

China's Country Image and Bilateral Relations in Malaysia: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and productivity are accelerating exchanges and cooperation across countries around the world. After World War II, countries have recognized that a positive country image and branding contribute to national development and international cooperation. Despite changes in leadership, China and Malaysia have maintained close and friendly connections since the start of bilateral relations in May 1974. Their diplomatic ties reached their 50th anniversary in 2024. The study aims to review studies exploring China country image and Sino-Malaysia relations. Previous scholars have explored bilateral relations and China's partial image in Malaysia. Particularly, studies on specific events or field have explored some perceptions on China. However, there is no coherent systematic review of China's image and Sino-Malaysia relations. Therefore, this study conducts a review and analysis of literature from 2013 to 2024, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA2020) method. The data sources include three databases: Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The results indicate that five key themes from 14 studies are a) Political and diplomatic relations, b) Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), c) MH370 disappearance, d) Educational and cultural exchanges and e) General perception on China. In relation to orientations of China's image and Sino-Malaysia relations are most neutral, followed by positive, with no negative. Future research should further explore China's country image and bilateral relations in different regions and contexts.

Keywords: *China country image, Sino-Malaysia relations, belt and road initiative, MH370 disappearance, educational and cultural exchanges.*

INTRODUCTION

In times of globalization and digitization, individuals can conveniently learn about the news events happening around the world. Maintaining a positive image is important not only for individuals and companies but also for countries (Müller et al., 2024). Country image is becoming increasingly important in international relationships (Zhao et al., 2022), it can be viewed as an successful approach for improving national soft power (Ju et al., 2023). The world has many uncertainties and challenges, such as epidemics, wars, climate issues, cultural hegemony, governments realized the importance of a better country image (Jin et al., 2025). In relation to the composition of country image, It encompasses domestic as well as foreign images (Zhu et al., 2022), and media play a crucial role in moulding people's views on a country (Wu et al., 2022). Therefore, Country image has been an essential construction in the fields of the global communication and diplomatic relations.

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China and Malaysia launched formal diplomatic ties in May 1974. In 1974, Malaysia became the first ASEAN country to establish diplomatic ties with China (Bing, 2015). In 2004, the heads of state of the two nations agreed to strengthen China-Malaysia strategic partnership. In 2013, the two countries established a comprehensive strategic partnership. With the implementation of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has become the largest trade partner of Malaysia. In the year 2023, the two countries declared the formation of a China-Malaysia community of shared future (Chinese Foreign Ministry). 2024 recognized the 50th anniversary of the beginning of diplomatic connections between China and Malaysia. Besides, their relations were strengthened with two-way visits by high-ranking officials, trade missions (Koh & Yeoh, 2025) and also closed cultural exchanges (Wang, 2024).

In communication and international relations studies, country image and diplomatic relations are popular research topics. However, most studies on China's country image and foreign relations emphasizes China and Western countries, particularly the United States. There are fewer studies on China-Malaysia relations. In addition, many studies of China-Malaysia relations focus on specific events or certain aspects of China, that means they provide a partial China image and Sino-Malaysia ties. As a result, the research area lack of systematic literature review on China's country image and its relations with Malaysia.

This study seeks to close this gap by reviewing research on China's country image and Sino-Malaysia relations. There are two basic research questions: a) what are the key themes in studies on China's country image and Sino-Malaysia relations? b) what are the orientations toward China's image and its relations with Malaysia (positive, neutral, or negative)? The study uses the PRISMA method to conduct a systematic thematic analysis of literature from 2013 to 2024. China and Malaysia established a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2013, which marks a new chapter for two countries. By addressing this research gap, the study summarizes key topics from the past 12 years, helps scholars understand current research trends, and provides guidance for future studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Country Image

Since the 1950s, scholars have studied the country (national) image from different research perspectives and areas (Zhu et al., 2022). Simon Anholt (1998), is often considered as the founder of national image studies, initially focused on a country's products and services. Due to the intersection of various disciplines, the later study of national image began to involve social, cultural, political, diplomatic and other elements. Currently, the research topics of national image mainly appear in the fields of international journalism, international diplomacy (Tang, 2021) and cross-cultural communication.

