

China-Malaysia Relations as a Campaign Strategy: The BN Prime Ministers' Understanding of China and the Ethnic Chinese

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Abstract

During the administration of the Barisan Nasional in Malaysia, three Prime Ministers, namely Abdul Razak, Mahathir Mohamad and Najib Razak, strategically incorporated the China factor to attract the support of the Chinese voters in their respective election campaigns. These campaigns took place in 1974, 1999, and 2013. It appeared that the Prime Ministers perceived a preference among the Chinese community for China, despite the Chinese were born in Malaysia or had been granted Malaysian citizenship. Thus, Razak, Mahathir and Najib's understanding of China and Chinese voters played a crucial role in shaping their decision to employ diplomatic relations as a campaign strategy.

Keywords: *Malaysia-China Relations, Elections, Chinese*

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1. Introduction

The Barisan Nasional (BN) had been in power since the independence of Malaysia in 1957 until it lost its first general election in 2018. BN had held 14 general elections throughout these 61 years. Three of these elections were held within three months after the friendly interaction of Malaysian high-ranking officers with China. The elections were the 1974 election during the administration of Abdul Razak, the 1999 election during the administration of Mahathir Mohammad, and the 2013 election during the administration of Najib Razak. The purpose of these Prime Ministers was obvious. They aimed to attract support from the Chinese¹ community. Yet, it is worth highlighting that this strategy was the Prime Ministers' last resort because national interest always took precedence.

Bilateral relations between Malaysia and China had been seen as cordial after the 1990s despite territorial disputes over the South China Sea. Both countries had managed to set aside their differences and collaborated for mutual benefit. However, during the initial 17 years following the formation of Malaya/Malaysia, the country posed a hostile attitude toward China. This was partly due to Malaya/Malaysia's adoption of a pro-western foreign policy during the Cold War and the presence of domestic communist threats. Beginning in 1948, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), an overseas branch of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) with most of its members being Chinese, launched numerous armed struggles in Malaysia with the aim to establish a communist Malayan People's Republic (O'Ballance, 1966). Even though the Alliance, BN predecessor had led Malaysia to gain independence from the British, CPM never ceased fighting. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, therefore refused to establish diplomatic relations with China even though Zhou Enlai, the Premier of China extended his goodwill in 1957 (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 1957a; 1957b). According to Baginda (2016), Malaya perceived China as an enemy at this stage.

During the second half of the 1960s, the British planned to gradually reduce their garrison in Malaysia and Singapore and eventually complete a full withdrawal by the mid-1970s to reduce their defence expenditure (*The Straits Times*, 1966; 1967). This news came as a shock to Malaysia, as the country had heavily relied on the British military for its defence since gaining independence. The Tunku did not hide his despair and openly stated that the government would surrender if a major power, such as China, were to attack the country. He said:

It is just impossible to defend (ourselves against aggression from a big power)it is not that I foresee any such danger from China but if we cannot fight, we might as well give up to avoid unnecessary destruction of life and property.

If Communist China wants to attack us, all the communists here will support her while the others will just sit on the fence. (The Straits Times, 1968).

In the midst of losing British defence support and against the backdrop of the Cold War, Malaysia made a strategic shift in its foreign policy, transitioning from pro-Western to neutrality and non-alignment. Malaysia began establishing diplomatic relations with communist countries such as Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, North Korea, and finally China on May 31, 1974. Yet, Baginda (2016) indicated that BN had an additional motive for formalizing relations with China, which was to gain the support of Chinese voters who considered China as their ancestral country in the upcoming election. The BN leaders aimed to capitalize on the enthusiasm of the Chinese electorates, who were pleased with the newly established relations. Therefore, the general election needed to be held before their enthusiasm subsided. Consequently, BN conducted the general election on September 14, 1974, which was 83 days after Razak left China on June 2, 1974. Approximately 20 to 30 years later, Mahathir and Najib followed in Razak's footsteps by incorporating the China factor in the 1999 and 2013 general elections during their respective administrations. In 1999, Mahathir invited Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji to visit Malaysia from August 20 to August 27, and the election took place on November 29, 1999 (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 1999). During Zhu Rongji's visit, he and Mahathir jointly witnessed the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding for the reopening of the "Bank of China," which Chinese businessmen had urged the Malaysian government to reopen for seven years. As for Najib (2009-2018), he jointly presided over the opening ceremony for the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) with Jia Qinglin, the chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPCPP) on February 5, 2013. According to Cai Xi, the former Chinese ambassador to Malaysia, the date of the opening ceremony was deliberately fixed before the Chinese New Year. BN instructed its members to utilize the establishment of MCKIP to enhance the impression of friendly relations between BN and China within the

Chinese society when they participated in the Chinese New Year celebrations (*Guang Ming Daily*, 2013). BN later conducted the general election on May 5, 88 days after the opening ceremony.

