

Identity as a Strategic Frontier

Why Malaysian Chinese Identity Matters to National Resilience

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In the post-2018 era, defined by China's rise and intensifying Sino-US trade friction, Strategic hedging has emerged as an unavoidable pillar of Malaysian foreign policy. Deputy Minister of Investment, Trade, and Industry (MITI) Liew Chin Tong has consistently emphasised the imperative of diversifying into new markets. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's 2025 signing of a Strategic Cooperation Memorandum with President Xi Jinping not only signals a deepening of bilateral ties but also underscores China's role as a critical alternative partner to the United States in strategic sectors.

Beijing is acutely aware that Malaysia views it as a vital hedging partner, just as it recognises Malaysia's pivotal geostrategic significance. The South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca serve as indispensable lifelines for China's energy imports and maritime exports. Furthermore, amid a cooling domestic economy, China increasingly views Malaysia as a key market for absorbing its industrial overcapacity.

Beyond purely commercial interests, Malaysia's unique demographic composition has historically acted as a bridge for these ties. Malaysia's unique historical trajectory has produced a substantial population of multi-generational ethnic Chinese citizens. The resulting linguistic alignment and cultural affinity grant China a distinct advantage in projecting soft power, positioning the Malaysian Chinese community as a focal point for Beijing's influence operations.

According to the ISEAS State of Southeast Asia 2024 report, when forced to choose between the US and China, a significant 75.1% of Malaysian respondents favoured China¹. However, disaggregated data from the Merdeka Center in the same year highlights a distinct disparity in the nature of this support².

¹ Seah, S. et al., 2024. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Available at: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2024-survey-report/> [Accessed 6 February 2026].

² Merdeka Center, 2024. *Survey: Almost Two-Thirds of Malaysians Hold Favourable Views of China, Malay Perception Improves Significantly*. Available at: <https://merdeka.org/survey-almost-two-thirds-of-malaysians-hold-favourable-views-of-china-malay-perception-improves-significantly/> [Accessed: 7 March 2026].

While favorability among ethnic Malays surged from 28% in 2022 to 73% in 2024 (largely as a reactive shift to US policy on the Israel-Hamas conflict), favorability among Malaysian Chinese remains the highest in the country at 97% (up from 67% in 2022) regarding the bilateral relationship. This suggests that for the Chinese community, the 'China Factor' is not merely a transient geopolitical reaction but a deepening, consolidated alignment.

This brief will first delineate the historical evolution and strategic objectives of China's United Front work. It will then analyse the specific cognitive and psychological factors that render the Malaysian Chinese community an ideal target for such efforts, and conclude with targeted policy recommendations for the Malaysian government to strengthen national resilience and governance.

From “Overseas Chinese Affairs” to the “United Front”

From a historical perspective, the involvement of overseas Chinese in mainland politics predates the Cold War, tracing back to the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, where the Nanyang diaspora provided the essential financial and organisational backbone for Sun Yat-sen's republican movement. Following the subsequent Chinese Civil War, both the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued to regard overseas Chinese as sojourners—citizens temporarily residing abroad who remained duty-bound to the 'motherland.

During this period, the "Nanyang" Chinese were viewed as a vital reservoir of financial capital, technical skills, and political legitimacy. Both the KMT and the CCP established dedicated overseas affairs commissions to manage these populations, treating them not as foreign nationals, but as an external province of the Chinese nation whose primary loyalty should remain tethered to the "ancestral home."

However, following the end of the Second World War and the subsequent global wave of decolonisation, many newly independent states gained recognised sovereignty. In Southeast Asia, this transition was fraught with tension as emerging nations sought to consolidate a singular national identity. In the case of the Federation of Malaya (later Malaysia), the state faced a unique paradox: while the domestic government was staunchly anti-communist—fighting a prolonged guerrilla war against the Malayan Communist Party (1948–1960)—it maintained a pragmatic, strategic outlook toward regional geopolitics.

This "Malaysian Realism" eventually led Malaysia to become the first ASEAN member to normalise ties with Beijing in 1974. As ASEAN's collective diplomatic posture evolved, the bloc emphasised the principle of non-interference, effectively demanding that China stop viewing ethnic Chinese citizens of ASEAN states as its own subjects.

