

Marine Corps Intelligence Activity Cultural Intelligence for Military Operations Malaysia Cultural Field Guide

Summary

- Malaysia's population consists of 58 percent ethnic Malays, 24 percent ethnic Chinese, 8 percent ethnic Indian, and 10 percent other groups.
- The three main ethnic groups (i.e., Malays, Chinese, and Indians) can be differentiated by their appearance, language, religion, and customs, though there is significant variation within each ethnic group.
- Malays are predominantly Muslim, and as a result, the country is strongly influenced by Islam. Most Malaysian Muslims are moderate in their views. They do not want Malaysia to become an Islamic state, and regard Islam primarily as a religion, not a lifestyle. Some of Malaysia's smaller religious and ethnic groups are concerned about what they perceive as the increasingly Islamic nature of Malaysian society.
- Racial polarization is common in Malaysia, as there is little ethnic mixing or integration in either urban or rural areas. Malays living in rural areas rarely come across non-Malays, and Malays in the city tend to live around other Malays. Ethnic segregation is especially apparent in the separate school systems for each ethnic group.
- The three main ethnic groups generally coexist peacefully, but there is an undercurrent of tension, especially between the Malays and the Chinese. Inter-ethnic violence has occurred several times over the last several decades; the Chinese are occasionally targeted as scapegoats for the country's problems.
- Malaysians place strong emphasis on social order and deference to superiors rather than on individual achievement or personal initiative. Age, rank, social standing, wealth, and education are all used to determine superior-inferior relationships between individuals.
- The most important unit of society to Malaysians is the family. Within the family, traditional concepts of the roles of women and men persist. Clan, lineage, and geographic affiliation also strongly affect the cultural attributes and ethnic identity within each of Malaysia's ethnic groups. These attributes are often considered to be determining factors for one's current social status and future opportunities.
- Malaysians have mixed feelings toward government affirmative action policies, which were designed to provide a disproportionate economic and political advantage for the majority ethnic Malays. Conversely, Malays often harbor resentment toward the ethnic Chinese, who dominate the economic sector.

Physical Description

Most Malaysians have dark brown hair and brown eyes, and are slightly shorter and thinner than the average American. Malays and Chinese are both classified as members of the Mongoloid race, but the Malays' skin pigment tends to be darker than that of Chinese people, and more closely resembles that of ethnic Indians or Indonesians. Indians in Malaysia tend to be of North Indian origin, and typically have a relatively light complexion. The Chinese tend to have the lightest skin color, and many have the distinctive almond-shaped eyes typical of East Asians. All three ethnic groups have straight black hair. The tallest of the ethnic groups is usually the Indians, followed by the Chinese and the Malays.

Religion

Malaysians practice a variety of religions, but Malays, who make up the largest ethnic group, are predominantly Muslim. The Chinese often combine elements of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, as well as folklore and traditions like *feng shui*. Indians are usually Hindu or Buddhist, or in a few cases, Muslim. A few Chinese and Indians practice Christianity.

Islam

When Islam came to Malaysia, it did not completely supplant existing spiritual beliefs and systems of social law, so some aspects of Malaysian Islam include Hindu and even pre-Hindu influences that are not found in the Middle East. Islam manifests itself everywhere in Malaysia. Mosques are ubiquitous, as are *surau*, a specially designated Muslim prayer room within a larger building, seen even in shopping malls. Signs to *suraus* are common. The mosque call to prayer is broadcast five times per day from each mosque, and through larger networks of speakers in larger cities. Calls to prayer also are broadcast from many radio and television stations. Wide latitude is given to all Muslims for prayer and religious observance, whether it is worship in the office or *surau*, or taking a short trip to the local mosque. Major Muslim holidays are national holidays, such as the end of Ramadan and Hijra. Non-Muslim Malaysians often defer to Muslim concerns and sensibilities, such as refraining from eating publicly or in front of Muslim friends and colleagues during the fasting month of Ramadan.

The main scripture of Islam is the Koran, regarded as the word of Allah. Muslims believe in five basic duties, known as the Five Pillars of Islam: profession of faith; prayer five times a day; giving alms to the poor and the mosque; fasting during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan; and a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once in life for those who are able. Muslims gather collectively for worship on Fridays at a mosque, which is also a center for teaching the Koran. The community leader, the *imam*, is considered a teacher and prayer leader.

