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# A comparative study of Malay/Chinese and Malay/Indian ethnic conflicts and relations in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society

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**Abstract.** Since Malaysia's independence, the relationship between the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups (Malay/Chinese) and the relationship between the Malay and Indian ethnic groups (Malay/Indian) have been two of the most significant political issues in the country. While both belong to the category of indigenous groups and immigrant relations in Malaysia, there are fundamental differences between these two relationships. This paper argues that the Malay/Chinese relationship is a long-standing ethnic conflict caused by social class disputes, characterized by economic disparities, cultural clashes, and structural factors such as colonial history. In contrast, the Malay/Indian relationship is primarily a short-term regional conflict triggered by unexpected events. The ethnic stratification in the Malay/Chinese relationship, formed on the basis of economic differences, has become a structural condition, and the historical friction since the British and Japanese colonial periods has further exacerbated the situation. For Malaysia to build a truly equal and mutually respectful multicultural society, many areas still require significant efforts.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Malays, Malaysian Chinese, Malaysian Indians, ethnic conflict, ethnic relations

## 1. Introduction

In modern world history, with the growth of Western maritime technology and geographical knowledge, European societies formally entered global overseas trade and colonial expansion in the 15th and 16th centuries [1]. In addition to the rampant colonization of Asia, Africa, and the Americas [2], the plunder and transfer of colonial labor became an important process for accumulating wealth for the colonial powers, and it remained the norm for a long period of time. In contemporary times, how emerging nations handle the ethnic conflicts and integration issues left by labor migration during the colonial period has attracted the attention of researchers from various fields and has become an important topic in postcolonial studies. As an island nation spanning the Pacific, Malaysia occupies a key position in maritime traffic. Historically, it suffered colonial rule by the Portuguese (1511-1641), the Dutch (1641-1824), and the British (1824-1941), as well as military occupation by Japan (1941-1945). After World War II, Britain continued its colonial rule over Malaya until 1957, when the Federation of Malaya declared its independence. [1]In 1963, the Federation of Malaya united with Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah to form the country of Malaysia, establishing a constitutional monarchy with a federal system. Singapore, however, left the federation and became an independent state in 1965. Currently, Malaysia consists of 13 states and 3 federal territories.

Before Malaysia's independence, large numbers of Chinese and Indian immigrants were brought to the Malay Peninsula in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century to supplement the local labor force under the development needs of the British colonial authorities. By 1940, the Chinese population in Malaya reached 34.2%, and the Indian population accounted for 44.2% [3]. The proportion of immigrant labor was nearly equal to that of the Malay population, with immigrant workers becoming the dominant group in Malaya at that time.

Against the backdrop of colonial development, post-independence Malaysia became a multi-ethnic country. The British colonial administration granted the Malays "indigenous" privileges at the outset of their rule, creating barriers for non-Malays in political, economic, and cultural spheres, which led to imbalanced ethnic development and worsened relations between the Malay

[1] "British Malaya" (abbreviated as Malaya) is a regional name, not a national name. "Malaysia" became the national name after the 1963 Malaysia Agreement, which included North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore. ("The Colonies of North Borneo and Sarawak and the State of Singapore shall be federated with the existing States of the Federation of Malaya as the States of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore in accordance with the constitutional instruments annexed to this Agreement and the Federation shall thereafter be called Malaysia.") Therefore, this paper uses "Malaya" when referring to events before 1963 and "Malaysia" for events after 1963, or when discussing events that span both periods.

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ethnic group and other ethnicities. After Malaysia's independence, the government continued to follow British colonial management strategies, clearly distinguishing between "Malays" and "non-Malays" [4] in national laws, making ethnic relations one of the most sensitive political issues in Malaysia [5]. This division continues to contribute to the need for addressing the ongoing fragmentation of society [6]. On May 13, 1969, racial riots broke out in Malaysia due to Malay dissatisfaction with the economic control held by the Malaysian Chinese, bringing ethnic conflicts to the forefront once again [7]. Since then, most studies on Malaysian society have focused on the Malay/Chinese relationship, neglecting the relationship between the Malay ethnic group and another important ethnic group, the Malaysian Indians, as well as comparative analyses of the Malay/Chinese and Malay/Indian relations [8, 9].

In the current multi-ethnic society of Malaysia, although both the Chinese and Indian groups are classified as "non-Malay" ethnic groups, their own cultures, livelihood patterns in Malaysia, and political and economic influence differ significantly. Their historical interactions with the dominant Malay ethnic group and the nature of their relationships also vary. This paper compares and discusses the relationships between the Malay and Chinese, as well as between the Malay and Indian ethnic groups, to highlight the differences in these inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

## 2. Formation of Malaysia's multi-ethnic structure and the history of ethnic governance

Currently, Malaysia's ethnic policy follows the principle of "multiculturalism." Multiculturalism, in its original meaning, refers to the equal legal protection of the rights of different cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial groups [10]. However, Malaysia's version of multiculturalism differs from the commonly understood notion of multiculturalism based on the principle of ethnic equality. In Malaysia, the political norm of "Malay priority" is established first, ensuring the protection of Malay interests. Only after safeguarding the rights of the Malay ethnic group does the country legally recognize the citizenship rights of the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups, allowing their cultural traditions to continue and develop freely [11]. Under this framework, where Malay interests are prioritized, both the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups face certain discrimination, which in turn strengthens their own ethnic consciousness.

