

Rethinking citizenship from Southeast Asia: Recognition, belonging, and unequal rights

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Introduction

Volume 23, Issue 2 of *Jurnal Civics* brings together contributions from authors in more than ten countries, and many of them return to one question: under what conditions does being recognised as a member become an effective claim to rights? The articles test it in philosophy, public policy, local culture, and the classroom, and the editorial that follows develops it for Southeast Asia.

Philosophical and ethical studies reinterpret [Pancasila as a symbolic system](#), as a basis for [reflective civic nationalism that guards against indoctrination](#), and as a moral foundation for [relations between officials and citizens](#). Studies of borders, diaspora, and policy show where belonging and rights diverge: [Mulyadi and colleagues](#) find a development gap between North Kalimantan and Sabah and a fragmented Indonesian diaspora, [Suswanta and colleagues](#) find that the Special Fund relocation of Yogyakarta street vendors brought little meaningful benefit, and [Omojemite and Cishe](#) show that community-based schools improve access in rural Nigeria and South Africa.

Other contributions ground civic formation in local wisdom, such as [Piil Pesenggiri in Lampung](#) and the [Sko tradition in Jambi](#), and in Islamic boarding schools and school-based climate action, while studies of [games](#), [interactive learning](#), [AI-assisted design thinking](#), and [Finnish teachers' practices](#) examine how civic competence is built. [Febriani's review](#) of Sevenhuijsen's *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care* points to a theme that the journal's scope names but no article title in this issue foregrounds, gender, and we welcome submissions on it.

Recognition and the unequal substance of citizenship

In 2026, *Jurnal Civics: Media Kajian Kewarganegaraan* marks the twenty-second anniversary of its first publication in 2004. This anniversary offers an opportunity to rethink citizenship in Southeast Asia by examining how recognition and belonging shape unequal access to rights. Citizenship becomes politically consequential through the institutions and relationships that make membership count. Across Southeast Asia, recent research examines situations in which recognition by a community, documentation by a state, and access to protection follow different trajectories. A person can be socially embedded yet administratively excluded; another can possess secure nationality while encountering unequal treatment. These discrepancies raise a question for citizenship studies: under what conditions does being recognised as a member generate an effective claim to rights? This editorial approaches that question through selected regional scholarship and proposes an agenda connecting the anthropology of citizenship with civic education. Its central concern is the unequal conversion of recognition into rights.



Recognition requires specification. Administrative recognition concerns the categories and records through which institutions identify a person. Social recognition concerns acceptance within relationships and collectivities. Political recognition concerns the standing to make claims and receive an accountable response. These dimensions interact without necessarily coinciding. Belonging names attachments and situated experiences of membership, while rights concern entitlements and the institutional means of securing them. Keeping these distinctions visible prevents participation or cultural acceptance from becoming proxies for equality. Earlier scholarship on cultural citizenship and the politics of belonging already demonstrated how subjects are formed within relations of power and how boundaries of membership remain contested (Ong, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Rethinking citizenship from Southeast Asia therefore requires a precise account of what recent scholarship adds. The contribution lies in explaining connections between forms of recognition across particular institutions, historical circumstances, and social positions. An editorial on South Asian borderlands offers a productive methodological comparison by situating citizenship within local histories and relational spaces that exceed territorial classifications (Chakraborty & Roy Chowdhury, 2025). Southeast Asian cases can develop this approach through their own histories of state formation, mobility, and differentiated membership. The comparison concerns how questions are posed; it does not establish a regional trajectory. Research sites become sources of conceptual explanation when their differences alter the relationships that a theory expects to find.

Thailand illustrates why the acquisition of formal status cannot by itself explain the substance of citizenship. Historical analysis of statelessness connects nationality provisions and documentation practices to changing state projects and the political allocation of recognition. The social conditions under which people become accepted as members remain relevant after a legal category changes (Cheva-Isarakul, 2024). This directs attention to the sequence through which an entitlement becomes usable: recognition of eligibility, acceptance of evidence, and access to an institution capable of responding. Researchers can examine where a claim stops, who is authorised to decide, and whether that decision can be contested.

Administrative exclusion can also arise through the withdrawal of recognition. Research on the Rohingya documents the omission of their collective identity from Myanmar's 2014 census and the dispossession of documents before the 2015 elections. These processes show how bureaucratic practices can obstruct claims to membership while altering the evidence through which people establish their relationship to the state (Cheong, 2025). The analytical implication extends beyond describing an absence of papers. It becomes necessary to investigate who produces documentary absence and with what consequences. Community testimony, remembered residence, and family histories may sustain belonging while lacking the authority that an administrative encounter demands. The unequal valuation of evidence is therefore a central problem of citizenship.