As a result, the "sojourner" identity of overseas Chinese gradually faded. Most ethnic Chinese abroad transitioned into citizens of their respective countries of residence, often developing strong localised identities and a sense of belonging. Despite this transformation, cross-strait competition for overseas influence persisted. This rivalry has extended beyond geopolitics into a contest over the legitimacy of "Chinese orthodoxy."

Prior to Taiwan's democratic transition, both sides competed intensely over the legitimacy of "Chinese orthodoxy." This rivalry has extended beyond geopolitics into a contest over the definition of traditional culture, the ownership of popular cultural production (such as the national affiliation of pop singers and debates over traditional versus simplified Chinese characters), and the recruitment of overseas Chinese students (for instance, choices made by Malaysian Chinese students to study in Taiwan or mainland China). At stake was not merely cultural prestige, but overseas Chinese support for each regime's political legitimacy and its respective vision of national unification.

Beyond cultural soft power, mainland China developed a highly organised "United Front" strategy rooted in Soviet political practice. The United Front is not a modern invention but a strategic framework embedded in Leninist theory. Its core logic was originally straightforward: when one's own forces are weak, one should temporarily ally with all groups dissatisfied with the status quo—such as peasants or segments of the national bourgeoisie—to isolate and eliminate the principal enemy³.

³ See International Socialism, 2012. *The United Front*. Available at: <https://isj.org.uk/the-united-front/> [Accessed 4 Feb. 2026].

Under the guidance of the Comintern in the 1920s, the CCP initiated its first United Front through cooperation with the KMT. This strategy was tested during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), in which the CCP utilised the 'National United Front' to align with its primary rival, the KMT, against Japanese imperial aggression. In 1939, Mao Zedong formally defined the United Front as one of the Party's "three magic weapons" for defeating its enemies, integrating psychological warfare, organisational mobilisation, and armed struggle into a flexible political strategy of "uniting with secondary enemies to strike the primary enemy."⁴

Following the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) victory over the Kuomintang (KMT) in 1949, the United Front transitioned from a revolutionary tool for domestic seizure of power into a primary instrument of foreign policy and diplomacy. During the Cold War, it sought to construct an 'anti-imperialist front' across the Global South to challenge Western hegemony. With the advent of China's 'Reform and Opening Up' in 1978, the mechanism was strategically repurposed to attract overseas Chinese capital, technology, and managerial expertise to fuel China's economic modernisation. This period marked a shift from ideological subversion toward the pursuit of global economic and political legitimacy, a foundation that would later be centralised and expanded under the Xi administration.

Entering the era of Xi Jinping, however, this mechanism underwent a strategic shift from defensive coalition-building to proactive global engagement. The establishment in 2015 of the Central Leading Group for United Front Work—personally led by Xi—marked the elevation of United Front efforts to the highest level of direct Party command⁵.

Within China's political system, such a strategy is not administered primarily through the State Council's bureaucracy but rather operates directly under the CCP Central Committee. Under China's Party-state structure—often summarised as "the Party leads everything"—ministries and administrative agencies all maintain internal Party committees whose secretaries exercise decisive authority over political direction and major policy decisions.

⁴ Mao, Z.D., 1939. *Inaugural Message to "The Communist"*. Marxists Internet Archive. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-19391004.htm> [Accessed 7 Feb. 2026].

⁵ People's Daily, 2015. *Establishment of the Leading Group for United Front Work: The Upgrade of the "Grand United Front" Strategy*. CPC News. Available at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0731/c385474-27391395.html> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2026].

This institutional logic was fully consolidated in the 2018 governmental restructuring, when the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council was formally absorbed into the CCP's United Front Work Department. The move signified a transition from a state administrative body to one fully integrated under Party command⁶.

According to official CCP statements, the restructured United Front-led overseas Chinese affairs apparatus is responsible for:

"...unified leadership over overseas United Front work; administration of overseas Chinese affairs; formulation of policies and planning; research on overseas Chinese communities; coordination of relevant departments and social organizations; liaison with Hong Kong, Macao, and overseas associations and representative figures; guidance of overseas Chinese propaganda, cultural exchange, and Chinese-language education; and giving full play to the role of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese as a bridge linking the Party and government with returned overseas Chinese and their relatives."⁷

This Party-state consolidation clearly reflects the CCP's elevation of overseas Chinese affairs from routine administrative service to a central strategic mission of the state. The objective is to transform overseas Chinese identity into tangible support for China's global strategy. In this framework, emigrants and ethnic Chinese abroad alike constitute key targets of United Front work.

