Asia Pacific Science Press

Asia Pacific Economic and Management Review
ISSN(O):3005-9275
ISSN(P):3005-9267
Vol. 3 No.4 (2026)

Selective Multiculturalism and Strategic Connectivity: Representing Malaysia as a Trade, Tourism, and Cultural Gateway in China Daily

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Abstract: This study examines how Malaysia is represented in China Daily, focusing on the construction of multicultural identity and Malaysia's positioning between China, ASEAN, and the Muslim world. Guided exclusively by Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the study treats news discourse not as a transparent reflection of Malaysia but as a meaning-producing practice organized through selection, visibility, association, and absence. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on 20 English-language articles published by China Daily between September 1, 2023, and April 30, 2025. The articles were purposively selected from cultural, political, economic, heritage, and tourism coverage in which Malaysia was the central subject. Two themes were identified. First, China Daily constructed selective multiculturalism by placing Chinese diasporic heritage at the center of Malaysian diversity while translating cultural plurality into food, festivals, tourism, and harmonious coexistence. Second, Malaysia was represented as a civilizational bridge through historical connections, particularly Malacca and Zheng He, and through contemporary intermediary roles involving ASEAN diplomacy, halal trade, infrastructure, education, and tourism. The study argues that Malaysia is granted visibility and agency, but mainly in forms compatible with cooperation, connectivity, and mutual benefi t. This representation makes Malaysia simultaneously culturally familiar and strategically useful within China-centered regional narratives.

Keywords: Malaysia; China Daily; Representation; Multiculturalism; Civilizational Bridge; Qualitative Content Analysis

Published: Aug 14, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.62177/apemr.v3i4.1603

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Importance

Malaysia holds a unique place in the Chinese regional imagination due to its location in Southeast Asia, institutional membership in ASEAN, predominance of Islam, and historical connection with China through maritime trade and migration. Malaysia's complex society of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous populations, alongside considerable regional, linguistic, and religious diff erences, renders it diffi cult to off er a single identity for Malaysia. The multivariate character of Malaysian society provides the international media with various signs for signifying Malaysia in terms of Malay-Muslim identity, Chinese diasporic identity, indigenous identities, colonial past, economic modernization, religiosity, regional politics, and sociopolitical confl icts. The emphasis placed on one sign at the expense of another helps create a specific national image. This question is particularly important for China Daily – the English-language state media in China partly targeting foreign

audiences. As indicated by the previous research, Chinese state media tend to emphasize collaboration, development, cultural exchange, political stability, and mutual benefits while discussing China's interactions with other societies [1-3] . However, other countries are not just a backdrop for China constructing itself. Rather, other countries are portrayed as specific types of partners, destinations, markets, cultural communities, and regional players. Malaysia attracted particular attention in China Daily around the time of the fiftieth anniversary of China-Malaysia diplomatic relations in 2024, ASEAN chairmanship of Malaysia in 2025, visa-free travel arrangements, heritage cooperation, and economic initiatives between the two nations. During this period, Malaysia appeared in the context of Malacca, Zheng He, Chinese diasporic traditions, food festivals, halal business, tourism, infrastructure projects, ASEAN consensus, and civilization dialogue.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

These patterns cannot be understood through simple labeling as positive and negative coverage due to the fact that even positive visibility has its own selectivity. Not all cultural groups receive equal visibility by celebrating multiculturalism, and the image of a bridge for Malaysia puts the country into a context of certain strategic relationships in which its role has already been defined. For this reason, the research is solely based on the theoretical framework suggested by Hall in his theory of representation. According to Hall[4] , representation can be described as production and circulation of meaning using language, signs, classification, discourse, and recurring patterns of association. Nations and communities do not carry predefined meaning in media discourse as such; instead, the meanings of nations and communities are organized using narrative positions, difference, visibility and invisibility. Therefore, representation is linked to power relations because certain identities are privileged and developed, whereas other identities are marginalized or remain undeveloped. The theoretical framework used by Hall will help to analyze the construction of Malaysian multiculturalism rather than just taking it for granted and studying how labeling Malaysia with such terms as bridge, partner, gateway, chair, and hub creates a particular subject position for this country. For this reason, the research will address the following questions: RQ1: How is Malaysia's multicultural identity represented in China Daily by means of selected/visible/invisible ethnic/cultural signs? RQ2: How is Malaysia represented as a civilizational bridge between China, ASEAN and the Muslim world?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Representation, State Media, and Foreign National Images

