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# China's Cultural Diplomacy in Malaysia During Najib Razak's Premiership

Jakub Hrubý & Tomáš Petrů

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This article aims to provide an analysis of China's cultural diplomacy (CCD) in Malaysia in the latter years of the premiership of Najib Razak (2015-2018). It intends to reflect on the efforts China has been exerting in order to increase its soft power in the Southeast Asian nation. The authors have identified and analyzed four major fields of CCD: the activities of two Confucius Institutes; the first overseas campus of a renowned Chinese university; invocations of shared history, embodied mainly by the figure of the legendary admiral-eunuch Zheng He, regularly commemorated as China's historic envoy of peace; and Malay translations of classical Chinese novels. The article's findings reveal an intricate pattern of networks involving various actors, both Chinese and Malaysian, state, semi-state, and non-state, pursuing their own particular interests, which tend to converge and overlap with the aims of Chinese cultural diplomacy. The implementation of CCD has also been formed by the local political and societal structures: a) a 'special' relation between Razak's cabinet and the PRC leadership, revolving around party-based diplomacy and intensive economic cooperation especially between 2015 and May 2018; b) the presence of a large Chinese community, which provides opportunities and, at the same time, creates limitations for the China's cultural diplomacy practice in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** China-Malaysia Relations; Confucius Institute; Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power; Tertiary Education; Zheng He

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## INTRODUCTION

Aspiring to the position of a global player, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been exerting a great effort to increase its soft power in world politics. The past two decades have seen heightened activity in the field of public diplomacy, which has been used to promote a positive image of China as a responsible stakeholder and peaceful rising power. This has been especially true in the case of neighboring countries. Southeast Asia is perceived as a strategic region which is of vital importance for maintaining the security of China's borders as well as establishing thriving economic relations (d'Hooghe, 2015, pp. 185-187). Given the geographic proximity and long-standing presence of the Chinese element in the region, the PRC is eager to establish close relations with this part of the world, cultivating existing historical ties and offering a vision of an allegedly mutually beneficial partnership based on shared interests (Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 95-105; Suryadinata, 2017).

First conceptualized by Joseph Nye, the soft power theory postulates that the attractive appeal of a state's culture, values, and institutions can be nurtured and used in order to influence others and make them well disposed towards one's needs and interests (Nye, 2004, pp. 5-11). Symbolic soft power acquired in this way is described as "the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes" (Nye, 2011, p. 13). As such, it stands in opposition to hard power, which is based on coercion. While Nye identified military might and economy as the sources of hard power, later theorists developed a more nuanced interpretation, speaking about hard and soft uses of power, arguing that particular sources are neither inherently soft nor hard, but can be used as such depending on the given conditions and needs (Li, 2011, p. 3).

The official Chinese understanding of the concept is also broader, encompassing also economic tools, such as aid and investments, or membership in multilateral organizations (Kurlantzik, 2007, p. 6; Lai & Lu, 2012). Aware of the potential of soft power, the PRC leaders have embraced the concept, repeatedly stressing the importance of Chinese culture for establishing the country's international standing and acquiring its desired influence in world affairs ("Hu Jintao calls for", 2007; "Xi: China to promote", 2014). These goals are to be achieved mainly through public diplomacy, which is perceived as a tool of soft power.

So far, there is no generally accepted definition of public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008), yet it can be described as a "process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented" (Sharp, 2005, p. 106). With public opinion playing a still greater role in international relations, public diplomacy is becoming important for the promotion of a positive image of a given country in the minds of foreign peoples, which might eventually enable that country to advance its interests. While in the past public diplomacy was perceived primarily as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies" (Tuch, 1990, p. 3), there has been a shift from this hierarchical, unilateral, and state-centered understanding of the concept to the so-called new public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005), which stresses the involvement of non-state actors. The new approach is multilateral, focusing on networks (Pamment, 2012, pp. 3-4) formed by various cooperating actors, who happen to share certain interests. These are not to be seen as mere recipients of public diplomacy, for they are often actively involved in shaping its message, influencing the outcome of the overall diplomatic effort (Hocking, 2005, pp. 37-38).

Our understanding of cultural diplomacy is based on the work of Ingrid d'Hooghe who has extensively researched the public diplomacy activities of the PRC (d'Hooghe, 2011; d'Hooghe, 2015). She sees cultural diplomacy as one of the three subsets of tools subsumed within the concept of public diplomacy, the other two being citizen diplomacy and strategic communication. Referring to an ongoing theoretical debate (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010; Mark, 2009), she identifies cultural diplomacy with "activities such as cultural performances, exhibitions, cultural and film festivals, language promotion and participation in World Expositions" (d'Hooghe, 2015, pp. 28-29).