Daoism

The term Daoism (also known as Taoism) encompasses a wide scope of folk and animist traditions which originated in China. Daoism continues to influence the religious and social behavior of Chinese in Malaysia. Daoism can best be defined as a catch-all term used to describe the cosmology and ritual that gradually emerged over centuries in China. It is a polytheist religion, encompassing gods recognized throughout China as well as many local gods. Daoist cosmology teaches that *yin* and *yang*, the spiritual and material components of everything in existence, are in constant change. *Yang*, the force associated with the male, light, heaven, and activity, mixes with *yin*, which is female, darkness, earth, and inactivity, to make up every being and object, and to create that object or person's *qi*, or life energy. These concepts are evident in many aspects of Malaysia's Chinese society. For example, Chinese believe that foods exhibit

properties of *yin* and *yang*, and an unbalanced intake of these foods will cause illness. These influences usually do not appear in public actions such as business activities, and never in government actions or decisions. They are mostly reflected in family and social actions such as considerations for marriages and other major life decisions or activities.

Buddhism

The Chinese in Malaysia often practice elements of Buddhism. Buddhists believe that souls are reborn after death into humans, animals, or plants. One's present state is a reflection of past behavior (*karma*), and present actions affect one's future state. Due to this, many Chinese believe in destiny (*yuanfen*) as a repercussion of one's behavior in a former life. This belief emphasizes acceptance of hardship in this life through a belief that one has earned it. This cycle of death and rebirth continues until one has acquired sufficient merit through good deeds to be released from the cycle of rebirth. Buddhists worship many deities (as in Daoism), which include personalities who have escaped the cycle of rebirth (called *bodhisattvas*).

Buddhist influence sometimes show in Chinese being vegetarians, but this is not common. Buddhism usually shows itself in numerous Buddhist temples, which also are centers of Chinese social interaction and community organization. Most Chinese houses have at least one Buddhist altar, at which food, small goods, and fake paper money are offered at least daily. Incense is usually burned at these altars, which are located in auspicious locations within dwellings, usually at the front of the home, and in particularly powerful/influential positions within rooms (usually determined by *feng shui* consultation).

Hinduism

Most Indians in Malaysia are Hindus. Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions, dating back more than 5,000 years. Though Hinduism does not have a codified system of beliefs or linkage to a known founder, there are some tenets that are held by all Hindus. Among the most significant is the belief in one supreme being referred to as Brahman, who is present in all living things, and is also embodied in countless lesser Hindu gods and goddesses.

Hindus (like Buddhists) believe that all living things have souls, and after death, the soul is reincarnated in another form. One's present state is a reflection of past behavior (*karma*, the same term used in Buddhism), and present actions affect one's future state. Hindus refer to karma to encourage good actions, and to explain good and evil events that occur in a person's life as a consequence of past actions. This cycle of life, death, and rebirth continues until the soul achieves *moksha*, or release from the cycle of reincarnation. *Moksha* is achieved only after a long journey of observing proper behavior (*dharma*) over many lifetimes, and is the ultimate goal of all Hindus.

An important aspect of Hinduism is a particular reference the scriptures make to the social ordering of people. This concept groups people into four *varnas*, or castes. Each *varna* has rules of conduct regarding diet, marriage, and contact with people of other *varnas*. Over time, a caste system has developed into an rigid and tightly enforced social hierarchy, in which people are often discriminated against based on caste. Though the influence caste has declined, it continues to be invoked by some Malaysian Hindus with regard to select issues such as marriage.

Hinduism manifests itself in Malaysian society and culture primarily through public holidays and festivals. In Malaysia, the most widely known festival is Thaipusam, taking place in late January

or early February, and celebrating Lord Murugam, also known as Lord Subramaniam. There are major processions to Hinduism temples for offerings and prayer, and many devotees undergo extensive body and skin piercing as symbols of penitence and devotion. Hindu temples in the larger cities are often large and extensively decorated. Visitors are welcome. In villages and smaller cities the temples often are more modest.

Confucianism

Confucianism is a set of beliefs which form a basic world view for almost all Malaysian Chinese. Confucianism is not a formal religion. Consequently, most Malaysian Chinese Buddhists and Christians also likely would identify with principles and tenets of Confucianism. Confucianism is based on a set of ancient rituals that organize society, relationships, and proper behavior. The world view emphasizes the role of proper personal behavior to ensure social harmony.

