



Malaysian Perspective on Malaysia-China Relations and the Bilateral Educational Exchanges between Malaysia and China

Xia Nan^{1,2}, Lee Yok Fee^{1*} and Zatul Himmah Adnan¹

¹Department of Government and Civilization Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

²School of International Education, Chengde Medical University, 067000, Chengde, Hebei, China

ABSTRACT

Malaysia and China have established formal-diplomatic relations since 31 May 1974. The bilateral relations between Malaysia and China are well developed in the economic and trade fields, followed by tourism. Therefore, there are many records and studies on these aspects. However, in a recent development, the bilateral relation in the field of education has become more and more important, thus the bilateral educational exchanges between Malaysia and China has become the focus of this writing. This article has two main objectives, firstly, to elaborate the background of Malaysia-China relations; and secondly, to examine the achievement of educational exchange between Malaysia and China since 1974, especially on the higher education aspect. Primary data for this study were collected through interviews and a total of ten informants were selected based on purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected from journal articles, reports, and websites. Both data were analyzed using content analysis. The findings of this study indicate that, due to the ideological issue, Malaysia and China did not have any actual contact until 1989 when the issue of the Communist Party of Malaya was solved. However, the development of Malaysia-China relations was initially slow until the rise of China and the promotion of the “Belt and Road Initiative,” when the relations between the two countries entered the most splendid period in history. Nevertheless, the rapid development of

Malaysia-China relations has caused some controversial voices among Malaysians. Malaysia and China began to conduct educational cooperation officially after they signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on education cooperation in 1997. In addition, mutual recognition of academic higher education qualifications was finally

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 10 September 2018

Accepted: 18 June 2019

Published: 23 July 2019

E-mail addresses:

flyforever2008@hotmail.com (Xia Nan)

leeyokfee@upm.edu.my (Lee Yok Fee)

zatul@upm.edu.my (Zatul Himmah Adnan)

* Corresponding author

resolved when the two countries signed the Framework Agreement to Facilitate Mutual Recognition in Academic Higher Education Qualifications in 2011. Today, it is believed that the educational exchange between Malaysia and China has become better and more significant.

Keywords: Bilateral relations, educational exchange, Malaysia-China relations

INTRODUCTION

The friendly relation between Malaysia and China has a long history. Malaysia and China have established formal diplomatic relations since 31 May 1974. Politically speaking, Malaysia did not change its attitude towards China until the late 1980s (Liow, 2005). Then in the 1990s, there has been a substantial improvement in the bilateral relations (Liow, 2000). With the rapid development of the economy, the rise of China is clearly one of the most important trends of recent times (Pumphrey, 2002). As a rising power, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has attracted serious attention from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries, and also other major countries in the world (Ku, 2008).

The bilateral relations between Malaysia and China are mainly established based on the economic and trade fields, followed by tourism and education. Compared to other fields, the development in education is relatively lagging behind due to many reasons, mainly ethnic problems and the Chinese education issues in Malaysia (Liao, 2012). It was not until the year 1997 when Malaysia and China signed the

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Education Cooperation that opened a prelude to educational cooperation between these two countries and they began to interact actively in educational exchange. Most of the previous discussions on the bilateral relations between Malaysia and China were based on China's perspective and also secondary data. This paper attempts to provide additional primary data through interview and also see the relations from Malaysia's perspective. This paper aims to, firstly, to elaborate the background of Malaysia-China relations in different significant periods; and secondly, to examine the achievement of educational exchange between Malaysia and China since 1974, especially on the higher education aspect.

Literature Review

Malaysia and China have a long history of connection of over 2000 years, during which their citizens have forged a profound friendship. In the academic circle, there are many approaches to analyze the Malaysia-China relations. Some of the scholars used the horizontal analysis method. For instance, Lin (2011) analyzed the development of economic and trade between Malaysia and China since the 1970s. She stated that after the establishment of diplomatic relations with each other, the fields of economic and trade as an important part of the bilateral relations had entered a new stage. However, merchandise trade between the two countries was both competitive and complementary. Li (2006) analyzed Malaysia and China relations in the post-

Cold War period. He stated that the relations between Malaysia and China constantly strengthened. Zhu (1996) pointed out some problems in the relations between the two countries that needed to be solved. The first one is the Nansha (Spratly) Islands dispute and the second one is Malaysia and Taiwan relations. Wang (2000) said that after the founding of The People's Republic of China, the influence of world political trends and the restrictions caused by the internal situation of the two countries had caused China and Malaysia to experience a tortuous process of development, and slowed down the development in bilateral economic and trade relations. Liao (2005) also used the horizontal approach to look into political, economic and cultural relations between Malaysia and China. She pointed out that since the end of the Cold War, Malaysia had adopted a very positive and friendly policy towards China and strived to seek close cooperation in all aspects. China's positive response had made the Malaysian government reacted positively to China's policy, thus led to win-win results in their bilateral relations.