The change of paradigm brought about by the new public diplomacy shift has broadened our understanding of public diplomacy dynamics. However, the focus on

non-state actors tends to overlook the continuing involvement of the state. If public diplomacy is considered a part of the diplomatic effort – that is, something which should serve the interests of a given country – then it is presumed that the state agenda constitutes one of the forces behind public diplomacy. This is especially the case in China, where non-state actors are never totally independent (d’Hooghe, 2011, p. 22). The exact role of the state may differ, ranging from initiator, to sponsor, or mere formal patron, yet it should be taken into account as one of the actors participating in the process. Therefore, in our contribution we follow the approach of Vera Exnerova, who proposes using the theory of transnational societal spaces (Faist, 2006; Pries, 2005; Pries, 2008) and perceiving the dynamics of cultural diplomacy not as a dichotomy of state–non-state actors or centre–periphery, but as a network of transnational relations involving many different actors, including the state, which is non-hierarchical and polycentric in nature (Exnerova, 2017).

The way the network functions is further shaped not only by the actors involved, but also by so-called domestic structures, which influence the possibilities of promoting one’s culture as well as the reception of the message projected by cultural diplomacy. According to Risse-Kappen (1995), the domestic structures consist of the political institutions of the state, societal structures, and the policy networks that link them together (p. 20). In other words, the content of CCD may originate in China’s own perception of its culture, but at the same time the local conditions of the target country further delimit the space for CCD and partially shape both its form and content.

While many aspects of China’s engagement with Southeast Asia have received scholarly attention, Chinese cultural diplomacy has only been partially researched, often within the scope of a wider overview of its public diplomacy (d’Hooghe, 2015; Kornphanat, 2016; Shambaugh, 2013; Shuto, 2018). The PRC maintains a varying degree of presence in all eleven countries of the region, yet Malaysia holds a special position in terms of strategic importance and economic partnership. Since 1974, when Malaysia became the first country in the region to recognize the PRC, their friendship has evolved into a ‘special’ relationship underlined by the previous Razak government (2009–2018). Despite a substantial political change in May 2018, when the new government of Mahathir Mohamad announced a ‘reset’ in the relations with China, bilateral relations remain on good terms. Secondly, the waterways controlled by Malaysia are of pre-eminent importance to the PRC as they include vital arteries of the *Maritime Silk Road for the 21st Century*, which is a part of the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), launched in 2013 by China’s president Xi Jinping. In line with that, China has exploited various tools of soft power to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of Malaysian people with the aim of maintaining good rapport and bolstering its position in the country.

Based on the aforementioned concepts, the article will outline several examples of cultural diplomacy in Malaysia conducted either by the PRC, or by local state and non-state actors on behalf of, and to the benefit of China. It will show that CCD is not a straightforward process of the promotion of images and values projected from China to the ‘target’ country. Instead, these activities should be perceived as polycentric transnational networks in which various actors get involved for various reasons, and in which they have various interests that happen to converge with the interests of the PRC. It is their willingness to promote China’s vision of its culture

that facilitates the PRC's diplomatic effort.

Focusing on different actors, both state and non-state, Chinese and Malaysian, who have for their own reasons contributed to the promotion of the positive image of China as a good neighbor, responsible partner, and source of economic benefits, the article identifies the converging interests of individual actors, and thereby outlines the intricacy of the PRC's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia as well as the complexity of China-Malaysia relations throughout the later phase of Najib Razak's government (2015-May 2018). The case studies are followed by an analysis of the domestic structures influencing the possibilities and actual dynamics of CCD in Malaysia. This will shed more light on Chinese diplomatic efforts in the region and will also contribute to our understanding of cultural diplomacy, for it will show how the political and societal structures of a recipient country are prone to modify its form and means.

Our research is based on empirical data, including academic literature, official and media reports, and textual sources produced by various local actors involved in the promotion of CCD in Malaysia. Further information was gained through semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the Malaysian Chinese community, and researchers at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya (ICS), the Centre for Policy and Global Governance, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and the Centre for Malaysia Chinese Studies in Kuala Lumpur, as well as Malaysian students graduated from Chinese universities, and members of local NGOs. Data collection, which took place in spring 2016, also included participant observation in activities of the *Kong Zi Institute* and a visit to cultural sites that have adopted the message of Chinese cultural diplomacy.

### CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

In spite of China's intensive campaign to promote its culture and use it as a tool of soft power the world over, in Malaysia the manifestations of CCD have not been especially pronounced so far.<sup>1</sup> As in other countries, the most visible actors are two *Confucius Institutes*, sometimes likened to organizations such as the *Goethe-Institut* or the *British Council*. They constitute a network of institutes, set up in collaboration with a Chinese university and a partner institution in the recipient country, whose stated mission is to promote the understanding of Chinese language and culture and to develop friendly relations between China and other countries. However, unlike European initiatives, the CIs are not independent as they are affiliated to *Hanban*, the *Office of Chinese Language Council International*, which then reports to the Chinese Ministry of Education, and are regarded as a government entity – an instrument of CCD to bolster the PRC's soft power (Gil, 2015; Hartig, 2012).