Additionally, a country's image represents its reputation and status on the world stage (Wang, 2024). As a result, most countries are increasingly concerned about protecting their reputations and fostering cross-cultural interactions (Zhao et al., 2022). Chen et al. (2020) define a country's image involves the public's opinion and assessment on a nation's politics, society, and culture. In addition, due to the limitation of time and space, foreigners' perception of a country's image relies largely on media communication (Yu et al., 2024). As in turns out, the media has a significant role in building and disseminating this image. Meanwhile, since mainstream media and media framing have a strong influence on shaping national image, news coverage from mainstream media are often used as research materials for country image (Jin et al., 2025). In media coverage, news frames can help

shape a nation's image by highlighting and avoiding certain content (An et al., 2023). An important research topic has always been the association between the media, especially the mass media, and the image of the country (Zhu et al., 2022). International news communicating is essential to conveying the national picture since national image encompasses not only a country's view of itself but also that of the international community (Yang & Wang, 2023).

In various research fields like marketing, sociology, communication studies, and political science, the concepts of country image are related to others constructs, such as country reputation, national branding, and identity (Ingenhoff et al., 2018). According to Fan (2006) and Hao et al. (2019), the terms "nation" and "country" are often used interchangeably in the literature, although they are different. This fundamental distinction is crucial for understanding the concepts of image and branding. Nation branding involves using branding and marketing communication strategies to enhance a country's image (Fan, 2006). Thus, nation branding is a strategic process that aims to shape and manage a country's image. Moreover, national branding uses a country's image, products, and overall attractiveness to promote its identity and appeal to both tourists and foreign investors (Tijani et al., 2024). These show that while nation branding and country image are mutually reinforcing, they are studied in different fields and with different research focuses. Country image is variable, particularly if mega-events happen, such as the Olympic Games, war, and major crises. (Chen et al., 2020). For example, the reaction of a country towards significant events, such as the fight against the Covid-19 outbreak, may impact its reputation and perception globally (Tan et al., 2024). In other areas, a great country image can promote the country's international tourism and build a better brand for foreigners (Terasaki et al., 2024).

b. China Country (National) Image

China places great importance on cross-cultural communication and the promotion of a positive country image. The study of China's national image has always been a popular research hotspot for international relations scholars in communication studies at home and abroad. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the earliest studies on China's country image is to explore how American media portray China (Liss, 2003; Peng, 2004; Chen et al., 2020). Due to the special world pattern, the western media (especially the American media) always paid more attention to China's national image (Zheng et al., 2024). China's country image in some western countries' media has been slightly poor (Huan, 2024; Sun, 2024), influenced by ideological bias, but there have been positive changes over the last 10 years (Tang, 2021). Compared to mainstream international media, international English social media shows a more neutral and diverse image of China. Meanwhile, scholars also focus on other themes, such as Confucius Institutes (Zhu et al., 2022), and the image of China reported by mainstream media in other countries (Huan & Deng, 2021). Confucius Institutes, international media, and the Belt and Road Initiative all contribute to the reputation of China as a nation that encourages cooperation and peace (Karim & Rong, 2025). In addition, research on China's national image is often indirectly included in case studies of specific events, such as the SARS outbreak (Tang, 2021), Beijing Olympic Games (Kuang, 2024; Xie, 2024), COVID-19 pandemic (Zhang & Trifiro, 2022; Klenk & Gurol, 2024).

c. Bilateral Relations of China and Malaysia

The bilateral relations between China and other countries have been extensively studied by many scholars, such as the relations between China and ASEAN, Malaysia, South Africa, and other countries (Wang & Tao, 2024; Shoba & Mlambo, 2024; Md Nasrudin et al., 2018). Some scholars have already concluded that the stability of bilateral relations has an impact on the trust, dialogue, and economic interests between the two countries (Song et al., 2020). Malaysia and China developed official diplomatic connections on May 31, 1974 and have maintained a close and friendly relationship for 50 years (Wu et al., 2022; Wang, 2024; Koh & Yeoh, 2025). Research on China-Malaysia relations has been a key focus for scholars from both countries, includes the Belt and Road Initiative (Muhamad Azwan, 2022; Dar & Seng, 2022; Wang et al., 2023), Political and diplomatic relations (Bing, 2015; Fong & Chia, 2017), and Educational exchanges (Nan et al., 2019) and other topics. In addition, crisis events such as the MH370 incident (Fong, 2019) have also attracted attention.