Such comparisons require a distinction between unequal citizenship and the absence of nationality. A citizen denied a service, a migrant holding temporary residence, and a stateless person may encounter related practices of exclusion, but their legal positions and routes to remedy differ. Documentation is evidence produced within an administrative system; lacking papers does not necessarily establish statelessness, since nationality and its documentary proof remain distinct. Preserving these distinctions makes it possible to compare mechanisms without merging the populations they affect. It also prevents the language of belonging from suggesting that basic protections should depend on cultural familiarity or acceptance by a majority. The proposed approach examines how an institution recognises a claimant, what entitlement is at stake, and which authority is responsible for responding. It asks how these elements become connected in practice. An account of successful recognition would therefore identify a change, such as access to a procedure or the possibility of challenging a decision. An

account of inequality would identify where that connection fails and how the burden of repairing it is distributed.

Belonging across borders and over time

At the Indonesia–Malaysia border, state and customary authorities classify membership differently. Research among Dayak Bidayuh communities in Sontas and Entubuh examines kinship, cultural exchange, and attachment to ancestral landscapes alongside national affiliations. These relationships organise forms of membership that remain meaningful across a state boundary (Dewantara, Budimansyah, Prasetyo, et al., 2026). Their significance concerns the coexistence of distinct authorities over belonging. A relative can be recognised through shared descent and obligations while being classified by immigration institutions. This coexistence calls for attention to the occasions when customary membership becomes administratively relevant, the occasions when it does not, and the negotiations required to move between them. Kinship is consequential without possessing the same jurisdiction as nationality.

Comparative ethnographic work on Dayak Bidayuh and Malay communities further associates national and transnational identification with ancestral land, circular mobility, and kinship relations (Dewantara, Budimansyah, & Komalasari, 2026). These findings complicate interpretations that treat movement across a border as direct evidence of weakened national attachment. The relationship between mobility and identification has to be demonstrated in practice. At the same time, customary belonging cannot be assumed to distribute opportunities equally. A research agenda attentive to recognition would ask whose testimony carries authority, how marriage changes membership, and whether women, younger people, or newcomers can contest decisions made in the name of community. Answering these questions would reveal how the internal distribution of authority makes customary belonging consequential.

Maritime mobility raises related questions under different legal conditions. Research with Moken communities in southern Thailand shows how state practices of legal identity and citizenship affect livelihoods and traditions, while emphasising people's agency in responding to those arrangements (Cheva-Isarakul & Sperfeldt, 2023). The comparison with Bidayuh border communities concerns the encounter between established forms of mobility and institutions that organise membership territorially. Their legal circumstances remain distinct. Treating both as examples of an undifferentiated border identity would obscure the mechanisms producing their respective constraints. Comparative citizenship research gains explanatory value by examining which practices are accepted as evidence of membership and how administrative recognition changes the possibilities of movement and livelihood.

In Sabah, the relationship between territory and membership takes another form. Research among populations of Filipino descent connects statelessness to the dispute over Sabah and competing national projects in Malaysia and the Philippines. Territorial claims coexist with failures to secure political membership for people living in the territory (Cheong et al., 2025). This account locates documentary insecurity within interstate relations and histories of sovereignty. It also warns against interpreting local attachments as evidence that communities have escaped state power. Social relations may sustain everyday life while access to documentation and protection remains constrained. The relevant comparison concerns how states recognise a territory, recognise its inhabitants, and allocate responsibility for their claims, sometimes through contradictory institutional practices.

These configurations also develop over time. Scholarship on citizenship pathways in and beyond Asia follows how migrants pursue personal and family projects across national spaces and generations as their circumstances change (Ho et al., 2025). Recognition can arrive incrementally, remain provisional, or acquire a different meaning as a person enters employment, marries, or raises children. The resulting analytical unit is a trajectory through

institutions. A single interview about identity or a snapshot of documentary status offers limited temporal evidence. Longitudinal research can examine how earlier encounters influence later possibilities and how the consequences of an unresolved claim extend to other family members.

Singapore provides an example of how these pathways are evaluated through socially differentiated expectations. Research on Chinese migrant workers who become marriage migrants examines how women pursue self-development and improve their social standing within an ethnicised citizenship regime (Yang, 2025). Their strategies reveal the work involved in becoming legible as desirable members. This suggests questions about the distribution of that work: who has time and resources to meet institutional expectations, and whose contributions remain discounted? Recognition can open opportunities while remaining conditional on assessments of productive or reproductive value. The comparison with statelessness must retain that distinction. Different legal positions can nevertheless expose a shared analytical problem concerning who bears the costs of making membership credible.

Research involving Southeast Asian immigrant mothers in Taiwan extends the discussion beyond the region's territorial boundaries. It examines how multicultural recognition is organised around the transmission of ethnic culture to children and women's public participation through family responsibilities (Lan, 2025). The case demonstrates why a perspective from Southeast Asia includes relationships formed through outward migration. It also raises the possibility that recognition of cultural difference can coexist with restrictive expectations about legitimate social roles. Recognition must therefore be assessed through the opportunities and obligations it produces. The central question is whether an acknowledged identity increases a person's capacity to make claims, or confines that capacity to activities already designated as appropriate.