The story of the founding of the first CI in Malaysia is representative of the role of domestic, political, and societal structures in shaping cultural diplomacy. Despite Beijing's efforts, Malaysian leaders did not at first feel the need to open a local Confucius Institute, due to the existence of more than 60 Chinese schools and colleges in the country. Operated by various Malaysian Chinese entities, these institutions have

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1 This opinion was repeatedly endorsed by our informants in the interviews conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Malacca in May 2016, who all agreed that China has not been overly active in this sphere.

provided Mandarin courses to the local Chinese, as well as non-Chinese populations. That is why it took five years of negotiations before China succeeded in establishing a CI attached to the University of Malaya (E. Yeoh, 31 May 2016). Initially scheduled for 2007, the opening of the CI was postponed until November 2009 due to another contentious issue. As the name of Confucius was deemed unacceptable in majority-Muslim Malaysia for allegedly propagating idolatry, it had to be renamed the *Kong Zi Institute* (ICS researcher, 25 May 2016).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the importance that China attributed to the opening of the first CI in Malaysia is indicated by its willingness to agree to a name change.

Initially, the activities of the institute were rather basic (not exceeding the basic requirements from *Hanban* that apply to all the institutes) and mainly targeted the Malay community. The institute presented itself as a venue where Malays and other non-Chinese Malaysians could study Chinese and also learn some 'fun' knowledge about China. However, the scope of the KZIUM (Kong Zi Institute University of Malaya) operations has been broadening ever since. For instance, in 2016, in addition to providing Chinese language courses to students at the University of Malaya, there were altogether 28 language tutors teaching Mandarin courses at 11 other state universities. The institute has also been offering courses in calligraphy and Chinese chess (Z. Chen, Chinese Director of Kong Zi Institute, 25 May 2016). Since 2016, the institute's activities have markedly intensified. Firstly, the selection of language courses at KZIUM has widened, with six knowledge levels of Mandarin on offer, plus Chinese for business. Furthermore, the institute arranges for Malaysian secondary school students to participate in annual summer and winter camps in Beijing, and offers different types of scholarships funded by *Hanban* (Hanban Scholarship).

The institute also organizes special language courses for state officials, police corps, and the management of the Maybank and Petronas (ICS researcher, 25 May 2016), which demonstrates the appeal of Mandarin within Malaysian social and economic elites as it is rapidly becoming a strategic asset in the world of business and facilitates negotiations on the official level. These courses are paid for by the respective institutions, and the collected fees are used to finance other activities, such as the celebration of the Lantern Festival or a contest for writers in Chinese (Z. Chen, 25 May 2016).

The institute also realizes the importance of reaching out to the Malay-Muslim majority through Islam, having (co-)organized two forums on Islam in China in 2016 and 2017, which included the *3rd International Seminar on the Modernization of Islam in China* held by the State University of Kuala Terengganu (Chiam, 2017). These forums invited scholars from China to address current developments and issues related to Islam in China – within approved official parameters (Ngeow, 2017b). To sum up, the Kong Zi Institute has gone beyond the pattern of teaching Mandarin and organizing cultural courses, working to address various social strata, while showing different aspects of China and its culture.

Another Confucius Institute in Malaysia was established in 2014 at *SEGi University*, a private university in Selangor, in collaboration with *Hainan Normal University*

2 In fact, Kong Zi is just a transcribed version of the name Confucius in Chinese. However, unlike its international counterpart, it is not readily associated with the figure of a religious thinker and founder of Confucianism.



“Exciting programme planned for”, 2016). The institute provides Mandarin lessons, promotes cultural activities, and organizes students under the Confucius Institute scholarship. Its activities include events such as the *China Cultural Summer Camp Programme*, which receives assistance from the Chinese Embassy in Malaysia and is aimed at giving Malaysian students an opportunity to experience Chinese culture on Hainan Island. Another activity was the *Training Program of Local Preschool Chinese Teachers*, organized in May 2017, with support from *Hanban* and Hainan Normal University. The SEGi Confucius Institute has also embarked on the promotion of the BRI, organizing student excursions such as *Trailing the Belt and Road Once Taken: A Trip to the UNESCO World Heritage City of Malacca*, which was to highlight the shared historical links between Malaysia and China, habitually used as a precedent for ongoing infrastructure projects. The existence of another Confucius Institute in the capital city of Malaysia reflects the fact that CCD is not always implemented by strictly official circles, but that actors such as a local Chinese university and a private Malaysian institution can also contribute to the effort.

### UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

The educational activities of Chinese actors are not limited to language courses offered by Confucius Institutes. In late 2015, *Xiamen University*, a top-ranking Chinese institution, established its branch in Malaysia (“China’s Xiamen University officially”, 2016). The choice of Malaysia underlines the historical ties binding the two countries as well as the attention some circles in China are paying to Malaysia and its potential. Xiamen University happens to have a strong link to Malaysia: it was founded in 1921 by Tan Kah Kee, a wealthy overseas Chinese from what was then British Malaya. The university has maintained academic ties with Malaysian educational institutions to this day; for instance, the 90th anniversary celebration held in 2015 in Xiamen, was attended by delegations from many Malaysian Chinese associations (E. Yeoh, 31 May 2016; “Nostalgic ties with Malaysia”, 2018). The good rapport between China and the Malaysian Chinese community, and their interest in having a top Chinese university in Malaysia, are evidenced by the generous donations from Chinese Malaysians including the tycoon Robert Kuok, also known as the “Sugar King of Asia” (“China’s Xiamen University officially”, 2016).