Confucianism places great value on education and respect for hierarchy, forming a simple code of conduct emphasizing education and order. It shows itself within Chinese society by strict adherence to straightforward rules of obedience and respect to elders and seniors, whether in family, business, organizational, or social settings. There is a strong drive for extensive education, usually well beyond the college undergraduate level. Many are being highly trained technicians and professionals, usually doctors, engineers, and highly accomplished businessmen (though rarely lawyers).

Language

Bahasa Melayu (Malay) is spoken throughout Malaysia. Malays consider the language to be a key component of their national and ethnic identity. *Bahasa Melayu* can be written in two forms, an Arabic-derived script called *jawi*, and a Roman/English script called *rumi*. *Rumi* is the most commonly written form of Bahasa Melayu.

Even though many Malays believe that fluency in *Bahasa Melayu* is a necessity for inclusion into Malaysian culture, the non-Malay ethnic groups continue to also speak languages related to their country of origin, or to mix elements of several languages, including English, together into an informal slang. For example, the Chinese ethnic group speaks various dialects of Chinese, including Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, and Hokkien, while the Indian ethnic group speaks a variety of Indian dialects, including Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Hindi. In rural areas in East Malaysia, indigenous groups often speak native languages such as Iban, Dayak, and Khadazan. English is common in urban areas and among the professional classes.

Cultural History

Malaysians proudly trace their history back to prehistoric times. There is evidence of human habitation in Malaysia as far back as 4,000 years. Malaysia's geographic location made it very popular with merchants trading goods between the Middle East, India, and China. As a result, there is a long history of outside influence in Malaysia. Islam was brought to the region by Malay kings who felt it could facilitate improved trade relations with the Middle East, and there has been a Chinese presence since at least the 14th century. However, ethnic tension and at times outright conflict are often brought to the surface by policies and events that occurred over the course of the country's long history.

Malaysia was colonized by Europeans starting in the 16th century, and occupied by the Japanese during World War II. During this period, many Chinese and Indian immigrants were brought in

to facilitate the foreign colonial administrations. These experiences generated a strong sense of Malay nationalism, which continues to be an issue between the races.

After World War II, the Malays lobbied for independence from the resurrected British colonial administration and achieved their goal in 1957. Six years later, the former British colonies of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah formed the Federation of Malaya. However, ethnic tensions led to Singapore leaving the federation and becoming an independent state.

In 1969, Malay resentment over Chinese dominance of Malaysia's business sector resulted in major rioting. The riots prompted the government to invoke several economic protection plans favoring Malays. The most sweeping of these was instituted in 1971 when the constitution was amended to give the Malays more rights through a quota system, called the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP mandated a set minimum representation of Malays in government, business, and education. In 1991, the NEP became the New Development Policy (NDP) and it was altered to marginally help other races. This plan has not led to greater racial integration, but it has been credited with appeasing Malays and promoting stability and subsequently enabling economic growth. Other policies designed to increase ethnic integration, such as a National Service program for Malaysian youth initiated in 2004, have had limited results.

Malaysians have mixed feelings toward government policies that were designed to provide a disproportionate economic and political advantage for ethnic Malays. Conversely, Malays often harbor resentment toward the ethnic Chinese who dominate the economic sector.

Intra-ethnic relations are also stratified. For example, there are essentially two tiers of Indians—the elite and the working class—each with culture, status, and attitudes. The elite consist of a few wealthy Indian tycoons, as well as a small group of educated middle and upper class Indians working in professional occupations. Working-class Indians, however, make up most of the Indian population in Malaysia and are viewed quite negatively by elite Indians and others in Malaysian society.

Customs

The Malaysians have adopted a mix of traditional Asian values along with the particular practices of each ethnic group. Many of the customs, gestures, and values are similar for each ethnic group, even though they may have a different origin. Islam plays a significant role in daily life and customs for most Malays, and affects the country's holidays and cultural attitudes. Most Malaysians, regardless of ethnic group, share a respect for tradition and culture, close ties and obligation to one's family, and a respect for hierarchy, which translates to deference to age and education. A good example is the (originally Muslim/Middle Eastern) *salaam* gesture. When meeting with friends or strangers and shaking hands, one touches the right hand lightly to one's own chest after shaking. It is a sign of respect and familiarity. Another would be the Chinese bow. Although not nearly as formal and physically exaggerated as the traditional Japanese bow, it is a simple gesture of respect, which can go a long way to establishing a positive relationship and tone, especially when first meeting.