⁶ State Council of the PRC, 2023. *Notice of the State Council on Institutional Establishment (Guo Fa [2023] No. 5)*. 12371.cn. Available at: <https://www.12371.cn/2023/03/20/ART11679307540562181.shtml> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2026].

⁷ Central Committee of the CPC, 2018. *Plan for Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions*. The State Council of the People's Republic of China. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-03/21/content_5276191.htm [Accessed 6 Feb. 2026].

In 2014, two years after assuming office, Xi Jinping declared at a global overseas Chinese event:

“A united Chinese nation is the common root of Chinese sons and daughters at home and abroad; the profound and enduring Chinese culture is their shared soul; and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is their common dream... Generation after generation of overseas compatriots have upheld the fine traditions of the Chinese nation, never forgetting the motherland, their ancestral origins, or the Chinese blood flowing in their veins... They have made important contributions to the development and growth of the Chinese nation, to the great cause of peaceful national reunification, and to friendly cooperation between the Chinese people and the peoples of other countries.”⁸

In 2021, Xi further emphasised the need to:

“Accelerate the construction of a Chinese discourse and narrative system; tell China’s story well; spread China’s voice effectively; present a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China... and form an international discourse power commensurate with China’s comprehensive national strength and international status.”⁹

At another overseas Chinese event in 2023, he reiterated a similar theme, stating that:

“Overseas Chinese would become enthusiastic disseminators of Chinese culture, active promoters of exchanges and mutual learning between the culture of the Chinese nation and the cultures of other countries and regions in the world.”¹⁰

United Front objectives extend beyond building networks of local collaborators favourable to the CCP. They also include encouraging overseas Chinese communities to recognise the People’s Republic of China as the legitimate bearer of Chinese cultural orthodoxy and as the global protector of the Chinese people, thereby strengthening regime legitimacy and reducing resistance among foreign Chinese communities toward China’s controversial political or military actions.

⁸ Xinhua, 2014. *Xi Jinping: Chinese Culture is the Common Soul of Chinese Sons and Daughters at Home and Abroad*. Xinhua News. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-06/06/c_1111025922.htm [Accessed 5 Feb. 2026].

⁹ Qiushi, 2023. *Innovating International Communication and Telling China’s Story Well*. Qiushi Journal. Available at: https://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-10/01/c_1129890464.htm [Accessed 9 Feb. 2026].

¹⁰ Global Times, 2023. *Role of Overseas Chinese Stressed in Promoting Global Peace, Development*. Global Times. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1290318.shtml> [Accessed 4 Feb. 2026].

China's Influence in the Malaysian Chinese Community

Objectively speaking, every major power in the world seeks, to some degree, to project cultural influence and expand its soft power. However, China's soft power differs fundamentally from that of the United States or other global powers because it is embedded within a racialised and civilizational narrative. While the US does not call for an "Anglo-Saxon Rejuvenation," Beijing explicitly sings of the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (中华民族伟大复兴).

There are strong indications that the influence exerted on Malaysian Chinese communities is not confined to cultural exchange, business cooperation, or neutral soft power engagement. Rather, it often carries a discernible pro-Beijing political undertone. To unpack this, we must examine multiple dimensions: media ownership, overseas Chinese affairs, cultural organisations, and popular culture as channels of influence.

According to Freedom House's 2022 report "Beijing's Global Media Influence," Malaysia ranked 37th out of 85 surveyed countries and was classified as highly exposed to Chinese influence¹¹. The report noted that at the time, approximately 90% of Malaysia's Chinese-language media were controlled by tycoons with close ties to the Chinese capital. This ownership structure facilitates a pervasive mechanism of narrative shaping and self-censorship. Regarding the South China Sea, local media have been notably careful to avoid 'villainising' China, seeking to balance Beijing's position with local sentiments regarding Malaysia's territorial sovereignty.

