

HOW DOES ETHNICITY AFFECT CURRENT CHINA-MALAYSIA RELATIONS?

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the current China-Malaysia bilateral relationship from the perspective of ethnicity by drawing attention to Malaysia's ethnic-based domestic politics. Unlike in many other countries where Chinese diasporic communities account for only a relatively small portion of the total population, the proportion of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia represents a sizable minority of 24.6%. In order to take care of Chinese interests domestically while reducing the country's dependence on its ethnic Chinese minority in dealing with China-related issues, the Malay-controlled Malaysian government has actively adopted a series of implicitly pro-China policies in both bilateral and multilateral spheres. This paper first examines how the Chinese diaspora fits within the Malaysian domestic political climate in general. Based on a survey conducted in 2009, this paper discusses how Malaysian people's perceptions of China vary according to their ethnic background. Following this, it demonstrates the ways in which economic and cultural issues affect China-Malaysia relations as the country's domestic political struggles proceed. This study concludes that there is a mismatch between Malaysian Chinese's relatively high economic status and their subordinate role in Malaysia's patronage system. On the one hand, this allows them to benefit tremendously from close China-Malaysia bilateral ties and thus gain substantial leverage in domestic politics, but on the other, makes them further marginalized in inter-governmental dialogues.

INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1974, the bilateral relationship between China and Malaysia has been de-

veloping smoothly and steadily. The friendly ties between the two countries have become increasingly close over the subsequent 38 years. According to data published by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011, bilateral trade rose by 42.8% and its total amount reached \$74.2 billion USD in 2010, which was the highest among all ASEAN countries. China's imports from Malaysia reached \$50.4 billion USD and its exports to Malaysia totaled \$23.8 billion, an increase of 55.9% and 21.3% respectively compared to the 2009 data. As of the same year, Malaysia had directly invested \$5.6 billion USD in China. By comparison, China's direct investment in Malaysia was \$440 million. Driven by this vibrant economic cooperation, bilateral exchanges of people are also more frequent than before. More than one million people from each country visited the other in 2010.¹ For Malaysia, China has become a major source of tourists. The two countries have signed a number of agreements aimed at deepening bilateral cooperation in various fields, including technology, culture, education and military. Despite minor issues, such as a territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, the development of the China-Malaysia relationship is generally quite positive, and is expected to continue improving into the foreseeable future.

Among many important factors contributing to the stable development of bilateral ties, the ethnic composition of Malaysian society is one that influences their bilateral engagement in many areas. According to the 2010 census, 24.6% of Malaysia's total population is Chinese.² Unlike in many other countries where Chinese diasporic communities account for only a relatively small proportion of the total population (Singapore is the only exception), the percentage of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia is high and represents a sizable minority.

Politically, Beijing does not openly support the political organizations of Malaysian Chinese outside of the ruling United Ma-

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, *Zhongguo Tong Malaixiya De Guanxi (China-Malaysia Relations)*, updated on 8/9/2011, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/cgb/zcgmzysx/yz/1206_20/1206x1/t5702.htm (accessed 11/5/2012)

2 Department of Statistics, Malaysia, *Population and Housing Census, Malaysia 2010*, http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1215&Itemid=89&lang=en, (accessed 10/26/2012)

lays National Organization (UMNO). In fact, the Communist Party of China (CPC) maintains close contact with both the UMNO and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the UMNO's most important ally in domestic political campaigns and the largest Chinese political party in Malaysia. Economically, Malaysian Chinese have played critical roles in promoting bilateral trade and stimulating investment both into and from China. Especially during the early days of China's reforms and opening up, Malaysian Chinese businessmen were among the first investors from overseas Chinese communities who first entered the still largely undeveloped Chinese market. For obvious reasons, cultural affinities have to be given serious consideration in explaining this quick embrace. Traditional Chinese culture has been well preserved in Malaysian Chinese society. Chinese language and Chinese education, although experiencing various hardships, have survived decades of political struggles. Such cultural linkages have not only played important roles in maintaining Malaysian Chinese identity, but they also significantly contributed to the development of China-Malaysia relationship by facilitating channels of communication through personal and group connections.

Ethnicity is always a central issue in Malaysian domestic politics. As early as the colonial era, ethnic tensions emerged due to imbalances between the political and economic strength of different ethnic groups. After the Second World War, the introduction of the Emergency Regulation against the insurgency of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP)—a predominantly Chinese leftwing political party—greatly deepened existing racial tension. For a long period of time, China had openly supported the outlawed MCP in fighting the guerrilla war against the Malay-dominated Malayan/Malaysian government. On 13 May 1969, a severe riot broke out in Kuala Lumpur, in which 196 people died because of interracial violence. This incident further exacerbated the conflicts between Malays and Chinese. As a result, the Malaysian government adopted more stringent affirmative action policies in order to ease racial tension.³ In 1974, with the establishment of diplomatic relations

3 "Preparing for a Pogrom", *Time*, 18 July 1969. Retrieved 14 May 2007.<http://web.archive.org/web/20071116082658/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901058-1,00.html> (accessed 2/28/2013)

between the two countries, Beijing severed its connections with the MCP and China-Malaysia relations were normalized. Due to this significant shift occurring after 1974, the ways in which ethnicity influences China-Malaysia relations will focus only on the post-1974 era.