The complex and difficult-to-harmonize ethnic relations in Malaysia are closely tied to the colonial history of British and Japanese rule over Malaya. The analysis is as follows:

### 2.1. The introduction of Chinese and Indian laborers and ethnic differentiation policies during the British colonial period

In 1824, Britain gained control of the Strait of Malacca and gradually expanded its influence over the entire Malay Peninsula in the following years. To meet the material needs of industrial development in the colonial motherland, British colonists vigorously developed rubber plantations and tin mining in Malaya. In order to implement indirect rule and protect the traditional authority of the Malay nobility (Malay rajas), British colonists left the Malays in their original villages (kin-ordered villages) and turned to nearby Asian countries to seek labor supplementation [12]. At that time, China had been defeated by the British and French in the Second Opium War (1856-1860), and the Qing government was forced to sign the Treaty of Tientsin (Beijing Treaty). According to Article 5 of the treaty, "Any Chinese citizens who wish to emigrate to British territories or work elsewhere overseas are allowed to enter into agreements with the British, either alone or accompanied by their families, to board British ships without any obstruction [13]." As a result, British colonists recruited young male laborers from coastal provinces in China, but the recruitment process quickly turned into a large-scale practice of abduction and trafficking [14]. A large number of Chinese laborers were brought to the Malayan mining areas through intermediaries [15-17]. By 1895, the tin production in Malaya accounted for more than half of the world’s total output. The concentration of Chinese laborers led to the rapid development of once-remote mining areas into thriving towns, which in turn promoted the development of urban areas in Malaysia. This also marked the beginning of the tradition of Chinese communities settling in Malaysian cities [18].

In the late 19th century, to eliminate the governance threat posed by the rapid growth and excessive concentration of Chinese laborers [19], the British colonial authorities introduced immigrants from southern Tamil Nadu and rural northern India to work in the rubber plantations of Malaya [20]. As male-dominated immigrant labor populations were seen as a potential threat to social stability and public order, the British colonial authorities encouraged Indian laborers to migrate with their families by offering higher wages and providing employment opportunities for single Indian women, hoping that they would become wives of Indian male laborers and help stabilize the labor force [21, 22]. As a result of this policy, the proportion of Indian women working in rubber plantations steadily increased [23]. Between 1888 and 1929, the total number of Indian immigrants to Malaya reached 1.9 million, with the majority working in the rubber plantations, rapidly forming a substantial Indian community [24]. The British colonial authorities constructed a dual role for Indian female laborers: on one hand, they were seen as an essential element for ensuring the stability of the immigrant group and for producing more low-cost native Indian labor in the future; on the other hand, they also served as an immediate supplement to the labor force [22].

The British colonial government in Malaya promoted a dualistic economic development model: one based on export-oriented industry and commerce, and the other focused on the self-sufficiency of colonial agriculture. British colonists divided Malaya along ethnic, occupational, and geographic lines. According to the British colonial plan, Malays predominantly lived in rural areas,

focusing on rice cultivation. During the entire period of British rule, Malays had little to no interaction with the Chinese and Indian immigrants in their daily lives [25, 26].

In Malaysia, the concept of "natives" was artificially created after British colonial rule. As the first group the British colonizers encountered, the relationship between the Malays and the British played a crucial role in shaping the Malays into the "chosen natives" of Malaysia. Between 1874 and 1914, the Malay states signed treaties with Britain, which provided legitimacy for British rule in Malaya. In exchange, the British retained the monarchical system of the Malay rulers, granting them privileges [27] and allowing some Malays to receive elite education in order to enter the political system controlled by the British colonizers. This arrangement permanently placed the Malay ethnic group above the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups in terms of political and economic power [28]. In other words, the British colonizers designated the Malays as the indigenous people to be protected, granting them more special status and rights compared to the Chinese and Indians. However, in reality, the Malays' indigenous identity did not conform to the broader definition of "indigenous" because the land had already been inhabited before the Malays arrived on the Malay Peninsula [29]. Therefore, a significant proportion of so-called "Malay natives" were also immigrants, rather than original inhabitants.

