

Malaysian Studies in China (2014-2024): Evolving Trends and Multidisciplinary Perspectives

Kajian Malaysia di China (2014-2024): Perkembangan Trend dan Perspektif Multidisiplin

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ABSTRACT

The year 2024 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia. Standing at this juncture, this paper reviews the Malaysian Studies produced by Chinese academics in the past decade (2014-2024) and summarizes their research topics and disciplinary characteristics. China's academic research on Malaysia covers a wide range of fields, including politics, diplomacy, history, and socio-culture, and there is a trend of crossover from a single discipline to a multi-disciplinary. Political studies pay close attention to Malaysia's nation-state construction and ethnic politics; in the studies of foreign policy and relations, special attention is paid to Malaysia's role in both regional and international geopolitics and its balancing strategies. In socio-cultural studies, research focuses on the identity and cultural integration of ethnic Chinese, which reflects insights into the changing perceptions of ethnic Chinese in the Malaysian multicultural context. The overall research is characterized as interdisciplinary and pragmatic. This paper aims to provide references for future research on both Sino-Malaysian relations and Malaysian Studies, and indirectly serve the exchange and cooperation between Chinese and Malaysian academics.

Keywords: Malaysia; Malaysian Studies; China; Chinese academics

ABSTRAK

Tahun 2024 merupakan ulang tahun ke-50 penubuhan hubungan diplomatik antara China dan Malaysia. Sempena itu, artikel ini mengulas Kajian Malaysia yang dihasilkan oleh ahli akademik China dalam dekad yang lalu (2014-2024) dan merumuskan isu-isu penyelidikan dan ciri-ciri disiplinnya. Kajian Malaysia di China merangkumi pelbagai bidang, termasuk politik, diplomasi, sejarah dan sosiobudaya, dan terdapat trend persilangan daripada satu disiplin kepada pelbagai disiplin. Kajian politik memberi perhatian kepada pembinaan negara bangsa dan politik etnik Malaysia; dalam kajian dasar dan hubungan luar negeri, perhatian khusus diberikan kepada peranan Malaysia dalam geopolitik serantau dan antarabangsa serta strategi pengimbangannya. Dalam kajian sosiobudaya, penyelidikan tertumpu kepada identiti dan integrasi budaya etnik Cina di Malaysia, yang mencerminkan pandangan tentang perubahan persepsi etnik Cina dalam konteks pelbagai budaya Malaysia. Secara keseluruhan, kajian Malaysia di China bersifat interdisiplin dan pragmatik. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menyediakan rujukan bagi kajian Malaysia dan juga hubungan bilateral China-Malaysia pada masa depan, dan secara tidak langsung memberi perkhidmatan kepada pertukaran dan kerjasama antara ahli akademik China dan Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Malaysia; Kajian Malaysia; China; akademik China

INTRODUCTION

*Sayang Sayang, Dear Friend
Rakan sejati
Kasih setinggi gunung
Senyuman mesra mu dalam hatiku
Bagai alir sungai tak ada hujung...*

These are the lyrics from the song "Sayang Sayang Dear Friend", composed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia,

which was released on February 2, 2024, at the Chinese Embassy's Lunar New Year Reception. The lyrics aptly depicts the profound history and friendly traditions of the relationship between China and Malaysia. The two countries, which are geographically close to each other, have had an endless stream of people-to-people exchanges since ancient times, and the spirit of "mutual help and cooperation" continues to be passed on between the two countries today. For example, in April 2021, China and Malaysia worked together to combat

the Covid-19, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described China-Malaysia relations as “good neighbors, good brothers, and good partners spanning over a millennium” at that time. In the areas of trade and investment, the two countries are close partners for each other. As of 2023, China has been Malaysia’s top trading partner for 15 consecutive years, with bilateral trade accounting for about 21% of Malaysia’s total trade. In 2022, Malaysia was China’s second-largest trading partner in ASEAN and China’s seventh-largest trading partner globally (*China Business Network*, 2023). In October 2023, the two countries implemented mutual visa exemptions. At this historical moment of the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic ties between the two, the author attempts to outline the knowledge mapping of Malaysian Studies in China in the past decade. This paper reviews and analyzes the topics of interest and research paradigms of China’s Malaysian Studies between 2014 and 2024, with the hope of informing future studies. These studies represent the perception of Chinese scholars on Malaysia. Thus, the author also intends to share them with Malaysian counterparts to provide the opportunity to see the “self” through the lens of the “other”.