Ostensibly, much inter-governmental engagement in multi-lateral dialogues has very little to do with issues related to ethnicity. But I believe the evidence shows that ethnicity does affect Malaysia's foreign policy towards China. Specifically, in order to protect Chinese interests domestically while reducing its dependence on ethnic Chinese for dealing with China issues, the Malay-controlled Malaysian government has actively adopted implicitly pro-China policies, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

To elaborate on these points, I will first discuss how ethnicity became a central issue in Malaysian society and how the Chinese diaspora fits into the Malaysian domestic political climate in general. In the third section, I will discuss Malaysian perceptions of China based on a survey I conducted in 2009. Following this, I will underscore the mismatch between Malaysian Chinese's heavy investment in China and their limited roles in domestic politics, which on one hand allows them to economically benefit from close China-Malaysia ties, but on the other hand, marginalizes this group in inter-governmental dialogues. Finally, I will discuss how cultural issues affect China-Malaysia relations by examining the cases of the newly founded Confucius Institute at the University of Malaya and Malaysia's government fellowship program for students studying in China.

ETHNICITY AND MALAYSIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS

Directly influenced by British colonial rule that segregated people along ethnic lines, Malay and its successor state Malaysia, since the colonial era has been described as a plural society par excellence. *Bumiputera* is a politically constructed category, which means "indigenous people," literally a "son of soil." It includes both

the Malays and other indigenous peoples of Malaysia.⁴ Through this categorization, *Bumiputera* has become the dominant majority of the country to the exclusion of ethnic Chinese and Indians. As of 2010, *bumiputera* accounted for 67.4% of the country's total population, followed by Chinese at 24.6%, Indian (7.3%) and others (0.7%).⁵

As I have mentioned previously, the Chinese represent the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia with a population of nearly seven million,⁶ and their presence is significant by any measure. With a handful of active forces representing their communal interests, ethnic Chinese have played indispensable roles in the Malaysian political arena. On the other hand, Malaysian politics is still predominantly ethnic-based and largely Malay-dominated.

The Barisan Nasional (BN), along with its predecessor, the Alliance—largely comprised of ethnic-based political parties such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)—has been the only ruling party coalition since the country's independence.⁷ While ostensibly functioning as a multi-ethnic political party coalition, the BN has been predominantly controlled by UMNO. Over the past five decades, the country's prime ministers and the heads of the key ministries have always been members (Malays) of UMNO. Despite an official consensus of pursuing racial harmony, to a large extent, each constituent party of the BN primarily works in accordance with their respective ethnic interests in hope of securing and maximizing votes from their own community.

In fact, the origin of Malaysia's communal politics can be

4 According to the 2004 CIA World Factbook, Malays account for 50.4% of the total population, followed by Chinese 23.7%, indigenous 11%, Indian 7.1% and others 7.8%. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/my.html> (accessed 10/24/2012).

5 Department of Statistics, Malaysia, Population and Housing Census, Malaysia 2010, http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1215&Itemid=89&lang=en, (accessed 10/26/2012)

6 *ibid.*

7 The Barisan Nasional (also historically known as National Front) was formed in 1973 as the successor to the Alliance. Besides UMNO, MCA and MIC, participants of the BN also include other constituent parties such as Malaysian People's Movement Party (GERAKAN) and People's Progressive Party (PPP).

traced back much earlier when Malayan/Malaysian people were fighting for independence. Although there was a wide range of political options advocated by different interest groups, the central issues were always concentrated within the debate between two major camps: the *bumiputera*, who advocated the revival of Malay sovereignty as it existed in the pre-colonial era, and the non-Malay immigrants, who struggled for equal rights and permanent citizenship within the new country. In many Malay extremists' view, "immigrants formed an inextricable part of the colonization process" and thus, the realization of the decolonization must be conducted with an emphasis on the fact that "the land belongs to the Malays."⁸ In contrast, the Chinese and Indians were particularly anxious to end colonization through popular sovereignty, including the participation of immigrants by granting them rights equal to the indigenous. As Muhammad Ikmal Said argued, "(The Malay's special position or equal rights) is an open question and is an object of struggle. Such a struggle, of course, would not occur if the immigrant communities in question are small, as they could be accommodated, that is, 'controlled', easily. On the other hand, if they form a large proportion of the population, an economically stronger majority as in the Malayan case, the implications are very different."⁹ In this sense, each ethnic group was big enough to contest the others, but no single group had the absolute strength necessary to take the lead without making compromises. This fact also ensured that almost all political issues in Malaysia are approached as communal struggles, or at least in most circumstances, communal interests must be taken into account as a primary consideration.