On the other hand, some of the scholars used longitudinal analysis method to scrutinize Malaysia-China relations. For example, Leong (1987) examined the obstacles in the path of Malaysia-China relations and assessed the status of bilateral ties between the two nations in the 1980s. He stated that there were three problems in the first decade of Malaysia-China relations (1974-1984). The first problem was the Party to Party Relations; the second problem

was Beijing's Overseas Chinese Policy, and the third problem was the lack of direct trade. He concluded that although Malaysia-China economic relations is less susceptible to ideological influences, it would still advance further. In the political arena, the Malaysian government will continue to be suspicious of China's objectives in Southeast Asia. In addition, Liow (2000) focused on China and Malaysia relations in the 1990s and stated that there had been a substantial improvement in bilateral relations. Gu (2006) discussed the political and economic relations between Malaysia and China and he stated that the relation was prompted by three Chinese policies since the 1980s, namely: (1) the open door policy; (2) the good neighbor policy; (3) the "going out" policy. Wang (2011) examined early Malaysia-China relations under the historical background of Britain-China relations. He drew the conclusion that the process of establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia was full of challenges and efforts together in overcoming the difficulties. Yang (2004) also studied Malaysia-China relations using longitudinal analysis method. He found out that there were no diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China for a period of time. This was due to the conflicts of national interests when the bilateral relations developed to a certain extent. However, the conflicts were resolved through reconciliation between the two countries.

As mentioned above, most scholars focused on Malaysia and China political

and economic relations, especially from the Chinese aspect. In other words, most of them discussed China's policies in Malaysia-China relations. In addition, they also discussed the obstacles in the political and economic domains of Malaysia-China relations. However, few scholars pay attention to the field of educational exchange. As for this article, the authors used a longitudinal analysis approach to examine the Malaysia-China relations based on three different periods.

METHODS

This article was written based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews. At first, the key informants were selected based on purposive sampling, and then snowball sampling method was used to identify other informants. A total of ten informants were selected and interviewed from November 2016 to April 2017. The interview stopped when the data had reached a saturated point. In order to protect the informants' identity, the authors ensured that all data were collected with appropriate anonymity and confidentiality. The informants were categorized based on their background and involvement in bilateral relations. There were three categories of informants, i.e. category A for politicians, B for social activists and C for academic scholars. There were three politicians coded as A1, A2 and A3, three social activists coded as B1, B2, and B3, and four academic scholars coded as C1, C2, C3, and C4. The politicians were government

officials related to education. The social activists included political commentators and cultural workers. Scholars included senior lecturers and professors from universities in Malaysia. Meanwhile, the secondary data were collected from journal articles, reports, newspapers and magazines, website pages and the Internet. Content analysis was used to analyze both primary and secondary data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Background of Malaysia-China Relations from 1974 to 1990s

In 1970, Tun Abdul Razak became the second Prime Minister of Malaysia. He appointed a group of consultants who were more pro-Soviet. Though these consultants were Malay, they were against the one-sided policy to the West. They suggested that Malaysia should not implement an anti-China or anti-Communist policy like Britain and other western countries, which was not in the political interests of Malaysia (B2, personal communication, December 18, 2016). Thus, in 1972, Malaysia established diplomatic relations with Eastern Europe, included the Soviet Union. According to informant B2, "these so-called diplomatic relations with Eastern Europe mean that Malaysia was pursuing the policy of Neutrality, in other words, Malaysia and China had no formal alliance with or opposition to any major power groups because it participated in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)". Meanwhile, in 1972, former US President Richard Milhous Nixon visited Beijing and established

diplomatic relations with China. This move had a positive effect on Malaysia and other countries which thought to form diplomatic relations with China. In other words, the adjustment of Malaysia's policy towards China is the result of its adaptation to changes in the international situation (Wang, 2011). In addition, informant B2 stated that:

“Malaysia advertised itself as a neutral and non-aligned country. Later after a trade-off, consultants of Tun Abdul Razak told him that since Malaysia have established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, it should also set up diplomatic relations with China. And that time, Nixon went to Beijing, he had an effect, that is to say, Malaysia should follow the step of its leader” (personal communication, December 18, 2016).

On the other hand, after the 13 May 1969 incident, Malaysia stopped the Congressional Democracy and used the National Security Council to rule the country. But in 1975, in order to gain support from the Chinese voters, Tun Abdul Razak decided to set up diplomatic relations with China. In 1974, when he went to China and met with China's leader Chairman Mao, citizens from both countries found the historical visit as something very significant, because it renewed the tradition of the two countries. Just as informant B3 said:

“Tun Abdul Razak was very clever. He shook hands with Chairman Mao and established formal diplomatic

relations with China in 1974, and his timing was just right. The photo of him shaking hand with Chairman Mao became the most important poster of the 1975 election and was posted everywhere. At that time, many Malaysian Chinese were leftist and had socialist thought, so Tun Abdul Razak won a lot of votes to win the 1975 election” (personal communication, December 28, 2016).

Therefore, Malaysia became the first Southeast Asian country to establish formal diplomatic relations with China (Razak, 2014). In the beginning, the relations between Malaysia and China mainly focused on politics. Basically, there was only official contact. There is a very vivid example given by informant B2:

“In 1975, Zhou Enlai appointed Wang Youping, who was an admiral as China's ambassador to Malaysia. An NGO from Penang invited former leader named Cui Yaocai to organize a welcome celebration for the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia. They held a press conference for this event, but it was blocked and later disbanded by Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The reason was that this belonged to the government to government diplomatic relations, not the people to people, therefore none of the NGOs can hold any welcome ceremony” (personal communication, December 18, 2016).

Hence, official contact was very much a concern in the so-called Malaysia-China diplomatic relations at that time. During 1974-1980, China was relatively conservative. It was not until the end of the 1980s that China had a rapid domestic development and it began to establish good relationships with more countries, regardless of the economic or other aspects (C1, personal communication, November 9, 2016). It was in the 1980s that Malaysia and China had economic exchanges. There were several Malaysian businessmen who invested and set up factories in China, such as William Cheng Heng Jem, who established Parkson Group, Robert Kuok Hock Nien and Yuen Kim Koo.