## 2.2. Ethnic division policies during the Japanese occupation period

After the Japanese army captured Singapore in 1942, they continued their northward advance and began the military occupation of Malaya. During the Japanese occupation, the Japanese military government, recognizing the complex ethnic situation in Malaya after British colonial rule, selectively implemented different policies for different ethnic groups. While the Japanese military government carried out brutal persecutions of the Chinese ethnic group through activities such as the "Great Inspection," it simultaneously promoted the concept of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" as a lure, promising to expel British colonizers and regain national liberation. The Japanese government sought to gain the support of the Malay and Indian communities. They used the Malay military and police to fight against the "Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army," which was composed of Chinese, and formed a common anti-British stance with the Indian ethnic group [30, 31]. Under the Japanese colonial government's strategy, the Chinese resistance to Japanese occupation quickly transformed into ethnic conflict within the Chinese-Malay community, further exacerbated by the indifference of Chinese guerrilla fighters toward Malay customs, leading to frequent outbreaks of hostility between the Malay and Chinese communities [32]. Additionally, in order to secure Malay support and ensure a steady supply of military provisions, the Japanese colonial government implemented a policy of conciliation towards the Malays, granting them a degree of self-governance and political rights while encouraging their development in agriculture [33]. Although the people of Malaya were generally dissatisfied with the brutal rule of the Japanese, the greater conflict during this period was the ethnic tension deliberately fostered by the Japanese between the Chinese and Malay communities. Conflicts between the Chinese and the Japanese government gradually became direct confrontations between the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups, especially as the Malays began participating in governance.

The impact of Japan's military occupation of Malaya was profound. Firstly, Japan's invasion altered the demographic structure of Malaya, leading to a sharp decline in the Chinese and Indian populations [31]. Secondly, Japan's ethnic governance strategies left deep negative effects on future ethnic relations in Malaya, with hostilities between the Malay and Chinese communities seeping into the general population [34]. Thirdly, the colonial government's divide-and-rule strategy not only fostered a sense of ethnic identity within each group, but also artificially created boundaries between the groups, intensifying their ethnic differences. As a result, during the Japanese occupation, nationalist consciousness began to emerge among the various ethnic groups in Malaya.

After World War II, the British colonizers returned to Malaya. This time, the British colonial government abandoned its previous preferential policies towards the Malays and proposed the establishment of the "Federation of Malaya," aiming to grant equal citizenship rights to all residents who recognized Malaya as their homeland [35]. This move triggered strong dissatisfaction among the Malay ethnic group, leading them to form the "United Malays National Organization (UMNO)" in 1946 to protect their ethnic privileges. Subsequently, with the support of UMNO, the Chinese and Indian communities formed the "Malayan Chinese Association (MCA)" and the "Malayan Indian Congress (MIC)," respectively [36]. Thus, the political party system in Malaysia was shaped in a form of ethnic nationalism. In the political structure where Malays were the majority, Article 153 of the 1957 Merdeka Constitution stipulated that in order to improve the economic status of Malays, the constitution would grant priority in federal scholarships, civil service, land reserves, licenses, and permits [37]. Through legal means, the constitution protected the special political and economic interests of the Malays, creating a multicultural but unequal social environment in Malaysia.

After Malaysia's independence in 1957, the former immigrant laborers became recognized citizens of the new nation, permanently settling in Malaysia. However, as the economic disparities between the Malays and Chinese continued to widen, internal conflicts between the people grew. On the day following the May 13, 1969, racial riots, the Malaysian government declared a "State of Emergency" and suspended the democratic parliament [38]. In September of the same year, Tun Abdul Razak Bin Datuk Hussein assumed the office of Prime Minister and implemented the "New Economic Policy (NEP)," which was the first long-term development plan in Malaysia's history (1971-1991). The NEP aimed to eradicate poverty, address employment and economic inequality, and reorganize society by abolishing ethnic distinctions based on economic and geographical factors. The government also introduced a "Quota System" in higher education, employment, and capital ownership to correct social injustices. However, in the social context of the time, Malays still remained in rural areas, and foreign capital along with the Chinese community maintained economic dominance. Among the three major ethnic groups, the poverty and employment conditions of

the Malays remained urgent issues. Therefore, in essence, the NEP merely continued the colonial strategy of British rule, still prioritizing the special rights of Malays, and under this policy, state intervention in non-Malay ethnic groups became more open and forceful [37].

In June 1991, Malaysia's Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Bin Mohamad introduced the second long-term development plan (1991-2000) centered around the "National Development Policy (NDP)." The NDP focused on eradicating poverty, particularly addressing the economic disparities between regions, and maintaining a balance between economic growth and equal distribution. The policy also aimed to ensure that all Malaysian citizens could fairly enjoy economic benefits, reduce social inequality, and increase the capital ownership and employment rates of the indigenous population. As a supplement to the NEP, the NDP's policy goals remained rooted in Malay priority. Although the plan referred to "all Malaysian citizens," including the Chinese and Indians, the "equality" in the NDP referred to "ethnic equality" within each group, and the "justice" was similar to the "ethnic justice" outlined in earlier policies [39]. During this period, the Malaysian government continued to focus on supporting the development of the Malay ethnic group, largely disregarding the demands of the non-Malay communities.