When analyzing the historical context of these elections, the Prime Ministers desperately required support from not only the Malays, the largest population in the country but also from the Chinese, the second-largest population to secure a two-thirds majority and their party leadership. By strategically employing China's influence as a campaigning tool, it was obvious that even though the Chinese were born in Malaysia or held Malaysian citizenship, the Prime Ministers always perceived that they had a preference for China over Malaysia. The main objective of this paper is to examine the approaches that Razak, Mahathir, and Najib adopted to understand China and Chinese. Given that this paper is intended to study from the perspective of the Prime Ministers, it does not explore how the Chinese identified themselves, or how they viewed the Prime Ministers and the BN government. This paper employs content analysis as a research methodology and gathers secondary data from journal articles, book chapters, newspaper articles, and an opened ended interview. This paper is divided into four parts. The first part introduces the background of the three elections. The second part discusses the theoretical framework adopted in this paper. The third part analyses the formation of the perspective of the Prime Ministers on China and Chinese identity. The final part is the conclusion.

2. The Three Elections and the Visits of the High-Ranking Officers from Both Countries

After the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China in 1974, high-ranking officers from both countries frequently visited each other. Razak visited China once (1974) during his administration; Mahathir five times (1985, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999 and 2001); Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the fifth Prime Minister, twice (2004 and 2006); and Najib seven times (2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017) (Table 1). In contrast, Zhao Ziyang, the third Premier of China, visited Malaysia once (1981); Li Peng, the fourth Premier, twice (1990 and 1997); Yang Shangkun, the fourth President, once (1992); Jiang Zemin, the fifth President, three times (1993, 1997 and 1998); Zhu Rongji, the fifth Premier, once (1999), Wen Jiabao, the sixth Premier, twice (2005 and 2011); Hu Jintao, the sixth President, once

(2009); Xi Jinping, the seventh president, once (2013); and Li Keqiang, the seventh premier, once (2015). (Table 2).

Table 1. The Timeline of the Prime Ministers of Malaysia's Visit to China

Year	Name
1979	Hussein Onn
1985	
1993	
1994	Mahathir Mohamad
1996	
1999	
2001	
2004	Abdullah Ahmad Badawi
2006	
2009	
2011	
2012	
2014	Najib Razak
2015	
2016	
2017	

Source: Compiled by Author from Newspapers Coverage

Table 2. The Timeline of the Presidents and Premiers of China's Visit to Malaysia

Year	Name and Designation
1981	Premier Zhao Ziyang
1990	Premier Li Peng
1992	President Yang Shangkun
1993	President Jiang Zemin
1997	Premier Li Peng
1997	President Jiang Zemin
1998	President Jiang Zemin
1999	Premier Zhu Rongji
2005	Premier Wen Jiabao
2009	President Hu Jintao
2011	Premier Wen Jiabao
2013	Jia Qinglin (Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference)

Source: Compiled by Author from Newspapers Coverage

When comparing the dates of the visits with the Malaysia general elections, most of the interactions between the two countries high-ranking officers occurred almost more than six months before the general elections. Only three exceptions: Razak's China trip and the 1974 general election; Zhu Rongji's Malaysia trip and the 1999 election; and Jia Qinglin's Malaysia trip and the 2013 election. The 1974 general election was held on August 24, 1974, 83 days after Razak had left China, while the 1999 general election was held on November 29, 1999, 3 days after Zhu Rongji had left Malaysia. The visit of Jia Qinglin, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to Malaysia was noteworthy (Table 3). Even though Jia Qinglin's position was lower than that of the President and Premier of China, it suited the model, particularly because Malaysia was sending the invitation to Wen Jiabao rather than Jia Qinglin. Cai Xi pointed out that Wen Jiabao had to send Jia Qinglin because China was scheduled to convene the National People's Congress the following month (*Guang Ming Daily*, 2013). Given that Wen Jiabao was the premier of the country, it is understandable that he was unable to leave the country during that time.