Greetings

Handshakes are an appropriate form of greeting in most cases. Handshakes are less firm than in the West. Members of the opposite sex may shake hands in urban settings, but rarely do so in rural settings. In some cases, women may nod slightly when introduced. If a woman does shake

UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

hands, it is usually at the initiation of the woman, not the man. It is polite to bow slightly when meeting elderly or senior-ranking people and wait for them to initiate the handshake.

Business cards often are exchanged when meeting, in business and social situations. It is customary and polite to give and receive the cards using both hands, and to keep the card out during the meeting.

English greetings are generally acceptable and understood by most Malaysians. A common greeting is, "*Selamat pagi*," ("Good morning") and, "*Apa khabar?*" (literally, "What is the news?").

Muslims often greet each other with the Arabic, "*Ahsalaam aliaikumm*," ("Peace be upon you"). The proper response is, "*Wa'alikum ahsalaam*." Malays also greet by performing *salaam*, in which two people bring their right palms together (as if they were going to shake hands), touch hands, slide them apart; and then touch their palms to their hearts. Malaysian Indians traditionally greet each other by putting their palms together in front of the chest, similar to a position of prayer, and saying, "*Namaste*" (for northern Indians) or, "*Vanakka*" (among southern Indians). Chinese may greet each other by asking, "*Ni hao ma?*" ("How are you?") or, "*Tse pau le ma?*" ("Have you eaten?").

Most Malays and Chinese are addressed by their given name, along with any title. For example, the Malay Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad (former Prime Minister) is called "Dr. Mahathir." The family name "*bin Mohamad*" means "son of Mohamad." The term "*binti*" is used by the Malays to mean "daughter of." If a Malay person's title is not known, the terms *Encik* (Mr.), *Cik*, (Ms.) or *Puan* (Mrs.) are used. "Sir" and "Madam" are "*Tuan*" and "*Puan*," respectively. For Chinese names, the family name comes first, followed by the given name, so Ms. Lin would be used for someone named Lin Ming-na. A Chinese given name is only used in informal situations. Many children will address older adults as "auntie" or "uncle," even those whom they do not know. This is done as a sign of respect.

Gestures

- One gets another person's attention by waving all fingers of the right hand with the palm facing down, in a downward fanning motion; it is considered rude to wave by curling the fingers with the palm facing up
- Pointing at someone or forming the rounded "okay" sign with the fingers is considered rude; to point to something or someone, it is best to open the palm facing upwards and extend the hand in that direction
- It is always better to use the right hand to give and receive objects or to point
- Prolonged direct eye contact may be interpreted as a sign of aggression; it is polite to catch a counterpart's eyes for a second, then lower the head and look down
- The head is the most sacred area and should not be touched by others unless absolutely necessary
- The foot is considered the lowest part of the body, so it is rude to show the bottom of one's feet or soles, or to move important objects with a foot; most Malaysians cross their legs at the ankle when sitting instead of resting the ankle on the knee
- Tapping the foot implies a lack of interest
- Pounding a fist into an open palm is considered rude or vulgar

UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

While conversing or listening, Indians commonly shake their head from side to side in a circular way resembling the way Americans signal “no.” For Indians, this movement signifies consent or agreement with what is being said, or appreciation for what they are hearing.

Visiting

- It is generally impolite to arrive late for meetings and business events, though many Malaysians do not follow the practice of punctuality
- It is common to remove shoes before entering private homes and most sacred sites
- All ethnic groups place a strong emphasis on family, and tend to visit relatives often
- It is usually impolite to refuse initial offers of food or drink; to refuse seconds, place the hand above the plate; when finished, place the utensils together perpendicularly on the plate; if they are not placed together, more food may be offered

Negotiations

The concept of saving face is significant in negotiations with all Malaysians, and most significantly with the Chinese. A person loses face by making a mistake, failing to live up to others’ expectations, demonstrating ignorance, or losing his composure. One gains respect by remaining dignified and by showing respect to others, by showing care for guests, arriving early or on time to a meeting, praising someone in front of that person’s superior, and not drawing attention to others’ mistakes in public. During negotiations, if negotiators feel at any time that their own image or that of their organization or country has been harmed, they may terminate the discussions. It is also considered a loss of face to say “no” outright. Phrases like, “It is difficult,” or, “It is inconvenient,” are used instead. Subtle changes in body language also give clues to the outlook of the negotiator. Leaning forward slightly tends to signal agreement, while having a stern face or looking down indicates opposition to the idea. Raising one’s voice is not likely to be productive, as it causes a loss of face for all involved.