After 10 years of the Belt and Road Initiative's beginning, Muhamad Azwan (2022) explored how cooperation should continue in the following decade and proposed solutions for improving collaboration models. Since 2020, educational exchanges of China-Malaysia have become closer, with more Chinese students choosing Malaysia for their postgraduate (Koh & Yeoh, 2025). Despite the MH370 tragedy in 2014, the overall relationship between the two countries was not significantly affected (Fong, 2019; Chia et al., 2016); Regarding China-Malaysia relations and Malaysia's overall view of China, Yeoh (2019) argues that China's rise is a complex issue that should be examined from multiple perspectives. Wang and Liang (2024) found that the Malaysian media mainly presents a positive and neutral portrayal of China's modernization, which is conducive to national exchanges between the two countries. In summary, most research on China-Malaysia relations analyzes specific events or focuses on a single area. However, systematic reviews of previous research in this area are few. This study attempts to provide a comprehensive and systematic literature review to offer deeper insights into China-Malaysia relations.

Methodologically, research on Malaysia-China relations and China's country image in Malaysia mostly rely on qualitative content analysis. These studies usually examine how media outlets in both countries frame diplomatic relations and specific events, such as key political visits or the MH370 incident (Chia et al., 2016; Fong & Chia, 2017; Fong & Ponnann, 2019). The field also uses a range of other qualitative techniques. Bing (2015) used historical analysis to trace the development of defense relations. Additionally, Yeoh (2019) used interviews method to explore the public perception of Malaysians on China. While less common, other methods are also emerging. For instance, Wu et al. (2022) uniquely applies sentiment analysis to quantify the emotional tone of news coverage. This methodological diversity highlights how different research approaches complement each other to provide a more holistic understanding of this complex relationship.

The current literature provides a descriptive overview of specific issues in China-Malaysia relations, but it lacks deep analytical synthesis. A primary limitation is the limited integration of structural factors like media systems, diplomatic strategies, and domestic politics with the specific newsroom practices. This makes it difficult to fully explain why media frames differ across various outlets and time periods. Consequently, a significant gap remains in understanding the deeper drivers of these narratives. This gap motivates the need for a more systematic and comparative approach in future research.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs the PRISMA method (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). According to the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), research defined research questions and conducted a database search covered last 12 year (2013-2024). Meanwhile, after screened with criteria of inclusion and exclusion, 14 studies were selected for the systematic literature review. This study systematically reviews and analyzes studies on China's country image and China-Malaysia ties using the PRISMA approach and thematic analysis. The following is a detailed explanation of data collection and analysis.

a. Strategic Searching Systematically

This study gathered data (articles) from Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar covering 2013 to 2024, with the search completed in February 2025. Following PRISMA guidelines, the data collection process included three stages: identification, screening, and eligibility. There are two research questions: a) What are the key themes in studies on China's country image and Sino-Malaysia relations? b) What are the orientations toward China's image and its relations with Malaysia? The search strings were developed based on the research questions (Table 1). The same terms are utilized, but the search strategies are modified to be more Google Scholar appropriate. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the search, the search strings were pilot-tested and refined across all three databases.

Table 1: The search strings employed in the systematic review searching

Databases	Strings
Web of Science	((TS= ("China" OR "China image" OR "China country image" OR "China media image" OR "China brand" OR "China national image")) AND TS= ("Malaysia" OR "Malaysia media" OR "Malaysia Chinese media")) AND TS= ("China and Malaysia" OR "Malaysia and China" OR "bilateral relations of China and Malaysia" OR "bilateral ties of China and Malaysia")
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("China" OR "China image" OR "China media image" OR "China country image" OR "China brand" OR "China national image" AND "Malaysia" OR "Malaysia media" OR "Malaysia Chinese media" AND "China and Malaysia" OR "Malaysia and China" OR "bilateral relations of China and Malaysia" OR "bilateral ties of China and Malaysia")
Google Scholar	The same terms are utilized, but the search strategies are modified to be more Google Scholar appropriate.

Note: Search finished on 11, Feb.2025

In the first step of identified relevant studies, 1,012 related articles were searched. The researcher then applied strict screening criteria, including literature type, language, timeline, countries, and subject area, as shown in Table 2. Specifically, the primary data selected are peer-reviewed journal articles, as they offer reliable and methodologically sound information, which is very crucial for a systematic evaluation (Kho & Zawawi, 2023). Additionally, this study focuses on the period from 2013 to 2024, so older articles were excluded. Articles from non-English and non-Malaysia countries were considered unsuitable.

Studies on China-Malaysia relations involving multiple disciplines, such as economics, law, geography, and other very unrelated subjects, will be excluded.