In short, Malaysia-China relations before 1974 were almost non-existent. It remains unchanged until 1974, but relations in the pre-1990 period were mainly focused on official contact. One of the biggest obstacles in Malaysia-China relations before the 1990s was the threat of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). Leong (1987) pointed out that “undeniably, the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) links with the CPM constitute a major obstacle in Kuala Lumpur’s relations with Beijing”. That was the reason for fear; Malaysia feared of the ideology of Marxism and Communism, on the other hand, Malaysia also feared of political struggle from CPM. This problem was not solved, thus made Malaysia and China relations to become more cautious or conservative. Actually, the linkage between CPC and CPM was the real issue, which made the Malaysian government felt cautious. As stated by informant B1:

The Malaysian government has always believed that CPM was supported by CPC. In fact, it was true, because many of the important cadres of CPM were actually in China, there was also a radio station in Hunan, China that broadcasted to Southeast Asia. (Personal communication, November 24, 2016).

Another obstacle in Malaysia-China relations was the ethnic relations in Malaysia. Chinese Malaysians are the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia. For a long time, there was still the voice of doubt on the loyalty and allegiance of Chinese Malaysians until the 1970s, which questioned whether they were allegiant to their original country or Malaysia. In the peak of the Cold War, Chinese Malaysians, especially those who had the left-leaning thought were seen as the fifth column of the CPC.

Malaysia-China Relations in the 1990s

There are two important aspects in the understanding of Malaysia-China relations in the 1990s, i.e. the end of the Cold War and the reconciliation of CPM with the Malaysian government. These two events played a major role and exerted a significant impact on Malaysia-China relations. Although the two countries had established diplomatic relations in 1974, Malaysia did not change its perceptions of the Chinese until the end of the 1980s.

CPM, which was the biggest obstacle, had been solved. The leader of CPM, Chin

Peng, signed the Agreement between the Government of Malaysia and the Communist Party of Malaya to Terminate Hostilities, or also known as the Peace Agreement of Hat Yai 1989, with the Thailand and Malaysian governments on December 2, 1989. According to informant B2,

When Mahathir was our Prime Minister, he sent a representative and police delegation to Hong Kong to find Robert Kuok Hock Nien, who was accepted by the Malaysian government as a go-between contact with China. He recommended the Malaysian officials to the United Front Work Department of CPC Central Committee. Malaysia put forward a request to persuade CPM to lay down their arms, and the Malaysian government said, 'We did not call you a terrorist, and we did not say that you surrendered or disarmed, this is a peace contract.' So the Peace Agreement of Hat Yai 1989 was not the kind of surrender reconciliation like the Baling Talks. (Personal communication, December 18, 2016).

Hence, through the effort of Mahathir's government, the CPM problem was eventually solved. In addition, in 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved, which indicated the end of the Cold War. The US President at that time, George H. W. Bush, expressed that "the biggest thing that has happened in the world in my life, in our lives, is this: By the grace of God, America won the Cold War" (Ambrose, 2010). After that, Malaysia

began to change its perceptions towards the Chinese.

Thus it can be seen that Malaysia-China relations in the 1990s period entered a relatively new stage, where there had been a substantial improvement in bilateral relations. Not only did the official high-level visits become more normalized, but the people-to-people exchanges such as the flow of people between the two countries also rapidly became more frequent. The Malaysian Prime Minister visited China more regularly. In return to these formal visits, many Chinese leaders often came to visit Malaysia. With this underlying platform, both countries began to initiate the frequent exchange of high-level official visits which led to the expansion of cooperation in other areas. When Qiao Shi, who was the Chairman of the National People's Congress of China, visited Malaysia in 1993, the Congress diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China set off the starting point (A3, personal communication, March 8, 2017). People-to-people tourism had grown greatly, and more Malaysian Chinese businessmen began to invest in China.

In short, Malaysia-China relations in the 1990s period were a relatively new stage. In other words, mutual exchanges improved rapidly between the two countries, not only officially but also people-to-people. However, the Malaysian officials maintained the kind of embankment and alert, though China had reformed and opened up, that there was still ideological confinement between Malaysia and China.

Malaysia-China Relations after 2000

Malaysia-China relations after 2000 are another stage, where they were further developed. After China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, it was also included in the globalization of the world economic system and became one of its important members. Additionally, after China's former leader Deng Xiaoping's tour in the southern provinces of China, which made it the world's factory, many foreigners invested and set up factories in the country. China's manufacturing industry had a rapid development. Therefore after 2000, the relationship between Malaysia and China grew closer, and Malaysia began to rely more on China's trade. It seems that this dependence created a new problem as China factors slowly penetrate or affect some areas of Malaysian society, especially after the "Belt and Road Initiative", which has brought some positive factors as well as other negative effects and caused some domestic problems in Malaysia. These will be discussed in the following part.

In 2013, Xi Jinping, who is the President of China, raised the initiative of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which is known as the "Belt and Road Initiative." "Belt" refers to the economic belt along China's traditional Silk Road connecting China with Europe. "Road" is the new 'Maritime Silk Road' between China, Southeast Asia and Africa (Swaine, 2015). The aim is for China to invest in the infrastructure and linkages associated with these "Roads" to help bolster its overseas trade.