The school’s new foreign campus in Sepang, officially named *Xiamen University Malaysia* (XMUM), began student enrolment in December 2015. XMUM offers a variety of courses in English, ranging from journalism, international business and accounting to digital media technology, as well as two programs in Chinese. Our interviewees agreed that the whole project is largely profit-driven, yet they also admitted that this might be a good chance to propagate the Chinese style of education, and Chinese views and values along with it (ICS, 25 May 2016; members of Centre for Malaysia Chinese Studies, 28-29 May 2016).

Tertiary education promises to open up new possibilities for advertising a positive image of China as a modern and developed country offering to share its knowledge, know-how, and experience with the world. Indeed, CCTV (China Central Television)-conducted interviews with the freshly arrived PRC students at the XMUM campus revealed that these freshmen thought of themselves not only as envoys of a newly

rising China, but also as representatives of the BRI (Xiamen University Malaysia, 2018). Looking at this development, it seems that the educational sector is increasingly proving to be a suitable field for the implementation of CCD in Malaysia. Its rising importance is the result of a confluence of factors – from the interest and endorsement of the Malaysian government, to China’s universities ‘going global’, to Chinese communities wishing to reach out to mainland China for trading links. Despite the vested interests of the various actors involved, the objectives remain the same: the spreading of Chinese values and language, with the ultimate goals of improving China’s image and increasing Chinese influence in Malaysia.

### MING DYNASTY ADMIRAL

A different network of CCD in Malaysia is represented by various activities centered on the person of Zheng He, a Chinese, Muslim-born eunuch admiral who led seven naval expeditions to the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433. His voyages are regularly invoked by the PRC when dealing with maritime countries targeted within the BRI as a symbol of a shared past characterized by friendly relations and flourishing commerce. However, its message is particularly potent in the case of Malaysia, for Zheng He is credited with providing support to the Sultanate of Malacca (Wong, 2014; Chia & Church, 2012, p. xxii), which is perceived as the political predecessor of present-day Malaysia. The Ming maritime enterprise is therefore seen as an influence of great importance standing at the very inception of Malay statehood. Moreover, as some of the crew settled down in Malacca, these voyages were instrumental in introducing the Chinese element to the region, the presence of which has become an inseparable feature of Malaysian society and culture.

While the majority of Western historians agree that the main aim of Zheng He’s enterprise was to display the wealth and might of the empire in order to awe local rulers into formal acknowledgment of Chinese superiority (Dreyer, 2007; Wade, 2005), the official PRC narrative tends to portray the voyages differently. Zheng He is celebrated as an explorer who had ventured into the unknown on a quest for knowledge long before the European ‘age of discoveries’ (Li, 2005). However, the PRC authorities claim that unlike the Western explorers, who allegedly brought only violence and exploitation, ushering in the period of colonization, Zheng He’s was a peaceful mission which has facilitated the economic growth of the region (Murphy, 2010). In this respect, he is invoked as an envoy of peace and a harbinger of civilization, introducing advanced technologies and spreading Chinese culture to the outside world (Li, 2005). The figure of the Ming admiral has gradually come to stand for peaceful trade and harmonious cooperation and is often used as proof that China is a good neighbor whose peaceful rise to power should not be feared, but rather embraced as an opportunity for further development (“Full text of Premier’s”, 2015). At the same time, the technological superiority of the Ming fleet has become a symbol of the recent achievements in advanced technologies and general development of present-day China.

This new perception of Zheng He became more pronounced in connection with the sixcentenary anniversary of the admiral’s first voyage in 2005 (“Shipping news: Zheng He’s”, 2005). Part of the official celebrations was a traveling exhibition co-organized by the ministries of culture of both China and Malaysia, *Envoy of Peace from China*, which



was opened in Malacca in July 2005 by then Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi. According to Xinhua, the exhibition “highlights the spirit of peace and friendship embodied in Zheng He and expresses China's wish to carry out dialogue and exchanges with all other countries in the world” (“Malaysian PM Unveils”, 2005).

The same message was conveyed by the sea voyage of a training vessel named Zheng He, which set sail to circumnavigate the globe in 2012. This “harmonious mission” was aimed at “consolidating and developing the relations between China and various countries” (Li & Cao, 2012). When calling at Malacca, a group of Chinese naval cadets visited places associated with the admiral “to cherish the memories of the great achievements of the great maritime pioneer and messenger of peace and friendship” (“Chinese naval servicemen visit”, 2012). Similar statements are regularly expressed by Chinese representatives, who never forget to invoke Zheng He during their official visits to Malaysia (“President Xi Jinping meets”, 2013; “Full text of Premier's”, 2015). Yet, it is apparent that the fanciful narrative of a peaceful enterprise bringing commercial opportunities is also attractive for different local actors in Malaysia who are ready to adopt and even elaborate on this narrative, thereby contributing willingly (if unwittingly) to the PRC's cultural diplomacy effort.