Table 2: The criteria of inclusion and exclusion

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Literature type	Journal (Peer-reviewed journal articles)	Journals (systematic review), book series, book, chapter in book, conference proceeding
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2013-2024	<2013 and >2025
Countries	Malaysia	Non-Malaysia
Subject area	Social Science, Psychology, Art & Humanities, Communication, Area Studies, and International relations	Other than Social Science, Psychology, Art & Humanities, Communication, Area Studies, and International relations

The intention of this study is to conduct a thorough review of studies on China's country image and Sino-Malaysia ties. Following the PRISMA guidelines, data collection was conducted in three stages: identification, screening, and eligibility (Figure 1). After the eligibility, 88 articles were selected by inclusion and exclusion criteria. However, this does not mean all 88 articles were eligible. After the initial screening, the 88 eligible articles were assessed for quality using a standardized checklist. This evaluation focused on the methodological rigor, clarity of research questions, and consistency of conclusions.

To minimize bias, a second reviewer independently screened the 88 articles. The Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT) developed by Hong et al. (2018) served as a guide to ensure the quality of the articles selected. Articles that did not meet a minimum quality threshold were excluded. The main reasons for exclusion were irrelevant and low quality. For instance, some articles' focus is not on Sino-Malaysia relations, and some articles lack a clear methodology or sufficient analysis. Finally, 14 articles were found to be fully suitable for this systematic review.

b. Data Analysis

Through data collection, 14 articles were identified as high-quality and relevant to this study. The two main research concerns under this study are the themes and orientations in research on China's national image and China-Malaysia ties. This serves as a guide for researcher concentrate on collecting relevant information. Thus, relevant data from the 14 selected articles were systematically extracted into a table. The extracted information included authors, publication year, methodology, key findings, and the specific themes related to China's image or China-Malaysia ties.

At first, researcher read and analyzed the titles, abstracts, results, and discussions to fully understand the main research topics. To clarify the findings clearly, important information was placed into a table. In data analysis, this study used qualitative synthesis with thematic analysis to specify topics involved China and its bilateral ties with Malaysia. Thematic analysis is beneficial because it thoroughly considers many viewpoints and contrasts data similarities and discrepancies (Kho & Zawawi, 2023). Thematic analysis was conducted in six phases following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, grouping codes into themes,

reviewing themes, and finally defining and naming the five key themes identified in the literature. Finally, by analysing and categorizing the themes of these studies, five key themes and these orientations were identified.