As of 1961, there were 7.19 million people living in Malaya, 3.57 million of whom were Malays and were accounted the majority of the population; whereas within a Chinese population of 2.63 million, only 880,000 had citizenship.¹⁰ Despite the economic advantages the ethnic Chinese enjoyed, they were politically un-

8 Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh, 1992, *Framged vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. P261

9 *ibid.* P276.

10 Sabah and Sarawak were not incorporated into Malaysia until 1963. Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "*Malaixiya De Yiyi He Qiantu* 马来西亚的意义和前途 (*The Meaning and Prospect of Malaysia: Lim Kcan Siew's Speech in Johor*)," Huo Yan Bao (Nyala), Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 3, Issue 10, May, 1963.

derprivileged due to a lack of eligible voters when the country's independence was achieved. By working closely with the dominant UMNO, the MCA successfully helped the vast majority of ethnic Chinese obtain citizenship and secured its own position within the ruling party coalition. In exchange, however, the special right of *bumiputera* became legally acknowledged in the country's constitution.¹¹

In the following decades, the UMNO-dominated federal government implemented a series of policies that favored *bumiputera*, not only in hope of narrowing the economic gap between ethnic Malays and Chinese, but also to create a large and politically powerful Malay middle class that would continuously support the UMNO's rule. In 1970, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was officially implemented by the Mahathir administration in order to ease the tension provoked by the May 13 Incident of 1969, the most notorious interracial riot in the country's history. Based on Article 153 of the Constitution, the NEP specified the special rights enjoyed by *bumiputera*, including subsidies for real estate purchases, quotas for public equity shares, and general subsidies to *bumiputera* businesses. As a result, ethnic Malays (elites in particular) became the largest beneficiaries of such policies. The Chinese community, by contrast, although not always content with the compromises the MCA made with the UMNO, usually had no better alternative than relying on this kind of political arrangement in order to make their voices heard. While primarily focused on the interests of the Malay community, the UMNO also must help the MCA take care of Chinese interests, and thus secure Chinese votes for the BN. Although such a political structure has a very limited effect on alleviating tensions between different ethnic groups domestically, it is helpful in maintaining a generally peaceful and stable environment in plural societies like Malaysia.

11 Also refers to "*Ketuanan Melayu*", which is commonly translated as Malay Special Position, Malay Special Right, Malay Privilege, Malay Supremacy, etc., which was recognized by Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution: "It shall be the responsibility of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (the head of state of Malaysia) to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article."

MALAYSIAN PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA

Both the Malaysian Chinese community and the Malaysian government have played very important roles in improving the China-Malaysia relationship, but their respective incentives are quite different. Beyond economic considerations, I believe that ethnic Chinese in Malaysia have favorable perceptions of China largely due to ethno-racial connections. In contrast, for the UMNO-controlled Malaysian government, in light of its major concern with maintaining the status quo in Malaysian domestic politics, it seeks to make the Chinese community happy by maintaining friendly ties with China.

To test this hypothesis, I conducted a survey of Malaysian perceptions of China in 2008. I collected data from 131 participants from both Chinese and non-Chinese communities in Malaysia and investigated their perceptions from three different angles, namely "China and Chinese," "China-Malaysia Relationship," and "Culture and Communication" (Table 1).

Table 1

	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Ethnicity	Chinese	63	48.1%
	Non-Chinese	68	51.9%
Age	15-24	105	80.2%
	24+	26	19.8%
Gender	Male	44	33.6%
	Female	87	66.4%
Occupation	Student	102	77.9%
	Businessmen	8	6.1%
	Staff	14	10.7%
	Farmer	5	3.8%
	Worker	2	1.5%

Education	Secondary	6	4.6%
	Diploma	17	13.0%
	Bachelor	105	80.2%
	Post-graduate	3	2.3%

Regardless of ethnic background, the majority of respondents expressed positive views of China's national image (71%) and China's efforts in dealing with global and regional issues (69.2%), reflecting Malaysian people's generally positive impressions of China. The differences between ethnic groups are not statistically significant (Table 2 and 3).