SIGNIFICANCE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Why is this review deemed significant? First, it would foster academic exchanges between China and Malaysia. While economic and trade exchanges and diplomatic cooperation between the two have been remarkably prominent as noted above, academic exchanges have been relatively subdued. For example, only Malaysian Chinese scholars have occasionally co-published articles in China together with scholars from southern China, and most have written within a single area of Chinese literature (Tee 2021; Tseng 2021; Fan 2024). Also, due to the linguistic barrier Malaysian non-Chinese scholars are not aware of China’s academic knowledge of Malaysia. Second, the merit of this review also lies in its transcendence of country-specific limitations. Malaysia is perceived as a “Southeast Asian country” both by the public and in academic research classifications. As such, it also serves as a representative snapshot of Southeast Asian studies. In other words, its basic/primary value is that it can help scholars systematically learn about the major achievements, trends, and gaps of Malaysian Studies in China – which themes have received

major attention, which issues are newly emerging, and which intrinsic Malaysian affairs have yet to be explored. Such a review also allows scholars to compare the research with that of other Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Indonesian Studies, Thai Studies, etc.), thus offering a wider academic vision of the region. This means that the article would inform future studies on both individual Southeast Asian countries and the region as a whole.

Why then commence with the studies in 2014? The rationale behind this decision is that China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was initiated in 2013 and Malaysia was (and continues to be) seen as a pivotal node country within this framework. As a result, Malaysia has begun to garner more scholarly interest in this context, prompting a surge in research diversity that has surfaced since 2014. Even so, Malaysian Studies remains a niche field with a relatively small cadre of researchers. Also, unlike the studies in Literature, Culture and other disciplines, it tends to explore the dynamics of reality (at least in China). As such, a 10-year period provides an apt timeframe for reviewing the evolving themes and features in academic expertise on Malaysia in China. This decade (2014-2024) also coincidentally overlaps with the fifth decade of diplomatic ties between China and Malaysia. Thus, it is opportune for now to undertake a phased summation of the decade’s research.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS

1. Overall Research Objective

This study aims to sort out the status of Malaysian Studies in the Chinese academia over the past decade (2014-2024). It seeks to inquire into the research focus of various disciplines, the theoretical frameworks and research approaches employed, as well as to analyze the distinct research features of the major disciplines.

2. Research Questions

- a. Disciplines and Major Topics. From which disciplines have Chinese academics studied Malaysia and why? What specific issues and phenomena have scholars from different disciplines focused on?
- b. Research Approaches and Distinguishing Features. What are the key theoretical frameworks and research methodologies

adopted by Chinese scholars in exploring the above topics? What are the distinctive research orientations and characteristics that various disciplines have demonstrated in conducting Malaysia Studies and why?

- c. (3) Future Research Outlook. What are the challenges encountered in Malaysia Studies in China? What approaches should be taken to refine the further deepening of Malaysian Studies?

The research questions will be progressively addressed in the two core sections of the analysis, dedicated to examining research topics and their distinct traits across various disciplines. The logical process of this research synthesis is to (1) identify a collective pool of research subjects (the details are outlined in the Method section); (2) organize them according to their respective disciplines; (3) classify research topics within each discipline; (4) summarize their perspectives and approaches, along with a deductive analysis comparing various conclusions within the same thematic domain. After categorizing the screened articles by discipline, it will analyze them within each discipline based on their respective research topics. For instance, it will explore how researchers conducted their studies, whether they linked their research to specific theories within a discipline, or whether they carried out their research by comparing cases from various countries. Additionally, it will examine the perspectives chosen by the researchers, their motivations or hypotheses, and so forth. Ultimately, it will summarize the prevailing viewpoints of Chinese scholars on particular topics or phenomena and assess whether a consensus has been reached on these issues.

DEFINITION AND METHOD

Malaysian Studies in China is a branch of Southeast Asian Studies. It takes Malaysia as an entry point for a comprehensive inquiry into its politics, foreign policy, society and even history. In other words, Malaysian Studies is not an independent discipline on the same level as political science, sociology, history, etc., but an approach to understanding the “other”, namely Malaysia. In such a research context, Malaysia has become a country-specific field of study that brings together research approaches from various disciplines and is unique in its own right.

Therefore, this paper considers Malaysian Studies as a complex, inclusive and dynamic concept, and selects research papers from different disciplines that address “specific issues and particular phenomena in Malaysia”.