Displays of Affection

Malaysians maintain separation of the sexes in terms of displays of affection. They generally do not touch members of the opposite sex in public, and public displays of affection are more rare than in the West. However, this attitude is less strictly observed by younger Malaysians and non-Malays, and is most evident in urban areas.

Business

Malaysian business frequently draws on family and personal connections. Therefore, nepotism is considered good business practice rather than a corrupt practice. Introductions or referrals are extremely important for an outsider conducting business in these cases. It is customary to arrange meetings in advance, and meetings are generally more successful when arranged by a mutual acquaintance if the parties do not initially know each other.

Other considerations relating to business include the following:

- Shake hands before and after a business meeting or social occasion with all in the room; firm handshakes may not be common; it is polite to bow slightly while shaking hands
- Be punctual for social occasions and business meetings, even though Malaysians may not
- Exchange business cards when introduced; present cards with both hands after being introduced, and treat the received card with respect (do not write on it, fold it, or put it in a wallet in front of the person it represents)

Gifts

When visiting a home for the first time, it is acceptable to bring food such as fruit or cakes as an initial gift. Alcohol should be avoided as a gift for Malays. On a special occasion, an expensive or auspicious gift would be welcome, but gifts should never be extravagant or beyond the recipients ability to reciprocate. Gifts are not immediately opened.

Values and Practices

Most Malaysians exhibit some Western manners and behaviors, but retain distinct cultural values at the same time. The Chinese measure success in both academic and economic terms; the Chinese community tends to be better educated than the other ethnic groups. Malays are particularly sensitive of their religious faith, and *adat*, or customary law, guides the important ceremonies and events in life, such as birth, coming of age, and marriage. Malaysian Indians who trace their origins from southern India tend to be more conservative and traditional than other Indians.

Unique Cultural Attributes

Banquets tend to feature Chinese food and seating; seating usually is hierarchical; one should wait to be shown to a seat. At Chinese meals, one should never stand ones chopsticks in a dish or rice bowl; this symbolizes death. After dessert, the guests leave while the host stays to pay; it is considered rude to offer to split the bill; if time allows, it is polite to reciprocate with another meal. Colors are very significant in Malay and Chinese culture; for the Chinese, red symbolizes life, and it is used for decorations during festivals and holidays, while white and black are traditional mourning colors. Green and black are commonly associated with Islam, therefore they are important to Malays.

Dining

Eating customs differ between Malaysia's ethnic groups, as well as within each ethnic group. For example, Indians with a lineage from southern India eat in a different style than those from northern India. Chinese food differs based on the region of China from which it originated. Malays and Indians tend to eat with their hand or a spoon, while the Chinese often use chopsticks or a spoon. In some Muslim rural areas, people sit on the floor to eat, but throughout most of Malaysia, people eat at a table. Rice is the most common food for all Malaysians. Fish is also popular. Curry is common to Indians and Malays and is usually spicier than Chinese food. Several traditional Malay and Indian dishes are served on large banana leaves rather than plates. Chinese dining is considered the most refined, and formal dinners include numerous courses. Dining together is considered an important bonding experience, especially for the Chinese, who often host large banquets for business and social events. Western foods are common in large cities and popular with many younger Malaysians. Devout Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol. Many Hindus and some Buddhists do not eat beef, or are vegetarian.

Plates and bowls of food are usually set in the center of a table, where it is eaten communal style, with people taking a small portion to their own plate before being placed in the mouth. It is rude to pass food between two people with chopsticks—allow the food to be placed on a plate before picking it up. Guests are often served food by their hosts. It is considered rude to leave food on the plate. Drinks and small dishes are passed using the right hand or both hands. Avoid use of the left hand for anything other than providing support to the right hand for a heavy dish. The left hand should not be used to signal or pass things to others. Meals can last several hours,

especially formal or official dinners. Placing a hand or leaving one's chopsticks over the plate signals that one is finished eating.

Clothing

Most urban Malaysians wear Western-style clothing, sometimes in combination with a few traditional articles that are unique to their ethnic group. Urban ethnic Malays are more likely to wear traditional clothing than Western clothing. Traditional clothing for Malays includes a *songkok* (skull cap), a *baju Melayu* (loose shirt), and *sarongs* for Malay men; and a *tudung* or *selendang* (head scarf) and *baju kurung* (loose tunic) for women.