Table 3. Malaysia and China High-Ranking Officers' Nearest Interaction Before Elections

Administration	Election Date	Malaysia High-Ranking Officers to China	Date of the Visit	China High-Ranking Officers to Malaysia	Date of the Visit	Days before election
Tunku Abdul Rahman	19.08.1959	-	-	-	-	-
	25.04.1964	-	-	-	-	-
	10.05.1969	-	-	-	-	-
Abdul Razak	24.08.1974	Prime Minister Abdul Razak	28.05.1974 to 02.06.1974	-	-	83
Hussein Oon	08.07.1978	-	-	-	-	-
Mahathir Mohammad	22.04.1982	-	-	Premier Zhao Ziyang	09.08.1981	256
	03.08.1986	Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad	20.11.1985 to 27.11.1985	-	-	249
	25.04.1995	-	-	President Jiang Zemin	10.11.1994	166
	29.11.1999	=	=	Premier Zhu Rongji	22.11.1999 to 26.11.1999	3

Administration	Election Date	Malaysia High-Ranking Officers to China	Date of the Visit	China High-Ranking Officers to Malaysia	Date of the Visit	Days before election
Abdullah Badawi	08.03.2008	Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi	29.10.2006 to 31.10.2006	-	-	494
Najib Razak	05.05.2013	-	-	*Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Jia Qinglin	04.02.2013 to 06.02.2013	88
	19.05.2018	Prime Minister Najib Razak	12.05.2017 to 16.05.2017	-	-	733

Source: Compiled by Author from Newspapers Coverage

The use of China's influence by the BN Prime Ministers to secure support from Chinese voters was not mere speculation, but rather a proven fact. After a decade out of office, Abdullah Badawi acknowledged that the BN government intended to influence the 1974 election through the establishment of Malaysia-China relations. Michael Chen Wing Sum, the former vice president of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and one of the individuals who played important roles in facilitating the Malaysia-China diplomatic relations, expressed a similar sentiment. They recalled that Razak was scheduled to visit China in the spring of 1974 under the pretext of normalizing relations. Following Razak's return from China, an opinion poll had to conduct within one to two months to gauge public sentiment before the general elections. The BN political elites believed that by shifting the country's foreign policy towards China from being adversarial to cordial, they could gain the approval of the Chinese community who still held strong connections with China as their ancestral homeland and secure the Chinese support in the election. Although the establishment did not occur until the summer, the plan remained unchanged (Baginda, 2016). The 1974 general election took place 83 days after Razak's return from China. It marked the best result the BN government had ever achieved, garnering 60.7% of the popular votes and winning 135 parliamentary seats out of 154.

The MCA, which was responsible for capturing Chinese support, won 19 seats, a significant increase of 6 seats from the previous election. This was a resounding triumph for the BN government. It was not surprising that Razak's successors adopted this strategy when they needed Chinese votes to secure their election victories.

The following paragraph provides an overview of the background of the 1974, 1999, and 2013 elections and explores the factors that prompted the Prime Ministers to consider leveraging China's influence as their final option to secure Chinese support in these elections.

The 1974 General Election

The May-13 tragedy, an ethnic riot between the Malays and the Chinese that occurred in 1969, cast a shadow over the Chinese community. The National Operations Council (1969) revealed in a report that the death toll was 196, and the number of injured was 439. The Chinese were the largest victim of this incident; with 143 fatalities and 270 injuries. The National Operations Council (1969) pointed out that the reasons for this ethnic clash were: 1. different interpretations of certain provisions of the Constitution, principally Articles 152 and 153 which related to the Malay language and the position of Malays among the Malays and immigrant races; 2. Certain politicians and supporters' disrespectful language and insulting behaviours after the 1969 general election sparked the conflict, and 3. CPM and secret societies exacerbated the existing tension between Malays and Chinese. Additionally, according to Brown (2005), Razak believed that the economic disparity, with the Chinese being wealthier than the Malays, also contributed to the May 13 Tragedy. In 1970, the national family poverty rate in West Malaysia was 49.3%, of which 65.9% were Malay families and 27.5% were Chinese families; among the shareholdings of limited companies, Malays only had 2.4% and Chinese 27.2% (Gomez, E.T. and Jomo, K.S., 1997).