Since 2014, China’s academics have produced fruitful research on Malaysia, which covers a wide range of disciplinary areas. This review delineates the scope from the dimensions of publication time and journal rank – the articles published in high-quality journals listed in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) and the Peking University Chinese Core Journals Catalog from 2014 to 2024. Specifically, the study employs a rigorous “five-step” screening methodology, with each step guided by clear criteria, to guarantee academic excellence, rigor, and authenticity in both the study itself and the chosen literature. This approach enables the author to inclusively capture the targeted literature related to Malaysia and accurately pinpoint articles that align with the aforementioned definition of “Malaysian Studies”. The specific selection strategies are as follows:

1. Initial screening. All papers published during 2014-2014 that contained the keyword “Malaysia” in the title were initially included. This step aims to collect as many studies related to Malaysia as possible.
2. Assess academic quality and impact. Papers published in journals listed in the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI) or the Peking University Chinese Core Journals Catalog were further screened to ensure the quality and impact of the selected papers.
3. Determine the research focus. Papers that only mentioned “Malaysia” in the subtitle were excluded to ensure that the research focus was directly relevant. This step is intended to filter out papers that may only mention Malaysia in passing, rather than as the primary research subject.
4. Confirm the primary research object. The author retains papers that have “Malaysia” or “Malaysian XXXX” as their primary research subject. This step further ensures the focus and relevance.
5. Confirm of author’s nationality. This is to confirm that the authors are China’s scholars, or the co-authors include China’s scholars. This step aims to ensure that the research represents the outcome of China’s academics.

The two-dimensional search strategy employed in Steps 1-2, coupled with adherence to a pre-established set of criteria, aimed to reduce the likelihood of overlooking vital research or succumbing to biased selection. Among these criteria (outlined in Step 2) is a particular emphasis on academic rigor and excellence. Afterward, the criteria for pinpointing the primary research focus (Steps 3 and 4) were determined to ensure the relevance of the chosen literature. Lastly, the requirement that authors must be Chinese scholars or have Chinese co-authors was a deliberate decision to ensure that they represent a truly Chinese perspective. Through these five steps, the study has screened out authoritative articles that both meet certain academic standards and express the unique insights of China's scholars on Malaysian affairs.

MAJOR DISCIPLINES AND RESEARCH ISSUES

Malaysian Studies is both part of Southeast Asian Studies and the "International and Regional Studies" that have emerged in China in recent years. The latter is strongly influenced by current geopolitics. Over the past decade, as China's political and economic power has grown, the need to understand the outside world has expanded, fueling the rapid development of International and Regional Studies. Half a century ago, China's Southeast Asian Studies focused on literature, history, and social culture, but in recent years, scholars have begun to conduct policy-related research. The rise of China as a world power has provided the background for International and Regional Studies. Rapid development in recent decades has led to the deep integration of the Chinese economy into the global market, and China's interaction with the world has undergone fundamental changes. At the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese companies began to invest abroad under the Chinese government's "Going Out Strategy", which evolved in 2013 into the more ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at promoting infrastructure development in nearly 70 economies around the world. China's growing political power and increasing ties to the world economy have fueled a growing need to protect its interests abroad. At the same time, the international environment has undergone significant changes, forcing China to take a more proactive role in dealing with global issues and to adjust its stance and policies in response to challenges such

as territorial disputes, trade wars, and epidemics. These changes have prompted Chinese academics to increase their focus on political, economic, and social changes in Southeast Asian countries (Xie 2021). As the most notable demand originates from policymakers, there is currently a trend of "policy turn" in Southeast Asian Studies, and studies of "contemporary relevance" have begun to dominate the field. This is also observed in Malaysian Studies.

POLITICAL STUDIES ON MALAYSIA

NATION-STATE CONSTRUCTION

In political studies, Chinese academics have focused on mining the impact of Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious complexity on state construction. The research focuses on the Malaysian national integration model, state construction and ethnic policies, and analyzes the challenges of interactions between different ethnic groups on national integration. For example, Shen Qiuben (2020) of Guangzhou University and Qi Shunli (2021) of Guangzhou University of Technology both view Malaysia as an example of a multi-ethnic state and explore its state integration model and effects. Zhuang Liwei (2015) of Jinan University, on the other hand, examines the behavioral patterns of Malaysian political entities and explores the principles and functions of civic nationalism and multiculturalism that influence the state construction. These studies reveal different levels of state integration patterns, where nationalism usually corresponds to integration at the nation-state level, while multiculturalism targets integration at the societal level. In addition, Jiang Bingqing (2016) of Yunnan University and Yi Yuan (2020) of Xiamen University analyzed the evolution of ethnic policies from the perspective of "identity politics", highlighting the multiple roles of ruling groups, multi-ethnic societies, and religious groups in the political process.

These studies reflect that China's academics are aware of Malaysia's unique socio-historical context and understand how related factors have shaped Malaysia's current social structure and ethnic policies. They usually adopt the theoretical framework of state construction and integration to analyze Malaysia. They all agree that the construction of Malaysian national identity and political stability are achieved through a complex process of managing multiculturalism and inter-ethnic differences. In short, Chinese scholars recognize that Malaysian

state integration is not merely a political process, but also involves interactions at the cultural and social levels.