Traditional clothing for Indians includes the *salwar kameez* (pantsuit with long shirt), *dupatta* (long scarf), *sari* (shawl), and *bindi* (dot placed on the forehead) for women, and a *dhoti* (*sarong*) for men. Chinese rarely wear non-Western clothing other than perhaps a sarong in rural areas. Increasing social pressure is being put on female Malays to wear clothing that is considered *feysen muslimat* (appropriate Islamic fashion).

Social Values

Centers of Authority

Malaysians are more deferential to authority than most Westerners. Malaysia's ethnic groups place more emphasis on social order and deference to superiors than on individual achievement or personal initiative. Age, rank, social standing, wealth, and education are used to determine superior-inferior relationships between individuals. Superiors are expected to mentor and protect those below them in return for deference and loyalty. Deference and respect is paid to rank, position, title, authority, age and seniority, and education and experience, usually in this order. Patronage, as a form of deference to authority and position, is also a very important aspect of Malaysian social interaction, however, it usually takes place within respective ethnic groups, and rarely crosses these lines.

The Family, Ethnicity and Regionalism

On a personal level, the most important unit of society among all Malaysians is the family. Within the family, traditional concepts of the roles of women and men persist. Men typically hold a position of superiority, and women have little authority in family or national decision-making. Malays, especially religious ones, tend to have the most traditional views toward women and the family. Clan, lineage, and geographic affiliation also strongly affect the cultural attributes and ethnic identity within each of Malaysia's ethnic groups. For example, there are significant differences in the behavior and customs for Indians and Chinese depending on their lineage. Malays consider *asal-asal* (origin point) important in shaping their social status and future opportunities. Families tend to stay close together, even into adulthood. Children often live with the family until married, and then stay very close to their respective families.

Most Malaysians retain some tie to their home region. Particular regions are predominantly populated by one ethnic group or another. Some areas are known as predominantly Malay (Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu), and some as Chinese (Penang and Pinang Island, parts of Melaka, Johore). Another significant regional difference within the country is between East Malaysia and West Malaysia. East Malaysia (consisting of the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak) is considered a far more distant frontier than the more cosmopolitan and populated West Malaysia.

Role of State among Ethnic Groups

The Malaysian government plays a significant role in the cultural life of Malays. Most top government positions are filled by Malays. The Chinese have been very vocal in their opposition to the perceived increasing Islamic character of Malaysian politics and the threat it poses to their cultural identity and commercial interests. The Chinese depend on ethnic associations and political coalitions to help them adapt to institutional discrimination by the Malay majority.

Conflict Resolution

Malaysians tend to resolve conflicts in private between the two parties, or in some cases using a third party to mediate. Malaysians tend to defer to those in authority and avoid conflict in the first place, whenever possible. When violent conflict arises, it tends to escalate quickly because of the tendency for others associated with the instigators to become involved. As a result, what could have been an otherwise small and easily resolved incident can become a threat to public security. To prevent these incidents from escalating, the Malaysian government tends to react quickly and directly against perceived threats to public order. Examples would be limited Indian riots in Kuala Lumpur in 2004, which arose quickly over a relatively minor event, and were very quickly and--by Western standards--brutally ended.

Cultural Views

United States and U.S. Military

Malaysians have an appreciation for U.S. culture, especially popular culture. U.S. movies and television programs are broadcast with both Malay and Chinese subtitles, although they are frequently censored for content. Some Malays have strong negative views toward the United States because of its perceived immoral and overtly sexual culture. U.S. involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and as military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq also have caused many Malays to consider the United States as being anti-Islamic. Misbehavior by U.S. service members is often used as a pretext to voice these grievances. Other Malaysians see the United States as providing an important counterbalance to increasing Chinese influence in the region.

Other Ethnic and Regional Groups

After gaining independence, Malaysia had tense relations with its regional neighbors and the minority ethnic groups within its borders. Malaysia continues to have a somewhat strained relationship with its northern and southern neighbors, Thailand and Singapore, respectively. Thailand has implied that its problems with Islamic insurgents have been complicated by insurgents which may have trained or been based in Malaysia. Singapore and Malaysia have not fully reconciled their differences regarding the race-driven separation of the ethnic-Chinese city-state from the Malaysian Federation in the 1960s. The Malays are particularly uncomfortable with the economic success of ethnic Chinese throughout Southeast Asia, and view the Chinese as a threat, especially with the growing economic and military power of the People's Republic of China.