Malaysia is located at the center of Southeast Asia and holds the Straits of Malacca as an incomparable advantage in the cooperative construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Malaysia views the unity and cohesiveness of ASEAN and a Southeast Asia that is free from major-power dominance and rivalry as matters of major strategic importance (Brant, 2015). So, with the rise of China and the promotion of the "Belt and Road Initiative," Malaysia-China relations entered the most splendid period in history, especially economic relations strength which is a double-edged sword that caused some controversial voices. Thus, the authors focused on the negative effects of China factors on Malaysia-China relations based on Malaysia's attitudes or perspectives.

There are four main negative effects of China factor on Malaysia-China relations. Firstly, it hinders democratization in Malaysia. Recently, Malaysia has a closer relationship with China; the former Prime Minister Najib's visit to China would give an impression to the Democrats and raise their suspicion that the Chinese government is supporting a corrupt regime. In addition, informant C3 said:

We know that in Malaysia, Najib is very fragile, and his political prestige is very low. If people have the illusion that China supports a corrupt regime, then Malaysians will think that China hinders our democratization. Our opposition party and democratic movements want Najib to step down, but

because of China's strength to help Najib solve some of his financial problems, they will misunderstand that China supports an authoritarian government. (Personal communication, December 27, 2016)

It can be seen that the Democrats believed that China's support for Najib's government hindered democratization in Malaysia, which was the first negative effect of China factor on Malaysia-China relations.

Secondly, it damages national interests and national security of Malaysia. Recently there were many State-owned enterprises such as China General Nuclear Power Corp, China Railway Construction Corp Ltd (CRCC) and some other large enterprises of China which invested in several projects and bought some state-owned resources in Malaysia. In the 1MDB scandal, 60% stake in 1MDB's Bandar Malaysia was sold to a joint venture between CRCC and Iskandar Waterfront Holdings Sdn Bhd for RM7.41bil in December 2015, which made many people think that the Malaysian government sold some state-owned assets to China so that their power could penetrate some of Malaysia's strategic infrastructure (Tee, 2016). These are related to the strategic interest in infrastructure and national security, which are harmful to Malaysian sovereignty and national security.

Apart from that, although there is an increasing volume of China's capital investment to Malaysia, yet some small and medium enterprises in Malaysia did not enjoy any benefits and this has caused

their dissatisfaction towards China. China's investments in Malaysia are well diversified (Chew, 2016). As mentioned by informant C2:

China's large state-owned enterprises came to Malaysia to contract some projects, but they did not use raw materials from Malaysia or hire local manpower, which was brought from China. For example, when Xiamen University Malaysia was built, the cement and bricks were all shipped from China. So, even if China's funds and projects are very big, some downstream manufacturers have no way to benefit, and this may result in the exclusion of the small and medium enterprises that may be closed down if they cannot overcome this competition. (Personal communication, November 18, 2016).

It can be seen that China's large state-owned enterprises did not use raw materials and human resources from Malaysia, instead, they used their own resources from China, which led to the dissatisfaction of some small and medium enterprises in Malaysia.

Thirdly, it affects the subjectivity and autonomy of Malaysian society. In order not to offend China as well as getting the distribution of resources from China, some Chinese communities in Malaysia have to fight for China's identity and be more careful when dealing with Chinese Embassy in Malaysia. So, when organizations hold

activities or deliver speeches, they have to be very cautious to avoid touching the sensitive issue of China. For example, Ma Ying-jeou was invited by Southern University College in Malaysia to participate in the Eighth World Chinese Economic Summit on 15 November 2016. The invitation and promotional material described him as the “former president of Taiwan,” but *Sin Chew Daily* called him a “former leader of Taiwan” (B1, personal communication, November 24, 2016). According to the interviews, some informants said if Chinese communities made the Chinese embassy unhappy, the embassy will not contact and allocate resources to them.

Fourthly, it may cause tension among ethnic relations in Malaysia, especially between the Malays and Chinese. Even though Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-cultural country, there are subtle relations between different races. With China’s investment in Malaysia, the relationship between these countries became better and closer than ever before, nevertheless, it may break the balance of ethnic relations in Malaysia. This argument was illustrated by informant C4 who said that:

Some politicians in Malaysia still have racist thinking. Before this, they have been spreading the threat of the Chinese. For one thing, the Chinese are very happy to see investments from China, on the other hand, we are also afraid that this will aggravate the threat of the Chinese, and cause worry among the Malays. There are tense

relations between the Malays and the Chinese, though it seems peaceful on the surface, there is still mutual suspicion between the two major ethnic groups. The substantial investment in China will make the Malays feel threatened. (Personal communication, December 30, 2016).

In brief, the relations between Malaysia and China have gone through different stages since the two countries established formal relations in 1974. During the Cold War period, relations were generally characterized as antagonistic because of ideological, political, and strategic differences created divide and mistrust. In 1974, the relation is almost zero, even though the two countries established diplomatic relations, there are still the issues of ideology and CPM, which caused the relations between the two countries to stay only at the official level. The year 1989 was a watershed for Malaysia and China relations. With the CPM problem completely solved, the relations extended to people-to-people exchanges, which entered a relatively new stage. The development of modern relations between the two countries covered from a small respective sector to every aspect in the 2000s. In other words, following gradual adjustment of policies by both sides, the relationship evolved from a state of confrontation to normalization and finally cooperation and partnership. Nowadays, along with the promotion of the “Belt and Road Initiative,” Malaysia and China relationship is now facing

opportunities and challenges. The relations between these two countries ushered in the best time in history and will become better in the future.

