend societal needs and demands. For example, a baby's behavior differs from that of a child in their early teens or a teenager, and it is different again when approaching marriage. A woman’s ability to engage with children across these various stages mirrors her capacity to engage with society. Thus, her experience with children at different ages enhances her understanding of societal issues.” (P: 87, L: 2531-2539).</p> <p>“Yes, I support having more women in politics. I believe that their commitment will lead to greater success compared to men. I support this view, not as self-promotion but based on my observation. Many women exhibit qualities and insights that men may not fully understand. Women often possess a finer sensitivity in addressing issues that men might not grasp.” (P: 88, L: 2547-2551).</p>
Informant 5	<p>“It is essential and mandatory, regardless of gender, for everyone living in a society to be involved. Whether elderly or young, male or female, involvement in public affairs is crucial as it affects everyone. Women should also be involved in all decision-making processes.” (P: 107, L: 3150-3153)</p>
Informant 6	<p>“It is necessary and mandatory. For instance, studies have shown that in Scandinavian countries where women are required to hold at least 20% of positions in all sectors, there is lower mortality, a significantly reduced infant mortality rate, and higher happiness indices. Corruption indices are also lower. This evidence supports the idea that having women in leadership and decision-making roles, ideally with a 50% representation, leads to better outcomes. Recently, Finland appointed a woman as Prime Minister at age 34, and her cabinet also comprises a majority of women.” (P: 125, L: 3661-3667)</p>
Informant 7	<p>“It is necessary, indeed. Only we can speak for our own needs. Just as we need representation from Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazans, Dusuns, and other groups, it is crucial to have representatives from both genders and youth. It is vital because only we understand what happens to us. For instance, men may not grasp why we need 90 days of maternity leave. They might think three months is too long, as the baby will have grown by then. However, they do not understand the difficulties we face in recovering from childbirth. Therefore, only we</p>

can advocate for ourselves.” (P: 165, L: 4910-4918)

Moreover, most informants associate characteristics traditionally attributed to women—such as maternal instincts, friendliness, attentiveness, adherence to rules, and an understanding of societal needs—with the qualities necessary for successful political leadership. These attributes of women align with the maternal ideology, which views the role of a mother in raising children as a significant and courageous responsibility. According to Ruddick (1989), the maternal perspective suggests that women who have experienced motherhood understand the complexities of giving birth, raising, and protecting their children. Consequently, maternal ideology suggests that mothers employ peaceful approaches, such as sisterhood and negotiation, in problem-solving. The qualities associated with women under this theory can contribute to their success as politicians. Viewing women's roles and responsibilities as mothers and wives through the maternal lens highlights how these roles are advantageous rather than limiting. Women are perceived as empathetic, protective of their children, gentle, and meticulous in fulfilling their responsibilities, which can enhance their political involvement.

Furthermore, informants stated that maternal instincts enable women to understand children's needs better, which in turn makes them more attuned to societal needs. Therefore, women's involvement in politics is essential for developing gender-sensitive policies and advancing issues related to women's rights. Informants also expressed confidence in the ability of Malaysian women to participate in politics, citing the high educational levels among women in Malaysia. Additionally, informants noted that only women can effectively reach out to other women, as not all women feel comfortable sharing their issues and perspectives with male politicians, particularly concerning women's issues. Therefore, having female political representatives is necessary for engaging with women. Most informants agreed on women's political participation, attributing this to factors such as women's inherent qualities, educational levels, the need for gender-friendly policies, and advocacy for women's issues.

4.1 Empowering The Voice: Strategies For Enhancing Chinese Women's Political Engagement

Efforts by the Federal Government to increase the involvement of Chinese women in politics have yet to succeed. Therefore, collaboration and effort from all parties are crucial to address this issue. The patron-client concept can be employed to enhance women's political participation, including that of women from the Chinese ethnic group. Through this system, women would fully support party leadership and attract more female voters. However, simultaneously, male political elites who control party leadership need to provide opportunities and support for women to hold positions at the highest party councils or to be selected as candidates in elections based on the opportunities and space provided by male political elites within the patron-client framework. Empowering women in the political arena is one way to gain female voter support, demonstrating political parties' sensitivity to women's issues. Women also play a critical role as actors influencing parties through elections. If parties neglect the importance of female votes, they will face losses- this is evident from the statistics released by the Election Commission (2018), which show that the number of female voters is one percent higher than that of male voters. Women make up 50.5 percent of the 14.9 million voters in Malaysia (Shiekh, & Zakuan, 2019).