Table 2

How do you view China's national image?		
Ethnic Group	Responses	Percentage
Non-Chinese	Positive	77.9%
	Negative	5.9%
	Neutral	16.2%
Chinese	Positive	63.5%
	Negative	8%
	Neutral	28.5%

Table 3

How do you view China's efforts in dealing with global and regional issues?		
Ethnic Group	Responses	Percentage
Non-Chinese	Positive	75%
	Negative	14.7%
	Neutral	10.3%
Chinese	Positive	62.9%
	Negative	16.1%
	Neutral	21%

On other issues, however, there were huge divergences between ethnic Chinese respondents and their non-Chinese counterparts:

Table 4

Which one of following countries is Malaysia's most important partner?		
Ethnic Group	Name of Country	Percentage
Non-Chinese	Japan	35.80%
	China	31.30%
	The United States	20.90%
	Others	11.90%
Chinese	China	60.30%
	The United States	23.80%
	Japan	11.10%
	Others	4.80%

In this survey, I asked the participants to answer the question: which country is Malaysia's most important partner, and listed "The United States," "Japan," "China" and "Others" as options. The Chinese respondents demonstrated a significant preference for China, with 60.3% of them selecting China as Malaysia's "most important partner." In comparison, non-Chinese respondents did not show any particular preference for any single country. Among three options, Japan ranked first, accounting for 35.8%, while China and the US had slightly smaller proportions, namely 31.3% and 20.9% (Table 4).

Table 5

Free trade between China and Malaysia will damage Malaysia's interests.		
Ethnic Group	Responses	Percentage
Non-Chinese	Agree	82.10%
	Disagree	14.90%
	Do not Know	3%

Chinese	Agree	15.90%
	Disagree	73%
	Do not Know	11.10%

As high as 82.1% percent of the non-Chinese respondents believe that China-Malaysia free trade will damage Malaysia's interests, whereas only 15.9% of Chinese respondents shared the same concern (Table 5).

In general, the development of economic collaboration has demonstrated strong momentum in recent years. China-Malaysia bilateral trade has been growing by double digits annually since the end of the Cold War. By the year 2002, Malaysia surpassed Singapore to become China's primary international trading partner among ASEAN countries. As mentioned earlier, bilateral trade totaled \$74.2 billion USD in 2011.¹² Significantly, Malaysia has long been running a bilateral trade surplus with China, making clear that its economic position is by no means that of inferior partner.

Furthermore, it is unsurprising that Malaysian Chinese demonstrate greater satisfaction towards the bilateral economic relationship due to close and frequent China/Malaysian-Chinese interaction. While being the biggest beneficiaries of bilateral trade, the Malaysian Chinese also act as investors who contribute most significantly to the bilateral collaboration. It is hard to find an accurate percentage of their share of investment in Malaysia's overall investment to China,¹³ but Malaysian Chinese investors have surely played major roles: As of 2009, Malaysian Chinese were running 4,189 investment projects in China, which translates into a total of \$4.53 billion USD Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).¹⁴

12 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, *Zhongguo Tong Malaixiya De Guanxi (China-Malaysia Relations)*, updated on 8/9/2011, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/cgb/zcgmzysx/yz/1206_20/1206x1/t5702.htm (accessed 11/5/2012)

13 According to the data released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, Malaysia's FDI to China reached 5.6 billion US dollars in 2009.

14 Zheng Da, *Direct Investment in China from Chinese Malaysian Businessmen since the Reform and Opening up*,

P85-92 Mar., 2009 Vol.16 No.2 Contemporary China History Studies

Table 6

How do you feel about China's foreign policy towards Malaysia?		
Ethnic Group	Items	Percentage
Non-Chinese	Satisfied	25.40%
	Dissatisfied	64.20%
	Do not Know	10.40%
Chinese	Satisfied	91.90%
	Dissatisfied	6.40%
	Do not Know	1.70%

Similarly, the overwhelming majority of ethnic Chinese respondents feel satisfied with China's current policies towards Malaysia. Among the non-Chinese, however, 64.2% expressed dissatisfaction (Table 6).

In general, both ethnic Chinese and non-ethnic Chinese hold positive views of China's national image and its role in dealing with regional and global issues. However, the survey also demonstrated that China was more positively perceived among Malaysian Chinese, who had good impressions of China regardless of whether or not they had visited the country personally. Contrarily, China's image needs improving among Malaysia's non-Chinese citizens, as these respondents expressed mostly negative feelings about their country's current relationship with China. For the Malaysian government, it believes that maintaining a good relationship with China is a helpful strategy for taking care of the domestic interests of ethnic Chinese.

THE DILEMMA OF BEING MALAYSIAN CHINESE

At the risk of oversimplifying, Malaysian Chinese occupy economically advantageous, but politically underprivileged, positions within Malaysian society. Rich ethnic Chinese businessmen rely heavily on Malay elites in securing their economic interests.

Similarly, Chinese business tycoons' strong financial support is critical to the ruling Malay upper class. This situation has formed a typical patronage system, in which the powerful and the wealthy exchange resources effectively at the top, in spite of racial segregation on the lower rungs of society.