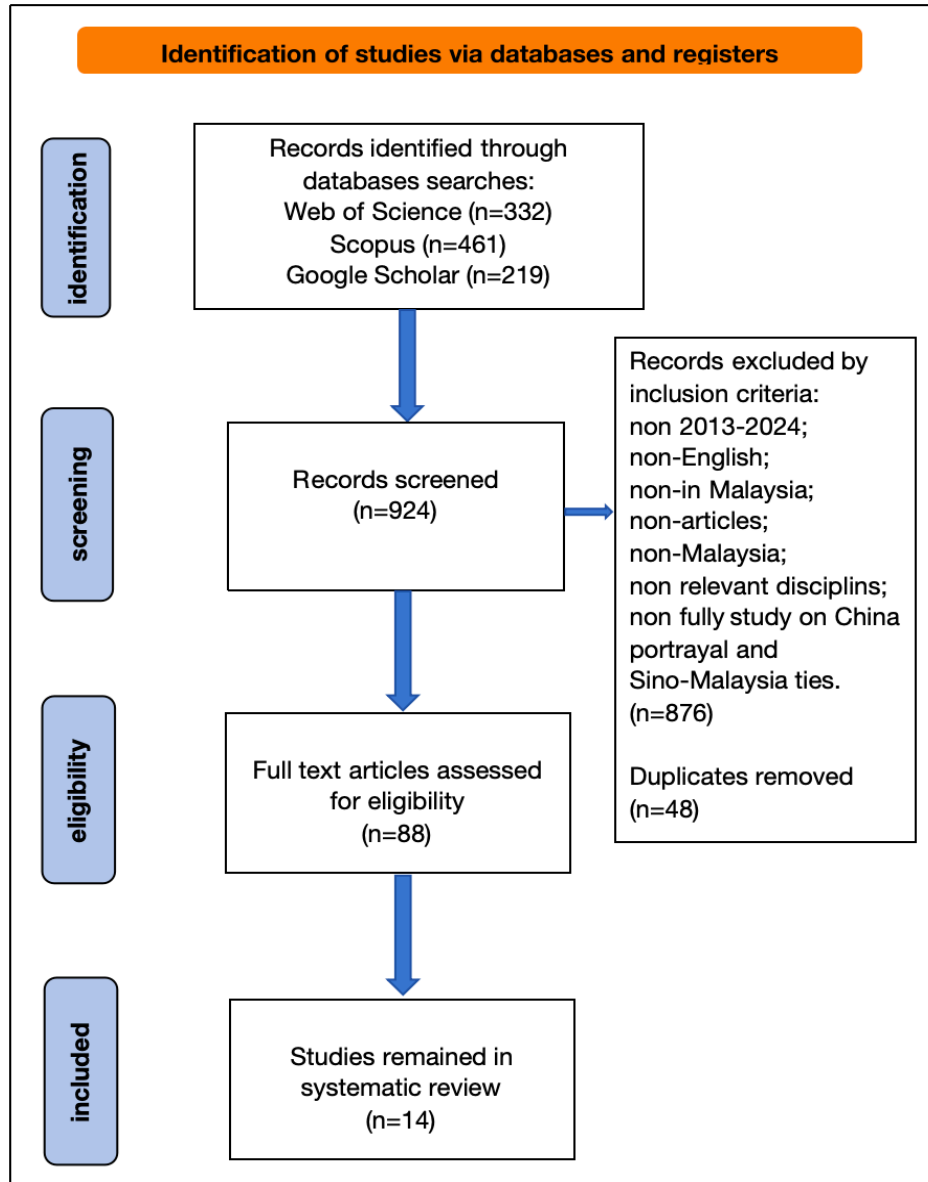


Figure 1: The flow diagram for the study (PRISMA 2020)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study produced the key themes and orientations related to China country image and Sino-Malaysia relations. Data from the 14 selected articles were analysed using thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the literature. The process involved a systematic, iterative approach. First, key concepts and findings from each article were coded. These codes were then grouped into potential themes based on their common features. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were distinct from one another.

There are five key themes, namely a) Political and diplomatic relations, b) Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), c) MH370 disappearance, d) Educational and cultural exchanges and e) General perception in China. In relation to orientations of China's country image and Sino-Malaysia relations are most neutral, followed by positive, and no negative. In addition, the researcher reviewed the main study findings of 14 articles to better understand the research issues. Table 3 provides details of the analysis.

Table 3: Literature review overview matrix, themes, and orientations.

Authors	Titles	Main findings	Themes	Orientations
Bing (2015)	Comprehensive strategic partners but prosaic military ties: the development of Malaysia–China defence relations 1991–2015.	Sino-Malaysia defence ties have not developed quickly, but engaging with one another friendly.	Political and diplomatic relations: Defence ties	Neutral
Chia et al. (2016)	Framing diplomatic relations: A comparative analysis of Malaysian and Chinese newspapers coverage of Najib's visit to China	Positive tone towards bilateral relations but using different frames.	Political and diplomatic relations: State visit	Positive
Fong & Chia (2017)	Framing Diplomatic Relations: A comparative analysis of Malaysian and Chinese newspaper coverage on Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Malaysia	Both Malaysian and Chinese newspapers were mostly neutral in news report, and they both most used economics and trade frame.	Political and diplomatic relations: State visit	Neutral
Nan et al. (2019)	Malaysian Perspective on Malaysia-China Relations and the Bilateral Educational Exchanges between Malaysia and China	It is believed that the educational exchange between Malaysia and China has become better and more significant.	Educational and cultural exchanges	Positive
Fong & Ponnann (2019)	Framing the bilateral relations between Malaysia and China: The news coverage of flight MH370	The study identified two dominant frames: "search and rescue operations" and "friendship, connection, and understanding", which shift public focus from blaming responsibility to joint efforts in handling the crisis.	MH370 disappearance	Positive

Yeoh (2019).	Malaysia: Perception of contemporary China and its economic, political and societal determinants	The China picture from Malaysia official public statements or mass media is positive, but Malaysian perception of China should be analysed from multiple perspectives.	General Perception on China	Neutral
Dar & Seng (2021).	The road and belt initiative in Malaysia: Challenges and recommendations	BRI has brought economic opportunities in Malaysia, but there are challenges and policy adjustments are needed to optimize the cooperation model.	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	Neutral
Muhamad Azwan (2022)	China's Belt and Road Initiative Progress towards Malaysia's Development: Where Are We Heading after the First Decade?	BRI promotes economic cooperation between China and Malaysia, but there are still challenges at the geopolitical and strategic level.	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	Neutral
Wu et al. (2022)	Sentiment Analysis of China-Related News in The Star Online Newspaper	There were some negative news stories, but which was driven by global events, not direct bias against China, and positive sentiment on China increased over time.	General Perception on China	Neutral
Chaoqun et al. (2023)	China-Malaysia Relations and The Belt and Road Initiative	China and Malaysia have created an innovative model of bilateral cooperation and have achieved fruitful results.	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	Positive
Yu (2023)	Research on the brand image of "study in China" in the new era of overseas Chinese newspapers and periodicals: a case study of Sin Chew daily in Malaysia	"Study in China" is seen as a bright and promising opportunity for Malaysian Chinese community	Educational and cultural exchanges	Positive