In addition, political studies have addressed the concept of “nation-state construction” and its application to social realities and have examined it with the use of exogenous variables. For example, Guo Qiumei of Guizhou Normal University (2020), Qi Shunli of Guangdong University of Technology, and Zhai Xiaohua of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2022) all focus on the impact of immigrants on the composition of Malaysian ethnic groups. They argue that the waves of immigration during a specific period have led to the gradual transformation of Malaysia from a multi-ethnic society dominated by Malays and Chinese to a Malay-dominated social structure. This also suggests that the construction of national identity and stability is a dynamic process of continuous adaptation to changes in ethnic composition. The above studies reflect that China’s academics believe that Malaysian nation-state building is not only a political and administrative task, but also a comprehensive project at the cultural and social levels. It is worth noting that most of the authors of the above studies are from universities in the southern provinces of China, such as Guangdong and Fujian, and some of the studies were done in collaboration with Malaysian (Chinese) researchers. As such, these studies are close to the inherent characteristics and realities of Malaysia itself.

PARTY AND ETHNIC POLITICS

Party and ethnic politics occupy a significant proportion of Malaysian Studies and almost all researchers on this subject come from northern universities, especially those in Beijing. The study of party and ethnic politics can be broadly categorized into two directions.

The first is studies on specific political parties. These studies cover several mainstream political parties and party organizations, such as UMNO, Islamic Party (PAS), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Barisan Nasional (BN) and many more, focusing on their emergence, electoral strategies, political beliefs (conflicts between political groups, factional disputes among top-level core figures), and social influence (Hui Ming 2016; Chu Jianguo & Li Jiang 2017; Yuan Jingjing 2019; Fu Congcong & Chen Rongxuan, 2020). They are in agreement that party and ethnic politics in Malaysia embody a kind of elite politics based on religious and ethnic differences and their influence on the public.

The second type of research explores Malaysia’s political transition from a long-term perspective, dissecting the ruling party’s beliefs, ideological changes, and its potential impact on the political landscape (Chen Wen & Huang Weiping 2015; Yu Haiqiu 2018; Xu Liping 2021; Xu Liping 2023). Some adopt a specific theoretical perspective and try to capture the regular connection between party fragmentation and changes in the political landscape (Chen Jiayi & Teng Junfei 2020; Chen Rongxuan & Fu Congcong 2021). For example, some scholars have suggested that in Malaysia, a political party can maintain its survival if it can combine with the structure of social fragmentation, otherwise, it will face failure (Chen Rongxuan & Fu Congcong 2021).

In addition, some have also noted the “Sultans” inherent in Malay society as a distinctive actor in Malaysia’s political makeup. For example, Zhang Xiaofang (2018) of the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing explored the implicit and explicit roles of the Head of State in Malaysia’s domestic politics from the perspective of institutional complementarity and presented to the Chinese academia that constitutional monarchy of Malaysia is adaptive, with a significance of stabilizing the society in times of political chaos. Chinese academics recognize that party politics and ethnic politics in Malaysia are a complex system of interactions, with both competition and cooperation between political parties, which further affects Malaysia’s ethnic relations and social structure. While Chinese academics have achieved some success in studying Malaysia’s political parties and their impact on society, there is a lack of research on the effectiveness of their governance and public satisfaction.

FOREIGN POLICY AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS STUDIES

Diplomacy is an extension of domestic affairs, but this does not seem to be reflected in China’s studies on Malaysian foreign policy. However, through the dual dimensions of “vertical time” and “horizontal space”, Chinese scholars have shown the full picture of Malaysia’s diplomatic strategy in the time-space transition.

First, scholars generally focus on Malaysia’s interactions with ASEAN, extra-territorial powers and developed countries, including its unilateral policy preferences, two-way interactions, and even multiple balancing strategies. For example, Zheng Xun and

Guo Qiumei (2023) of Guizhou Normal University analyze Malaysia's new "Look East Policy" and its continuing impact on industrial transformation and modernization from a contemporary perspective. Ge Hongliang (2017) of Guangxi University for Nationalities explores Malaysia's engagement and promotion of ASEAN community building from the perspective of Malaysia's interaction with ASEAN.

Second, unlike scholars in the South, scholars in Beijing tend to study how Malaysia, as a member of ASEAN, adopts "balanced diplomacy" in the context of U.S.-China strategic rivalry (Su Yingying 2020). They have explored how the ruling government has responded to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy to maintain the tradition of independent diplomacy and safeguard the centrality of ASEAN (Sun Xihui & Jin Canrong 2017; Su Yingying 2022). Although most studies have seen Malaysia as a "Southeast Asian multi-ethnic state" and "ASEAN member state", Chinese scholars have not overlooked Malaysia's strong Islamic character and its profound connection with the Middle East. Studies have covered Malaysia's foreign policy towards the Middle East and the penetration and influence of Islamic extremism on Malaysia (Zhu Lumin & Yang Haifei 2017; Qi Shunli 2016; Ge Hongliang & Wang Sijia 2021).