After Razak assumed office as the Prime Minister of Malaysia in September 1971, he made significant efforts to reassure the Malays that the government would protect their future survival and well-being in their own country. He led the Parliament in amending the constitution to prohibit any form of open discussion on the special rights of the Malays, the official status of the Malay language, the status of the Malay ruler, and any other sensitive ethnic issue pertaining to ethnic relations (Cheah, 2002). Later, he introduced the "New Economy Policy" aimed at eradicating poverty in the

country, but it predominantly benefited the Malays in practice. These policies pleased the Malays while infuriating the Chinese (Faaland, Parkinson & Saniman, 1991). The 1974 general election held great significance for Razak as it marked his first election as the Prime Minister. He had to regain the government's two-thirds majority in parliament, which it had lost in the 1969 election, in order to validate his leadership. This mission could only be accomplished by gaining support from both Malays and Chinese voters. Therefore, establishing diplomatic relations with China became the most cost-effective strategy that would satisfy the Chinese but would not provide a substantial benefit to them. This would also prevent the recently appeased Malay population from becoming agitated.

The 1999 General Election

In the first 8 years of Mahathir's tenure, Malaysia and China only maintained limited interactions because CPM was still presumably a threat to Malaysia. It was only when the CPM announced its dissolution on December 2, 1989, did Malaysia's suspicion of China reduced and began to develop closer ties with China. Collaboration with China in terms of trade help Malaysia to reduce its dependence on Western countries to prevent a recurrence of the mid-1980s economic downturn. In addition, Mahathir also had the tendency to utilize China to organize an East Asian regional organization to counter the West, especially the United States.

Despite the fact that Malaysia had recovered from the effects of the Asian financial crisis by 1999 (Felker, 2000), BN lost its popularity among Malays after Mahathir's sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on September 2, 1998. Anwar was charged with ten counts of criminal activity, including disclosing state secrets, corruption, and unnatural sex (Chin, 2010). Anwar, the blue-eyed boy of Malay society, immediately gathered tens of thousands of Malays to initiate the "Reformasi" movement and condemn Mahathir for corruption, cronyism, and nepotism (Weiss, 2000). The police later arrested him under the Internal Security Act, which permitted detention without prosecution. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, wife of Anwar, later founded the Parti Keadilan Nasional and allied with the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia and the People's Action Party, to jointly challenge the ruling BN in the upcoming election (Cheah, 2002; Felker, 2000).

In comparison to Malay society, Chinese society displayed a largely indifferent attitude (*Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, 1999). The majority of Chinese

individuals viewed the “Anwar Incident” and the “Reformasi” as primarily Malay issues and held that it would be best for the Chinese to refrain from interfering (Chin, 2000). This response from the Chinese community could be attributed to 1987 when Anwar served as the Minister of Education and was involved in the Vernacular Chinese Primary School Incident.² In addition, Anwar’s indirect involvement in the Operation Lalang crackdown later deepened the Chinese community’s grievances. Prominent Chinese intellectuals, Chinese opposition politicians, and students were among the more than 100 people arrested, and the publishing licenses of three newspapers, *The Star*, *Sin Chew Daily*, and *Watan*, were revoked. The incident, although occurred 10 years ago, left a lasting impact on the Chinese community, and their resentment towards Anwar remained. Giving the Malay votes broadly divided, Chinese electorates became crucial for Mahathir to retain his power.

2013

Najib Razak led the 2013 election for the first time since he was sworn in as Prime Minister in April, 2009. His predecessor Abdullah Badawi was forced to step down after he failed to maintain a two-thirds majority in the 2008 election. BN lost approximately 50% of Chinese ballots compared to the 2004 election (Case, 2014). Najib needed Chinese votes to regain a two-thirds majority to establish he was the party’s legitimate leader. Before the 2013 election, Najib actively engaged in Chinese societal activities and sought to make an impression on the Chinese community. He visited Chinatown in Kuala Lumpur to demonstrate his willingness to connect with the local Chinese population. He even participated in two events that previous Prime Ministers never attended, which were the annual dinner of the Chinese independent high school and participating in the Chinese New Year gathering organized by the United Chinese School Committees Association (Chin, 2010). These gestures held great significance for Chinese society, showcasing Najib’s commitment to engaging with their community and addressing their concerns.

