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Images and the Shaping of Malaysia's China Policy: 1957-1974

***Lee** Kam Hing**
Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper describes early images of China in Malaysia and explains how they reflected Malaysia's early China policy. The images were mostly negative in character and were the outcome of Malaysia's historical experience, both in the distant past and in more recent years. This was set against a background of colonialism, nationalism and the Cold War. The last forty years of official Malaysia-China relations, however, have led to a generally more positive view of China in Malaysia. This improved relations helped reshape the images of China in the perception of Malaysians.

Keywords: *images, Malaysia, China, state, revolution, homeland, market*

1. Introduction

A Pew survey in 2013 on global attitudes towards the United States and China revealed that China had an 81% favourable rating in Malaysia compared to US's rating of 66% (Pew, 2013). This is significant and even surprising for two reasons. First, the 2013 Pew's Global Attitudes Survey showed that generally most countries viewed the United States more positively than China. Only in a few other Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Pakistan did China, as the Pew survey suggests, has a higher rating than the US. Second, the image of China in Malaysia has, until recently, been largely negative. China was generally held with suspicion and seen as a power threatening the interest of Malaysia.

Certainly, China's image in Malaysia has, in recent years, improved. This favourable view of China by Malaysians is currently underlined by growing trade between the two countries. Since the establishment of Kuala Lumpur-Beijing relations in 1974, China has emerged to be Malaysia's biggest trading partner. In turn, Malaysia is China's eighth largest trading partner worldwide and the largest in Southeast Asia (Lee, 202). There is growing

exchange between the two counties in education and tourism. At the same time, the security concern about China has since receded and Malaysia in official forums has declared that it does not consider a rising China as a threat (Saravanamuttu, 1983).

This paper explains why early images of China in Malaysia were negative and how those unfavourable images reflected Malaysia's early China policy. It will then consider the emergence of a latter set of images following the establishment of relations and the sources for the construction of these new images. Generally, the images of China in Malaysia were drawn from two sources. First, they were formed by the behaviour or statements by China and responses to them by Malaysian leaders. Second, the images arose out of the historical experience of Malaysians. These experiences found expression in events, writings and policies of Malaysian leaders.

The images that countries have of one another are important. An image is a mental conception held in common by members of a group and represents a basic attitude or the general impression that a person, organisation or product presents or is presented to the public. Various scholars contend that decision-making in foreign policy formulation is influenced by how decision-makers view other counties. Kenneth Boulding suggested that: "We act according to the way the world appears to us, not necessarily according to the way it 'is'… it is one nation's image of the hostility of another, not the 'real' hostility, which determines its reaction" (Boulding, 1959). How a country is perceived or projected by another influences the nature of their relations. In international relations, images of nations hint at or project intent, whether friendly or hostile (Nathan and Scobell, 2012). They also enable nations to attract or conversely deter foreign investments and trade (Anholt, 2007). Images reduce very complicated real environment into simpler models easily comprehensible to the society at large. They are also not value free mainly because the images are associated with the attributes of the target nation and those of the beholders. Furthermore, they are often mediated through historical memory, articulation of leaders, and the selectivity of the press in the countries concerned (Li and Chitty, 2009).

China, as a series of images was first used by Ruth McVey in her study of the Indonesian Communist Party (McVey, 1968). McVey argues that to Indonesians, China in the 1949-1965 period was viewed as a state, a revolution and homeland to their own ethnic minority. In the early years especially during the period of liberal democracy the Chinese images were received positively by many Indonesians. Liu Hong argued that in immediate post-independence Indonesia, China was idealised. Many Indonesians separated the China they admired from its communist ideology and credited the creation of a disciplined, cohesive and harmonious society they saw to Chinese nationalism and the new democracy (Liu, 2011). Sukarno found no

incompatibilities between the ideas driving China and his own views, and his interpretation of China's political experience served as a key rationale for the introduction of Guided Democracy that greatly concentrated power in the president's hands (Bunnell, 1966). Disenchanted with Western-style democracy, China as a model appealed to Sukarno. This idealised image of China differed greatly from Western observers who viewed the country as a repressive, totalitarian communist state.

China as a state, revolution, and homeland were also images projected to Malaysians. However, unlike Indonesia, China in the same period was perceived in Malaysia as a threat. This difference in perception of China in Malaysia and Indonesia arose out of different decolonisation process. It was also due to Malaysia's own historical experience, both in the distant past and in more recent years. The images of China were particularly threatening when they were seen as linked together. When this happens China was not only a state but a state that came to power through a communist revolution and had set out on a course of a continuous revolution supporting liberation movements worldwide. Furthermore, Beijing offered the view of China as a homeland for Chinese overseas by recognising as Chinese national those whose grandfather was a Chinese. Thus, Malaysia was unable to see China without associating it with its revolutionary origin and with its homeland appeal. China as a revolution and as homeland posed difficulties for Malaysia at a time when Beijing declared support for the insurgency in Malaya led mostly by local Chinese. This shaping and re-shaping of China's image must also be seen against a backdrop of colonialism, nationalism and the Cold War.

With diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China established in 1974 and trade between the two countries growing, the images took on a less hostile appearance. As the international scene changed, so did the nature and the evocative power of the images. Indeed the image of China as a revolution faded into the background while new images of China as a market and a trading partner as well as of a shared past that has an Islamic sub-text became more prominent. Gradually the several images of China were de-linked from one another and efforts were made to re-cast each of them in more positive appeal.

2. China as a State

Contact between a Malay state and China started as early as the 15th century. There are two sources referring to this contact. These are the *Sejarah Melayu* (the Malay Annals) and the Ming records (*Ming shi lu*). In neither was China portrayed as a threatening or belligerent power. Rather, some historians argue that the visit of Chinese naval fleets in the early 15th century especially led by Admiral Zheng He helped consolidate Malacca as

a power in the Straits of Malacca. However, contact between Malay states and China was not sustained.

It was towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century that China as a state reappeared in the political discourse in Malaysia. This was a period when China was going through political upheavals amidst efforts to reconstruct the Chinese state. The conflict in China between reformists and revolutionists extended to Southeast Asia when both sides sought the support of overseas Chinese. This caused concern to the colonial powers at the possible political impact the reformist-revolution conflict and the emerging new Chinese state would have on overseas Chinese and local nationalists. Certainly the 1911 Chinese revolution that overthrew Manchu rule was followed with great interest in Malaya and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. However, the subsequent civil war and Japanese invasion left China weakened and the image was of a state unable to exercise overseas influence.

It was through the lens of post-World War Two and Cold War politics that the image of China as a state reappeared to Malaysians. It was an image of a China going through revolution that persisted in the post-war and post-1949 period in Malaya. The response to a revolutionary China was divided (Wolf, 1983). Indeed, while London recognised the new government in Beijing and established diplomatic relations, the British colonial administration in Kuala Lumpur banned all contact and communication between Malaya and the People's Republic of China (PRC).[1] Within Britain, there were strong criticisms of London's recognition of Beijing in January 1950.[2] There were fears that establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC would complicate the security situation in Southeast Asia and serve to encourage the communist-led insurgents in Malaya. Sir Gerald Templer, High Commissioner of the Federation of Malaya, declared that the insurgency was supported by China. In a meeting with Richard Nixon, the then US Vice President visiting Kuala Lumpur on a fact-finding mission, Templer warned that to safeguard Southeast Asia "…a halt must be called to Chinese encroachment, and again the sooner the better" (Cloake, 1985).

The Malayan leadership on taking over from the British (Malaya gained its independence in 1957, renamed as Malaysia in 1963 after Sabah and Sarawak joined Malaya) maintained the policy of not recognising China. All official contacts between the two countries were forbidden. The exception was unofficial trade that was carried out largely through Singapore and Hong Kong. Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first Prime Minister, gave several reasons for not recognising China. First, the Tunku contended that Malaya would not recognise a regime which openly supported the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in its war against the Kuala Lumpur government.[3] Second, he feared that given the fact that a majority of the Malaysian communists were of Chinese origin, recognition of Communist China could

not only be a morale booster to the insurgents but might give occasions for China to interfere in the internal affairs of Malaysia.[4] Related to this was the concern that recognition could be misconstrued by the huge Chinese majority in Malaysia that he approved communism. Third, the Tunku used the China case to explain his dilemma of not having diplomatic relations with other communist countries. He explained that he did not want to be forced into a situation where, by recognising communist countries, Malaysia would eventually have to have diplomatic relations with China. Fourth, as elaborated by Abdullah Ahmad, a former cabinet member and UMNO (the dominant party in the ruling coalition) leader, "the Malays would not take kindly to a China-Malaysia relationship" (Ahmad, 1985). Memory of the mainly ethnic-Chinese-based and communist affiliated Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army's (MPAJA) reprisals against the Malays after World War II remained and there was unease among Malays to China because of alleged links it has with local Chinese communists. There was also the long held fear as expressed by Dato Onn Jaafar (founder of UMNO) that China had ambition of taking over Malaya and this could be achieved with the help of local Chinese. The link between the Chinese state and local Chinese appeared in a statement by Dr Ismail bin Dato Abdul Rahman, the Malayan ambassador to the United Nations and the US in 1959. When asked whether Malaya might recognise Communist China, Dr Ismail explained that, "…there were still Communist terrorists in Malaya and the Government was building a united nation helping citizens of Chinese race to identify themselves completely with Malaya."[5]