In Malaysia, class divisions are systematically manipulated within prevailing ethnic-based communal politics. Voices of the lower class are ignored or intentionally superseded by discourses of racial inequalities. The UMNO and the MCA, both largely representing the elites in their respective ethnic groups, often use requests from the lower classes as bargaining leverage against opposition parties. To fully take advantage of ethnic Chinese citizens' favorable perceptions of China, both the UMNO and the MCA have eagerly developed a close relationship with Beijing, as a way to show their commitment and capability to take care of ethnic Chinese interests in Malaysia.

One of China's most consistent policies towards Malaysia since the establishment of diplomatic relations has been the maintenance of friendly ties with both the UMNO and the MCA. According to the records of the International Department, Central Committee of the CPC, in the past ten years the two sides have exchanged high-level delegations on an annual basis, without the involvement of the Malaysian opposition parties, regardless of ethnic composition.¹⁵

Of course, it is also worth noting that the Malaysian Chinese who have been making investments in China are of the same group of people who rely the most on the domestic patronage system.¹⁶ During the early years of China's "Reform and Opening Up" policies, "overseas Chinese" was no doubt a very lucrative identity. On the

15 International Department, Central Committee of CPC, *Foreign Affairs of the CPC*, <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/dongtai/index.htm> (accessed 20 November 2012)

16 By the mid-1990s, almost all the major Malaysian Chinese enterprises had invested in China, include Robert Kuok Hock Nien's Kuok Brothers Sdn Bhd, William Cheng Heng Jem's Lion Group, Lim Goh Tong's Genting Group, Vincent Tan's Berjaya Corporation Berhad, etc. Zheng Da, "Shixi Malaixiya Huashang Dui Hua Touzi De Fazhan, Wenti Yu Duice 试析马来西亚华商对华投资的发展、问题与对策 (*Malaysian Chinese's Investment in China: Development, Problems and Policies*)," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, No.3 2009 No. 139. Also see Gomez, Edmund Terence, and Jomo K. S. 1997. *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage, and Profits*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

one hand, people in China were eager to access the resources the Malaysian Chinese had in hand: capital, technology, and access to foreign markets and overseas networks. On the other hand, being ethnically Chinese meant they could get things done easily in China by using their Chinese networks when investors elsewhere were still suspicious of China's prospects. Being politically vulnerable and dependent, it was believed that the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia (as in other politically unstable countries) had stronger incentives to put their eggs in other baskets. Afraid of losing their most important financial resources, the Malay-dominated government also became more generous in offering profitable deals to these wealthy Chinese businessmen as long as they remained active in the domestic patron-client relationship.

Despite knowing that it is very dangerous to let a powerful country like China intervene in its domestic politics by forging close ties with the Malaysian Chinese, visionary Malay leaders decided to take the initiative to engage Beijing directly by refusing to allow Malaysian Chinese to act as middlemen, and by keeping them out of state-to-state interactions. The Malaysian government has actively adopted an implicitly pro-China policy in both bilateral and multilateral dialogues. In fact, Malaysia is not only the first ASEAN country that established diplomatic relations with China, but also the first country that initiated the China-ASEAN Dialogue and hosted the China-ASEAN Summit.¹⁷ At the regional level, Malaysia has also been playing an important role in pushing forward multilateral cooperation between ASEAN and China as well as other players from across the Pacific. Within the framework of regional institutions such as ASEAN Plus Three, the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), and the East Asian Summit (EAS), China and Malaysia have been working quite closely with each other.¹⁸ Nonetheless, both China and Malaysia claim overlapping territorial waters within the South China Sea. But unlike Vietnam and the Philippines, the

17 Xinhua News Agency, "Xi Jinping Huijian Malaixiya Fuzongli Maoxingding (Xi Jinping Met Muhyiddin Yassin, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia)", 21 September 2012, (http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-09/21/c_123747237_2.htm) (Accessed 2/24/2013)

18 "Joint Communique Between the People's Republic of China and Malaysia", 30 May 2004, *People's Daily*, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200405/30/eng20040530_144795.html (accessed 2/20/2013)

tension between Malaysia and China has rarely escalated. Armed conflict between the two countries has never occurred since the establishment of diplomatic relations.¹⁹ In dealing with territorial disputes, both sides have agreed to follow the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and the principle of “shelving disputes and seeking joint development.”²⁰ The ethnic Chinese in Malaysia usually do not play any substantial role in such inter-governmental interactions.

HOW CHINESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION MATTERS

Other than the general improvement in terms of political engagement and economic cooperation, the close China-Malaysia relationship has boosted a high volume of cultural exchange between the two countries. Due to the sharp imbalance of power between the two countries, China’s cultural influence on Malaysia is far stronger than vice versa, is similar to the situation faced by other Southeast Asian countries. In addition, because of the large percentage of ethnic Chinese, Malaysian society is not only more accommodating of Chinese culture, but there is also high demand to develop it locally.