In contrast, during the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, this editorial restraint gave way to overt alignment with Beijing; global Chinese-language disinformation campaigns heavily penetrated Malaysian diaspora media, often repeating fabrications aimed at discrediting the movement or portraying protesters as terrorists. These dynamics suggest that while media outlets may still respect local sensitivities on maritime issues, they remain highly susceptible to pressure from the Chinese embassy and local actors to suppress critical reporting on China's internal political challenges.

Another telling example emerged during President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Malaysia. On the eve of his arrival, former Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi passed away. The following day, the front page of Sin Chew Daily – under the Media Chinese International Group – sparked public controversy not only because of its incorrect depiction of the national flag, but also because the overwhelming majority of its front-page coverage was devoted to Xi's visit.

¹¹ Han, B.C. and Loh, B., 2022. Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022: Malaysia. Freedom House. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/beijings-global-media-influence/2022> [Accessed 19 February 2026].

Abdullah's death was relegated to a relatively minor placement, arguably disproportionate to the passing of a former prime minister¹². (Although the paper later explained that more detailed reporting was provided inside the newspaper, this did not alter the symbolic prominence granted to Xi on the front page.)

Beyond media, the CCP's United Front Work Department maintains structured engagement with overseas Chinese communities, including major Malaysian Chinese associations. Organisations such as the China Overseas Friendship Association and the World Conference of Overseas Chinese Associations – both linked to the United Front system or Beijing – frequently see participation from Malaysian Chinese organisations¹³.

In Malaysia, major umbrella bodies such as Huazong and ACCCIM (the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia) serve as core pillars within China's overseas United Front network. Research suggests that leaders of these associations maintain institutional alignment with the Chinese embassy and with the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (de facto the United Front Work Department)¹⁴.

Under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, these organisations have played key intermediary roles. Leveraging deep-rooted *guanxi* (关系) networks, they organise major trade forums and investment platforms that facilitate the strategic embedding of Chinese capital into key Malaysian industries. In doing so, local commercial interests become increasingly intertwined with China's geopolitical objectives.

¹² Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Malaysia, 2023. [Post regarding the Malaysian One China Peace and Unity Promotion Association]. [Facebook] 24 May. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/chinaembmyCN/posts/pfbid0fM2EtXNXWknvPAHY6w5jXVMNj9beNP2wXbD91gHZ7nddcxBNo4JAmBuNpEs4XP1v> [Accessed 11 February 2026].

¹³ Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM), 2019. *The 9th Conference of the World Overseas Chinese Associations: ACCCIM is the Only Malaysian Chinese Association Awarded "The Light of Chinese Community" Honor*. Available at: <https://accim.org.my/press-releases/%E7%AC%AC%E4%B9%9D%E5%B1%8A%E4%B8%96%E7%95%8C%E5%8D%8E%E4%BE%A8%E5%8D%8E%E4%BA%BA%E7%A4%BE%E5%9B%A2%E8%81%94%E8%B0%8A%E5%A4%A7%E4%BC%9A%E4%BC%8C-%E4%B8%AD%E6%80%BB%E5%94%AF%E4%B8%80%E9%A9%AC%E6%9D%A5/> [Accessed 13 February 2026].

¹⁴ Borges, D. and Costa, C.M., 2025. Malaysian Chinese and their influence on China-Malaysia relations: a contemporary perspective. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1671767/full> [Accessed 15 February 2026].

The last decade has seen China consolidate its position as Malaysia's most significant economic partner, maintaining its status as the nation's largest trading partner since 2009¹⁵. In 2024, trade with China reached RM484.1 billion (16.8% of total trade), consistently outpacing Singapore (RM336.2 billion) and the United States (RM324.9 billion). While the US remains a vital source of historical FDI stock, China's current investment momentum is formidable; in 2024, China was a top-three source of foreign investment at RM28.2 billion, trailing only the US (RM32.8 billion) and Germany (RM32.2 billion), while surpassing Singapore (RM27.3 billion)¹⁶.

This scale of engagement has created a deep structural interdependence, particularly within the E&E and digital sectors. This pragmatic reality naturally creates a 'softening' effect on public discourse regarding sensitive bilateral issues, as the economic cost of diplomatic friction is now significantly higher and more immediate than it was a decade ago.

During the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition movement, a small solidarity gathering was organised in Kuala Lumpur on September 29 in coordination with the global 9.29 "Stand with Hong Kong" campaign. On the very same day, six Chinese assembly halls jointly issued a statement condemning the rally, arguing that it would damage Malaysia-China relations¹⁷. The following day, Malaysian media reported a statement by the Malaysia-China Public Relations Association condemning the gathering.