Educational Exchange and Malaysia-China Relations

The development of bilateral Malaysia-China relations in the educational area is lagging behind due to many reasons, such as ethnic problems and Chinese education issue in Malaysia (Liao, 2012). It was not until the year 1997 when the government of Malaysia and China signed an MOU on Education Cooperation that opened a prelude to educational cooperation between the two countries. As an important aspect of the relationship between Malaysia and China, the educational exchange has gone through different historical stages and are moving forward.

Educational Exchange before the 1990s: Sensitive and Cautious

The educational exchange between Malaysia and China started very late. There was no educational exchange in the early period when the two countries established diplomatic relations. Malaysia's education policy was also stricter, where Malaysian students could not enter China to study before the 1990s. Even citizens, especially the Chinese, were not allowed to go to China freely. Informant B3 explained that there were only three situations that people could visit China. Firstly, people who have a heavy illness like cancer can go back to China to visit-relatives. Secondly, according

to the Department of Immigration Malaysia, people who were more than 60 years old could go to China, and thirdly, with special approval of the government such as for trading and so on. If any delegation has to go to China, there were also many restrictions imposed. He gave an example to describe this. He said that if the delegation wanted to go to China, the Malaysian government had to appoint one person who holds an idle position, but was responsible for monitoring the action of the delegation. After they came back, they had to write a report and be interviewed by the government. In fact, it was not until the 1990s when the CPM issue was resolved that the two countries began to allow people-to-people exchanges.

Actually, during the colonial period, the British government did not encourage Malaya to get in touch with China. Though Malaya had achieved independence in 1957 and established diplomatic relations with China in 1974, there was no actual contact, let alone educational exchange, due to ideological reason. This was effected by the British colonial government, just like the informant C7 said, "We were colonized by the British, so the mentality still looks towards the west. If you look from the 1970s when the government would send students overseas, of course, they would mainly send them to the UK, some to the United States, Germany, and a small number to Australia and New Zealand."

Even if the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1974, there are no people-to-people exchanges and no educational exchange. It was not until the

1980s that it became more open. People couldn't go to China to study, and it became more stringent especially during the British colonial period. It was mainly influenced by British colonial policies, which oppressed and limited Chinese education in Malaysia and restricted Malaysian Chinese to study in China. But in fact, from the early 1950s, there were people, such as Liang Liji, who went back to China to study. After the end of World War II to the early 1950s, a lot of Chinese secondary schools in Malaysia were affected by the left, therefore a group of students returned to China because they were repressed by the government and could not cope in Malaysia. These people went back to China mainly through some informal channels. Informant B1 further pointed out that:

“Although they were Malaysians, some of them were expelled by the government due to involvement in the left movement, so they returned to China and were arranged to study at local universities.” (Personal communication, November 24, 2016).

In addition, informant B1 said “the secondary school students or Chinese students could not go back to study in China because the two countries did not have formal diplomatic relations. Due to the factors of ideology and the Cold War, China did not accept a large number of students at that time”. As a matter of fact, many students went to Taiwan for their study from the end of the 1940s onwards, especially in the 1960s. During that time,

there was the anti-China policy of the United States and Taiwan started to enroll overseas Chinese students. Also during that time, Southeast Asia was still filled with the influence of CPM, which was relatively large, based on political factor. In order to retaliate against the CPC and CPM, the United States implemented the US aid plan in Taiwan, which informant C3 pointed out, “From that time on, students who came to Taiwan to study would be given financial support from the US government. If Taiwan enrolled overseas students successfully, the United States would subsidize money to Taiwan every year, which supported the anti-communist policy. So Taiwan began to recruit a large number of overseas students from the beginning of the 1950s. We went to Taiwan to study under this circumstance and received scholarships every month.” However, by 1965, the US aid plan stopped but at that time it was already a trend to go to Taiwan to study. So, there were hundreds of people going to Taiwan every year, and until now, the number had accumulated up to four or five thousand every year.

In short, only a few students went to study in China due to the opposite ideology. Meanwhile, there were strict restrictions to enter China. Although the relationship was still there, in terms of students exchange Malaysia was very cautious. The educational aspect was a relatively sensitive area in Malaysia-China relations. The Malaysian government thought education in China would promote communist ideology to grown among the Malaysian students. Hence under this circumstance, most Malaysian students went to study in Taiwan.

Educational Exchange after the 1990s: From Education Cooperation to Mutual Recognition

Malaysians did not go to China for education before the 1990s, mainly because of different ideologies. At the same time, Malaysians have not much knowledge about China during that time. They did not come into contact with the reality of China and only obtained some information from the media or publicity. They thought that China was still relatively backward and in poverty.

With the settlement of the CPM issue, which was the biggest problem hindering Malaysia-China relations, the Malaysian government gradually loosened the restrictions to visit China, and people-to-people exchanges became more common and frequent. So in the early 1990s, there was a trend of educational exchange between Malaysia and China. According to informant A1, "I think... started in 1992 when the sixth Primer Minister Najib was the Minister of Education, so that was the first time that we had this exchange."

But there was very few official educational exchange at that time. Many Malaysians went to study in China through the people-to-people exchange, and most of them were Chinese Malaysian, who were students from Chinese independent high schools and students who could not access the public universities in Malaysia. At the beginning of the educational exchange in the early 1990s, though there were many students who went to China, the lack of experience and comprehensive institutionalized policies caused Malaysia

and China were relatively vogue towards educational exchange and their attitudes towards management of students. This has had caused the "Jinan University Storm," and many Malaysian students have been driven away and suspended from entering China. Chinese universities immediately repatriated more than one hundred Malaysian students back to Malaysia for unknown causes.