Cultural Economy

As in much of Southeast Asia, ethnic Chinese control a large share of Malaysia's economy and have been the dominant community behind the country's economic development. Many Malays resent the large role of the Chinese in the national economy, and have pressured the government to enact various social and economic programs that favor the ethnic Malays. These programs are

a source of resentment and debate within Malaysian society, and have not eliminated the disproportionate role of ethnic Chinese in the economy. Most poor and rural Malays and Indians, along with some Indonesian migrant workers, are involved in the agricultural sector.

Military Culture

The modern Malaysian approach to warfare is thoroughly Western, dominated by British colonial experience and close post-independence British and Commonwealth military ties. It also incorporates ancient symbols and traditions of past Malay glory, including the ceremonial *keris* dagger and *silat* martial arts training and discipline, but does not incorporate these concepts into planning or warfighting. Islamic symbols and influence are pervasive throughout the armed forces, due to the complete domination of the upper ranks by Malay officers, and despite the multi-ethnic and multicultural makeup of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF).

Although the threat of communist insurgency has been over for at least 15 years, with no indications of any resurgence, the Malay national elites and the top levels of MAF leadership continue to harbor strong suspicion of the loyalty of Malaysian Chinese soldiers and officers. After World War II, China continued training and equipping ethnic Chinese insurgent fighters in Malaysia to fight against the British with the aim of establishing Malaysia as a communist state. Malaysia has never forgotten this, and remains wary of what they see as Chinese designs on all of Southeast Asia. This Malay distrust of the Chinese is one of the primary reasons the Royal Malay Regiment continues to be the only all-Malay military unit to serve as the ultimate guarantor of the nation's and Malay sovereignty in the event of Chinese-inspired insurrection.

Doctrine and Strategy

The primary military doctrine of Malaysia is defensive, although Malaysian military doctrine and training emphasizes and purports to train in offensive operations. Malaysia's 20th-century colonial and post-colonial era powerfully influenced its operations. After experiencing (as a colony) the futile battle to resist Japanese invasion in 1941, and fighting the Communist insurgency from the 1950s to the late 1980s. Malaysia's fight against the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) continues to dominate military framing of threats and issues, both institutionally and individually, and also strongly affects all other sectors of the Malaysian national government. MAF force structure, which is modeled on that of the British armed forces, as well as its doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures, is configured primarily for defensive conventional warfare. The MAF, almost exclusively the Army, has a very strong core competency and rightful pride in counterinsurgency warfare. Army infantry and other primary combat and combat support units train often, and are highly effective in small-unit jungle counterinsurgency operations. Malaysian forces are at their best in jungle warfare when operating at the squad and platoon levels. They are also highly skilled at jungle tracking and conducting ambushes. Soldiers train in simulated urban combat environments in basic skills, but do not exercise on a large scale (battalion and higher). The MAF has not considered much or trained in urban counterinsurgency. The focus remains on encountering and defeating insurgent enemies in Malaysia's jungles, not in urban areas.

With the end of the Communist threat, the MAF has no real threat on which to focus development of doctrine, training, and long-term acquisition. The MAF apparently has moved toward active participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations. The MAF and Malaysia have gained a reputation as a reliable and adequately prepared contributor to UN missions. Peacekeeping missions are highly valued because participation in these operations is the only

way for Malaysian troops to gain such experience.

Planning

MAF planning, particularly in the Army, is rigid and highly formulaic. The MAF follow the order and plan formats without variation or exemption, often planning for and codifying annexes and appendices for which they have no actual military capability, or which are not called for given the nature of the mission. This unquestioning adherence to rote formatting prevents realistic planning and imaginative approaches to complex military situations. It also trains MAF officers to rely heavily on an abundance of time to conduct planning. When pressed, officers present solutions that reflect an inability to adjust to time constraints.

Foreign Influences

MAF units and personnel frequently interact with Western armed forces. The Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) and the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN), are the more highly mobile, highly technical, and highly visible services, and they have more frequent interaction with foreign military forces, institutions, and systems. The MAF is impressed with foreign weapon systems, especially those of the West and Russia. Although impressed with these capabilities, often MAF and national political leaders fail to grasp whether weapon systems and other major purchases genuinely meet Malaysian military needs, and are compatible with Malaysian military doctrine, training, and operations. In addition, a strong sense of Malaysian nationalism and pride almost requires avoiding the perceived dependence on foreign capabilities.