Interestingly, screenshots circulated alleging that certain Chinese associations had received instructions from the Chinese embassy in Malaysia to lodge police reports and obstruct the event. The embassy neither confirmed nor denied these claims¹⁸. Regardless of formal acknowledgement, the episode illustrated the sensitivity of overseas Chinese mobilisation when it intersects with Beijing's core interests.

¹⁵ MATRADE, 2025. *Trade Performance for Year 2024 and December 2024*. Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry. Available at: <https://www.matrade.gov.my/en/about-matrade/press-release/trade-performance-for-year-2024-and-december-2024/#:~:text=In%202024%2C%20China%20continued%20to,share%20of%20Malaysia's%20total%20trade>. [Accessed: 7 March 2026].

¹⁶ MIDA, 2025. *Malaysia Records Historic High RM378.5 Billion in Investments in 2024*. Malaysian Investment Development Authority. Available at: [https://www.mida.gov.my/media-release/malaysia-records-historic-high-rm378-5-billion-in-investments-with-14-9-y-o-y-growth-generating-more-than-207000-jobs-in-2024/#:~:text=Foreign%20investor%20confidence%20in%20Malaysia,billion\)%2C%20Singapore%20\(RM27](https://www.mida.gov.my/media-release/malaysia-records-historic-high-rm378-5-billion-in-investments-with-14-9-y-o-y-growth-generating-more-than-207000-jobs-in-2024/#:~:text=Foreign%20investor%20confidence%20in%20Malaysia,billion)%2C%20Singapore%20(RM27). [Accessed: 7 March 2026].

¹⁷ *Malaysiakini*, 2019. *Anti-Hong Kong Rally Opposed: Chinese Associations Claim 929 Protest Damages Malaysia-China Ties*. 30 September. Available at: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/493868> [Accessed 16 February 2026].

¹⁸ *Malaysiakini*, 2019. *Interference in Domestic Affairs? Chinese Embassy Responds to Calls for Associations to Block 929 Rally*. 2 October. Available at: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/494199> [Accessed 16 February 2026].

The Malaysia One China Peaceful Reunification Association (大马—中和平统一促进会) represents a clearer institutional manifestation of United Front mechanisms on Malaysian soil. It maintains a close parent–subsidiary relationship with the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification, headquartered in Beijing, whose leadership includes senior Politburo Standing Committee members such as Wang Huning and United Front Work Department officials¹⁹.

The political sensitivity of this organisation has become increasingly visible. When concerns were raised over potential political interference, certain Malaysian politicians of Chinese background publicly defended the association. For instance, PKR lawmaker Tan Kar Hing argued that its activities constituted normal civil exchange rather than unlawful conduct²⁰. Such episodes – from Chinese association leaders to elected representatives – reflect the depth of China’s soft-power penetration of Malaysia’s political and business landscape. They also demonstrate how the openness of democratic systems can be leveraged to neutralise suspicion toward strategic intent.

There are numerous additional examples: the handling of Xinjiang-related issues, the instrumentalisation of China-related narratives during Malaysian elections, and academic research devoted to studying these patterns.

The question that follows is this: Why has China’s United Front strategy – whether framed as soft power or otherwise – yielded such tangible results in Malaysia?

Why Are Malaysian Chinese Susceptible to This Influence?

As discussed earlier, whether through the “Chinese Dream,” the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation,” or the promotion of “Chinese civilisation,” the CCP has consistently sought to blur the boundary between Chineseness as nationality and Chineseness as ethnicity – regardless of one’s citizenship or national allegiance.

In English usage, the word Chinese can refer to a citizen of China, and sometimes to a person of Chinese ethnicity. However, in Chinese linguistic convention, the distinction is clearer: a citizen of China is Zhongguo ren (中国人), while an ethnic Chinese person is Hua ren (华人).

¹⁹ China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR), n.d. *About Us: Introduction to the CCPPNR*. Available at: <http://www.zhongguotongcuhui.org.cn/bhjs/> [Accessed 16 February 2026].