Though there were many problems in the early educational exchange, some parents still gradually sent their children to study in China in the late 1990s. This was because of China's reform and opening up. Chinese universities gradually recruited international students. Some Malaysians relatively yearned for China because of its reform and opening up, even though they did not know the real China well.

At the beginning of the 1990s, there were some students who went to study in China but this occurred mainly through the people-to-people channel, and there was no agreement between the two governments or institutionalized management mechanism. It was not until 1997 when Malaysia and China signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Education Cooperation that opened a prelude to educational cooperation between the two countries. Though it was just an understanding without recognizing the mutual degrees, the Malaysian government opened a door to an agreement to study in China. Since then, the educational exchange expanded to two levels, namely the government to government level and the private level, which can also be called the people-to-people level.

After the MOU on education cooperation in 1997, the educational exchange became more public and frequent. On one hand, Malaysian students could go to China to study through government and private level, but there were only numbers of students who went to China compared to Chinese students to Malaysia. On the other hand, more Chinese students came to Malaysia for their further studies. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Malaysia, there were almost 100 Malaysian students studying in China. But in contrast, there were more than 5000 Chinese students in Malaysia till 2000 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017). There are two reasons for this occurrence.

Firstly, there was a policy of the Malaysian government during Mahathir's time, which aimed to make Malaysia the educational hub of Southeast Asia. As told by informant A1, "In order to make Malaysia the center of international education, Malaysia regards China as the main source of students. Many private universities have done their own marketing in China to recruit Chinese students. I think we have thousands of Chinese students in Malaysia from 1996 to 1998." Under this policy, Malaysia enrolled more Chinese students actively in order to achieve that goal.

Secondly, the twinning program was very attractive to Chinese students. On this, Dr. Mahathir who was the Prime Minister of Malaysia at that time pointed out that:

"We have set up a new kind of educational institution program called twinning, which means a Malaysian Higher Education Institution will collaborate with a foreign university, and the students will study two years in Malaysia and spend their final year at a foreign university. Therefore the cost is much less than studying full-time overseas, and because of this many Chinese students were able to get an education."

Due to the two reasons above, many Chinese students came to Malaysia to study. There were more than 10,000 Chinese students until 2011. The Malaysian government made an effort to promote educational exchange between Malaysia and China. First, the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia contacted the Ministry of Education of the PRC to discuss educational exchange between the two countries. Informant A8, who was the former deputy Minister of Higher Education, said that:

I remember after the 2005 election, the Ministry of Higher Education was established with two aims, first was to have a more comprehensive systematic development to train more talents to meet the manpower needs of economic development in Malaysia. The second was to make Malaysia an education hub and attract more students from other countries. Then, we began to have a close relationship with

the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. During that time, we started to do exchanges between universities and colleges in China. (Personal communication, November 29, 2016)

In addition to communication and cooperation with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, the officials of the Minister of Higher Education also went to China to participate in the annual education exhibition to introduce Malaysian education and enroll Chinese students, as well as explored the learning opportunities in China for Malaysian students. Informant A8 further pointed out that:

I led many delegations to China to hold the Malaysian Education Exhibition. I traveled many places in China like Beijing, Shanghai, Dalian, Nanjing, Chongqing, Taiyuan, Qingdao, etc. to recommend and ensure that Chinese people understand and know about Malaysian education and also to enroll their students. Through the education exhibition, they learned that we have a twinning program with foreign universities; Chinese students can get a degree not only from universities in Malaysia but also foreign universities, which became a reason to attract them to study in Malaysia. Afterward, a lot of Chinese students came to Malaysia. (Personal communication, April 26, 2017)

Furthermore, informant A3, who was also the former Deputy Minister of Higher Education, emphasized that:

During my tenure, I was in charge of the matters related to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, which mainly involves two aspects. One was to enroll students, which was two-ways, in other words, Malaysia hoped to recruit more Chinese students by providing a twinning program. On the other hand, we also have Malaysian students who wanted to further study in China, especially students from Chinese independent high schools. Generally, there was only one way for them to go to universities, and that was Taiwan. Then, at that time we tried to open up another channel for them to study in mainland China. We were very active in our effort to promote and strive for admission into universities. Although it was a start, I think that the start was very critical. (Personal communication, March 8, 2017)

Besides making contact with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, the Malaysian government also offered government scholarships for Malaysian students to study in China, especially in the fields of Chinese language, Chinese medicine and so on. Informant A5, who was an official of the Ministry of Education of Malaysia, said that:

We also gave a lot of scholarships for Malaysian students to study in China. A recent example is when our Ministry of Education sends many excellent students who completed high school to study Mandarin in China, especially to BFSU and Beijing Language Study University. We hope that when they finished their study, they can come back to Malaysia and teach Malaysian students the standard Mandarin as a third language. We started this program under the Ministry of Education scholarships for excellent students since 2007, but every year it grew very quickly. We started with 10 students but last year almost one hundred students were sent to study in BFSU and BLSU under scholarship. (Personal communication, March 26, 2017)

Therefore, the educational exchange between Malaysia and China, especially in the exchange of students gradually became more established under the effort of both governments in the 2000s. But there were still some problems that hindered educational exchange, especially for Malaysian students to study in China. One of the biggest problems was the recognition of the degrees between Malaysia and China. In other words, when Malaysian students finished their study in China came back to Malaysia to work, their degrees were not recognized by the Malaysian government, especially for civil service.