## 3. The fundamental difference between Malay/Chinese and Malay/Indian relations

Due to the lack of research attention on the Malay/Indian relations, a long-standing stereotype has persisted in academic circles that the ethnic conflict between the Malay and Chinese communities in Malaysia is intense, while the Malay/Indian relationship is harmonious or distant. In reality, the Malay/Indian conflict is also one of the sharp political issues in Malaysia, but it is fundamentally different from the Malay/Chinese conflict.

### 3.1. Malay/Chinese relations: long-term ethnic conflict arising from class struggles

Under the influence of the British colonial government's "divide and rule" policy, the Chinese and Malay communities were long kept apart, with little interaction and few recorded incidents of inter-ethnic conflict. However, after the Japanese army occupied Malaya, the long-standing isolation between the ethnic groups was gradually broken. Due to differing political stances and the deliberate incitement by the Japanese military government, tensions between the Malay and Chinese communities began to escalate and gradually came to the forefront. Furthermore, after Malaysia gained independence from colonial rule, the conflict between the Malay and Chinese communities became increasingly intense, leading to social unrest that turned into long-term, collective, and inter-ethnic confrontations.

To illustrate, two of the most severe conflicts in post-independence Malaysia serve as examples. On May 10, 1969, Malaysia held its third general election. The Malay alliance party suffered an unexpected defeat, while opposition Chinese parties, such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), significantly increased their number of seats. This indicated that opposition political forces, particularly the Chinese, could now legally challenge the political status of the Malays, thereby posing a serious threat to the political power and privileges of the Malay community. On May 13, Chinese youth supporters of the DAP and MCA held victory parades. When the parade passed by the residence of the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Selangor, Dato' Harun in Kuala Lumpur, they clashed with angry Malays. The unrest quickly spread from Kuala Lumpur and escalated into a violent and bloody conflict, with Chinese-owned shops being looted and maliciously set on fire. There were also indiscriminate attacks on passersby across the country. This riot lasted for nearly two weeks [40-42]. According to data from the Malaysian National Operations Council, the conflict resulted in 196 deaths, 439 injuries, and 39 people reported missing. However, statistics from other sources suggest that the death toll was much higher than the government's official figures [43]. Furthermore, over 80% of the victims were Chinese [44].

The election result that led to the Malay alliance party's defeat can be seen as merely the trigger for the 1969 riots. The deeper cause was the widening economic disparity between the Malay and Chinese communities. According to 1970 statistics, the national poverty rate in Malaysia was 52.4%, while the poverty rate among the Malays was as high as 66%, which not only far exceeded the national average but was also much higher compared to the Chinese poverty rate of 27% [45]. The 1969 conflict began in Kuala Lumpur, where many impoverished Malays, who had recently migrated from rural areas of other states, had settled. These Malays were facing poor living conditions and economic struggles. The impoverished life of the lower-class Malays and their sense of defeat from the election loss collided with the wealthier Chinese from the upper class, who were celebrating their victory. The class-based ethnic differences quickly became apparent, and violent conflict erupted almost immediately. The initial acts of violence, including stabbings and arson, were carried out by young Malay migrants who had recently arrived from the countryside [46].

The second major Malay/Chinese ethnic conflict occurred in September 1987. At the time, the Minister of Education, Anwar Ibrahim, assigned a large number of non-Mandarin-speaking Chinese teachers to administrative positions in Chinese-language schools across the country. This move was met with protests from the Chinese community, and the Ministry of Education announced it would reconsider the assignments. However, the issue dragged on for six weeks. The Chinese community feared that the government's action would harm the future of Chinese-language education. Prior to this, there had already been dissatisfaction with the Ministry of Education's refusal to rescind the decision made by the University of Malaya Senate regarding the discontinuation of Chinese, Tamil, and English elective courses [47]. Following the controversy over the appointment of teachers,

Chinese-language newspapers extensively covered the issue and published editorials on the developments. With the support of the media, the Chinese education issue rapidly escalated into a confrontation between the Ministry of Education and the entire Chinese community. As Chinese protests intensified, and with collaboration between civil society groups and political parties, UMNO (United Malays National Organization) became alarmed, seeing this as a challenge to Malay sovereignty and status.

The protests, led by the opposition Chinese party, the DAP, and supported by Chinese educational organizations and other Chinese associations, culminated in a large rally at the Thean Hou Temple in Kuala Lumpur on October 11 [48]. Chinese political parties and major Chinese organizations worked together to organize the protests and openly demanded that the Ministry of Education reverse the teacher appointments by October 14. On October 13, if the Ministry did not comply, they threatened to launch a three-day school strike [49]. In response to the strong condemnation from the Chinese community, Education Minister Anwar Ibrahim promised to address the issue fully. However, the next day, 57 Chinese schools went on strike, affecting over 30,000 students. The strike and the government's concession enraged the Malay community. On October 17, more than 10,000 Malays gathered at the Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur to condemn the government's agreement, demanding that the Education Minister resign, and used threatening language toward the Chinese [50]. Protestors openly carried banners in Malay that read "Gugurkan Kerakyatan Mereka" ("Cancel Their Citizenship") and in English "Revoked Their Citizenship, Send Them Back to Mainland" ("Send Them Back to China") [51]. The tense situation between the Malay and Chinese communities quickly escalated.