Regional membership adds a further institutional scale. Comparative research on ASEAN and ECOWAS identifies tensions between commitments to people-centred community building and the organisation of rights and political participation (Weinrich, 2025). For Southeast Asian citizenship studies, regional belonging consequently warrants analysis through the institutions that can receive claims and the responsibilities they can enforce. A sense of regional identification and an entitlement represent different outcomes. Examining their relationship would connect studies of everyday membership with research on regional governance. It would also make visible the limits of shifting an unresolved claim between national and regional settings when neither provides an effective route to redress.

Citizenship learning and a regional research agenda

The conversion of recognition into rights frequently depends on intermediaries. Research on informality in Indonesia shows how personal relationships, mediation, and social affiliations shape everyday encounters with state institutions (Berenschot & van Klinken, 2018). This complicates the distinction between formal entitlement and practical access. Assistance from a recognised intermediary can make an institution accessible, yet reliance on that relationship may leave the claimant dependent on continued support. The comparative task is to identify when mediation expands the capacity to claim and when it reproduces unequal access. Attention to these mechanisms connects community relations to institutional accountability without assuming that either informality or formal procedure has a uniform effect.

This approach has implications for civic education. An ethnographic editorial on the Indonesian–Malaysian border describes the limitations of educational approaches that centre national identity while giving insufficient attention to students' cultural and kinship relationships (Dewantara & Budimansyah, 2024). Schools participate in the classification of belonging because teaching materials and classroom interactions communicate which histories and attachments are intelligible as civic experience. A researchable question follows: how do students explain obligations to relatives across a border when lessons organise political

identity around a single national territory? Examining these encounters can connect educational content with the circumstances under which students understand membership, legitimacy, and access to institutions.

Research published in *Jurnal Civics on Paloh and Jagoi Babang* examines the coexistence of national identification, economic dependence, cultural practices, and schooling in Indonesia–Malaysia border communities (Sulistyarini et al., 2026). The analysis connects material inequality to civic learning. Participation in national ceremonies cannot alone establish how students experience the availability of education or other public services. Classroom research could follow how learners connect obligations to the institutions they encounter outside school. This would allow the assessment of civic learning to include their capacity to distinguish a promised entitlement from its delivery and to explain the social conditions affecting that difference.

Research on global citizenship education in Indonesia examines environmental concern, mutual assistance, and tolerance through school engagement (Casma et al., 2023). These dimensions can be connected to questions about whose difficulties become visible and whose claims receive a response. Helping another person and recognising an obligation owed to that person can involve different understandings of civic responsibility. Educational inquiry can examine how students interpret that relationship in activities. It can also investigate whether participation changes their explanations of disadvantage, including the role of institutional arrangements. The object of analysis is the reasoning developed through an encounter, with attention to what learners can substantiate about the circumstances they discuss.

Recent ethnography of a feminist leadership school in Indonesia examines how affective, relational, and embodied experiences contribute to political subject formation (Hartoto, 2026). This brings the conditions of speaking and acting into the study of civic learning. Research can follow how shared experiences acquire a public vocabulary and how participants develop the confidence to articulate claims. Such an approach requires sensitivity to context. Scholarship on activist citizenship in non-democratic settings cautions that transformative action takes forms shaped by available institutions and constraints (Jakimów, 2022). Investigators therefore need to establish what an action enables, which relationships sustain it, and what risks participants themselves consider relevant.

Digital participation requires comparable scrutiny. Analysis of student-designed civic prototypes for Indonesia's 2024 election identifies efforts to widen electoral information and participation, alongside weaker attention to social justice and marginalised groups (Sobari, 2026). These findings suggest that an expansion of communicative opportunity cannot serve as a sufficient measure of equal political standing. Future research could examine who contributes to a platform, whose concerns influence its design, and whether institutions respond to claims made through it. The same analytical distinction applies to classroom participation: opportunities to speak acquire civic significance through the reception and consequences of that speech. Participation becomes a question about relationships of authority as well as individual competence.

A regional research agenda can bring these inquiries together by following claims through linked settings. Ethnographic observation of an administrative encounter can be connected to family histories, documentary records, and subsequent decisions. Comparisons can examine a similar claim across different institutional arrangements while retaining differences in legal status. Collaborative research with local scholars and affected communities can refine the categories used to describe membership and disagreement. It can also record cases where recognition improves access, avoiding an account in which exclusion appears inevitable. The central outcome to explain is a change in the capacity to secure an accountable response. This makes the proposed approach open to evidence about institutional improvement as well as evidence about continuing inequality.

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