The most visible example is the *Zheng He Cultural Museum* in Malacca, a private institution run by Tan Ta Sen,<sup>3</sup> a Singaporean Chinese scholar-cum-businessman who has been very active in promoting the legacy of Zheng He's voyages, founding the *International Zheng He Society*, publishing books, and organizing talks and conferences (Hong & Huang, 2009, pp. 300-301). Open since 2006 on the supposed site of the admiral's fortified depot (International Zheng He Society, n.d.), the museum conveys a message of peaceful relations, stressing the role of Zheng He's diplomatic and trading activities in the rise of the Malacca Sultanate. China is portrayed as a benign protector and source of technological know-how whose support enabled Malacca to become a vibrant and racially diverse emporium.<sup>4</sup> According to its founder, the museum should celebrate the diplomatic, cultural, and economic contribution of the voyages to Malacca and the whole region and promote “Zheng He's spirit”, understood as the legacy of peace, equality and racial harmony (Tan, 2014, p. 85). Tan Ta Sen's private initiative has been officially endorsed by China's leading representatives, including Prime Minister Li Keqiang, who deliberately visited the museum.

Although the Zheng He Cultural Museum could be viewed as a purely profit-driven enterprise promoting heritage tourism, it is important to realize that its obvious commercial potential converges with other interests of its proprietor as a member of the Chinese diaspora, for whom Zheng He has become a special figure of identification, spiritually linking overseas Chinese communities to their original homeland (Ptak & Salmon, 2005, pp. 20-21). By invoking Zheng He and his voyages they are able to reaffirm their distinct identity as members of the greater Chinese world vis-à-vis the ethnically and culturally different Malay majority. It also serves as a potent reminder of their long presence in the region and constitutive role in the

3 See its webpage at <http://www.chengho.org/museum/>. For more details about the *Zheng He Cultural Museum* and its exhibitions, see Lim (2018). For Ta Ta Sen's activities promoting Zheng He's legacy see Hrubý (in press).

4 Based on the author's visit to the site in May 2016. For the layout of the museum and its exhibitions, see also Tan (2014, p. 85-86) and the webpages of the Museum <http://www.chengho.org/museum/>.

emergence of the present-day nation-state.

It seems that the Chinese community in Malacca has become more active in promoting Zheng He, using his legend for marketing tourist attractions in this historical city (Murali, 2013). The increasing visibility of Chinese heritage has been made possible by a gradual change in the attitude of the Malaysian government. While the official narrative in the 1970s and 1980s emphasized a rather Malay-centric version of Malaysia's history (Worden, 2003), the pragmatic effort to win the goodwill of China and strengthen friendly ties with the new strategic partner has made the government more willing to grant public space to the Malaysian Chinese past (Thirumaran, 2007, pp. 202-203). Malacca is viewed as a symbol of historical ties between the two countries, through which China's protection and trade cooperation facilitated the transformation of a small Malay polity into a regional power. The Malaysian government is therefore eager to promote the Zheng He narrative, taking it as a pledge of Malaysia's new economic significance within the scope of the New Maritime Silk Road (Jiang, 2015).

Already in 2004, when Malaysia was celebrating 30 years of diplomatic relations with China, the main state museum in Malacca opened *The Cheng Ho Gallery* (*Galeri Laksamana Cheng Ho*), dedicated to the voyages and Zheng He's role in the history of the Malay-Chinese relations (Hong & Huang, 2009, pp. 302-303). The exhibition displays "the success of the voyages in fostering a brotherhood relationship between China and the African and Asian countries and opening doors for fair business" (*Galeri Laksamana Cheng Ho*, n.d.). Ever since, the Malacca museums have been active in organizing international conferences and publishing books on Zheng He (Chia & Church, 2012; Suryadinata, Kua & Koh, 2012). One of the reasons why the Malaysian government is ready to adopt this narrative seems to be that it supports the official national history discourse and corresponds to the nation-building efforts of the state. Above all, in the story of Zheng He's coming to Malacca, the legacy of Chinese influence is inseparably bound up with the perceived beginnings of the Malay nation state. In this way, the narrative of peaceful encounters between the two countries shows that the Malays and the Chinese can live side by side in mutual respect and tolerance, working hand in hand for the benefit of their common interests.

### CHINESE MOSQUES

The growing state support for Chinese heritage is also evident in several new mosques for Chinese Muslims built in the Chinese style and funded by the federal government together with Malaysian Chinese Muslim associations. The first appeared in Rantau Panjang in Kelantan and is locally known as the 'Beijing Mosque' because its architecture is reputedly modeled on an ancient mosque in Beijing ("Pagoda-like mosque all set", 2009). It was later followed by mosques in Ipoh (Kaur, 2013), Rawang, and, finally, by the Chinese Mosque in Krubong, Malacca, which opened in June 2014. Each mosque displays a unique combination of an Islamic architectural style with peculiar features of famous historical mosques in China.

The new mosques are intended to serve not only as places of worship but also as spaces where members of Chinese communities can share their distinctive culture, regardless of their religion. The religious authorities plan to organize various cultural events, such as competitions in dumpling-making, or Chinese New Year celebrations

(Beck, 2014; Zarizi, 2013), which should contribute to a better understanding of Islam among the Malaysian Chinese. In this way, the Malaysian government is trying to reach out to the Chinese community in an effort to show that Islam “does not promote hatred towards other religions” (Looit, 2009), stressing its universal appeal. Chinese-style mosques prove that even the ethnic Chinese can embrace Islam without losing their racial or cultural identity. At the same time, the mosques should provide the Malay majority with a window into a different culture with a long Islamic tradition of its own (“No harm in having”, 2007). It is hoped that the construction of Chinese-style mosques “could help to ease current racial tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims” (Looit, 2009).