Najib introduced the concept of “1Malaysia: People-First, Performance Now” within a month of assuming office. He promised that no eligible nationals would be excluded from receiving state subsidies. Singh (2010) interpreted “1Malaysia” as intended to replace the differences between ethnic groups and religions in Malaysia with performance as the goal of

national governance. Five months later, to attract foreign investment and enhance Malaysia's competitiveness in the global economy, Najib announced that the government would reduce economic intervention. He amended the restriction in the 1971 New Economy Policy, reducing the requirement for bumiputra equity in public listed companies from 30% to 12.5%. In addition, the requirement for bumiputra equity ownership in 27 areas, such as tourism, transportation, and medicine would be eliminated (*Malaysiakini*, 2009; *Guang Ming Daily*, 2009).

These policies initially pleased the Chinese community, but Malay extremists eventually weakened them. Some members of UMNO instilled a great deal of fear among non-Malays. As Pakatan Harapan, the opposition coalition, gained large-scale popularity among urban Malays, UMNO candidates shifted their attention to rural or semi-rural areas to manipulate rural Malays' emotions by generating their animosity towards urban Malays and Chinese. They conveyed to local Malays that UMNO's purpose was to protect the power of "Malays First" while accusing greedy and untrustworthy urban Malays of joining Chinese forces to threaten Malay privileges. To demonstrate UMNO's concern for the Malays, the party distributed grocery coupons, rice subsidies, and 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M) via the government. UMNO's campaign strategy successfully consolidated the support of non-urban Malays and won back some urban middle-class Malays who had defected to Pakatan Rakyat, the predecessor of Pakatan Harapan, in 2008 (Case, 2014). In another incident, Ibrahim Ali, the chairman of PERKASA and a former member of UNMO, accused the Chinese of being greedy, urged the Chinese to spare the Malays, distributing white envelopes to the Chinese during Chinese New Year³ and urged the burning of the Bible⁴ (*Sin Chew Daily*, 2010; *Malaysiakini*, 2012, 2013). Furthermore, the Bersih 2.0 and Bersih 3.0 demonstrations which accused the government of engaging in electoral misconduct successfully attracted tens of thousands of Chinese individuals to participate. As a result, Najib's popularity among the Chinese plummeted. In December 2009, Najib's approval rating was 54% but by December 2012, it had declined to 34% while it remained around 77% among the Malays and Indians (Merdeka Centre, 2013).

3. The Post-Chineseness

Wang Gungwu (2002) remarked that the study of *Chineseness* among overseas Chinese had historically intertwined with China. It involved

exploring the memories of overseas Chinese towards China and how those memories shape their identity, encompassing factors such as biological origin, culture, and tradition. However, the notion of *Chineseness* was inevitably influenced by local culture, social structures, legal constraints, and political systems. As a result, the manifestation of *Chineseness* in each country was distinct yet recognizable. Both Wang Gungwu (2002) and Gu Hongting (1994) argued that overseas Chinese could not and should not be rigidly classified as a homogeneous group. Shih (2018a) further asserted that the meaning of *Chineseness* also varies based on interactive dynamics. Even individuals without Chinese heritage, if they possessed certain aspects of *Chineseness* and strategically exhibited it in the presence of objects who self-identified and had commonly recognized as having *Chineseness*, those objects would acknowledge their *Chineseness*. For instance, if an Indian Sinology professor demonstrated his proficiency in Chinese calligraphy to an individual commonly perceived as Chinese, this individual would recognize and appreciate the Indian Sinology professor's *Chineseness*. This illustrated the fluidity, contextualized, and individualized nature of *Chineseness*. Building upon this observation, Shih (2018a) introduced the concept of *Post-Chineseness* to better comprehend this phenomenon.

The concept of *Post-Chineseness* emerged with the perspective that, while it was derived from *Chineseness*, it rejected the notion of a fixed and predetermined meaning of *Chineseness* and what it meant to be Chinese. Moreover, *Post-Chineseness* argued that *Chineseness* could be cultivated through cultural and political means and strategically exhibited to achieve individual objectives (Shih, 2018b). In short, one's ancestor came from China or not no longer a determining factor. Anybody could possess *Chineseness* as long as they were willing to learn or to be assimilated. Shih (2017) further divided *Chineseness* into six categories:

1. *Cultural Chineseness*: Engaging in cultural or religious practices that are commonly associated with Chinese traditions, such as following Confucian principles and participating in ancestor worship.
2. *Experiential Chineseness*: Having had prolonged interactions with self-identified Chinese groups, acquiring the ability to mimic their preferences and behaviours, yet not fully grasping the essence of *Chineseness*.
3. *Sinological Chineseness*: Possessing the capacity to communicate

and elucidate cultural beliefs and differences between Chinese and non-Chinese groups, as a result of studying and researching various aspects of Chinese culture.