Hall's theory challenges the notion of media language as an unbiased reproduction of an independently existing reality and claims that representation creates meaning through positioning people, places, and practices within networks of classification, association, and difference [4]. It means that national imagery emerges through selective recollections of histories, quoting specific voices, making certain communities visible, establishing particular metaphoric associations, and leaving some contradictions unanswered. As there is no news story that could convey a nation in its full complexity, national identity is reduced to easily recognizable signs of leaders, monuments, goods, religious practices, ethnic traditions, and landscapes. If repetition occurs, a limited vocabulary becomes representational closure – the normal framework for the interpretation of a foreign country. Such closure cannot be limited only to stereotypes because even positive discourse can create closure through the essentialization of only those differences that are considered culturally appealing, politically acceptable, and economically beneficial. The studies of Chinese state media underline the significance of researching this aspect. Edney claims that international communication of China combines the goal of attractiveness with propaganda purposes while Rawnsley proves that Chinese international broadcasting strives to establish connections with foreigners through preferred institutional discourse [1-2]. Fan argue that Chinese state-affiliated media has managed to produce an increased number of diverse stories without actually creating interactive relations with foreign audiences [2]. The use of culture is common in order to link national visibility with openness, heritage, and civilizational exchanges. Zhu discusses the integration of culture into national communication through international documentary production[4]. The work of Zhu states that media images are shaped not only by political, economic, and cultural relations but also media system relations[4]. However, researches conducted so far were devoted to either self-representation of China, perception of China in the world or China's overseas communication strategy. There is a lack of studies devoted to the subject positions attributed to partner countries. Hall's

theory requires analyzing not only positive qualities attributed to Malaysia but also a Malaysia that should be constructed for narratives about friendship, connectivity, trade, and civilizational cooperation to make sense.

2.2 Multicultural Malaysia and Mediated Nationhood

It can be argued that Malaysia is a multicultural state. However, it is shown by research that there is contestation of this multiculturalism in history, politics, and institutions of Malaysia. Noor and Leong indicate that multiculturalism of Malaysia cannot be disconnected from differential ethnic categorizations, political structures, and cultural accommodation models [5]. The formal acknowledgment of differences does not change the nature of unequal relations between national, ethnic, and religious groups. Similarly, Fee and Appudurai demonstrate that ethnicity, class, and political organization in Malaysia are still deeply interconnected[6]. Therefore, the depiction of harmonious diversity can symbolize the aspiration of a nation while hiding inequalities. Everyday multiculturalism is characterized by the same tension between conviviality and differentiation. According to Harris and Han, Malaysian youth negotiate the official rhetoric of unity and realize existing racial and unequal relations, proving that the multiculturalism is not only a result but a process of the nation-building including unity, division, bias, and interactions between the people[7]. Koh and Harris characterize Malaysian multiculturalism with “pockets” of encounters and “strings” of connection in different spaces[8] . Thus, the plurality of cultures should not be considered as a stable phenomenon without taking into account the context of inequality in which differences occur. Moreover, the identification with the other ethnic community is dependent on the perception of the necessity of the community for the country. Verkuyten and Khan show that inclusive nationhood is related to group identification and estimation of the importance of different ethnic groups in the nation[9]. Therefore, the media representation is important because constant attention to the history of one community can create a role of the community as an essential part of the national identity, while other communities will have a nominal presence. Promotion narratives often translate diversity into visible symbols like food, festivals, heritage districts, clothes, tourism, etc. It is shown by Matthews and Zain that the nation-branding creates national imaginaries through selected images that are also open to interpretation[10]. Nevertheless, these papers do not provide an understanding of the externalization of the Malaysian diversity in a Chinese English-language outlet. China-related signs, like diasporic heritage, Malacca, Baba-Nyonya culture, lion dancing, food, maritime history, bilateral festivals, etc., can have more visibility, while Indian Malaysian, Orang Asli, and East Malaysian Indigenous traditions have less elaboration. Thus, multiculturalism is seen as a selective representational structure in this paper.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study relied on one single research methodology known as qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is ideal when one intends to derive meaning patterns from texts without disregarding the contextuality of how individual texts relate to the whole document [11-12]. Different from quantitative content analysis, the study did not determine the frequency of the words, sources or topics. The purpose of the study was to explore the way that certain signs and relations formed the intelligibility of Malaysia in various fields. The full article was the unit of analysis for the research. Meaning units included the headlines, introduction, description, historical accounts, speakers, community names, cultural objects, places, relational verbs, and the regional or international position of Malaysia in the news reports. Hall’s representation theory was applied as a sensitizing theory for the analysis process. The theory led to issues like selection, visibility, invisibility, cultural categorization, relation and subject positioning without setting any theme prior to reading the articles.