While such public support of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim community has undeniable nation-building potential, the officially endorsed display of Chinese Muslim heritage simultaneously highlights the image of China as a country friendly towards Islam, sporting an ancient Islamic tradition of its own. In this way, the Malaysian government promotes awareness of the existence of the strong Muslim community living in China and helps to enhance the credibility of the PRC's public diplomacy, which seeks to advertise China as a prospective market for Islamic financial operations conducted by major Malaysian banks as well as Malaysian *halal* products (Lee & Alam, 2015).

## TRANSLATIONS OF CHINESE LITERATURE

A kind of synergy that is identical in principle, involving the local Chinese community, the Malaysian government and the PRC's cultural diplomacy, is at work in a longtime effort to make selected masterpieces of the classical Chinese novel available in Malay. The first to appear was the translation of *Water Margin* (2002), followed by *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (2011), and *Journey to the West*, which was published in 2014. The novels were translated by the *Malaysia Translation and Creative Writing Association* and published jointly with the *Language and Literature Council* (*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*), a government agency responsible for coordinating the use of the Malay language and Malay literature. It is hoped that the publication of these literary masterpieces will promote friendship between ethnic groups living in Malaysia by contributing to a better understanding of Chinese culture and values. According to a representative of the translating association, the story of the Monkey King “emphasized moral values, as well as the importance of team work and cooperation” (“Chinese classic ‘Journey to’”, 2014). At the same time, it should also help to strengthen friendly bilateral ties between Malaysia and China, because “the Chinese government would be proud that non-Chinese Malaysians have the opportunity to appreciate these literary works” (“Chinese classic ‘Journey to’”, 2014). And, indeed, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang gladly used the Malay version of the *Journey to the West* as a gift during his official visit to Malacca (“Li Keqiang visits Malacca”, 2015).

The set of the Chinese classical novels was made complete by the translation of the *Dream of the Red Mansion*, which appeared in 2017, as a result of a decade-long project of *Yayasan Karyawan* and the *Alumni Association of the Department of Chinese Studies* of the University of Malaya. Published in collaboration with *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, the book attracted a great deal of attention. On the occasion of its launch,

the Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak, declared again that the publication of the translation was a “part of efforts to strengthen the literary and cultural relations between the Malay and Chinese civilisations”, and that the novel “highlights the universal values that can be practiced by Malaysians in order to maintain a harmonious environment” (“Classic China novel now”, 2017).

## **DOMESTIC STRUCTURES INFLUENCING CHINA’S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN MALAYSIA**

Activities connected to the promotion of Chinese culture and the positive image of China described in the preceding sections show that CCD in Malaysia often works as a transnational network which is polycentric and non-hierarchical. While the PRC government might be seen as the original source of the narrative of the peaceful rise of China promising a vision of economic cooperation and development for all, it is not necessarily directly involved in these activities. Leaving aside both Confucius Institutes, other various actors, such as Xiamen University, Malaysian Chinese and non-Chinese entrepreneurs, Malaysian state agencies, and local Muslim associations, take the initiative and, pursuing their particular interests, promote the same Chinese narrative. By doing so, they contribute to the PRC’s public diplomacy goals. Yet, it is important to realize that China’s actual role in these activities might range from that of a co-organizer, to a fellow participant, a sponsor, or even a non-participating recipient of the benefits of cultural diplomacy conducted by other actors.

Observing the dynamics of China’s cultural diplomacy in Malaysia, it seems that the PRC government as well as Chinese non-state actors tend to focus on specific fields where their interests converge with the interests of the Malaysian government. Besides invoking historical ties binding Malaysian and Chinese peoples and highlighting its own Muslim heritage, Chinese activity appears to be primarily confined to the educational sector. At the same time, it seems that the PRC has so far not been overly active in the field of cultural diplomacy, prioritizing other means of public diplomacy and economic incentives. The degree of China’s involvement in cultural diplomacy, its choice of means, and the content of its message have been significantly determined by the existing domestic structures in Malaysia, the most important of which are: (a) the ‘special’ relationship between the governments of China and Malaysia under Najib; and (b) the specific position of Malaysian Chinese communities within Malaysian society and vis-à-vis the Malay majority.

Up to 2018, Razak’s government repeatedly declared that Malaysia was enjoying a “special relationship” with China (Bentley, 2018, p. 134). There are strong economic ties not only on the national level with the PRC government but also on the level of provincial governments, with several Chinese provinces vying with each other to secure the best investment opportunities under the auspices of initiatives such as the BRI (Cheng, 2013, pp. 320-332; Kuik, Li & Sien, 2017, pp. 261-263). China has been Malaysia’s largest trading partner for ten consecutive years (Rosli, 2019), and Malaysia was China’s number one business counterpart in ASEAN from 2009 to June 2018, when it was surpassed by Vietnam (“Vietnam overtakes Malaysia”, 2018). In line with that paradigm, Najib’s cabinet was keen on boosting the economic cooperation even further. There had been plans to establish high-speed train connections across the

Malay Peninsula linking Thailand (and eventually China), Malaysia, and Singapore, and deep-sea harbors to be built in Malacca, Carey Island, Kuala Linggi, and Kuantan (Ignatius, 2017). There was even a special Second Minister of International Trade and Industry, a Malaysian Chinese, whose agenda focused mainly on China-Malaysia economic cooperation ("Moving up the value", 2017).