In societies where the Chinese presence is not significant, “Chinese culture” usually functions as a medium to showcase China’s image. In Malaysia, however, vaguely defined “Chinese culture” has multiple layers of meaning. First, it is an integral part of Malaysian culture itself, on which the identity of the Malaysian nation has been politically constructed. Therefore, being recognized as an

19 “Review: Disputes in the region”, *Global Times*, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/SPECIALCOVERAGE/SouthChinaSeaConflict.aspx> (accessed 2/17/2013)

Also see “TIMELINE: The roots and present status of the WPS disputes”, *The Manila Times*, 02 September 2012, <http://www.manilatimes.net/index.php/special-report/30222-timeline-the-roots-and-present-status-of-the-wps-disputes> (accessed 2/17/2013), “Timeline: Disputes in the South China Sea,” *The Washington Post*, 8 June 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/special/south-china-sea-timeline/index.html> (accessed 2/18/2013)

20 Deng Xiaoping, *Speech at the Joint Press Conference of the State Visit to Japan*, “Ge Zhi Zheng Yi, Gong Tong Kai Fa”, <http://www.mfa.gov.cn/chn/gxh/xsb/wjzs/t8958.htm> (accessed 12/05/2012)

indispensable pillar in Malaysia’s plural society, Chinese culture plays an important role in maintaining racial harmony and mutual respect amongst different ethnic groups. Secondly, Chinese culture is extremely important for the Chinese community in Malaysia. More specifically, it is both a powerful weapon that ethnic Chinese wield in domestic political struggles against the non-Chinese dominant powers, as well as representing an ultimate goal that they intend to achieve, namely preserving their cultural identity. Although less explicit than these first two layers, a third layer is equally important: Chinese culture (Indian culture is similar in this case) is constantly manipulated as a label that reflects the “foreignness” of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, which distinguishes them from the politically more privileged “local” and “indigenous” *bumiputera*. Consequently, while preserving their cultural identity by keeping this “foreignness” and “otherness,” ethnic Chinese have prevented themselves from accessing political resources that exclusively belong to the *bumiputera*.

Therefore, the term “Chinese culture” is very ambiguous in Malaysia, conveying the meaning of both Chinese culture from China and the culture of Malaysian Chinese themselves. Despite the fact that there are many differences between the two, they are also closely connected to one another. Under the banner of preserving cultural identity, ethnic Chinese in Malaysia engage themselves actively in cultural exchanges with China, including activities such as ancestor worship, education cooperation, and joint festival celebrations. In respect to culture, the Chinese community benefits more from the close China-Malaysia bilateral relationship than other ethnic groups.

As the guardian of both the interests of the state and more importantly, the *bumiputera* community, the UMNO-controlled government often plays seemingly contradictory roles in promoting—and simultaneously curbing—the development of Chinese culture. As previously mentioned, the Malaysian government has implemented a series of economic policies that favor the *bumiputera* in terms of subsidies for real estate purchases, quotas for public equity shares, and land ownership, etc. In fact, the government’s favorable treatment of the *bumiputera* has gone far beyond the realm of purely economic interests. In the field of education, for in-

stance, there are constant controversies amongst different ethnic communities related to what the ethnic Chinese see as educational discrimination.

In Malaysia, there are basically two types of public elementary schools. One is the Malay-medium national schools where Malay (Bahasa Melayu) and English are the recognized languages of instruction.²¹ The other type is the national-type schools where ethnic languages such as Chinese and Tamil are taught, while Malay and English courses remain compulsory.²² Although ethnic Chinese enjoy the freedom to send their children to either type of school at the primary level, students have few options but to attend Malay-medium high schools so that they can further their studies at the country's public universities.²³ Otherwise, they may choose to attend private Chinese-medium schools outside of the public education system, though the graduates of these schools can only go abroad for higher education and have absolutely no chance of enrolling in domestic public universities. Such education policies result from the 1956 Razak Report, in which the Malaysian government established the goal of making Malay the dominant medium of instruction by assimilating Chinese and English national-type schools into the Malay-medium national school system.²⁴ Through various types of political campaigns and fund raising projects, the Malaysian Chinese have exerted every effort to protect their own education system. To this day, however, the government does not recognize the Chinese-medium independent schools. Due to the favorable treatment of *bumiputera*, it is also far more difficult for Chinese and Indian students who attend Malay-medium national schools to get in to public universities, not to mention the paucity of financial aid available to non-*bumiputera* students.