The first Prime Minister was generally pro-West and in the Cold War environment he always saw China as a threat to regional security. Thus, when the issue of China's admission into the United Nations was raised by India in September 1957, Malaya, which had just become a member of the world body, voted with 46 other countries to have the question shelved.[6] India, which supported the motion, strongly criticised Dr Ismail who was leading the first-ever Malayan delegation to the United Nations for taking such a stand.[7] In January 1959, Dr Ismail, who was then also Malayan Ambassador to the US, elaborated on Malaya's apprehension of China. He declared that "the free world has to contend against two big Communist powers, one of which will concentrate on South-East Asia… Communist China is the one which will concentrate on South-East Asia."[8] Two months later, in March 1959, the Malayan Federation Government released an 11,000 word document claiming that there were, "…plans and plots of Communists inside and outside Malaya for overthrowing the Government and establishing a Red state."[9] The document alleged that there were secret printing presses in the Kuala Lumpur area and that these reproduced propaganda from Radio Peking and from Chinese Communist publications. Some of these materials were said to be targeting students in Chinese schools. The government warned that

the Communist regime in China was making an all-out effort to spread its influence particularly among the local Chinese. The document further claimed that in its drive to gain local support, the Chinese Communist Party in the previous year sent into Malaya more than 13 million Chinese publications. This was 10 per cent more than the total sent in 1957.

Events in Tibet and India seemed to lend support to Malaya's view of China as a state with expansionist intentions. In March 1959, following reports of China's use of military force against unrests in Tibet, Malaya issued a statement condemning Beijing.[10] Then in 1962 a border war broke out along the Himalaya between India and China. In the India-China border dispute, the Tunku declared support for India. He saw the conflict as more than a border dispute. He described the clash between the two Asian powers as a battle between democracy on one hand and communism of a totalitarian society on the other. The Tunku thereupon launched a "Save Democracy Fund" in support of India.

In the 1959-1966 period, China's alignment with Indonesia gave Kuala Lumpur further reasons to see the Chinese state as unfriendly towards Malaysia.[11] In 1963 Indonesia launched a confrontation against the formation of Malaysia and landed armed "volunteers" along the coast and border regions of Malaysia (Weinstein, 1976). In this confrontation campaign, Beijing joined Jakarta in attacking Malaysia as part of a scheme to retain neo-colonial influence in the region. In 1965 the Tunku alleged that China had amassed some $150 million in Malayan currency for subversive purposes in Malaya. In 1971 Zaiton Ahmad, the Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry of Malaysia, declared that China continued to give support to the Malayan Communist Party: "The MCP claims affiliation with Peking and China has not denied this. Rather Peking has allowed a radio station in South China calling itself the 'Voice of the Revolution of Malaya' to beam propaganda for the party in this country."[12] The image of China as a state thus came through regularly as a malevolent one to Malaysia.

It should be noted that this negative image of China as a state was also shared by some Malaysian Chinese. These were older Chinese who in the pre-WWII years had been sympathetic to the Kuomintang and were opposed to the communists in Malaya and China. Indeed, it was said that among some leaders in the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Chinese coalition partner of UMNO in the ruling Alliance coalition, were Kuomintang sympathisers. Several of these leaders were close to the Tunku and their influence on Tunku's China policy cannot be discounted. Many of these strongly anti-communists were from business groups and had business ties with Taiwan. Not surprisingly, the Malaysian government allowed Malaysians to travel to Taiwan for business and education, in contrast to its ban on all contact with mainland China. Several hundred Malaysian students,

mainly from Chinese-language schools, enrolled each year in Taiwanese universities. In November 1965 a trade mission was sent to Taiwan and in 1966 a Malaysian consulate was established in Taiwan.

3. China as a Revolution

China as a revolution was also a striking image for many in Malaysia because of the manner the new government in Beijing came to power and because of its association with the communist insurgency in Malaysia. The Chinese Communist Party gained control of Beijing in October 1949 after a protracted struggle against the Kuomintang. Furthermore, for Mao Zedong the revolution did not end in 1949. The struggle was to be a continuous one, both at home and abroad. Zhou Enlai, PRC's first Foreign Minister, declared that China would support revolutions in countries still under colonial rule and work to unite the world's people (Kissinger, 2011; Lowenthal, 1968).

Most of Southeast Asia in 1949 was still under colonial rule or engaged in the struggle for independence. The Dutch in Indonesia and the French in Indo-China were attempting to regain control of their former colonies. In Malaya, the MCP had, in June 1948, launched an armed insurgency against the British. It was in this regional context of political upheaval that the communist leadership in China kept up its rhetoric of China's continuing revolution and declared solidarity for all liberation movements.[13] And consistent with this rhetoric, Beijing declared support for the communist insurgency in Malaya.[14]

Nevertheless, Mao realised that China did not have the capacity to intervene directly in support of overseas revolution. Preoccupied with domestic challenges and with fears of Western threats surrounding it, Beijing's support was largely rhetoric (Schram, 1977). Still, the image projected was of an expansionist and hostile China providing direct material and moral aid to overseas revolutions. It was this image that was received and exploited by decision-makers in Malaya in the military and psychological war during the Malayan Emergency. But they were also convinced that China's support for the Malayan Communist Party was part of China's efforts to export its revolution overseas. Colonial administration and military commanders fighting the communists in the Malayan jungle accused China of backing the Malayan insurgency. This image of China was accepted by Malayan leaders as they gradually replaced the British.