In an attempt to prevent the conflict from turning into another violent outbreak, the Malaysian government ordered the arrest of 118 Malay youths who were allegedly inciting the public. The government also promised to change the teacher assignment plan to defuse the crisis [52]. What began as a dispute between Chinese political parties and the Ministry of Education quickly became an ethnic conflict between the Malays and the Chinese. The banners held by the Malay protestors showed that their issue was not with the specific policies regarding Chinese schools, but with the realization that the Malays could no longer rely on their political privileges to suppress the economic and educational advantages of the Chinese.

Though the causes of the two conflicts may seem entirely different—one following an election and the other stemming from an opposition to a decision by the Ministry of Education—the underlying issue in both was a class-based ethnic confrontation. In other words, the Malay/Chinese conflict stemmed primarily from ethnic tensions rooted in economic disparities and the structural hierarchy of ethnic relations.

### 3.2. Malay/Indian relations: short-term regional conflicts triggered by sudden events

In the latter half of the 19th century, driven by the Second Industrial Revolution, the British colonial government introduced Brazilian rubber into Malaya to meet the raw material needs of large-scale industrial production. Subsequently, to address labor shortages on rubber plantations, British colonial officials targeted British India (British Raj),[2] which also had plantation experience, and brought in a large number of laborers from southern India and other regions [53]. After Malaysia gained independence, an increasing number of Indians migrated from plantations to urban areas [53], and their forms of employment continued to evolve with social development, although they remained largely in manual labor sectors. In recent years, more than a third of the Indian population still works in basic jobs such as plantation and machinery operations, and poverty remains concentrated in these sectors [53]. Additionally, due to factors such as caste, religion, and occupation, the Indian population in Malaysia is highly dispersed, to the extent that they have not formed concentrated voting blocs in any parliamentary constituency [54]. Therefore, compared to the Chinese community, the integration level of the Indian community is lower. Furthermore, due to differences in livelihood, economic level, and religious beliefs between the Malays and the Indians, the Malay/Indian ethnic relations inevitably differ from the Malay/Chinese relations.

During the British colonial period in Malaya, the Malay/Indian relationship was very similar to the Malay/Chinese relationship due to the influence of racial segregation policies. The Indian community had limited interactions, mainly with British colonial officials, and very little contact with other ethnic groups. The experiences of discrimination and exploitation in the plantations led to a large-scale strike by Indian laborers in 1941, but these conflicts were not related to the Malay community. After the Japanese occupation of Malaya, the Indian community, under the Japanese military government's influence, participated in the anti-British struggle as part of the Indian National Army, while the Malays also served the Japanese military government. Both groups had similar political stances and did not experience significant conflicts. After Malaysia's independence, Indian immigrants continued to maintain traditional ways of life, residing in plantation areas and maintaining their religious beliefs and language, keeping a certain distance from the Malays and remaining outside the political life of mainstream society, with very few cross-ethnic conflicts. Their main sources of conflict were related to the preservation of religious buildings, rather than to ethnic or class issues.

Two of the most intense Malay/Indian conflicts that occurred after Malaysia's independence serve as examples. The first incident took place in 2006 when the Malaysian government launched a nationwide "Demolition of Unregistered Hindu Temples Campaign," leading to the gradual demolition of many Hindu temples due to "illegal land use [55]." To protect the rights and cultural heritage of the Hindu community, around 50 Hindu organizations spontaneously united to form the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), a coalition to resist the government's actions [56]. Under the leadership of HINDRAF, videos documenting the demolition of Hindu temples were recorded, distributed to the public for free, and uploaded online in hopes of garnering public

[2] Between 1858 and 1947, Britain established colonial rule over the Indian subcontinent, which included present-day India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Myanmar.

support both domestically and internationally [57]. On November 25, 2017, HINDRAF gathered thousands of Hindu worshippers in downtown Kuala Lumpur to protest, and they filed a lawsuit against the British government, demanding that it take responsibility for its failure to fulfill its post-colonial obligations to the Indian community, particularly regarding the importation of Indian Tamil labor during British colonial rule. In reality, this action was aimed at accusing the Malaysian government of intentionally marginalizing the Indian community economically and persecuting Hindu practitioners [58]. This movement was regarded as the largest protest in Malaysia since 1969 [59].