The target of achieving a 30 percent quota for women in politics will not be met unless this quota is enacted as a mandatory law or regulation by the Federal Government, state governments, and political parties- this is because the target set may not be fulfilled without legal enforcement. If this issue persists, achieving the quota target will become increasingly difficult. It is not easy to dismantle male dominance at any level, whether at the federal government, state government, or within political parties. Therefore, legal enforcement is necessary to ensure that the quota is met. In this context, 127 countries worldwide have implemented gender quota systems. These quota systems are enshrined in national constitutions, party constitutions, or electoral laws. Countries implementing such quota systems include Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Data from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance shows that, on average, countries that implement gender quotas as national policies successfully achieve at least 25 to 30 percent female representation in Parliament (Abdullah, 2019). However, once the target is achieved, the quota system can be replaced with a merit-based system to ensure that elected female political representatives are qualified.

Additionally, the 'mentor-mentee' system can be utilized to increase the number of qualified Chinese female politicians, as gender-based quotas often result in women being selected merely to fulfill the quota. To successfully implement the 'mentor-mentee' system, mentors should be successful and skilled women in the political field to produce the best mentees. This system can be applied at the level of political parties, the federal government, or the state government. Therefore, before women are nominated for important positions or allowed to run in elections, mentors should first train them. Advanced countries like New Zealand and Finland have successfully produced qualified female leaders who have become Prime Ministers and Presidents. For example, Sanna Marin was appointed as Prime Minister of Finland and became the world's youngest national leader, while Jacinda Ardern became the female Prime Minister of New Zealand (Ramli, 2023).

Political parties, including Chinese women, are key stakeholders in enhancing women's political participation. Political parties can undertake various efforts, such as reviewing party systems that discriminate against women, whether in selecting party leadership or election candidates. This effort can be achieved by enforcing rules through party constitutions to eliminate barriers that hinder women from actively participating in internal party affairs. These laws must be adhered to, with penalties imposed on offenders. Additionally, political parties can develop women's potential at the grassroots level by implementing gender-inclusive educational and awareness programs to nurture capable female leaders.

The government should also effectively increase women's political involvement, including women from ethnic Chinese communities. The government should review policies and programs provided for women. Specific policies for women need to be formulated to encourage their political participation, and before these policies are developed, the government must consider the current status and developments of women in Malaysia. The National Policy on Women 2009 needs to be revised and reassessed. Therefore, improvements should be made to this policy to address weaknesses that may hinder women's participation in politics. Moreover, gender awareness programs should be implemented by the government, and these programs should involve both women and men. Changing the overall structure requires awareness

and commitment from both genders. Gender discrimination will persist if not supported by men. These programs should be ongoing and managed by trained experts with extensive knowledge of gender issues (Ramli, & Talib, 2023).

Furthermore, strengthening the relationship between the government and NGO organizations is recommended. NGOs can play a role by organizing gender awareness programs for various segments of society. The government should support NGOs by providing up-to-date information and financial assistance. Gender centers could also be established in collaboration between the government and NGOs. The objective of these centers would be to gather direct information from women and communities regarding gender issues.

5 Conclusions

Imagine the journey of Chinese women entering the political landscape in Malaysia. Their involvement is shaped by multiple factors, one of the most significant being political literacy. Women with high political literacy become more aware and engaged in political activities. On the other hand, low political literacy can hinder their participation, leading to lower involvement and affecting their representation in decision-making roles within political parties, executive bodies, the House of Representatives, and state legislative assemblies. Studies have shown that Chinese female representatives generally have a high level of political literacy, recognizing the importance of women's political involvement.

Nevertheless, despite this awareness, the actual participation of Chinese women in Malaysian politics remains strikingly low. Their presence in the House of Representatives, state assemblies, and as Ministers or Deputy Ministers is minimal. This paradox reveals that factors beyond political literacy are at play. Consider the everyday lives of these women, where time constraints, patriarchal cultural norms, and opposition from family members can significantly impede their political aspirations. These obstacles paint a more complex picture of Chinese women's political challenges. Future studies must delve deeper into these additional factors to fully understand the dynamics of Chinese women's political involvement in Malaysia. We also recommend empowering Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia, emphasizing the need for comprehensive research to ensure their participation in crucial national decision-making processes. By amplifying their voices in the House of Representatives, state assemblies, and executive bodies, we can ensure that the rights and interests of Chinese women Malaysian citizens are heard and defended.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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