4. China as a Homeland of Malaysian Chinese

The image of China as a homeland persisted among the older generation of Chinese in Malaya. This was especially among those who had hopes of returning to China. But this image aroused unease among other communities,

particularly the Malays. Since the 19th century a large number of immigrants especially Chinese had settled in Malaya. These immigrants came from China to work as labourers in tin mines and rubber estates. Many had hoped to make enough money and eventually to go back to China where they had families they left behind. But over time most Chinese chose to remain in Malaya. They had long settled down and had families and children. These included those born in the Straits Settlements, many of whom qualified for British nationality.

China as a homeland of the Chinese in Malaysia was also a position accepted by Chinese governments. The Kuomintang government when in power in mainland China and when they subsequently retreated to Taiwan regarded as a Chinese national anyone overseas whose grandfather was Chinese. When the communists took power in China in 1949 they continued the policy of *jus sanguinis*. Under this, China held that "any person born of a Chinese father or mother was a Chinese citizen regardless of birthplace" (Chang, 1980; also, Fitzgerald, 1970).

In the past, China benefitted from the loyalty and homeland sentiments of overseas Chinese. Such benefits included funds sent from Southeast Asia as remittances to support immigrants' families back in China. So large were the amounts sent back that during the Great Depression in the 1930s it was estimated that these remittances made up for China's trade deficit. There were also the funds raised by overseas Chinese for natural disaster relief efforts in China. Finally, overseas Chinese in rallying in support of China when it was invaded by Japan in 1937 collected large sums raised through sales of Chinese bonds. At the same time, thousands of overseas Chinese went as volunteers to Burma and the border regions of China to assist what many then still regarded as their homeland.

The nationality policy pursued by the Chinese government created early difficulties for many Southeast Asian nations which had just obtained independence. These newly independent nations would not tolerate large communities living in their midst who were citizens of another country, especially of a big nearby power such as China.[15] The image of China as a homeland was troublesome because the indigenous community placed premium on loyalty to Malaysia and held with suspicious those whose affection was for another country (Katayama, 2013). This unease created by the image of China as a homeland was particularly evident during the Emergency. Conjured up by the image was of local Chinese facilitating the expansion of China which on its part was already said to be supplying arms to the insurgency. Indeed, in the context of the Cold War, there were claims that the overseas Chinese particularly in Southeast Asia were potentially fifth columnists for China's expansionist ambitions.[16] Such claims fuelled further suspicion of nationalists groups in Southeast about the loyalty of the Chinese in their midst. Added to this was also resentment among indigenous

groups of the economic dynamism of the Chinese community within the national economy.

The image of China as a homeland gained further traction when some 30,000 Chinese suspected of aiding the insurgency were detained and deported to China (Low, 2014). This despite the fact that many of those repatriated were local-born and had resisted deportation since for them Malaya rather than China was their homeland. Indeed, the new Chinese government unsure of the political background of those sent back was initially unwilling to accept the boatloads of Malayan Chinese.

This spectre of the homeland image was raised by Dato Onn bin Jaafar, founder of UMNO. In March 1953, speaking in his capacity as Member for Home Affairs in the Legislative Council, Dato Onn warned that "… Chinese organisations in Malaya were trying to make the country [Malaya] the thirtieth province of Chinese."[17] To Dato Onn, the anti-China policy was perfectly understandable because the country was still fighting the China-supported communists.

5. The Market Image

A strong image of China as a market and trading partner took a longer time to take shape. This was despite the fact that China has always been important in Malaysia's overseas trade. Such trade began when early merchants from China visited Southeast Asia regularly. When the port of the Malacca sultanate was established it became a destination for Chinese ships. Then later, as increasing number of Chinese immigrants settled in the Malay states in the 19th century this trade grew especially through newly opened Hong Kong and Singapore. Chinese goods such as medicine and foodstuff were imported from southern China into Malaya in exchange for primary produce. Actively participating in this growing trade were Chinese merchants in the Straits Settlements who sent ships to Guangzhou, Xiamen, Hainan and Shanghai.[18] World War II, however, disrupted regular trade between Malaya and China.

Efforts were made after WWII to restore commercial links. One of the first steps taken by the Nationalist Chinese government was to appoint a Commercial Advisor to the Chinese consulate in Singapore.[19] When the civil war in China ended and the communists gained power in Beijing, there were hopes for increased export of Malayan rubber to China as large quantities of the commodity were needed to rebuild the country. In return Malaya increased the import of textile and traditional foodstuff and medicine.[20] However just as trade was beginning to pick up, volume once again dropped sharply. This happened when China entered the Korean War that broke out in June 1950. In May 1951 the United Nations enforced an embargo on sale of arms and

strategic supplies including rubber to China.[21] Malaya under British rule was bound by the embargo.[22]

So severe was the impact of the rubber embargo that Malaya's export to China fell from $99.5 million in 1951 to $32,000 in 1952 and imports from $127 million in 1951 to $120 million in 1952.[23] There was strong reaction to the trade embargo in Malaya especially within the rubber industry. While Malaya had to abide by the embargo, Britain was conducting trade with China. Woodrow Wyatt, a Labour MP raised the matter in the British parliament: "Did Mr Nutting [Conservative MP] not know there was considerable feeling in Malaya and Singapore because there was discrimination against them, while Britain was increasing trade with China?"[24] Earlier, Wyatt pointed out that despite the UN embargo, there was considerable export of rubber by other countries to China. Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) which was then not a member of the world body was sending large quantities of rubber to China. Sources from the rubber industry pointed out that Sri Lanka rubber was sold to China at prices above prevailing market rates (Shao, 1959).