In recent years, with the deepening of Southeast Asian Studies in China and the introduction of cross-national comparative perspectives, scholars have also focused on the historical legacy of the Borneo subregion. They cast their vision to the territorial disputes between Malaysia and its neighbors (Guo Jian & Yu Changsen 2015; Dai Yulong 2019), especially with Brunei and the Philippines. The above studies reveal Malaysia's complex modes of international interaction and strategic choices. These studies not only show Malaysia's multidimensional role in geopolitics, regional cooperation, and international strategic competition but also reflect how it actively participates in the globalization process while maintaining its national position and religious identity.

HISTORICAL STUDIES

We can categorize China's historical studies of Malaysia as "ethnic Chinese history", "history of (post)colonial resistance" and "ancient history".

ETHNIC CHINESE HISTORY

China's scholars primarily write social histories that explore specific cultural symbols in places of life, shifts in ideology, to changes in Chinese communities/organizations. Some scholars have focused on the cultural symbols and practices of the Chinese, such as commemorative places, cultural organizations, and the celebration of festivals, to examine the ways and strengths of the local Chinese in passing on their culture and ancestral practices (Liu & Gao 2022). Such research occasionally involves complex aspects such as power relations within the Chinese community, interactions with indigenous groups, and the formation of local consciousness. Chinese scholars have also examined the shift in the cultural attributes of the Chinese community from "Chineseness" to "nativeness". This is evident in their interrogation of the nature of Chinese social movements in British Malaya. They analyzed the local concerns of Malayan Chinese by comparing social movements that supported China with those that responded to local issues (Chen 2014).

In addition, Chinese academics have paid special attention to the formation and differentiation of Chinese communities/organizations and even the transformation of their nature. These studies strongly reflect how the Chinese communities seek to position and develop themselves in the changing local milieu. (1) The formation and integration of Chinese communities. For example, using the Guangdong community as a case study, a recent work examines how they define their own community boundaries and integrate sub-communities (Song & Chen 2022). This type of research explores Chinese intra- and inter-community connections and demonstrates the ability of Chinese to organize and mobilize locally. (2) The shifting nature of Chinese organizations (from social ones to political parties). Further, the academics have also noted the history of the Chinese political party. Some scholars study relations between the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and ethnic Chinese societies from 1949 to independence and find that with the transformation of the MCA into a political party, it has gradually distanced itself from other social Chinese organizations (Shi & Cao 2023). Interestingly, they did not simply examine the differences before and after the change, but rather the complex process of evolution. Such studies reflect the impact of political dynamics on the Chinese organization.

HISTORY OF (POST)COLONIAL RESISTANCE

Studies of (post)colonial Malay(si)a have studied local acts of resistance with a foreign relations perspective. These studies discussed not only the Malayan resistance movement, Malaysia's confrontation with Indonesia, the Sabah sovereignty dispute before and after the formation of the Malaysian Federation, but also the struggle of the Malayan Communist Party (Zhong Rixing 2014; Zhang Xiaoxin 2018; Yin Mengmeng 2022). These were key events in the period from Malaysia's independence to the formation of the Federation in 1963, with both local and regional significance. The concern on the above issues suggests that Chinese academics could identify crucial historical events in Malaysia and have an in-depth understanding – examining the involvement of extra-territorial powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom as well as China. Chinese historians have integrated Malay(si) into a broader historical space and time, reflecting on the linkages between these regions and the global geographic unit at different stages, as well as on the initiatives of local elite groups and their limitations at the time. However, the reliance on Western narratives and the lack of reference to local sources has led to a somewhat one-sided understanding of the Malaysian historical interaction with the outside entities, which is a minor regret in the current study.

ANCIENT HISTORY

Ancient history studies are exclusively concerned with the interaction details between China and Malaysia during the Ming Dynasty. The study by Mao Rui (2019) of Nanjing University on the Ming Dynasty princesses' marriage to Malacca and its perception among the ancient local Chinese community demonstrates how Chinese-Malay historical events are understood and remembered in different cultural contexts. Further, the scholars who are literate in Malay, by analyzing the Malay Annals, pointed out the singularity and limitations of the Chinese historical sources in describing this event and tried to reconstruct the image of Princess Hang Li Po and the narration of the marriage event from a native Malay perspective (Xu Mingyue 2021; Hou Yanni & Liu Zhiqiang 2022). The widespread interest in the "Marriage of Ming Dynasty Princesses" and the choice of the above perspectives indicate that the China's researchers from a micro level attempted to tap into the ancient

Malay dynastic society's perception of China and to learn about the influence of the tribute system in the Malay World.

SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDIES

Looking at socio-cultural studies, we find that the "ethnic Chinese issue" dominates.¹ This phenomenon has a profound historical tradition. First, the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia have become the focus of China's researchers because of their large population size and their significance to Malaysia. In fact, Overseas Chinese Studies in China began in the 1980s. For a long time, its research direction was limited to the study of the history of overseas Chinese and their hometowns, and most of these studies took place in the coastal provinces, such as Fujian and Guangdong, which have deep affinities with the Malaysian Chinese. Universities in these regions, such as Huaqiao University and Jinan University, have a tradition of Overseas Chinese studies. China founded the former in Fujian Province in 1960, with campuses in Xiamen and Quanzhou, the famous overseas Chinese hometowns in Fujian Province. Jinan University in Guangdong Province has an Overseas Chinese Research Institute. As early as 1927, Jinan University established the Nanyang Culture and Education Department to conduct research on Southeast Asia and the Chinese diaspora. Currently, Jinan University also has the academic journal *Overseas Chinese Studies*, and the Institute has also established a Literature Center for Overseas Chinese Studies with its university library.

Secondly, the phenomenon is also related to the language ability and academic background of the researchers. Theoretically, "socio-cultural research" should cover all components and phenomena of a society, and the "Chinese issue" should be only one of them. However, most researchers are not literate in Malay, which makes it difficult for them to explore areas other than Chinese society in Malaysia. What about scholars who know Malay? As of 2024, there are about 15 universities/colleges in China that offer Malay Programs. However, they are primarily aimed at undergraduate education and are designed to train foreign language professionals. Only a few universities, such as Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDFS), offer postgraduate programs in Malay Studies. In other words, the number of Malay language lecturers engaged in "Malaysian Studies" is limited. For example, in the

case of eight Malay teaching personnel at BFSU and GDFU, although their academic backgrounds are diverse, ranging from literature, linguistics, international relations and political science, only one has a background in sociology. As a result, there is relatively little socio-cultural research produced by them, especially in relation to the “non-Chinese” ones.

Overseas Chinese Studies is an interdisciplinary field that falls under three different areas: China Studies, Residence Country Studies (i.e. foreign studies or international studies), and Migration Studies. Malaysian Ethnic Chinese Studies falls under the second category and has its own uniqueness. The main themes of the study are the following three areas.

CULTURAL VALUES

Cultural values are the cornerstone of identity and sense of belonging to a community. Therefore, Chinese scholars are keen to study the core theme of Malaysian Chinese cultural values. Another reason is that this is also seen as evidence of the continuing global transmission of Chinese (or *Tionghua*) civilization and its cultural values. By analyzing the content of advertisements and the mentality they convey in Malaysia’s most widely circulated Chinese-language newspaper, the *Sin Chew Daily*, Wang Zhimin and Wan Muchun (2023) of Jinan University summarized five dominant values: affordability, family values, intellectual pursuits, healthy living, and the spirit of collectivism. Liu Shouzheng (2020) of Huaqiao University conducted an in-depth study of Taoist rituals in the Malaysian Chinese community and found a unique pattern of religious identity that shows a clear hierarchical differentiation. In this pattern, communal religious identity constitutes the base level, with the community festivities of folk temples in the middle, and the national Taoist indoctrination movement at the top. This finding not only reveals the diversity and hierarchical nature of traditional religious identities among Chinese Malaysians but also reflects how cultural values are embodied and passed on in different social practices.

COMMUNITY PATTERNS

Studies on community patterns have not only explored the interrelationships between Chinese and other ethnic groups but also examined factional differentiation within Chinese society

and the changing nature of Chinese associations. Zhou Jianxin (2016) of Guangxi University for Nationalities, through a field study of five lanes in Malaysia, recorded in detail the evolution of community relations in the area as well as the interactions of different groups such as Chinese, Malays, Indonesian foreign laborers, and foreign brides, and their joint contributions to the local society, revealing the interdependence and close ties between the communities. In addition, Song Yanpeng (2022) focuses on the Tai Po community in Penang and explores how the community, which has the Chinese county of origin as its basic identity criterion, adopts a flexible identity strategy in order to determine the acceptable range of identity for the different tiers of the community. Such flexible strategies reflect the adaptability of Chinese associations in the face of multicultural settings. Huang Siting (2023) from Jinan University further emphasizes the non-static nature of Chinese associations, pointing out that associations evolve over time, and their nature and functions are transformed accordingly. Taking the Kuala Lumpur & Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall since the 1980s as an example, she illustrates how the organization has shaped a democratic, transparent, autonomous, and independent public image and played a role in promoting the democratization process in Malaysia through internal reforms, civil rights campaigns, and monitoring of the government. From the above studies, the changing nature of the Chinese association reflects a smooth transition from the old to the new rather than a fragmentation. These studies provide valuable cases and theoretical foundations for studying the adaptation of ethnic Chinese in the context of a pluralistic society.