²⁰ *Malaysiakini*, 2025. *Tan Kar Hing Defends One China Peace and Unity Promotion Association as Legal and Reasonable, Slams Rais Yatim’s Accusations*. 26 February. Available at: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/738397> [Accessed 17 February 2026].

By ordinary reasoning, a Hua ren is not necessarily a citizen of China. Malaysian Chinese hold Malaysian citizenship and owe political loyalty to Malaysia. Yet under the CCP's discursive strategy, the term Hua ren is subtly manipulated as an anchor concept – used interchangeably to refer to citizens of the People's Republic of China and to overseas ethnic Chinese communities.

Historically, the term huaqiao (华侨, overseas Chinese nationals) was used. But as overseas communities became naturalised citizens and firmly rooted in their adopted countries, that label lost relevance. The replacement term “overseas Chinese” (海外华人) appears more neutral – yet these communities are not “overseas Chinese citizens,” nor do they bear legal obligations to the PRC. Consequently, broader civilizational constructs such as the “Chinese Nation” (中华民族) or even “Huaxia Nation” (华夏民族) are invoked.

The common thread is the reshaping of cultural identity, yet the CCP's success remains uneven across the community's internal linguistic divides. In contrast to the Chinese-educated community, the English-educated urban class often exhibits greater resistance; their media consumption is more diverse, and their political values—frequently rooted in liberal democratic norms—diverge sharply from Beijing's authoritarian model, highlighting a significant intra-ethnic fragmentation in susceptibility.

This strategy is reinforced by a subtle semantic displacement of the word “Motherland” (祖国). In 2022, Koo Yuen Kim – the controversial president of the Malaysian Association for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China – stated after listening to General Secretary Xi Jinping's address at the National People's Congress:

"As overseas Chinese, I am thrilled and deeply moved. A prosperous Motherland and the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation are the shared aspirations of all sons and daughters of China. We will continue to strive with confidence and strength... for the comprehensive promotion of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation."²¹

This rhetoric reveals the direction of influence. It “borrows” vocabulary familiar to Chinese Malaysians to quietly reconstruct their cognition. When “Motherland” is displaced from the land of one's birth to the land of one's ancestors, “Chinese-ness” is easily manipulated into “China-ness,” shifting a citizen's national sentiment toward a foreign political agenda.

²¹ Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the People's Government of Guangdong Province, 2022. *Leveraging the Role of Overseas Chinese Enterprises as Bridges and Bonds to Promote Chinese Culture to Better Reach the World*. Available at: http://www.gd.gov.cn/ztl/xy20d/qjry/content/post_1025902.html [Accessed 20 February 2026].

This pattern is not limited to association leaders.

In 2018, Malaysian singer Priscilla Abby (蔡恩雨), during a recording session at China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing, said she was moved to tears by the flag-raising ceremony at Tiananmen Square. In her remarks, she referred to China as “Motherland” and described her visit as “coming home.”²² The comments later sparked controversy within Malaysian Chinese society, after which she issued a public apology on Facebook, stating that she had used inappropriate wording.

It must first be clarified that Malaysian Chinese, as a community, have not abandoned their Malaysian national identity due to CCP propaganda. Even scholars who are generally sympathetic toward China acknowledge this point²³. However, we must also acknowledge another reality. Malaysian Chinese face a unique domestic political environment in which their ethnic identity – both politically and culturally – has long been contested and subjected to tension.

If China represents an external pull factor, then the domestic predicament of Malaysian Chinese functions as an internal push factor.

The evolution of Malaysian Chinese identity has been a difficult negotiation within the fissures of Malaysia’s ethnic structure. Compared with Chinese in China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, Malaysian Chinese encountered formal democracy and parliamentary politics earlier. From independence in 1957, they participated in a multiparty democratic experiment.

Yet this “early democracy” did not translate into enhanced ethnic standing. On the contrary, because Chinese subjectivity was consistently treated as non-mainstream – if not exclusionary – within national identity formation, the community experienced prolonged institutional marginalisation. This pressure peaked after the May 13 Incident in 1969 and was followed by the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which imposed structural constraints on political representation, economic quotas, and cultural voice.

²² *The News Lens*, 2018. *Controversy Over Calling China “Motherland”: Malaysian Singer Priscilla Abby States, “I am Malaysian, and I have always loved Malaysia”*. 21 August. Available at: <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/102243> [Accessed 20 February 2026].