The second incident occurred on November 26, 2018, when a group of Malay workers employed by real estate developers began demolishing the Seafield Hindu Temple. During the demolition, violent clashes broke out between the workers and nearby Hindu worshippers. The conflict resulted in one death, 18 vehicles and 2 motorcycles being burned, and one police car being damaged. However, the conflict did not end there. Another temple, located in Subang Jaya, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, also faced demolition and sparked further violent clashes. The local Hindu community had initially offered to purchase the land to preserve the temple. After the November 26th incident, about 1,000 worshippers gathered at the Seafield Temple early on November 27, and over 300 of them marched to the real estate developer's office, attacking the building and several nearby cars [60].

From the analysis of the above two incidents, four key features of Malay/Indian conflicts can be summarized. First, Suddenness: Violent conflicts triggered by unforeseen events. Second, Short-term Nature: The incidents quickly de-escalated after government suppression or official apologies. Third, Specific Identity: Participants in Malay/Indian conflicts were identified by regional identity, and the Malays did not conduct indiscriminate attacks on the Indian ethnic group. Fourth, Non-class-based Opposition: The conflicts were not driven by ethnic class divisions.

In other words, in contrast to the long-term nature and collective involvement of the Malay/Chinese conflicts, the Malay/Indian ethnic conflicts are characterized by their suddenness, short duration, and regional specificity. The participants in these conflicts were limited to specific individuals involved, and the conflicts did not expand into a large-scale ethnic issue involving the Indian community as a whole.

## 4. Analysis of the differences between Malay/Chinese and Malay/Indian relations

The differences between Malay/Chinese relations and Malay/Indian relations can be analyzed from both internal and external factors. Internal factors include the differences in the characteristics of the Chinese and Indian communities themselves, as well as the differences in how these two communities interact with the Malay community. External factors, on the other hand, stem from colonial history, where under the intentional manipulation of the British and Japanese colonial governments, the Chinese and Indian communities were assigned completely different social roles and statuses.

### 4.1. Internal factors

During the British colonial period in Malaya, both the Chinese and Indian communities migrated to Malaya as immigrant laborers. Chinese laborers mostly came from impoverished rural areas in the southeastern provinces of China, either seeking employment or migrating to join relatives [61]. They traveled to Malaya in groups, with their travel expenses initially paid by labor intermediaries [62]. Therefore, Chinese laborers often had familial or regional ties to one another. After arriving in Malaya, they maintained close contact with their hometowns, continuously accumulating wealth and remitting money back home to support their families and acquire property [63, 64]. In addition, to better adapt to life in a foreign land, many Chinese immigrants in Malaya spontaneously formed various community organizations. Within the Chinese social system, economic capability directly affected an individual's social standing, which not only helped to strengthen community cohesion [65] but also fueled their desire for wealth. According to the policies of the time, as long as Chinese laborers repaid their debts, they were free to move to other regions and choose their livelihoods [62]. As a result, many Chinese laborers, after accumulating enough wealth, left their original occupations and started engaging in retail trade, with some rising to become intermediaries in the procurement of raw materials and the sale of industrial products through British trading companies. By 1947, the Chinese had already gained dominance in at least 19 towns across Malaya due to their community organizations, technical skills, resource extraction methods, and growing population [66]. The Chinese community not only became the first group in Malaya to break free from the rural natural economy but also represented the earliest group in Malaysia to invest in industries, build a unified domestic market, and develop national capital [67].

As the Chinese gradually took control of trade, commerce, industry, and banking, the vast majority of Malays were still living in rural areas, struggling to survive through agricultural and fishing activities [68]. Many Chinese seized this opportunity to become intermediaries, selling goods directly to Malays in rural areas [69], profiting immensely and completing the initial accumulation of capital [67, 70].

The Indian laborers in Malaysia mainly came from southern India, particularly regions with significant low-caste populations, such as Tanjore, Trichinopoly, and North Arcot. These regions had long suffered from droughts and severe famine [71]. As victims of economic hardship and cultural discrimination, the Indian laborers found life in Malaya not only allowed them to escape the additional taxes and harsh land laws but also provided more equal social conditions compared to their home regions [72]. For Indian laborers, life in Malaya meant they did not strive for economic gains as fiercely as the Chinese, nor did they have the

additional desire to compete with the Malays for political rights. Moreover, the recruitment system for Indian laborers at the time was known as the kangani system. The term kangani in Tamil means "overseer" or "headman." A kangani was typically a worker already employed on a plantation, who was entrusted by the employer to recruit additional laborers using social resources and immigrant networks. The kangani acted not only as a low-cost intermediary but also had the authority to deduct "head money" from the daily wages of the workers, which functioned as a deterrent against workers fleeing [62]. Indian laborers were controlled by the British Indian authorities, the British colonial government, and the Malayan regulatory agencies. The paternalistic immigrant system severely restricted their mobility [62, 73], making it difficult for them to engage with the outside world or choose their own occupations like the Chinese.