Koh & Yeoh (2025)	Post-2020 mainland Chinese student mobility to Malaysia: Trends and drivers	Three main trends: Malaysia are new destinations for education migration; Study in Malaysia is an affordable means; Xiamen University Malaysia provides a unique experiment in educational exchanges	Educational and cultural exchanges	Positive
Wang (2024)	From China to Malaysia: Understanding the Cultural and Economic Dynamics of Imported Chinese Films	Some films have good box-office, and these products can be seen as economic value and a cultural exchange.	Educational and cultural exchanges	Neutral
Wang et al. (2024)	Reciprocity and negotiation: exploring the portrayal of the Chinese entertainment world in Malaysian news media coverage	The study highlights a framework of reciprocity and negotiation, where the media acknowledges China's cultural influence while seeking balance in discussing regulatory and ideological differences	Educational and cultural exchanges	Neutral

a. Political and Diplomatic Relations

China-Malaysia bilateral relations in defence diplomacy and high-level visits shows a complex and dynamic pattern. Political and diplomatic relations include two themes of China-Malaysia bilateral defence diplomacy (1 article) and the state visits (2 articles). Bing (2015) pointed out that although China-Malaysia defence and military relations have not developed as rapidly as other bilateral ties, such as economic and political relations, they have friendly and close interaction. The article examined a range of defence relations engagements, including as joint military exercises, defence and security consultations, arms sales, military student exchanges, and senior official visits. Although defence cooperation has developed more slowly than economic and political ties, their interactions reflect a gradual build-up of strategic trust. However, these interactions for economic, diplomacy and defence cooperation indicate that they remain cautious on sensitive national security issues.

The two articles on state visits focused on Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Malaysia and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib's visit to China. Regarding Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit, both Malaysian and Chinese newspapers found that economic and trade issues were the most used frames of media coverage. Additionally, the study presented that both countries' media mainly employed a neutral tone (Fong & Chia, 2017). The findings on Prime Minister Najib's visit to China revealed that the state visit was generally depicted in a favourable way for bilateral ties. There was difference in news frame with Malaysian newspapers emphasized the economic consequences frame, while Chinese newspapers focused on the responsibility frame (Chia & Fong, 2016). Media narratives are usually in line with their own national conditions and social environment media context, so different

countries' media coverage focuses will be different. Moreover, these distinctions indicate that media narratives influence public perception and could shape future diplomatic relations between the two countries. In media coverage of high-level visits, the differences in narratives between Chinese and Malaysian media are clear. These articles reflect a deeper divergence in national priorities, with China aiming to project a responsible global image and Malaysia focusing on tangible economic gains.

b. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

There are three articles focused on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Many studies on China's country image and China-Malaysia relations discussing the BRI, but only 3 articles were considered highly match this study. China and Malaysia have created an innovative model of international economic cooperation and bilateral cooperation and have achieved fruitful results. However, some challenges remain, and scholars suggest optimizing the cooperation model to improve future collaboration (Muhamad Azwan, 2022; Dar & Seng, 2022). In addition, Wang and other scholars (2023) offered a thorough evaluation and analysis of the successes in Malaysia-China political, economic, and cultural relations. These include signed agreements, infrastructure projects, industrial cooperation, educational and cultural exchanges. As a result, the BRI has created economic opportunities for both Malaysia and China, strengthening their economic cooperation. However, the critical analysis of these findings indicates that there are still remaining challenges for the continued development of the Belt and Road Initiative. For instance, China may focus more on a broader implementation scope and longer-term goals, while Malaysia pays more attention to the actual project benefits.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiative, launched by Xi Jinping (China's president) in 2013, has outlined new potential collaborations with Malaysia and other nations in a variety of fields, such as cultural, technical, economic and so on. The "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" compose the Belt and Road Initiative, which has garnered a lot of attention from around the world. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a key instrument of China-Malaysia cooperation, resulting in significant achievements on infrastructure, industry, and cultural interaction. Examples include the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) (Kuik & Lai, 2025), the Two Countries, Twin Parks, and deeper cultural exchanges (Wang et al., 2023). While both countries' media emphasize mutual economic benefits, differences in perspectives exist. For instance, China focuses on a broader strategic vision, while Malaysia prioritizes specific project benefits. To strengthen cooperation, the BRI should align with Malaysia's national development strategy. Both sides should engage in deeper discussions on partnership models, such as highlighting "joint agenda." Additionally, using ASEAN multilateral platforms (Jiang & Husin, 2024), such as RCEP, can help reduce geopolitical competition and enhance regional cooperation. For the BRI to achieve greater success, both sides must engage in deeper dialogue to align with Malaysia's long-term national development strategies, shifting towards a more jointly owned agenda.