²³ *ThinkChina*, 2021. *Chinese in Malaysia: Proud of China’s Rise, Yet Fiercely Malaysian*. 29 September. Available at: <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/chinese-malaysia-proud-chinas-rise-yet-fiercely-malaysian> [Accessed 22 February 2026].

Behind the NEP stood the 1971 National Culture Policy, which formally established Malay-Islamic culture as the core national identity²⁴. Chinese and Indian cultures were categorised as secondary elements, admissible only under “appropriate” circumstances. Institutionally, this framework positioned the Chinese community as a cultural “other,” reinforcing long-term structural disadvantage.

Without systematic access to national-level resources, local Chinese culture has faced persistent barriers in expanding and deepening its development.

- i. The Mahua literature (Malaysian Chinese literature) has long been excluded from the official definition of “National Literature” (Sastra Kebangsaan) and instead classified merely as “ethnic literature” (Sastra Sukuan)²⁵. As a result, outstanding Mahua writers are ineligible for national literary awards and lack access to state-supported translation programs, limiting their integration into the national narrative.
- ii. Locally produced Mandarin-language films often face mandatory Malay subtitle requirements, limited screening allocations, and disadvantages in applying for funding from the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) due to language barriers²⁶. Directors such as Tsai Ming-liang and Chong Keat Aun have frequently had to rely on external platforms and foreign support to sustain their creative work.
- iii. The recent political backlash following the listing of Bak Kut Teh as part of Malaysia’s national heritage highlights the religious and ethnic resistance faced by non-halal cultural elements attempting to enter official recognition²⁷.
- iv. Chinese vernacular schools have long faced funding constraints and teacher shortages. Despite their recognised constitutional status, they remain a recurring target in political rhetoric advocating their closure or assimilation into a monolingual national framework.

²⁴ Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia, n.d. *Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (National Cultural Policy)*. Available at: <https://www.komunikasi.gov.my/65-bahankpkk/dokumen/538-dasar-kebudayaan-kebangsaan> [Accessed 22 February 2026].

²⁵ *ArtsEquator*, 2019. *The Problem with Literature in New Malaysia*. 24 July. Available at: <https://artsequator.com/masalah-sastera-en/> [Accessed 22 February 2026].

²⁶ Kang, H. and Ang, L. H., 2021. “The History and Development of Chinese-Language Films in Malaysia,” *Psychology and Education*. doi: 10.17762/PAE.V57I8.1015.

²⁷ *The Straits Times*, 2024. *Malaysia’s decision to gazette bak kut teh as heritage dish stirs debate*. 29 February. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-s-decision-to-gazette-bak-kut-teh-as-heritage-dish-stirs-debate> [Accessed 22 February 2026].

The irony is that these four examples – literature, film, food, and language – are precisely manifestations of Malaysian Chinese having taken root in Malaysia. They may not conform to the cultural norms of the majority population, but they undeniably narrate Malaysian landscapes, sensibilities, and diversity. Substantively, they have evolved into something distinct from the larger Sinophone centres of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Yet Malaysia's unique political constraints have placed the community in an impasse. There is an aspiration to further develop a Malaysian Chinese cultural sphere comparable in vitality to other Sinophone regions. However, limited resources, restricted market space, and regulatory constraints make such ambition difficult to realise – while cultural abandonment is equally unthinkable. The result is a condition of stagnation: too embedded to withdraw, yet too constrained to flourish.

This prolonged experience of frustration, coupled with a sense of second-class citizenship, has shaped a complex psychological condition. On one hand, Malaysian Chinese remain committed to pursuing civic equality through democratic means, as demonstrated by their participation in the historic 2018 electoral transition. On the other hand, they may become susceptible to compensatory identification with external powers.

When Hong Kong's protests descended into turbulence, and Taiwan's democracy appeared accompanied by social polarisation, China's projection of strength – its narrative of national resurgence and centralised efficiency – filled a psychological vacuum. For a minority community long accustomed to structural constraint, the imagery of a powerful civilizational state can function as symbolic reassurance.

In the realm of soft power, China's entertainment industry offers modern pop culture spectacles: large-scale music productions, mobile gaming, variety shows, rap, stand-up comedy, and an ecosystem of short-form video content saturated with visual excess and consumer diversity – from food trends to fashion aesthetics, from Haidilao to Daguolucai (Big Pot Braised Dishes).