One of the consequences of such education policies is a trend among ethnic Chinese students to study abroad. Traditionally, Singapore and Taiwan have been two major destinations for Ma-

laysian students of Chinese background, not only because of their geographical proximity and their close linguistic and ethno-racial ties with the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, but also due to their own respective policies of attracting ethnic Chinese students from overseas.²⁵ Boosted by the rapid development of the China-Malaysia bilateral relationship in recent years, however, there is an increasing number of Malaysian Chinese students who choose to study in China, owing to the fact that China has a wider range of schools at a relatively lower cost. As of 2011, there were approximately 4,000 Malaysian students studying in China.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, these students are predominantly self-financed ethnic Chinese, although the exact number is unknown.

In the name of continuously promoting the development of the bilateral relationship, in 2007 the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (KPM) launched a government scholarship program to train Malaysian Mandarin teachers. Selecting students from national high schools across the country, the KPM has since sent out five batches of students to Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) to pursue bachelor degrees in teaching Mandarin as a second language.²⁷ Following the KPM program, the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), a government-run *bumiputera* development agency, has also signed an agreement with BFSU to train Mandarin teachers. As of 2012, there have been 175 Malaysian students studying at BFSU through these two programs. Like many other government education programs in Malaysia, the recipients of these two scholarships are predominantly Malay. According to an unpublished document from BFSU, out of the 175 students, there are only two ethnic Chinese, one ethnic Indian, and three indigenous Kadazans.²⁸

In addition to helping Malaysia train its non-ethnic Chinese

21 Sekolah Kebangsaan.

22 Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan

23 Chow Kum Hor, *Battle to save Malaysia's Chinese dropouts*, Asia One, The Straits Times, 31 Jan 2008 <http://www.asiaone.com/News/Education/Story/A1Story20080130-47357.html> (Accessed 11/29/2012)

24 *ibid.*

25 Lim Mun Fah, *More expensive to study in China than Taiwan*, Sinchew Daily, 22 July 2010, <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Education/Story/A1Story20100722-228336.html> (accessed 12/03/2012)

26 Premier Wen Jiabao's speech at the Malaysia-China Economic, Trade, and Investment Cooperation Forum in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 28 April 2011.

27 Program Pendidikan Ijazah Bahasa Mandarin, Zhao Wanzhen, "Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 Malaysian Mandarin Teacher Training Program at BFSU" (unpublished document), September 2012.

28 Beijing Foreign Studies University, "2012 nian 9 yue yingjie malaixiya jiaoyubu" (*Welcoming the KPM Delegation in September 2012*), (unpublished document), September 2012

Mandarin teachers in China, Beijing is also expanding its own education network in Malaysia. As part of China's global strategy in advancing its "soft power," a Chinese government-sponsored network of educational organizations named the "Confucius Institute" has been established to teach Chinese language and promote Chinese culture worldwide.²⁹ In contrast to most countries where the name "Confucius" represents a school of philosophical thought, in Malaysia the word is closely associated with the religious beliefs of a certain fraction of the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia, distinguished from ethnic Chinese Buddhists and Taoists. As a result, the Confucius Institute has experienced several unexpected difficulties in getting approval from the UMNO-controlled government to establish its branch in Malaysia, as many conservative party members were concerned that the institution would play a role in promoting the religion of a particular segment of ethnic Chinese.³⁰ As a compromise, the first Confucius Institute in Malaysia has changed its name into "Kong Zi Institute for the Teaching of Chinese Language" (KZIUM), to rid itself of the religious implications of "Confucianism."³¹

More importantly, the "Kong Zi Institute" is specially tailored to serve the non-Chinese community in Malaysia. According to an unpublished document of the institute, 1104 students enrolled in its Chinese language courses in the first year (2011) of operation.³² Malays accounted for approximately 80% of the total number, whereas the percentage of Chinese and Indian students was 15% and 5% respectively.³³ This situation is distinct from other Chinese language training institutions in Malaysia such as the non-Chinese government-sponsored Global Hanyu & Culture College and the Mandarin Journey Language Center run by Malaysian Chinese, where ethnic Chinese account for the overwhelming ma-

majority of their respective student bodies.

On top of offering courses to the public, the KZIUM actively engages in special language training programs for Malaysian government employees by cooperating with the Institute of Diplomacy & Foreign Relations (IDFR), the National Defense University (UPNM) and the Royal Malaysia Police College (RMPC).³⁴ Directly influenced by the ethnic composition of personnel in the Malaysian government, most of the participants of these programs are Malays. For example, out of 184 IDFR students who registered for language courses, only two were ethnic Chinese and eight were ethnic Indians. Similarly, 54 out of 55 students from the RMPC were Malays.³⁵ According to Zhao Wanzhen, a language lecturer who worked at the KZIUM from 2011 to 2012, there is virtually no connection between their institute and local ethnic Chinese organizations whatsoever.³⁶

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's domestic politics is highly ethnic-based. Due to imbalances of political and economic status between the *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera* communities in this plural society, different ethnic groups have engaged in constant struggles to secure their respective communal interests. Although tensions between different ethnic groups are sometimes politically manipulated, ethnicity remains a central issue in the domestic politics of Malaysia.