In fact, the discussion of the mutual recognition of degrees between Malaysia and China only began in the 2000s. According to informant A8, he said, “during my tenure, we discussed this issue with the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, but it was just at the initial stage, and there was no concrete action.” It was not until 2011 when the two countries signed the Framework Agreement to Facilitate Mutual Recognition in Academic Higher Education Qualifications that this problem was finally resolved. According to the original agreement, China recognized more than 70 degrees in Malaysia, but Malaysia recognized 820 universities in China. Finally, through the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), an official department governed by the Ministry of Higher Education which the main objective is to control universities’ accreditation status, 146 universities in China were recognized. Public Service Department Malaysia (PSD) which is in charge of the civil services in Malaysia only accepted and recognized degrees from 9 universities in China. The reason for this situation is because of the different mechanism in the recognition of degrees between Malaysia and China. Nevertheless, the signing of the recognition of the degrees cleared the obstacles that hindered educational exchange between Malaysia and China.

Since then, the educational exchange between Malaysia and China became more active (see Figure 1). It can be seen that more and more Chinese Malaysian students went to study in China since 1997 when

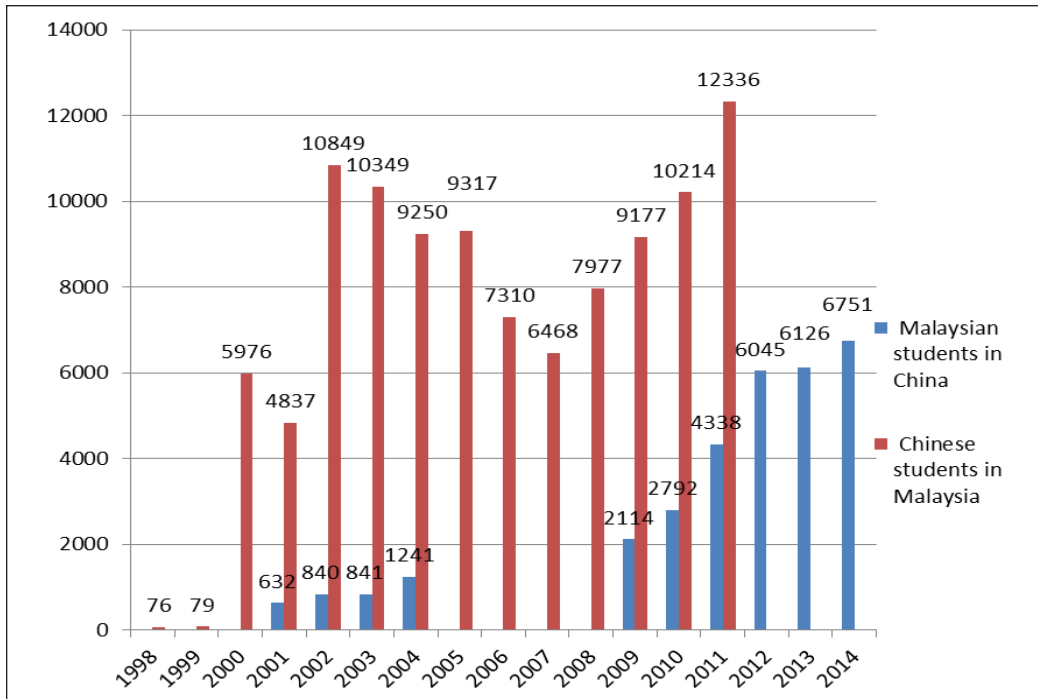


Figure 1. Numbers of students' educational exchange between Malaysia and China. Data adapted from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2017) and Fujian Qiaobao (2016). The statistics of Malaysian students in China from 2005-2008 are not available.

Malaysia and China signed the MOU. It increased gradually until 2002. However, there was a drop from 2002 to 2006, due to the degrees recognition problem of both countries. It was not until 2011 when Malaysia and China settled the mutual recognition of universities that it began to become normal and improved year by year. According to the People's Network of China, there were more than 12000 Chinese students in Malaysia. Meanwhile, there were more than 6000 Malaysian students who were in China to further their education.

With the educational cooperation between Malaysia and China, Xiamen University Malaysia was established and began to enroll students since 2015. According to the People's Network of

China, there were 1900 students studying in Xiamen University Malaysia until May 2017. It can be said that the establishment of Xiamen University Malaysia was a new milestone in the cooperation of higher education between Malaysia and China, which has also deepened the friendship between the two countries. In addition, informant A1 said:

I think the most important mark is when the government of China actually decided to open Xiamen University Malaysia campus for us to accept and support this, so for us, of course, we welcome the first university of China to have a branch campus, you know, so this is straight

up a cooperation on educational level. So we hope the Xiamen University here can bring Chinese students, Asian students, Malaysian students, so that there will also be Malaysians to market Malaysia as an international educational hub. (Personal communication, November 29, 2016)

Today, with the rise of China and the promotion of the “Belt and Road Initiative,” educational exchange became more important in Malaysia and China relations. In order to promote the construction of the initiative above and educational exchange between these two countries, China increased the number of government scholarships for ASEAN countries, including Malaysia. As remarked by Keqiang (2015), the Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China at the 18th China-ASEAN Summit, “We have agreed that the year 2016 will be the China-ASEAN Year of Educational Exchange, and China proposes the holding of a second Education Ministers’ Roundtable Conference under its framework. In the next three years, China will increase the number of government scholarships for ASEAN countries by 1,000 on the basis of existing scholarships.” According to a report by Oriental Daily News Malaysia on 6 March 2017, China added 50 government scholarships for Malaysian students who applied to study in China. It can be expected that the educational exchange between Malaysia and China will become better under this circumstance.