c. MH370 Disappearance

The MH370 incident, as a sudden international crisis, could have had a major impact on China-Malaysia relations. There is one article that focuses on the MH370 disappearance and

its impact on China-Malaysia relations. This article concentrated upon the impact of the incident on China-Malaysia relations by comparing how mainstream newspapers in Malaysia and China reported the event (Fong, 2019). Surprisingly, the incident did not have a negative impact on bilateral relations. The study identified two dominant frames: "search and rescue operations" and "friendship, connection, and understanding", which shift public focus from blaming responsibility to joint efforts in handling the crisis. Besides, news reports in both countries mainly presented a positive tone toward Malaysia-China relations. According to experience, media coverage and public opinion may influence bilateral relations during unexpected crises. This "crisis de-escalation" suggests a mutual understanding between the two countries on sensitive issues. Media narratives were intentionally guided toward technical and non-political aspects, avoiding the rise of nationalist tensions. This intentional "crisis de-escalation" suggests a mature, shared understanding between the two countries to prioritize the preservation of their relationship over political blame during a sensitive time.

d. Educational and Cultural Exchanges

The theme of educational and cultural exchanges includes five articles, covering international students (3 articles), Chinese entertainment coverage (1 articles), and the import of Chinese films in Malaysia (1 articles). China-Malaysia educational exchanges went through two key stages: the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Education Cooperation in 1997 and the Framework Agreement to Facilitate Mutual Recognition in Academic Higher Education Qualifications in 2011. Although some challenges remain, both sides are working to resolve these issues (Nan et al., 2019). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the topic of overseas students. There are two main patterns of Chinese students studying in Malaysia, that postgraduate students pursuing degrees in Malaysia and undergraduate students enrolling at Xiamen University Malaysia (Koh & Yeoh, 2025). Similarly, Malaysian students pursuing education in China are looked favourably since they consider it as an appealing prospect (Yu, 2023). The development of Chinese films in Malaysia is also notable. The interaction between Chinese films and Malaysian audiences highlights the role of transnational cinema in fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Additionally, it provides a cultural storytelling experience within different contexts (Wang, 2024). The way Malaysian media covers China's entertainment industry also influences how the country is perceived. Media outlets like The Star strategically use reciprocity and negotiation to find common ground while maintaining differences, which is crucial in shaping perceptions of China (Wang et al., 2024). These studies, however, reveal a notable imbalance in the culture exchanges, with an excessive focus on the flow from China to Malaysia in academic literature, films, and media coverage.

China-Malaysia educational and cultural exchanges have built a multi-level connection through student mobility, film dissemination, and media interaction. The two education agreements in 1997 and 2011 built the institutional foundation, promoting a two-way academic exchange model. Currently, Chinese students' cultural and academic adaptation in Malaysia has become a new research topic in this field. Researchers are beginning to explore how these students adjust to a different cultural environment and education system (Bi & Ahmad, 2024). The popularity of Chinese films in Malaysia has

encouraged "cross-cultural exchange," while Malaysian media coverage of China's entertainment news has used a "coexistence of differences" approach to balance national image shaping with audience reception. However, present exchanges tend to be one-sided. In order to improve bilateral exchange, efforts should be made to promote Malaysian films in the Chinese market and boost the number of Malaysian students studying in China. Additionally, issues such as mutual recognition of academic qualifications should be addressed in further.