It presents a world of scale and vibrancy that local Malaysian Chinese culture simply cannot match. (To be fair, Malaysia's broader cultural environment operates under significant structural restrictions that limit creative expansion across communities.) This contradictory psychology – locally frustrated yet externally projecting – forms the fertile ground upon which United Front influence in Malaysia continues to operate.

Recommendation: National Unity and Strategic Resilience

I. Exercise Prudence Toward Cultural Exchange Platforms

Cultural exchange should not be equated with political neutrality. While people-to-people engagement with China is both inevitable and beneficial in many areas – including trade, education, and tourism – the government should exercise greater scrutiny toward organisations, forums, and exchange delegations that maintain institutional links with foreign political structures, particularly those associated with United Front networks.

Transparency mechanisms – such as mandatory disclosure of funding sources, institutional affiliations, and formal partnerships with foreign state-linked bodies – would not restrict cultural interaction, but would strengthen public trust. The objective is not to sever engagement, but to ensure that cultural diplomacy does not become a vehicle for political alignment without public awareness.

II. Consider Foreign Influence Transparency Legislation

Malaysia may study legislative models such as Singapore’s Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA), adapted to local constitutional realities. However, to avoid the criticisms levelled at FICA for its potential to stifle domestic dissent, any Malaysian equivalent must be built on robust parliamentary oversight and independent judicial review. The objective is not to grant the executive branch unchecked power, but to create a transparent framework that protects NGOs and activists from covert foreign interference while ensuring the law itself cannot be weaponised against legitimate domestic political activity.

III. Strengthen Civic Nation-Building and Cultural Citizenship

Political philosopher Will Kymlicka argues that liberal democracies remain stable not by erasing minority identities, but by institutionalising “cultural citizenship” – recognising minority cultures as legitimate components of the national framework. When minority communities are granted meaningful cultural recognition and fair institutional access, they are more likely to internalise the state as their own.

For Malaysia, this means affirming that Malaysian Chinese cultural production – in literature, cinema, language, and heritage – is not peripheral, but constitutive of the national story. Expanding equitable access to cultural funding, acknowledging multilingual realities, and strengthening democratic participation would reduce the structural frustrations that external narratives seek to exploit.

Conclusion


At the level of national security, Malaysia must approach China and the United States with strategic clarity rather than by drawing false equivalences. The two powers occupy structurally different positions within the international order in which Malaysia has historically operated.

Since independence, Malaysia has developed into a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy. The international institutional architecture that Malaysia joined after nationhood – whether in peacekeeping, dispute resolution, or global trade – was largely shaped by the post–World War II order led by the United States and its Western allies. China, by contrast, only assumed its seat at the United Nations in 1971 and experienced accelerated growth after joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001, largely through its integration into the global manufacturing system.

Today, China’s strategic expansion is increasingly visible. Its development of a blue-water navy, the Belt and Road Initiative launched in the 2010s, and its role in expanding platforms such as BRICS, alongside Russia and other states, all aim to broaden its global influence and, in some cases, reduce dependence on dollar-centred systems. However, China’s emerging vision of international order does not fully articulate frameworks comparable to existing global norms concerning human rights, sovereign equality, and rule-based dispute settlement.

Maintaining constructive relations with China remains essential for Malaysia’s economic and regional stability. Yet strategic engagement must not obscure security realities. China’s military posture in the Taiwan Strait and its expansive claims and activities in the South China Sea introduce geopolitical pressures that directly intersect with Malaysia’s maritime interests and territorial integrity.

Conversely, Malaysia continues to rely – albeit cautiously – on security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and broader strategic balancing mechanisms involving the United States to prevent escalation in the South China Sea. The objective, therefore, is neither alignment nor hostility, but calibrated realism.

National resilience requires understanding that engagement with great powers must be differentiated rather than symmetrical – grounded in Malaysia’s constitutional foundations, strategic geography, and long-term sovereignty. 

Liang Hong's interests lie in political philosophy, geopolitics, and civic education. His work explores Malaysian society, politics, and public sentiment and extends to civic diplomacy initiatives that link civic societies across Ukraine, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. He also creates YouTube content and draws on his background in political communication to make complex issues accessible to wider audiences.

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