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**Understanding Malaysian Chinese Subjectivities Through the Seni Khat Controversies**

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Abstract

This presentation understands ethnic identity as a multi-dimensional social phenomenon and a historically constituted social construction. It takes inspiration from Fredrik Barth’s work to study ethnicity as a ‘social organisation of interaction’. Barth argues that the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implied that there is ‘a systematic set of rules governing inter-ethnic social encounters.’ One of the important rule-setting mechanisms is state policies on ethnicity and national integration in a modern nation-state. This is a crucial dimension which frames the nature of ethnic relations at the macro level. Besides this structural manifestation, ethnic relations could also be analysed in terms of the interactions and actions in the public sphere, as well as the more interpersonal relations in the private domain.

In this presentation, I will use the above-mentioned framework to examine the controversies which erupted end of July 2019 over the introduction of the learning of Arabic script of the Malay language from 2020 with the aim to instil linguistic appreciation of the Malay language among upper Mandarin- and Tamil-medium primary schools.

I will analyse Chinese ethnic identity in relation to the Malay-dominated state as well as its manifestations in other dimensions. I argue that many of the perceived interethnic problems could be resolved if the state adjusts and applies its nation-building policy as one consistent with the integration approach of the Berry model of acculturation. Nonetheless, this would be a slow process even with the defeat of UMNO during the last general elections in 2018, as policy changes could encounter resistance both at the bureaucratic (structural) level and in the form of popular mobilisation.