e. General Perception in China

Malaysia's perception of China presents a unique picture of the coexistence of "official positivity" and "social pluralism". The theme of General Perception of China includes two articles. Both articles examine Malaysia's overall perception of China without focusing on a specific aspect or event. One study highlights that from the perspective of government statements and official media, Malaysia's view of China's rise is undoubtedly positive (Yeoh, 2019). This is mainly due to strong economic trade and investment ties. However, As complicated as Malaysian society is, the country's view of China needs to be examined from a variety of viewpoints (Yeoh, 2019). Another article focuses on sentiment analysis related to China. Although the study found a large amount of negative sentiment, this was related to global events rather than specifically targeting China. In contrast, positive sentiment towards China has been increasing (Wu et al., 2022). This divergence suggests that while economic cooperation is a powerful driver of official relations, public perceptions are shaped by a wider range of factors, including domestic social diversity and the ongoing influence of major world events. As a result, because of Malaysia's multi-racial and multi-cultural composition, China-Malaysia relations should not be viewed in a single way. China's country image and bilateral relations between China and Malaysia should be analysed from multiple perspectives, such as economy, culture, society and others.

f. Orientations

As showed Table 3, most studies on China's country image and China-Malaysia relations have a neutral orientation, followed by a positive, no negative. In political and diplomatic topics, two studies are neutral (Bing, 2015; Fong & Chia, 2017), while one has a positive slant (Chia & Fong, 2016). Similarly, in studies on the Belt and Road Initiative, two are neutral (Muhamad Azwan, 2022; Dar & Seng, 2022), and one is positive (Wang et al., 2023). In contrast, research on educational and cultural exchanges is mostly positive (Nan et al., 2019; Koh & Yeoh, 2025; Yu, 2023), with two neutral studies (Wang, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Despite the MH370 tragedy, its impact on bilateral relations was minimal, and the study on this topic had a positive slant (Fong, 2019). Finally, both studies on Malaysia's general perception of China were neutral (Wu et al., 2022; Yeoh, 2019).

Overall, the studies suggest that China-Malaysia relations are generally viewed in a neutral or positive light, with political and economic topics being more balanced, while educational and cultural exchanges tend to be seen more positively. This reflects the stable and cooperative nature of their bilateral relationship in various areas. However, as global dynamics evolve, new challenges and opportunities may emerge in shaping China's image in Malaysia. For instance, geopolitical shifts, changes in Malaysia's domestic politics, or

differences in China's foreign policy could influence the future perceptions and relations. Future research could explore how emerging global events or shifts in public opinion may influence these perceptions over time. Additionally, examining media narratives in different languages or platforms could provide deeper understanding on how China's picture is portrayed in Malaysia, such as digital and social media (Wynn et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study reviewed and analysed research on China's country image and China-Malaysia relations from 2013 to 2024, identifying five main themes: (a) Political and diplomatic relations, (b) Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), (c) MH370 disappearance, (d) Educational and cultural exchanges, and (e) General perception of China. The findings show that most studies portray China-Malaysia relations and China's image in Malaysia as neutral or positive, with no negative evaluations. Only one study (Wu et al., 2022) contained negative information, but this was related to global events rather than China specifically. As the world continues to change, cooperation and exchanges between countries have become closer than ever. China and Malaysia are neighbouring countries that have maintained 50 years of friendly diplomatic relations. Exploring China's country image in Malaysia and their bilateral ties remains important. This study provides an overview of key research topics and orientations in China-Malaysia relations over the past 12 years (2013–2024), serving as a reference for future scholars. The year 2013 was chosen as the starting point because it was significant for both countries. In 2013, China and Malaysia established a comprehensive strategic partnership, and China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which created new opportunities for their bilateral relations. Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a key factor in bilateral relations, driving infrastructure projects and trade cooperation. However, due to the different positions of the two countries, there are currently some differences and challenges that require in-depth discussions on future cooperation models. Therefore, for China and Malaysia to continue to reap the advantages of the Belt and Road Initiative, they must share accountability for making sure the projects are carried out in a reasonable, open, and sustainable manner. Furthermore, the possible effects for the local community and the environment should be considered (Cheng & Fok, 2024).

Additionally, this study highlights the role of media narratives, policy decisions, and economic cooperation in shaping China's image in Malaysia. While official discourse tends to emphasize diplomatic achievements and economic benefits, public perception remains diverse, influenced by historical experiences, media representation, and global political trends. The variation in framing, particularly in political and economic topics, suggests that different stakeholders interpret China-Malaysia relations through different perspectives. In a short, this study fills a research gap by providing a systematic review of China's image in Malaysia and China-Malaysia relations. Therefore, future research should take a more nuanced approach by examining how different groups within Malaysia perceive China and how these perceptions evolve over time. Understanding these variations can provide deeper insights into the factors shaping China-Malaysia relations and contribute to more effective diplomatic and cultural engagement. Comparative research with other ASEAN countries could also offer a broader perspective on China's image in Southeast Asia.

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