CHINESE IDENTITY

Research on “Chinese identity and sense of nationhood” has shown a blurring of boundaries with the field of political science. This intersection is mainly reflected in the diversification of research perspectives, especially through the combination of “bottom-up” and “top-down” analytical methods. For example, some scholars have used the concept of international migration as a framework to explore the multiple factors affecting the identities of Chinese from the perspective of individual migration experiences, and then analyze the process of mutual identification and integration between the Chinese community and Malaysia (Sun 2021; Song 2020). This research approach responds to the complexity

of the relations between individuals and countries in the context of contemporary globalization. Meanwhile, Wang Xiaoping's (2021) study focuses on the special impact of Chinese language education on "Chinese identity", revealing that Chinese identity is in a state of limbo between ethnic and national identities. This study reveals the key role of the education system in shaping identity. It is worth noting that Chinese academics believe that the process of constructing Chinese cultural identity in Malaysia has undergone a slow but profound transformation since the 1990s. Specifically, with the gradual integration of Malaysian Chinese education into the national education system at the turn of the century, the original Chinese education movement gradually declined. This process contributed to the transformation of Chinese cultural identity from a resistant identity to a planned identity. This not only reflects the impact of educational policies on cultural identity but also suggests a gradual change in the strategies of cultural identity construction in the context of national policy adjustments.

In addition, minority groups that are different from mainstream Chinese society, such as "Peranakan" and "Chinese Muslims", have also been studied with a cultural anthropological approach. The study on Peranakan mainly talks about their food culture and its symbolism to grasp the cultural continuity and forms of change in a particular culture (Chen Zhiming & Ma Jianfu 2019). In addition, scholars have provided insights into the phenomenon of a small group of Malaysian Chinese choosing to practice Islam and "becoming Malay" in the constitutional sense. Ma Jin et al. (2016) point out that such identity conversion is not only motivated by economic interests, but more importantly, it is a solution to the contradiction and conflict between one's ethnic identity and national identity. Chinese academics have not yet paid attention to cases of "passively becoming" Muslims through marriage. Future research could explore how individuals reconcile and integrate different cultural and religious identities in the context of cross-cultural marriages, as well as the impact of this "passive transformation" on individual and community identities.

FEATURES OF CHINA'S MALAYSIAN STUDIES: TAKING POLITICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDIES AS EXAMPLES

Initially, China's academic research on Malaysia centered on the humanities such as linguistics, Malay literature, and history. However, over time, China's scholars have continued to expand the scope of their research and explore various branches of social sciences. Currently, political science studies, foreign relations analysis, and socio-cultural studies have become mainstream research areas. This evolution highlights the continued interest of China's academia in Malaysia and reflects the continuous enrichment of research methods and perspectives.

FEATURES OF POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC STUDIES

In the past decade (2014-2024), Chinese academia has directed considerable attention towards Malaysia's political and diplomatic landscapes, particularly examining key issues such as nation-state construction, party/ethnic politics, and overall political transformation. Concurrently, detailed analyses of Malaysia's intricate interactions within regional organizations, with extra-territorial powers, and among developed countries have been undertaken, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of Malaysian politics and diplomacy amidst the geopolitical complexities of Southeast Asia.

First, the study of Malaysian politics highlights the importance of theoretical frameworks. As a result, its research reveals the country-specific adaptability of disciplinary knowledge and spatial and temporal relevance. For example, the study of nation-state construction not only relies on local social events and media reports, but also draws extensively on nationalist theories and compares and analyzes them with cases in neighboring countries, so as to construct a research framework on "Malaysia's national integration model" (Zhuang Liwei 2015; Shen Qiuben 2020; Qi Shunli 2021). In addition, the introduction of real variables and political phenomena such as "international migration", "political party rotation" and "rational participation of the head of state in politics" for a comprehensive analysis over a long period of time

further enhances the temporal and spatial relevance of the study (Zhang Xiaofang 2018; Fu Congcong & Chen Rongxuan 2020; Zhai Xiaohua 2022).