Relations during Najib's term were equally good on the political level. There was a sense of mutual respect, support, and even admiration between the *Chinese Communist Party* and Malaysian *UMNO* (ICS researcher, 25 May 2016), which were both authoritarian regimes eager to retain their political dominance. Both parties signed an MoU, and regular visits of party members took place, as well as training in governance organized for UMNO members and government officials in China (Ngeow, 2017a, pp. 75-77). However, it was not a one-way process in which only China provided 'guidance' and 'instruction'. As a matter of fact, Chinese representatives also looked up to Malaysia for inspiration, given UMNO's former political longevity (Shambaugh, 2008, pp. 95-96).

As long as the PRC government was able to maintain the support of Malaysian ruling circles, there was not much need for China's representatives to use culture diplomacy to improve the image of the PRC. Until Najib's fall in May 2018, China had enjoyed the goodwill of the Malaysian government, which frequently intervened and defended the good name of its special economic and political partner, externally smoothing international tensions within ASEAN, and internally explaining away potentially offensive statements and behavior of China's government and its representatives in Malaysia (UKM researcher, 19 May 2016).

However, the political paradigm in Malaysia has completely changed since mid-2018 as a result of the defeat that *Barisan Nasional* suffered at the 14th general elections. In May 2018, after 63 years in power, the ruling coalition lost the elections to the *Pakatan Harapan* (*The Coalition of Hope*), led by the previous Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. It was a confluence of factors which undermined Najib's position and led to his political fall: his financial scandals, some of which were related to Chinese investments, the sale of national strategic assets to China, and his endorsement of controversial contracts assigned to Chinese companies (Malhi, 2018). The issue of China's growing influence in the country thus became a highly contentious matter during the campaign, and a key factor in the vote against Najib.

Shortly after the elections, Mahathir announced a shift in Malaysia's relations toward China, which are "not to be anti-China but more pro-Malaysia" (Ignatius, 2018). The probable implication of the announced reset of mutual relations is that the PRC will need to reassess its approach toward cultural diplomacy. In the near future, China might find it expedient to rely less on the economic hard power and instead try to step up its 'charm offensive' through more intensive use of cultural diplomacy *per se*.

Another factor representing domestic structures, which determine the PRC's cultural diplomatic activities in Malaysia, is the presence of the Chinese minority. Groups of Chinese descent today make up 22.6% of the Malaysian population (Ethnic groups of Malaysia, 2018). Many of these communities have been living in Malaysia for generations and today are perceived as an integral part of local society. Various Malaysian Chinese associations are active in organizing a range of activities propagating Chinese culture, which is therefore considered a part of the wider Malaysian



cultural heritage. As a result, any attempt to promote Chinese culture in Malaysia might either be seen as superfluous or perceived as an initiative to promote part of a well-known domestic culture, something not necessarily associated with the PRC (P. Lim, 20 May 2016). As many features of Chinese culture are familiar within the region, they seem to lack the intended appeal.

What is more important is the fact that, while the ethnic Chinese diaspora might be perceived as an ally of the PRC in promoting its culture and values, it is in fact the very existence of these communities and their standing within Malaysian society which is in a way restrictive for the possibilities of the CCD and limits its activities. In the words of Cheun Hoe Yow (2016), “Malaysia’s multicultural configuration and identity politics continue to play a crucial role in structuring the possibilities and limitations of diasporic Chinese engagements as well as those of Malaysia-China relations” (p. 837). While Beijing would certainly appreciate a more active involvement of ethnic Chinese communities in promoting the friendship between China and Malaysia (“Jia Qinglin delivers a speech”, 2013), there are tensions inherited from the past and internal political issues lurking behind the façade of the ‘special relationship’.

While a new perception of China as an important global player and crucial partner has emerged within Malaysian ruling circles over the past two decades (Kuik, 2013, p. 448), a degree of distrust of the Malay Muslim population towards the PRC still lingers. It is a legacy of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), when Beijing backed the Malayan Communist Party-led insurgency (Yao, 2016), which is why there is still a latent concern that the PRC might eventually try to tamper with the internal politics of the state (Thirumaran, 2007, pp. 195-196). In this respect, the future loyalties of the Malaysian Chinese community continue to pose an important issue, despite the fact that today a great majority of Malaysian Chinese identify themselves politically with Malaysia (Y. Chiam, 21 May, 2016). They see themselves first and foremost as citizens of Malaysia, and their allegiance belongs to their country of residence. However, culturally they tend to identify themselves to varying degrees with China (not to be confused with the PRC; Chang, 2018).