3.2 Data Selection and Collection

The sample contained articles in the English language, which were published between September 1, 2023, and April 30, 2025. This time frame was chosen since it included the period immediately preceding and following the 50th year anniversary of diplomatic ties between China and Malaysia in May 2024, Malaysia’s preparations for its 2025 ASEAN chairmanship, increased freedom of movement through visa-free travel, and the increasing focus on bilateral heritage and economic cooperation. This period was fixed prior to analysis to avoid including future articles based on interpretations.

The corpus search was conducted in July 2026 through site-restricted searches of the official China Daily domains, including

chinadaily.com.cn, global.chinadaily.com.cn, and epaper.chinadaily.com.cn. Search combinations included "Malaysia," "Malaysian," "China Malaysia," "Malaysia culture," "Malaysia heritage," "Malaysia halal," "Malaysia ASEAN," "Malaysia tourism," and "Malacca." Each retrieved page was manually opened to confirm its title, publication date, byline, source attribution, and substantive relevance.

Articles were included when they met five criteria. First, Malaysia or China–Malaysia relations had to be the central subject rather than a passing reference. Second, the page had to contain a complete English-language textual article. Third, the article had to be published by China Daily, chinadaily.com.cn, a named China Daily journalist, or an identified contributor appearing in the newspaper. Fourth, the article had to contain material relevant to cultural identity, heritage, tourism, religion, trade, diplomacy, ASEAN, education, or bilateral connectivity. Fifth, only one version was retained when substantively identical articles appeared across the main, global, and electronic newspaper domains.

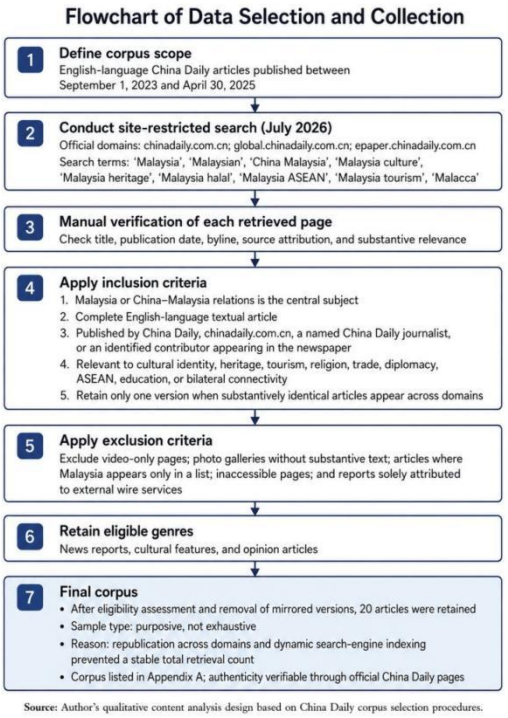
Webpages containing only videos, photo galleries lacking any written content, and articles where Malaysia only occurred in a list were not included. Also, webpages that could not be accessed and news articles written by only external wire services were excluded. This is because the study was on representation in the media and not the types of stories.

Following the screening process and elimination of the mirrored documents, 20 articles remained. The corpus can be found in Appendix A. This sample is non-exhaustive. Since China Daily publishes content under various topics and since search engine indexing is not static, a definite figure of all the potential documents that could have been retrieved was not determined. As a result, it cannot be claimed that this corpus encompasses all the articles published by China Daily related to Malaysia. Instead, this study uses the corpus as a limited but rich set of textual data relevant to addressing the chosen questions. The reliability of the corpus can be verified from the official sources. For example, the selected corpus contains the articles from September 12, 2023, about Malaysian culture; June 3, 2024, about Malaysian food festival; September 17–18, 2024, about heritage and halal trade; December 27–28, 2024, about ASEAN leadership and Malacca; and April 17, 2025, about bilateral tourism (Figure 1 & 2).