4. *Ethnic Chineseness*: Constantly being examined by both the non-Chinese society where they resided and by the China society. Consequently, they developed an ability to adapt and adjust to accommodate different expectations from both sides.
5. *Civilizational Chineseness*: Not identifying oneself as “Chinese” and lacking empirical knowledge of *Chineseness*. Using one’s civilization as a standard to distinguish similarities and differences between oneself and “Chinese”, to demonize or romanticize “Chinese”.
6. *Scientific Chineseness*: Not identifying oneself as “Chinese”. Systematically distinguishing others’ *Chineseness* using objective criteria, such as citizenship, class identity, kinship, and other universal standards.

In summary, the *Post-Chineseness* suggested that the interpretation of *Chineseness* was determined by the interaction of different combinations (Shih, 2018b). As such, *Chineseness* could have diverse compositions and carry different meanings. Even individuals without Chinese ancestry could acquire elements of *Chineseness* through political engagement or cultural assimilation. When one strategically demonstrated the *Chineseness* to the objects that were self-identify or widely recognized as possessing *Chineseness*, the objects might develop a sense of approval and satisfy the purpose of the individual. In this vein, Shih proposed that *Chineseness* was a kind of “imagined identity” that was reaffirmed through the political dynamics’ difference.

4. The Post-Chineseness of Razak, Mahathir and Najib

There is no doubt that Razak, Mahathir, and Najib’s self-identification were Malay. Three of them had no public record of having learnt Chinese culture or lived and studied in China as well. Based on the classification of *Post-Chineseness*, they fell into the category of either *Scientific Chineseness* or *Civilizational Chineseness*. To recap, *Civilized Chineseness* referred to distinguishing the similarities and differences between oneself and the Chinese using subjective civilization standards and ideologies to demonize or romanticize others. *Scientific Chineseness* defined *Chineseness* according

to certain common or universal standards such as sovereign territory, kinship, skin colour, language, citizenship, etc. In short, *Civilized Chineseness* was a subjective understanding of *Chineseness*, whereas *Scientific Chineseness* was an objective understanding (Shih, 2017; 2018a).

Razak

After assuming the position of Prime Minister in 1970, Razak actively pursued the establishment of diplomatic ties with China (Jeshurun, 2009). He believed that a neutral foreign policy was necessary for Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia, to remain outside the scope of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 1970). Razak believed that by establishing formal relations with China, China would no longer support or assist the CMP. Consequently, the threat posed by the CPM would be eliminated. This logical assumption did not require an in-depth comprehension of China, and it could be applied to any small country caught in the power struggle between the two superpowers. As such, China in Razak's view was a specific object that was defined by international relations, geography, demography, social structure, and government policy. Razak's understanding of China was the *Scientific Chineseness*. Sadly, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China, not only did China refuse to cut ties with the CMP, but also attacks by the CMP in Malaysia increased. Due to these factors, the relations between Malaysia and China became estranged. It was obvious that Razak viewed China and the CPM as a single organism with a shared ideology. Hence, since CPM was a threat to the security of Malaysia, so did China.

Razak's also used *Scientific Chineseness* to view the Chinese. Given the ethnic Chinese ancestral ties to China, Razak assumed that the Chinese would inherently hold pro-China views due to their bloodline and genetic influences. This presumption did not require a comprehensive understanding of China and the Chinese; in fact, many leaders of a country with a diverse immigrant population shared the same viewpoint.

Mahathir

Mahathir exhibited two distinct forms of *Post-Chineseness*. Despite China being a communist country when the CPM was disbanded in 1989, Mahathir began developing closer ties with China compared to the pre-1989 era.

As the threat from China was less direct geographically than that of the CPM, Mahathir objectively evaluated China from a standpoint of national interests and recognized China as a vast market with potential for business opportunities. Mahathir possessed a *Scientific Chineseness* in this case. In addition, Mahathir also sought China as an ally that shared Asian values to stand together in opposition to the spread of Western liberalism. It was these perspectives that played significant roles in furthering bilateral relations between the two countries. Mahathir's understanding of China in this context needed familiarity with China's historical culture, indicating his *Post-Chineseness* took on a civilizational perspective. Mahathir's *Post-Chineseness* towards the Chinese community can be characterized as *Scientific Chineseness*, similar to Razak's approach. In emulating Razak's election strategy, it was obvious that he also perceived a deep and inseparable connection between the Chinese community and China could not be easily severed. Hence, Mahathir recognized the importance of engaging with China before the general election to garner support from the Chinese community.