CONCLUSION

Though Malaysia and China established formal diplomatic relations in 1974, they did not have actual contact until 1989 when the issue of CPM was solved. Besides, there was also the ideological issue that hindered Malaysia-China relations. It was not until the early 1990s when there was a trend of educational exchange between Malaysia and China. Owing to China’s reform and opening up, educational exchange increased, but it was not until 1997 when Malaysia and China signed an MOU on Education Cooperation that opened a prelude to educational cooperation between the two countries, furthermore after the Framework Agreement to Facilitate Mutual Recognition in Academic Higher Education Qualifications was signed in 2011, more educational exchanges happened between Malaysia and China.

With the rise of China and the current promotion of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, Malaysia-China relations entered the most splendid period in history, especially in economic relations, which is a double-edged sword that raised some controversial voices. For example, it hinders democratization in Malaysia, damages national interests and national security of Malaysia, and also affects the subjectivity and autonomy of Malaysian society, which leaves us an interesting problem to think about in Malaysia-China relations. Meanwhile, although there were ethnic considerations and different mechanisms in the recognition of the degrees, the educational exchange between Malaysia and China has achieved

certain achievement, which needs to continue and be strengthened. Moreover, in the context of the “Belt and Road Initiative,” educational exchange between Malaysia and China will become better. It can be expected that educational exchange and Malaysia-China relations will reach a better level which benefits people of the two countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank all the informants for this study. We extend our appreciation to Sultan Abdul Samad Library UPM, Research Centre of Dong Zong, and Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies and New Era University College for facilitating this research. The authors also thank the Human Ecology International Conference (HEIC) 2017 Publication Committee for their invaluable assistance.

REFERENCES

- Ambrose, S. E. (2010). *Rise to globalism: American foreign policy since 1938*. New York, USA: Penguin.
- Brant, P. (2015). *One belt, one road? China's community of common destiny [The Interpreter]*. Retrieved September 3, 2019, from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/one-belt-one-road-chinas-community-common-destiny>
- Chew, A. (2016). *China becomes Malaysia's biggest foreign investor, thanks to IMDB purchases*. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <http://www.scmp.com>
- Fujian Qiaobao. (2016, Feb 19). *Dama Gongwu yuan fuHua Xue Hanyu Mian Xuefei*. Retrieved September 3, 2018, from http://www.cnepaper.com/fjqb/html/2016-02/19/content_4_6.htm.
- Gu, Y. C. (2006). China's changing political economy with Malaysia: A regional perspective. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 126(2), 19-27.
- Keqiang, L. (2015). *Full text of Premier's speech at 18th China-ASEAN Summit*. Retrieved March 1, 2017, from http://english.gov.cn/premier/speeches/2015/11/24/content_281475241254129.htm
- Ku, S. C. Y. (2008). China's changing political economy with Malaysia and Southeast Asia: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 43(2), 155-171.
- Leong, S. (1987). Malaysia and the people's republic of China in the 1980s: Political vigilance and economic pragmatism. *Asian Survey*, 27(10), 1109-1126.
- Li, Y. P. (2006). The New Relationship between China and Malaysia. *Paper presented at the 6th Annual Forum of Chinese Association of Asia-Pacific Studies*. Tsitsihar, China.
- Liao, J. X. (2012). Analysis of Malaysia's relationship with the US and China after the US "Returning to Asia". *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2012(1), 47-52.
- Lin, M., & Yan, S. (2011). Trade and economic relations between China and Malaysia: Competitive and complementary. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2011(1), 25-35.
- Liow, J. C. Y. (2000). Malaysia-China Relations in the 1990s: The maturing of a partnership. *Asian Survey*, 40(4), 672-691.
- Liow, J. C. Y. (2005). Balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging? Strategic and security patterns in Malaysia's relations with China, 1981–2003'. In H. Khai Leong & S. C. Y. Ku (Eds.), *China and Southeast Asia: Global Changes and Regional Challenges* (pp. 672-691). Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Ministry of Higher Education (2017). *Statistik pendidikan tinggi 2017*. Retrieved September

- 3, 2018, from <http://www.mohe.gov.my/muat-turun/>
awam/statistik/2017-3/469-statistik-pendidikan-tinggi-2017-bab-1-makro-institusi-pendidikan-tinggi/file.
- Pumphrey, C. W. (2002). *The rise of China in Asia: Security implications*. Collingdale, USA: DIANE Publishing.
- Razak, N. A. (2014). *The 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China*. Retrieved September 3, 2018, from <https://www.najibrazak.com/en/speeches/the-40th-anniversary-of-the-establishment-of-diplomatic-relations-between-malaysia-and-china-2/>
- Swaine, M. D. (2015). Chinese views and commentary on the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative. *China Leadership Monitor*, 47(2), 3.
- Tee, L. S. (2016). *The China factor in Malaysia's growth*. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <https://www.thestar.com.my>
- Wang, H. (2011). Analysis of the backgrounds of Malaysia's policy towards China: A case study on the process of reaching diplomatic relation between the two nations. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 4, 68-73.
- Wang, Q. (2000). Development of economic and trade relations between China and Malaysia: Retrospect and prospect. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 24(3), 14-24.
- Yang, R. F. (2004). On Malaysia and China relationships in 1957-1997 in the perspective of conflict and cooperation theory. *Paper presented at the 6th Annual Forum of Chinese Association of Asia-Pacific Studies*. Xia Men, China.
- Zhu, H. J. (1996). The status quo and trend of China and Malaysia relationship. *Around Southeast Asia*, 1996(3), 56-58.