Figure 1. Selection of Article from China Daily

No.	Article title	Publication date
1	Malaysian Culture Shows Its Crowd-Drawing Appeal	September 12, 2023
2	Fifty Years of Friendship Between China and Malaysia	February 27, 2024
3	China, Malaysia Eye Booming Cooperation	May 8, 2024
4	Ambassador: China–Malaysia Relations at Their Peak	May 30, 2024
5	Countries Working Together for Mutual Benefit	May 31, 2024
6	Malaysia–China Relations: An Exemplar for ASEAN Countries	May 31, 2024
7	Food Festival Celebrates 50 Years of China–Malaysia Diplomatic Ties	June 3, 2024
8	Strong Bilateral Relations Stressed in Anwar Speech	June 7, 2024
9	Bright Future Ahead for China–Malaysia Unity, Which Has Fine History	June 20, 2024
10	Preserving Cultural Heritage Essential for Shared Future	September 6, 2024
11	Cross-Border Efforts Needed to Protect Heritage	September 7, 2024
12	Teamwork Urged to Protect Asian Heritage	September 17, 2024
13	Malaysia's Halal Trade Reaching Far and Wide	September 18, 2024
14	Halal Exporters Eye Opportunities in Vast China Market	September 19, 2024
15	Malaysia Looks to Engage with China, Steer Region	November 8, 2024
16	Inclusivity, Sustainability to Help Steer ASEAN in 2025	December 27, 2024
17	China–Malaysia Bond Deepens over Malacca Heritage	December 28, 2024
18	Well-Positioned to Prosper	March 3, 2025
19	Bilingual Signs and Mobile Payments Help Fuel Tourism Between Nations	April 17, 2025
20	Malaysia Proving to Be a Hot Tourist Draw Card	April 21, 2025

Figure 2 . Flowchart of Data Selection and Collection



Source: Author's qualitative content analysis design based on China Daily corpus selection procedures.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis followed an iterative qualitative content analysis process involving preparation, coding, categorization, abstraction, and interpretation [14]. First, all articles were read in full to establish their immediate journalistic context. An article-level record was created containing the title, date, genre, main subject, quoted actors, locations, cultural references, and relationship attributed to Malaysia.

Second, meaning units were identified and assigned concise descriptive codes. Initial codes included "harmonious diversity," "Chinese pioneers," "diaspora heritage," "Zheng He," "Malacca," "Baba-Nyonya hybridity," "food as familiarity," "festival diplomacy," "shared heritage," "Islamic quality," "halal gateway," "ASEAN chair," "regional consensus," "neutral intermediary," "land bridge," "visa-free mobility," and "tourism as connection." Codes were semantic at this stage and remained close to the wording and content of the articles.

Third, related codes were compared across the corpus and grouped into broader categories. Codes concerning Chinese heritage, hybrid traditions, cuisine, and harmonious coexistence were organized under categories addressing the cultural composition of Malaysia. Codes concerning maritime history, religious dialogue, ASEAN leadership, logistics, halal markets, tourism, and educational mobility were organized under categories addressing Malaysia's intermediary position.

Fourth, the categories were interpreted using Hall's theoretical concepts. The analysis asked which signs were repeatedly selected to make multicultural Malaysia recognizable, which communities occupied central subject positions, and which cultural groups lacked equivalent elaboration. It also examined how historical and contemporary signs combined to position Malaysia relationally between China, Southeast Asia, and Muslim markets. This stage produced two themes, each containing two subthemes.

Finally, all coded excerpts were reread within their complete articles. This recontextualization reduced the risk of detaching individual expressions from their original purpose. Attention was also given to disconfirming material and representational absences. It was interpreted comparatively: the analysis considered which groups and social issues did not receive narrative development comparable to the cultural signs repeatedly placed at the center of Malaysian identity. An audit trail consisting of the corpus record, initial codes, category notes, thematic definitions, and article-based evidence was maintained to support analytical transparency.

4. Findings

4.1 Selective Multiculturalism as Curated Cultural Familiarity

Theme one explains how China Daily used a structure of cultural familiarity to depict Malaysia as being multicultural to answer RQ1. Diversity was always valued positively; however, diversity was not equally available among the communities making up Malaysia. The most elaborated forms of multiculturalism were found in diasporic Chinese history and Chinese-Malay culture, whereas the conversion of diversity to harmony came through food, festivals, and tourism.