As the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia, the Chinese community plays indispensable roles in the country's political arena. Their resilient linguistic and ethno-racial ties with China have meant that the engagement between China and Malaysia is not a conventional state-to-state relationship. The basic pattern of Malaysia's domestic politics has strongly influenced its foreign policy toward China. Due to the favorable perceptions of China among Malaysian Chinese, the Malay-controlled government has been cautious in developing its bilateral relationship with Beijing. It needs

29 The Economist, *China's Confucius Institutes: Rectification of Statues*, 20 Jan 2011. <http://www.economist.com/node/17969895> (accessed 12/05/2012)

30 Zhao Wanzhen, interview by author, 12/05/2012. Zhao Wanzhen worked as a language lecturer at the KZIUM from 2011 to 2012.

31 "Kong Zi" is the exact Chinese pinyin spelling of "Confucius".

32 Kong Zi Institute For the Teaching of Chinese Language at University of Malaya, "Ma Da Kong Yuan PPT" (*Introduction to the KZIUM*), (unpublished document), 06/23/2012

33 *ibid.*

34 *Maktab Polis Diraja Malaysia*

35 Zhao Wanzhen, interview by author, 12/05/2012.

36 *ibid.*

to maintain and improve this relationship in order to satisfy the ethnic Chinese, especially business tycoons who have made large investments in China and play critical roles in its domestic patronage system. Conversely, it has to prevent Malaysian Chinese from getting too close to a powerful Beijing, consequently jeopardizing the country's own security. To do so, while taking the initiative to engage Beijing in both bilateral cooperation and multilateral dialogues, the Malaysian government has simultaneously marginalized ethnic Chinese Malaysians in intergovernmental interactions.

The high volume of cultural exchanges between China and Malaysia should not be regarded as simply the combination of close government-to-government engagement and increasingly developed people-to-people interactions. Rather, it is a very complex network, in which the two governments and people with different backgrounds play distinct and variable roles. The ethnic Chinese in Malaysia rely heavily on the ethno-racial ties with China in order to protect their cultural identity in their political struggles against the dominant Malay majority. The Malaysian government, by contrast, usually plays a contradictory role in both promoting and curbing "Chinese culture." Specifically, it restrains the development of Malaysian Chinese culture by prioritizing the interests of the *bumiputera* community in most of its political agendas. At the same time, however, it is also very active in improving bilateral ties with Beijing by promoting "Chinese culture from China" in its non-Chinese communities in order to encourage racial harmony among its constituent ethnic groups. In return, while benefiting tremendously from a momentum driven, in large part, by its close interaction with ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, Beijing has tactically maintained a good relationship with the Malay-controlled Malaysian government by acquiescing to their demand to respect the interests of the *bumiputera*, and by excluding ethnic Chinese Malaysians from certain sectors of inter-governmental cooperation.

The basic pattern of Malaysia's ethnic composition is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Therefore, ethnicity will continue to play an important role in shaping the bilateral relationship between China and Malaysia. This does not mean, however, that the current relationship is not subject to change. In fact, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional is facing an unprecedented challenge

in the upcoming election from the opposition party coalition Pakatan Rakyat, consisting of the self-proclaimed non-ethnic-based People's Justice Party, the Chinese-led Democratic Action Party and the deeply conservative Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Malays). Regardless of the election's final results, it is widely believed that the country's domestic politics may be undergoing a major paradigm shift away from a largely ethnic-based arrangement. If this happens, it is unclear whether the China-Malaysia relationship will continue to follow its current trajectory.

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CONSTRUCTING “CULTURE”

Mark Portillo

ABSTRACT

Despite the vast amount of research surrounding Western photojournalist’s role in the Vietnam War, little is known about photography and its uses by the Vietnamese communist leadership during and after the war. Western photojournalists aimed to highlight the unnecessary suffering of the GI and the brutal violence occurring overseas, but what were the Vietnamese aiming to achieve with their images? To answer this question, I conducted a comparative historical analysis of communist leadership relationships to modes of culture production, specifically photography. Through this comparative analysis I demonstrate how photographs have served the nation’s Communist leadership by aiding in the construction of a cultural memory and consequently, a politicized identity. This research is part of a growing body of research on memory, culture production, and their role in politics. By utilizing photography and drawing attention to its important role in struggles for power, it is my hope that this research will contribute and promote future related projects.

INTRODUCTION

How can the culture of an entire country be constructed? The answer lies in cultural memory. In this essay I will discuss memory, what it means for a culture to remember, how that cultural memory is constructed, produced, and for what purpose. I will look specifically at the changing Vietnamese cultural memory beginning from the Vietnam War to the present. Through a comparative historical analysis of communist leadership relationships to