Templer, the High Commissioner of Malaya while firm about not recognising Beijing, nevertheless was not opposed to trade with China. In response to a question from Richard Nixon at their meeting in Kuala Lumpur in September 1953 on whether trade with China should be resumed, Templer told Nixon that wages in rubber estates had been cut five times in the previous five months because of low rubber prices and Asian-owned estates were badly affected. Furthermore, the government's social services programme introduced as part of the fight against the insurgency was hit by low commodity prices. The new leaders of self-governing Malaya likewise saw China as a large market. The Tunku, when meeting Peter Thorneycroft, president of British Board of Trade, pointed out that the Alliance Government would like to see the removal of the embargo. The embargo did not entirely prevent rubber going to China. Rather the embargo diverted the flow through Europe to China. China was still getting as much rubber as it wants, with profits from the higher prices going to European middlemen and to countries like Ceylon, which did not observe the embargo."[25]

In 1956, the UN lifted the ban on export of rubber to China, and this was soon followed by the Federation of Malaya government. With indications that the authorities were relaxing commercial restrictions between Malaya and China, plans were made to send trade missions to China. David Marshall, Chief Minister of Singapore, in declaring that his government was anxious to reopen trade with China added that: "…Singapore can survive only if it is a market-place open to all nations."[26] He then announced plans to lead an unofficial trade mission to China.

In June 1956, a group of Chinese traders and planters in the Federation announced plans to send a 15-man unofficial mission to China. China was likewise keen to improve trade. In July 1956, the All-China Commerce and Industry Association and the China Committee for the Promotion of International Trade cabled an official invitation to the Malayan trade mission.[27] It also invited a press party to accompany the trade mission. Earlier in the year, it was reported that the Singapore branch of the Bank of China was organising an exhibition of Chinese-made goods. It was expected that some 1,000 different items including appliances, textiles, food products, and medicine would be on display.

The Malayan mission consisting of 62 businessmen from various ethnic groups arrived in November 1956 and spent altogether six weeks in China to study trade conditions there.[28] While in China the mission discussed with importers problems affecting rubber trade and worked out new arrangements for the purchase of the commodity from Malaya. That the Chinese government placed importance in improving trade with Malaya was indicated by the attendance of Zhou Enlai, premier of China, in a reception to the Malayan trade delegation in August 1956. During the reception, the premier offered a toast to the prosperity of the people of Malaya and Singapore.[29]

Nevertheless, the resumption of Malaya-China trade was not without some problems and not all groups in Malaysia benefited directly. The import of cheaper Chinese imports such as cement and textile, for instance, threatened the young local industries. Many of the newly set up industries in Malaya could not compete with Chinese imports. As a measure to protect its industries, the Singapore government in October 1958, banned the import of textile claiming that it was a case of dumping by the Chinese. Singapore's decision was followed not long afterwards by Kuala Lumpur.[30] In retaliation, the Chinese government in the same month stopped all imports from Malaya and Singapore.[31] The trade dispute worsened when the Malayan government ruled in November 1958 that banks run by foreign government should be closed in Malaya. The ruling hit the Bank of China which had branches in the Federation and Singapore.[32] It was not until many years after the establishment of Malaysia-China diplomatic ties that the Bank of China was allowed to re-open.

Meanwhile, the new Malayan government also showed interest in developing trade with Taiwan. Certainly it was part of an effort by the new nation to open up commercial ties with as many countries as possible. It is likely that the Malayan initiatives were also encouraged by pro-Kuomintang groups within the ruling coalition which besides commercial reasons had also political consideration. In August 1957, a 63-member trade delegation from Singapore and the Federation visited Taiwan for a two-week trade visit. The aim of the mission was to promote Malayan rubber, iron-ore, coconut oil, and

tapioca, and in return to attract Taiwan investment to Singapore and Malaya.[33] Later, the delegation flew to Taichung where they were welcomed by Taiwan's president, Chiang Kai-shek.[34]

The following tables capture the flow of trade between China and South and Southeast Asia from 1930s to late 1950s and between China and Malaya from 1950s to 1970s.

6. Images De-linked

But images of nations can change. They alter, are replaced or fade away as circumstances dictate. A recent example are the images of Germany and Japan, seen by the US as enemies during World War II but since have been replaced by images projecting them as staunch allies. Russia and China which were on the side of the US during World War II are now cast in images as hostile rivals.