Visiting military units such as Australian infantry units rotating through the permanent Australian base at Butterworth, are highly welcome. Due to their concentrated periods of interaction and elite status, the units usually greatly influence the individuals and units with whom they interact, operate, and train. Malaysia has strong training relationships with the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Military units at the company and platoon levels enthusiastically welcome foreign military training, combined operations, and any opportunity to interact. They are eager for interaction with U.S. and Western military personnel and to conduct weapons training, and are eager for exposure, especially to combat-experienced U.S. and Western soldiers and units. They are eager to learn doctrinal and procedural lessons, particularly those that can be applied at the tactical level. They are also very eager to train on individual weapons.

Leadership and Authority

Authority in general comes from rank and not necessarily from position. Unit cohesion and morale in the MAF is depends highly on leadership, unit reputation, and location. With the Army, specialty/elite units such as the Royal Malay Regiment and the Royal Ranger Regiment have extremely high *esprit de corps*. Elite units receive preference in assignments, and in budget and equipment allocations.

MAF leadership at the top levels is determined by religious-ethnic status. This is particularly true in the Army, and to a slightly lesser degree in the Air Force and Navy. Just as ethnic Malays are pre-eminent in Malaysian society, culture and the government, the same is true in the armed forces, with the best and most significant positions consistently going only to ethnic Malay officers. Malays get a disproportionate number of opportunities to command, and the most prestigious and high-visibility positions go to Malay officers to ensure their promotions.

In addition to ethnic considerations, there are also strong patronage, nepotistic, and lineage considerations at play in MAF leadership assignments and promotion. The patronage system is very strong in the MAF, with influential senior officers, active and retired, playing major and often widely known roles in striking deals for protégés to assume command and receive other highly competitive nominative positions or assignments. These career-spanning relationships have an enduring, long-term impact and are vigorously sought, and constantly cultivated and reinforced.

In the MAF, authority for making decisions is very rarely delegated to subordinates, either for mission-specific issues or for general purposes. Decision-making is highly centralized owing to the extreme internal political and career ramifications of many decisions. As a result, those in a position to make decisions rarely allow subordinates to do so. Unpopular and risky decisions are easily recognized because subordinate officers are always expressly delegated the task of making such decisions. Leadership by noncommissioned officers (NCO) is weak. MAF NCOs exhibit very little initiative, and do not have the wide-ranging supervisory and leadership roles and functions as their counterparts to in Western militaries. This is deliberate. Officers with decision-making authority prefer to keep this power to themselves to avoid mistakes and to ensure that all high-visibility actions come through them so they gain credit for the action.

Regionalism

There are two main forms of regionalism in the MAF, one based on the individual Malaysian states and sub-regions within the states, and the other based on East versus West Malaysia. The first, and most profound, is the personal and unit loyalty that exist based on state origin. In Malaysia, some areas are known as being predominantly Malay, and some as Chinese. Units and troops from these areas are considered in the same way. Penang and Pinang Island are considered primarily Chinese, as are parts of Melaka and some coastal settlements. Consequently, many units near these locations tend to have a number of Chinese personnel. Certain areas, such as the far northern states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu, are predominantly Malay. The units in these areas also tend to be highly concentrated with Malay personnel. All personnel seek units closer to their places of origin, which further tends to make specific units more in tune with their regional identity.

There is also a regional outlook between East and West Malaysia. East Malaysia, consisting of the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak, is seen as a distant posting, almost a frontier posting. Bornean Malaysians see these assignments as opportunities to go home, although most of these units are not prestigious, and assignment to them does not necessarily confer advantage. Most of the elite units and choice assignments are in peninsular Malaysia.

For the Air Force and Navy, units tend to be more egalitarian, given the unique nature of their services and the location of their bases near major cities and urban centers rather than in the heart of a geo-ethnic area.

Socio-Economic Class

Military service is seen as an acceptable profession, although far from glamorous. It is touted publicly as a selfless profession and soldiers take great pride in their detached military professionalism, and the fact that in the history of the Malaysian armed forces, they have never stepped in directly to involve themselves in governing the country. They are loyal to the nation and the government, and to the nation's appointed or elected civilian leaders.

Class divisions within the MAF are as expected along socio-economic lines corresponding to enlisted, NCO, and officer ranks. MAF enlisted personnel generally are poorly educated and come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. NCOs and warrant officers usually have completed high school, and come from slightly higher socio-economic backgrounds. Officers come from the middle and upper middle classes. It is rare for an officer to come from an upper class or wealthy socio-economic background, since those people usually enter into private business, politics, or government. While the military is genuinely respected as an institution, it is not considered profitable or a route to significantly greater socio-economic status or wealth.