In other words, while pride in being a part of the great Chinese civilization may still loom large among the Malaysian Chinese, their political loyalty to Malaysia appears to be unquestionable, in spite of the unfair racial paradigm dominating Malaysian society. Yet, many Malaysian Chinese are supportive of China’s economic ventures and view its rise to power with certain expectations (P. Lim, 20 May 2016), which range from securing more business opportunities to hoping for China’s positive influence on the unequal position of the Chinese in Malaysia (ICS researcher, 25 May 2016). The sensitivity of this issue was illustrated by a 2015 incident caused by the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia, Huang Huikang’s involvement in the Kuala Lumpur Chinatown dispute. After learning about a planned march of Malay nationalists in protest against alleged dishonest practices of Chinese businessmen, he stated that Beijing “will not tolerate (violent) anti-Chinese demonstrations” (“The truth about China’s”, 2015). The disagreement was aggravated when Huang refused to be summoned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It clearly shows that even under Najib’s administration an inopportune statement by the Chinese ambassador could cause the displeasure of politicians as well as an outcry among the Malay public, who perceived Huang’s action as an



attempt to interfere in Malaysian internal politics and a “sign of disrespect towards Malaysia’s sovereignty” (“Chinese envoy must apologise”, 2015).

The lingering mistrust, and the fear that the Chinese minority in Malaysia may act as the proverbial fifth column (Baviera, 2011, pp. 176-177), together with wariness of ever-increasing influence of the PRC, make the Malaysian population sensitive to any display of what might be perceived as meddling. Therefore, overt support of local Chinese communities (let alone their use as possible tools of CCD) remains a sensitive issue and is possible only within certain limits.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of the development schemes envisaged within the BRI has been accompanied by heightened diplomatic activity of the PRC. Its public and cultural diplomacy offensive aims to promote an image of harmonious cooperation in an attempt to increase its soft power and allay the fears of prospective partners by emphasizing the peaceful nature of China’s recent rise. In the case of Malaysia, the situation appears to be complicated by the politically sensitive position of the wealthy Chinese minority. China has to be careful about how it engages with the Malaysian Chinese community because overstepping the mark might endanger the desired diplomatic outcomes.

For this reason, the PRC seems not to be too active on its own accord and has tended to cater to the needs of its Malaysian partners. As Malaysian ruling circles have been keen to court Chinese goodwill in order to secure economic benefits, more possibilities for the promotion of Chinese culture have opened up. We have seen that Najib’s government was ready to adopt the narrative of the inherently peaceful nature of Chinese civilization, actively promoting the vision of friendly cooperation along the Maritime Silk Road in the hope of promoting new economic incentives. This fanciful narrative also finds its place in the ongoing nation-building efforts of the Malaysian government, which is increasingly willing to grant the Malaysian Chinese population more space within Malaysian culture and the national historical discourse. Supporting cultural activities and perpetuating notions generated by the PRC’s cultural diplomacy enables state authorities in Malaysia to make an appeal for mutual understanding, harmonious coexistence, and political unity, in spite of the racial and religious rift between the Malay majority and other constituent ethnic groups.

However, the groundbreaking outcome of the 14th general election of May 9, 2018, which ended the long rule of *Barisan Nasional*, has led to a shift in Malaysia-China relations. While the new Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad does welcome intensive economic cooperation with China, he urges more caution in relation to some controversial Chinese investment projects that might jeopardize Malaysia’s sovereignty and throw the country into a debt trap. He has even warned of the danger of a new version of economic “colonialism”, in which “poor countries are unable to compete with rich countries in terms of just, open, free trade” (“Mahathir warns against new”, 2018). This implies that, in spite of Mahathir’s reassertions of continued friendly ties and high trading interconnectedness, the PRC will need to redefine some of their assertive economic plans, reducing the use of hard power tools while employing more (charming) elements of soft power.

The article has also shown that the presence of a robust Chinese community is an important factor delimiting the range of CCD in Malaysia, often influencing both its form and content. On the one hand, the Malaysian political and ethnic situation seems to limit the possibilities of China's engagement, but, on the other, it is obvious that local Chinese communities do play a significant role in promoting Chinese culture. Nonetheless, they are neither targets nor passive tools of CCD. Even though they often seem to be quite proactive in playing the role of agents of Chinese cultural promotion, the relationship is more complex, and their willingness to participate in the PRC's diplomatic effort reflects their own particular interests. Invoking the memory of Zheng He, building Chinese-style mosques, or translating Chinese literary masterpieces are activities through which these communities are able to identify themselves with Chinese civilization without compromising their political loyalties as citizens of Malaysia.

A detailed analysis of the Malaysian case reveals an intricate pattern of involvement of various actors, both Chinese and local, state, semi-state, and non-state, pursuing their own interests, which tend to converge and overlap with the aims of Chinese cultural diplomacy, forming a synergy that helps to promote a positive image of present-day China in Malaysia. And it is the engagement of local Chinese communities that makes the situation in Malaysia highly complex. To sum up, the current form of China's multifaceted cultural diplomacy in Malaysia is not only a result of what has been planned in Beijing, but also, to a great degree, a reflection of a situation that has been evolving over the past several years in the context of specific political and societal structures in Malaysia, including a 'special' government-to-government relationship and a complicated ethnic majority-minority paradigm.



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