Additionally, the social and cultural structure within the Indian community was highly complex, with divisions based on ethnicity, caste, religion, and language. These divisions often led to internal conflicts and infighting, hindering the cohesion of the community [74]. This made it difficult for the Indian community to form a collective identity, and when faced with external pressure, they were naturally less capable of mobilizing the entire community to resist outside threats, unlike the Chinese.

By comparing the migration history, social structure, psychological factors, and internal cohesion of the Chinese and Indian communities, it becomes clear that the Chinese community, with its exceptional ability to improve economically, had already developed a more advantageous social class structure than the Malays during the British colonial period. Furthermore, the social cohesion of the Chinese community enabled them to quickly mobilize as a group when conflicts with other ethnic communities arose. On the other hand, the Indian community, adhering more closely to tradition and lacking the desire for economic and political power, had limited contact with the Malays and, due to internal fragmentation, typically experienced regional and short-term conflicts when engaging with external forces.

## 4.2. External factors

Regarding external factors, the continuing tension in Malaysia's ethnic relations is closely related to the colonial history of British Malaya and Japan’s military occupation during World War II [75, 76].

Firstly, throughout the British colonial period in Malaya, the British colonial government had no intention of extracting capital from the indigenous Malay population [77]. The colonizers not only avoided disrupting Malay society but actively protected the Malays’ land ownership by strengthening the authority of the sultans and enacting land laws that tied farmers to the land. Although the colonial government appeared to be following a pro-Malay policy, in reality, it was using external power to reinforce feudal control over farmers [78]. artificially limiting the Malays' freedom of development. Furthermore, the colonial government implemented a pyramid-shaped education system in Malaya, providing an elite educational system only in urban areas and systematically excluding Malays from the colonial administration and technical services, relegating them to the lower classes. Meanwhile, middle-class Indians and Chinese children were allowed access to formal education. This imbalance in education left the Malay population culturally far behind the Chinese and Indian communities, which, as they grew up, resulted in Malays having fewer options in terms of livelihood and a limited value system compared to their Chinese and Indian peers [79]. This educational inequality made it easier for Chinese and Indian populations in urban areas to enter professional or technical positions [80]. The Chinese, unencumbered by caste restrictions and driven by a desire to accumulate wealth, stood out and occupied higher social positions. In contrast, the educational background of the Malays rendered them less competitive in the job market, forcing them to continue in agricultural production from generation to generation.

British colonial policies defined the economic and social status differences between the Chinese, Indians, and Malays. These historical and structural factors have not been fully corrected or changed to this day.

Secondly, the British colonial rulers consciously compared and categorized the Malays and immigrant communities, offering them different treatment. The British colonizers regarded the Chinese as industrious, the Indians as easy to control since they came from another British colony, and the Malays were described as superstitious, conservative, unwilling to work, and lacking the motivation to pursue wealth—often labeled as "lazy natives" [81]. The image of the lazy native stemmed partly from the fact that, during the colonial period, Malays rarely entered wage labor industries, in contrast to the British capitalist value of hard work for survival. The labor for the key colonial industries, such as mining and tropical agriculture, was largely provided by immigrant groups. Additionally, the Malays did not interact much with the colonizers in terms of livelihood and lifestyle, and were not seen as the providers for the comfortable lives of British colonial officials [82]. This colonialist ideology of "hardworking Chinese and lazy natives" became a racial stereotype manipulated by the colonizers to exacerbate tensions between the indigenous Malays and immigrant groups, thereby dividing the ethnic groups and consolidating their own authority. Furthermore, during this period, China had only recently broken free from a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, and lacked the political and military power to protect overseas Chinese. During times of crisis in the colony, the Chinese, as the object of colonial dominance and exploitation, became an easy target for the transfer of blame [67]. Overall, British colonizers deliberately manipulated the opposition between the Malay and Chinese communities regarding resource distribution, fueling ethnic tensions.

Thirdly, during World War II, the Japanese military occupied Malaya and promoted the concept of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," encouraging nationalist movements among various ethnic groups. The Malays and Indians were both influenced by this rhetoric and joined the Japanese on the same side. However, the Chinese community, due to their experiences with Japanese cruelty during the invasion of China, was deeply distrustful of the Japanese and formed resistance forces to combat

the Japanese military. For the Chinese, anti-Japanese actions overcame the internal divisions created by differences in ancestral origins, dialects, and other factors, significantly enhancing cohesion within the Chinese community [83].

On the other hand, the Japanese colonial government took advantage of the Malays' trust, training them to form military and police forces. Under the influence of the Japanese, the entire Chinese community became positioned against the Malays. The Chinese resistance to the Japanese quickly evolved into an ethnic struggle between the Malays and the Chinese, becoming an important historical factor in the tension between the Malay and Chinese communities [84]. The Japanese military's hostile attitude toward the Chinese and its conciliatory policies toward the Malays deepened the irreconcilable rift between the Malays and the Chinese.