Najib

Malaysia-China relations during Najib involved historical connection and personal sentiments. Wen Jiabao once told the Malaysian Chinese press that Malaysia had rendered China two enormous favours: 1) Malaysia was the first ASEAN country to establish diplomatic relations with China, and 2) Malaysia proposed dialogues between China and ASEAN during the Mahathir administration, thereby facilitating the cooperation between the two parties. If Malaysia required assistance, China would assist in return (*Sin Chew Daily*, 2011). Najib was the son of Razak and the protégé of Mahathir. His relations with Razak and Mahathir made China willing to accommodate his requests as long as they did not compromise the national interest of China. Cai Xi indicated that the establishment of the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) and the scheduling of its opening ceremony was in response to Najib's specific requests (*Sin Chew Daily*, 2012; *Guang Ming Daily*, 2013). Najib made use of the debt China owed to his predecessors, employing cultural norms of reciprocity and gratitude shared by both Chinese and Malays. His *Post-Chineseness* to China, therefore, was *Civilizational Chineseness*.

Najib shared the same *Post-Chineseness* as Razak and Mahathir when viewing the Chinese. Najib overlooked the fact that the Chinese electorate of the twenty-first century had evolved, along with their views on China and Malaysia. His adherence to a *Scientific Chineseness* viewpoint limited his understanding of the changing dynamics. As a result, Najib failed to connect with the Chinese voters, leading to a significant loss of support from this community.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, the Prime Ministers' *Post-Chineseness* towards China was not static and was influenced by different factors, including the national power, civilization and their long relations with China. Razak's initial approach to establishing formal relations with China was driven by a *Scientific Chineseness* perspective, which aimed to navigate the complex dynamics against the backdrop of the Cold War. However, when China did not withdraw support for the CPM, Razak shifted towards a *Civilizational Chineseness* standpoint and maintained a certain distance from China. Mahathir inherited Razak's *Civilizational Chineseness* in the first 8 years of his administration. With the dissolution of the CPM, Mahathir's *Post-Chineseness* shifted to *Scientific Chineseness* and developed business cooperation with China. However, when Mahathir sought an ally to align with Asian values to counter Western liberalism, his *Post-Chineseness* towards China reverted to *Civilizational Chineseness* in this incident.

Najib's *Post-Chineseness*, meanwhile, was on *Civilizational Chineseness* for his interaction with China, such as urging China of setting up the MCKIP was driven by emotional and historical appeals rather than purely objective calculation. In contrast, Razak, Mahathir and Najib's *Post-Chineseness* toward the Chinese were static, primarily adopting *Scientific Chineseness*. They perceived the Malaysian Chinese had a preference for China over Malaysia because of the ancestral ties between the Chinese and China. This paper would like to emphasize that the flow of Malaysian Chinese votes in the above elections was influenced by various factors with the China factor being one that cannot be ignored. While it was not the sole determinant, it does reflect the perspective of the Prime Ministers on Malaysia-China and Chinese-China relations.

Notes

1. In this article, the term “Chinese” refers to the Chinese population in Malaysia unless otherwise specified.
2. The government’s decision to appoint non-Mandarin-speaking teachers to senior administrative positions, including the principal, in Chinese primary schools raised concerns within the Chinese community. This move was perceived as a potential threat to the preservation of their Chinese identity, as the working language of these schools was Mandarin. The appointment of non-Mandarin-speaking teachers could have led to a change in the working language of the Chinese primary schools, possibly to Malay or English. The community interpreted this appointment as a deliberate attempt to undermine the essence of Chinese primary schools.
3. White envelopes generally given out at the funeral in Chinese culture.
4. Ibrahim Ali believed that the Malay version of the Bible was specially printed by people with ulterior motives to preach to Malays. According to Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution, those who call themselves or are called Malays must be Muslims, and it is illegal to propagate teachings other than Islam to Malays. However, the religious language of the aborigines in East Malaysia was mostly Malay, and the existence of the Malay version of the Bible was basically printed for the needs of the aborigines in East Malaysia. Ibrahim Ali called for the burning of the Malay Bible insulted the Christians. Chinese Christian made up approximately 11% of Malaysia population.

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