State, revolution, homeland, and market were images through which China once came to be known to Malaysia. The four images each conjured up a particular picture of China. The images projected by China and those received by Malaysia led to a particular perception of China. China saw itself not only as a state but also, following the communist gaining power in Beijing, as a continuous revolution supporting liberation movements worldwide. It was also a homeland because Beijing for a short while recognised as a Chinese national those overseas Chinese with a Chinese grandfather. For Malaysia during the Emergency, the three images of China as a state, of a state arising from a revolution and supporting worldwide revolution, and as homeland led to a perception of China as an expansionist power.

However, over time there was a de-linking of the images. First, the communist government in China was keen to establish diplomatic relations with the new Southeast Asian states. In fact, China as a state indicated early interest to improve relations with Malaya. When Malaya gained independence in 1957, the Chinese leadership sent congratulatory messages to Kuala Lumpur. Yet at the same time it could not renounce its claims on those Southeast Asians of Chinese descent without some reciprocity from these Southeast Asian states. Eventually China, in the process of establishing diplomatic relations with Indonesia in 1955, came out with a policy that subsequently formed the basis for its relations with other Southeast Asian states that have Chinese minorities. Beijing, in exchange for diplomatic recognition from Indonesia, relinquished its claims to those of Chinese origin who had become Indonesian citizens of their own free will. For those Chinese residing in Indonesia who, for one reason or another, could not be Indonesian citizens, Beijing urged them to respect the law and the customs of Indonesia. Second, China's changing policy was helped by the emergence of a group of

Table 1 Trade between Mainland China and South and Southeast Asia (a – in millions of USD, b – in percentages of total export or import of SEA country)

Export to China

Exporting country		*1938*	*1948*	*1952*	*1953*	*1954*	*1955*	*1956*	*1957*
Burma	a	3.8	13.4	0.1	1.3	0.1	17.5	14.4	9.1
	b	2.2	5.9	0.03	0.5	0.04	7.7	5.9	4.3
Ceylon	a	0	0	25.9	50.8	46.5	25.5	38.3	35.6
	b	0	0	8.2	15.4	12.2	6.3	11	10.1
Hong Kong	a	7.3	70.6	91	94.5	68.4	31.8	23.8	21.6
	b	4.7	17.4	17.8	19.5	16.1	7.1	4.2	4.1
India	a	4.8*	17.4	6.5	2.5	3.7	14.3	8	8.5
	b	0.8*	1.3	0.5	0.2	0.3	1.1	0.6	0.6
Indonesia	a	13.7	1.6	0	0	2.3	6.2	11.7	26.3
	b	3.6	0.4	0	0	0.3	0.7	1.3	2.7
Malaya	a	2.1	7.1	0	1.8	6.4	4.2	7.8	24.2
	b	0.2	0.9	0	0.2	0.6	0.3	0.6	1.8
Pakistan	a	0	9.9	83.8	7.2	26.1	31.7	15.9	9.5
	b	0	1.6	15.7	1.6	7.3	7.9	4.7	2.8
Total	a	31.7	120	207.3	158.1	153.5	131.2	119.9	134.8
	b	1.8	2.9	4	2.6	3.4	2.6	2.4	4.4

Import from China

Importing Country		*1938*	*1948*	*1952*	*1953*	*1954*	*1955*	*1956*	*1957*
Burma	a	1.4	5	2.3	1.5	0.5	2.3	22.2	12.5
	b	1.8	2.8	1.2	0.8	0.2	1.3	11.2	4.2
Ceylon	a	0.1	0.9	6.8	43.9	33.3	16.8	28.2	17.6
	b	0.1	0.3	1.9	12.9	11.3	5.5	8.2	5.9
Hong Kong	a	73.9	108.4	145.3	150	121.1	151.1	181.7	197.9
	b	39.5	20.7	21.9	21.9	20.1	23.2	22.7	22
India	a	5.9*	3.6	32.4	1.9	3.2	5.4	17.5	10.9
	b	1*	0.2	1.9	0.2	0.2	0.4	1	0.5
Indonesia	a	2	11.7	1.9	2.1	3.5	9.9	30.2	27
	b	0.7	2.9	0.2	0.3	0.6	1.6	3.5	3.5
Malaya	a	5.3	53.6	39.4	34.3	28.5	37.8	43.1	52.2
	b	1.6	6.3	3.1	3.3	2.8	3	3.1	3.7
Pakistan	a	0	20.8	2.2	3.3	1.6	0.2	0.5	7.8
	b	0	5.1	0.4	0.9	0.5	0.05	0.1	1.8
Total	a	88.6	204	230.3	237	191.7	223.5	323.4	325.9
	b	5.9	4.3	4	5.2	4.4	2.5	5.8	5

Note: * – including Pakistan.
Source: Shao, 1952.