Second, the study of Malaysian diplomacy shows a distinct regional character. During the first four decades of Sino-Malaysian diplomatic relations, Chinese academics mainly focused on bilateral relations. However, since 2014, Chinese academics have advocated examining Malaysia's diplomatic strategy in the context of ASEAN's geopolitical equilibrium and strategic competition among extra-territorial powers, especially in the context of "ASEAN community building", in order to deepen their understanding of vertical and horizontal relations in the region (Ge Hongliang 2017; Sun Xihui & Jin Canrong 2017; Su Yingying 2022). This approach not only helps to build a body of diplomatic knowledge adapted to the region, but also demonstrates the relevance of Malaysian and ASEAN diplomacy by shedding light on common issues in the region. Due to the unique national stance of Chinese scholars, unlike Western scholars and media commentators, Chinese research on Malaysian diplomacy demonstrates an alternative direction to the realities of Malaysian and ASEAN diplomacy, which is worthy of reference for Malaysian academics and policy circles.

FEATURES OF SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDIES

In the field of Malaysian socio-cultural studies, ethnic Chinese studies occupies a pivotal position. Not only has it inherited the sustained interest of China's scholars in overseas Chinese, but its scope of research and methodology has become increasingly comprehensive and interdisciplinary over time. Influenced by Western migration studies in recent years, Malaysian ethnic Chinese studies have become a confluence of sociology, political science, ethnography, and other social science fields. They have focused on three main themes: Chinese cultural values, the dynamic evolution of Chinese associations/communities, and the link between ethnic and national identity. These topics are intertwined with each other, and the boundaries are not well defined, making it difficult to categorize them only. In view of this, the author tends to adopt an "intra-group structural framework" to explain its multilevel character. Specifically, this framework encompasses multiple dimensions, ranging from specific Chinese minority groups (e.g., peranakan or Chinese Muslims), Chinese associations (geographic

or political), Chinese society, and even their external perceptions (e.g., perceptions of China).

In terms of research approach, the extant research shows a remarkable "comprehensive" and "interdisciplinary" character. For example, the "identity" is not only the focus of socio-cultural research but also a hot topic in the field of political research. The former aims to recognize the differential order of the identities in Chinese society, while the latter questions its potential impact on national integration (Yi Yuan 2020; Sun Zhiwei 2021). The purpose of interdisciplinary research on the same subject is to comprehensively understand the ties between Malaysia and its Chinese community. Unlike political studies, socio-cultural studies have viewed "identity politics" as a typical component of Malaysian multi-ethnic social life. In any case, however, Chinese academics are united in the view that the construction of the nation-state in Malaysia is not a failure but has its characteristics and points of equilibrium. They together have achieved a fusion of ethnographic approaches and political science issues in Malaysian Studies, demonstrating the inclusiveness of different political practices by appreciating, documenting and affirming plurality. This is the value created by "interdisciplinary research" itself.

CONCLUSION

The assembled studies should be viewed as a medium for understanding Malaysia, rather than leading to a specific "conclusion" only. For China's scholarship, Malaysia is not only a geographical concept or a representation of a certain socio-cultural phenomenon, but also a crucial field for scholars to establish their academic identities, to strengthen the exchange of knowledge between China and Malaysia, and to contribute their unique insights to the Southeast Asian knowledge system. This paper finds that China's research on Malaysia between 2014 and 2024 is characterized by interdisciplinary convergence, pragmatic orientation, and policy instrumentality. Malaysian Studies in China draw on the theoretical essence of traditional disciplines and test specific theories (e.g., state-construction theory) with the Malaysian social-political realities. In the field of social culture, one of the research priorities is on the Chinese community, which reflects the keen insights of China's scholars into the complex phenomena of Malaysian society, such as cross-cultural identity and multi-ethnic integration. Through an in-depth study of the Malaysian

Chinese, China has made crucial inputs to the study of the diversity and complexity of global ethnic Chinese. In short, a comprehensive approach has become the main research pathway for China to understand Malaysia. Through interdisciplinary research methods and interpretive tools, scholars are endeavoring to present the diversity of Malaysia holistically and to build a system of Malaysian Studies. Meanwhile, Malaysian Studies in China are also facing challenges. The imbalance between empirical research and theoretical construction has resulted in limited depth and breadth of research. Scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds differ in their perspectives, sometimes making it difficult to form a unified consensus. In addition, the insufficient use of Malay language sources limits the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the research. More critically, research published mainly in Mandarin have limited its international impact. This area of research may promise to gain new perspectives as more scholars come on board, especially younger scholars with a command of Malay. To further expand the scope of research, we need to pay more attention to the changing dynamics of Malay society from the inside, while analyzing Malaysia's engagement in regional and global agendas from the outside. By adding both internal and external perspectives, the academia will be able to construct a holistic framework for Malaysian Studies.

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NOTE

¹ Chinese scholars did study socio-cultural phenomena outside the Chinese community, although to a very limited extent. Only one or two scholars have focused on indigenous practices and beliefs, as well as on the topics of "national language policy" and "religious plurality", which appear to be very isolated.

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