The analysis of Malay/Chinese ethnic relations has long been an important focus for Chinese scholars. Yande Chen and Na Ren pointed out that Malay/Chinese relations are dynamic, with ethnic conflicts peaking between 1970 and 1990 during the New Economic Policy era, and only starting to ease after the 1990s. The easing of relations primarily came from the Chinese community's continued concessions, though the apparent harmony still concealed underlying inequalities [85]. Shaochong Zeng argued that the tension and distrust between the Malays and the Chinese began with the differential treatment by the British colonial government in politics, economics, and education, and that racial discrimination inevitably strengthened ethnic awareness, leading to competition between the groups. If the ruling party continues to maintain ethnic discriminatory policies, the Malay/Chinese community will never fully integrate [86]. Guotu Zhuang believed that the main reason for the exclusion of the Chinese from the Malays and the Malaysian government was economic disparity. The Malaysian government's New Economic Policy, launched in 1970, fully supported the economic development of the Malays. However, by 1995, the average income of Malaysian Chinese families was still more than twice that of Malay families. The stark economic gap and the resulting tensions easily led to ethnic conflicts. In addition to economic factors, differences in religious culture, Malaysia's diplomatic relations with China, and the hostile relationship between the Malaysian government and the Malaysian Communist Party also contributed to the anti-Chinese sentiment in Malaysia [87]. Yun Wu argued that the conflict between the Malays and Chinese stemmed from the vast differences between the two groups, and that only by politically strengthening the "national consciousness" and creating a national identity stronger than ethnic identity could the ethnic relations problem be fundamentally solved [88].

From the colonial history outlined above, it is clear that the colonial powers of Britain and Japan played a significant role in exacerbating the tension between the Malay and Chinese communities through external influence, laying the historical foundation for the later ethnic conflicts between the Malays and the Chinese.

## 5. Conclusion

Due to Malaysia's complex colonial history and intricate ethnic relations, there are significant differences in academic assessments of the country's domestic ethnic relations. Some scholars highly praise Malaysia's ethnic relations, viewing the flexible and pragmatic national policies as continuously eliminating differences between ethnic groups in the political, economic, and cultural domains, thus providing a buffer zone for ethnic relations [89]. These policies have not only effectively ensured the smooth functioning of Malaysia's multiethnic relations [90] but also integrated Malaysia's diverse ethnic ideologies into its national identity system [91]. Other scholars, taking a more neutral stance, argue that the relationship between the Malays and the Chinese is in a dynamic process. As the ruling government continues to adjust its policies toward the Chinese, relations between the two groups are gradually shifting from separation and opposition to coexistence and mutual prosperity [92]. However, some scholars contend that Malaysia's ethnic relations remain in a state of ongoing opposition. Tensions between ethnic groups can be seen in the ideological sphere; for instance, in Malay-language essays, the Chinese are often portrayed with negative stereotypes of greed and ruthlessness [93]. Moreover, some studies criticize the Malaysian government's discriminatory treatment of the Malay and Indian communities. For example, during the 2008 national elections, the multiethnic opposition coalition and the Progressive Party, representing the Chinese, Indian, and other minority ethnic groups, condemned the government's "asymmetrical differentiated citizenship" policy [94].

Through the comparative study of the Malay/Chinese and Malay/Indian ethnic relations in Malaysia, this paper argues that there are fundamental differences in the form and nature of these two ethnic relationships. In terms of the nature of the conflict, the Malay/Chinese relationship is a long-standing ethnic conflict caused by social class differences, with structural factors such as economic disparities, cultural conflicts, and colonial history. In contrast, the Malay/Indian relationship is mostly triggered by sudden events, leading to short-term regional conflicts. Regarding the extent of ethnic conflict, the Malay/Chinese relationship has a clear long-term nature, whereas the Malay/Indian relationship is short-term. In terms of the scope of ethnic conflict, the Malay/Chinese relationship can affect the entire group, while the Malay/Indian conflict typically manifests as regional disputes. Fundamentally, the Malay/Chinese conflict is primarily rooted in social class opposition driven by economic differences, whereas the Malay/Indian conflict lacks a class-based opposition.

Regarding the causes of the differences between the Malay/Chinese and Malay/Indian ethnic relations in Malaysia, this paper argues that the internal factors are paramount. The significant differences in the immigration history, community structure, cultural factors, and internal cohesion of the Chinese and Indian communities have led to distinct interactions between these communities and the local Malay population. The unity of the Chinese and their economic and social advantages pose a greater threat to the indigenous Malays. External factors, influenced by colonial history, have also played a role. British and Japanese colonial powers, through policy measures, drove the formation of opposition between the Malay and Chinese communities. In particular, the ethnic

class structure formed between the Malays and Chinese based on economic differences has become a structural reality. Coupled with various historical conflicts and frictions dating back to the British and Japanese colonial periods, Malaysia still faces significant challenges in establishing a truly equal and mutually respectful multicultural society.

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