Table 2 Malaysia's Trade with China 1950-71 (in RM million)

Year	Imports			Exports			Trade Balance
	RM	% of total imports	Index	RM	% of total imports	Index	
1950	18.9	2.5	42	18	1.4	100	-0.9
1951	28.2	2.1	63	16	0.8	89	-12.2
1952	27.2	2.8	60	*	–	–	-27.2
1953	23.4	2.6	52	1.6	0.2	9	-21.8
1954	19.1	2.4	42	5.6	0.6	31	-13.5
1955	24.5	2.6	54	2	0.2	11	-22.5
1956	29.3	2.8	65	8.5	0.6	47	-20.8
1957	36	3.3	80	28.5	1.2	158	-7.5
1958	45.2	4.5	100	51.6	4.1	286	6.4
1959	25.1	2.5	56	5.7	0.3	32	-19.4
1960	35	2.7	78	*	–	–	-35
1961	42.4	3.2	94	*	–	–	-42.4
1962	45.5	3	101	0.2	*	1	-45.3
1963	75.9	5	235	0.2	*	1	-75.7
1964	106	6.7	235	*	–	–	-106.0
1965	101.2	6.1	225	0.1	*	–	-101.1
1966	173.3	6.6	385	2.5	0.8	14	-170.8
1967	192.7	7.4	428	19.7	0.7	109	-173
1968	175.3	6.3	389	73.1	2.3	406	-102.2
1969	174.9	6.2	388	136.4	3.3	755	-38.5
1970	164.8	4.9	366	66.2	1.6	366	-98.6
1971	137.9	4.1	306	53.4	1.4	296	-84.5

Source: Wong, 1974: 26.

Chinese in Malaysia able to work with Malay nationalists to obtain for the community citizenship entitlement and a political role in the country. Chinese leaders formed the Malayan Chinese Association in 1949 that together with UMNO created the Alliance (now the Barisan Nasional), that negotiated independence from the British. Here were leaders and a party that convinced the Malays and the British that there were Chinese loyal to Malaya. Malaya and not China was their homeland. Third, by 1960 the independent Malayan government declared that the insurgency had largely been defeated and the Emergency officially ended. Armed members of the MCP had been forced to retreat to the northern jungles or to southern Thailand.

With the image of China as a state being de-linked from that of revolution and homeland, Malaya slowly adjusted its stance towards Beijing. The Tunku in August 1960 declared that Malaya would support the admission of China to the United Nations on the condition that Beijing recognised "the independence and sovereignty of Formosa." The Tunku pointed out that if "Peking was admitted to the United Nations on her terms, the fate of many millions of Chinese under Chiang Kai-shek would be sacrificed."[35] The Tunku argued that "…it is in our own interest to invite Communist China, one of the world's most powerful nations, to any talks that would ensure world peace."[36] Elsewhere, the Tunku pointed out that China was no more "war-like" than some countries which were members of the United Nations.[37] Nevertheless while Tunku was Prime Minister, Malaysia was not prepared to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing.[38]

7. Images Adjusted

It was under Tun Abdul Razak, the second prime minister, that Malaysia established diplomatic relations with China in May 1974. Under Tun Razak, Malaysia moved away from a largely pro-Western foreign policy. In helping to set up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Tun Razak was anxious that the region be turned into a zone of peace and neutrality. Towards this objective, Tun Razak held that ASEAN countries must engage China. China was too big and important to ignore. By this time too, China was beginning to open up more to the outside world. China was changing. Its economy had made little progress under central planning, and the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution beginning from 1966 brought disastrous consequences. China's leaders thereupon put aside ideological priorities and set to introduce market-economy reforms. Beijing also became more realistic about its place in the larger geopolitics of East Asia. The US played its part as well, when in 1972 President Richard Nixon visited China as a start to the rapprochement process. Furthermore, within Malaysia, the Malayan Communist Party was no longer a real threat militarily.

Following Tun Razak's visit and as Malaysia-China relations continued to improve, the images of China in Malaysia also came to be reshaped. The images of revolution and homeland while fading persisted but seemed incongruous with the new state of Malaysia-China relations. The old images needed to be reshaped or perhaps new ones created to offer a more positive tone reflecting the friendlier diplomatic footing.

In recasting the images to reflect the new relationship it was to the distant past that both China and Malaysia drew resources from. Recalled was the neglected story of early China-Malay relations as found in the narrative of the *Sejarah Melayu* (the Malay Annals) and the Ming records. Weaved into

this narrative is an Islamic encounter that had received little notice in the past but has since gained some renewed interest. This historical recall revolves around early Malacca rulers and of the visits of Ming naval fleets some 600 years earlier when Malay and Chinese political power were at their heights in the region and when the two had friendly exchanges. The encounter in this period provides helpful materials to forge a positive and more acceptable image of China.

The *Sejarah Melayu* is one of the oldest Malay historical texts and covers the Malacca sultanate part of Malay history. The text has three references to China. Two of these are associated with Sultan Mansur Syah who ruled in the 1456-77 period. In one of these is an episode of the marriage of Hang Liu (popularly referred to as Hang Li Po / 汉丽宝) to Sultan Mansur Syah that is narrated at some length (Brown, 1970). The text describes Mansur Syah sending a delegation to China and during a banquet managed to convince the emperor that Malacca was a powerful kingdom with as many subjects as there were grains of rice served. Impressed by this the Chinese emperor gave his daughter to be wife of the Malacca ruler. The story of Hang Li Po and Mansur Shah has in recent years been regularly highlighted to emphasise the friendly ties Malaysia had with China. Malacca in the *Sejarah Melayu* was depicted as enjoying parity of status with Ming China.

The visits of the 15th century Ming fleets to Southeast Asia have also been given renewed attention by China and Malaysia. For Beijing, those Ming fleets represented China's maritime power and China's peaceful encounters with neighbouring states. To Malaysia the visits of the Ming fleets is a reminder that Malacca was once a regional power whose friendship was sought by China. It was a regional role which is assumed by modern Malaysia and whose diplomatic support is cultivated by China today.

Significantly, the narrative of Admiral Zheng He has created awareness in Malaysia of the presence of a long Islamic presence in China. Given the growing Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, the discovery of a Muslim side of China offers Malaysians an added and acceptable perspective of the country (Zook, 2010). In August 1994 Anwar Ibrahim, the then Deputy Prime Minister, on an official visit to China took time off to visit Zheng He's tomb, accompanied by his wife and a large number of officials and businessmen.[39] Anwar was founder of Abim, the Islamic youth organisation and a charismatic Islamic leader. Malaysian newspapers gave great publicity to his visit to Zheng He's tomb. Supporting inter-civilisational dialogue and in taking a step back into history, Anwar turned the event into a historic moment as well. It was reported that during the visit, the Federal Auto chairman, Ahmad Saad, read a small prayer at the grave site of the Chinese admiral. Anwar, then using a Chinese brush wrote "In appreciation of the great Cheng Ho for a lasting Malaysia-China friendship – signed Anwar Ibrahim" on a piece of paper.[40]

Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, who as the fourth prime minster of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003 and whose administration boosted Malaysia-China trade exchanges, also showed a keen awareness of the historical dimension of Malaysia-China relations. Attending a dinner hosted by the Malaysia-China Friendship Association in August 1999 he noted that ties between the two countries started more than 600 years. He added: "For us Malaysians, names such as Yin Ching, Admiral Cheng Ho (Zheng He) and Princess Hang Li Po were associated with the history of the Malacca Empire."[41] Dr. Mahathir added that the close relationship between the two countries was weakened by the West whose power and influence began to prevail upon the two countries.

The references to Admiral Zheng He and Ming China by both Mahathir and Anwar helped to shift attitudes in Malaysia and in the process contributing to a new and positive image of China, an image rooted in Malay history and Islam. In 1996 the Malaysian Language and Literary Institute (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka), a government institution set up to promote Malay language and studies, organised a conference in Beijing on Malay studies. A second conference was held in Beijing in October 2002 where some 300 academics on Malay studies gathered.[42] Underlying the interest among the participants particularly those from Malaysia was not only the attempt to compare Malay and Chinese literature, but through studying the links between the Malacca Sultanate and Ming China to rediscover early Malay history. Keen interest was shown when touring the Forbidden City where Malay academics believed Mansur Syah and Hang Tuah (a 15th century Malay admiral and hero), were entertained when they visited China. A conference paper in referring to Zheng He being Muslim and the strong influence of Islam in Ming China, suggested that Malacca-China relations had some role in the spread of Islam in the region (Kong, 2000).

The new image of a powerful but peaceful China was to a large extent contributed by Dr. Mahathir Mohamed. In the world order as seen by Dr. Mahathir, China was not a threat. Instead, in speaking up for the developing countries, he had been critical of the West on several issues such as trade policies, the international financial system, the United Nations, and differing perceptions of human rights and democracy. In many of these concerns Malaysia took positions close to that of China. Dr Mahathir's views of a changing world order were important in helping to improve bilateral relations and constructing new images of China.[43]

8. Conclusion

Images are products of messages received, and the discussion above showed how through them China was projected and perceived by Malaysia. The early images of China in the imagination of Malaysians were of a state,

revolution, homeland, and a market. These images of China were moulded by Malaysia's historical experience, both in the distant past and in more recent years. This shaping and reshaping of China's image took place against a background of colonialism, nationalism and the Cold War. It is suggested here that how China was perceived in the pre-1974 period partly helps explain the non-establishment of diplomatic relations. These images presented China as a threat to Malaysia. Each image reinforced the perception of China as malevolent.

But images needed to be reconstructed when China and the international environment changed. The last forty years of official Beijing-KL relations especially from the end of the Cold War have helped recast the images to create a more favourable view of China in Malaysia. This is happening at a time of growing trade between the two countries. In education and tourism, there is increasing exchange between the two counties while on security, Malaysia does not see a rising China as a threat. Today, the dominant image of China is that of a market and a trading partner.

Notes

* Professor Lee Kam Hing is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya. His research interests include the Chinese society in Malaysia, Malaysian politics, and Indonesia's history. He is the author or editor of more than eight books, including *The Chinese in Malaysia*, *Education and Politics in Indonesia*, *A Matter of Risk: Insurance in Malaysia, 1826-1990*.

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