4.1.1 Chinese Diasporic Heritage as the Legible Center of Diversity

The Chinese background offered the major framework for interpreting Malaysian multiculturalism for the China Daily readership. The article published in September 2023 called "Malaysian Culture Shows Its Crowd-Drawing Appeal" presented Malaysia as a country of diverse culture that lived in peace and respect among each other. Nevertheless, the statement of such diversity was immediately connected with the work of Chinese pioneers, who preserved the culture. In addition, the Chinese readers were attracted to the food of Malaysia due to the large number of Chinese people and their similarity in tastes. Thus, diversity was mentioned inclusively but interpreted specifically from the Chinese point of view.

Heritage reporting strengthened this pattern. In "Teamwork Urged to Protect Asian Heritage," for example, the ceremony at Wangchuan was situated not only in China's Minnan region, but also within the Malaysian community of Melaka. In this way, the news article presented the cultural heritage of the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia as a bridge between bilateral friendship, and an example of Chinese culture traveling along the Maritime Silk Road.

Malacca functioned as the geographical concentration of this representation. "China–Malaysia Bond Deepens over Malacca Heritage" created order in the city by means of the person of Zheng He, the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum, Jonker Street, early Chinese settlements, Peranakan style, and Baba-Nyonya identity. The Baba-Nyonya society was viewed as an integration of Malaysian and Chinese culture. Such hybridization was vital for representing the cultural difference without creating the gap between them. The hybrid community proved that Chinese heritage could come to Malaysia and create a tradition of friendship.

As part of this representational structure, Malacca was much more than a single Malaysian city. Instead, Malacca became a condensed symbol of the country itself as historically linked to China, culturally mixed, commercially open, and attracting tourists who were Chinese. Additionally, the inclusion of Zheng He meant that there was a peaceful historical background for this relationship. Colonial rivalries, migration inequalities, and debates about ethnicity in the country itself were replaced by the story of meeting and mixing on the seas.

The problem is not that the history of the Chinese people has been misrepresented. Chinese communities of Malaysia and their heritage are an important part of Malaysian society. Instead, what the theory by Hall draws our attention to is the effects of repetition and comparison of visibility. In the case of the cultural articles, there was no comparable elaboration of the stories and traditions of Indian Malaysians, Orang Asli, Kadazan-Dusun, Iban, and many others of East Malaysia. These groups could be included in general references to the diversity of Malaysia. However, they did not do the same work.

4.1.2 Food, Festivals, and Harmony Depoliticize Cultural Difference

The second subtheme concerns the forms through which multiculturalism was narrated. Multiculturalism was turned into a delightful experience through food festivals, food experiences, tourism, and celebration. For instance, the "Food Festival Celebrates 50 Years of China–Malaysia Diplomatic Ties" was able to offer Malaysian identity in the form of buffet foods, desserts, and Sultan durian. It is important to note that even though the significance of the food festival was linked to the diplomatic commemoration, its immediate form involved the senses of the participants who were able to enjoy it.

The same happened in the case of tourist reporting as well. In the April 2025 piece concerning bilingual signs and mobile payments, Malaysian strategies for making the Chinese feel comfortable about their stay while experiencing something different were discussed. Chinese food, local dishes such as bak kut teh and durian, signs in the Chinese language, mobile payment options, multiculturality and visa free access were presented as difference without hassle. Difference was maintained but its strangeness was mitigated with the help of technology and cuisine.

These recurring terms of harmony, mutual understanding, friendship, and cross-cultural communication helped depoliticize

the concept of diversity. “Malaysian Culture Shows Its Crowd-Drawing Appeal” linked pluralism to innovation and bridge building. The Malacca stories portrayed the Chinese and Malaysian cultures as harmoniously blended. The heritage stories framed the concept of preservation in the context of Asia’s future. These depictions did not just celebrate Malaysia; they established pluralism as a solid moral principle.

This depiction was different from academic accounts of multiculturalism in Malaysia as being at once convivial and unequal [8-9]. In the literature, issues related to race-based policies, differential access, controversy about religion, and conflicting concepts of nationhood were infrequently centered. This does not mean that the representation was not true because there were elements of multiculturalism such as food, tourism, hybridity, and daily peaceful co-existence which exist in Malaysia. However, the combination of such elements resulted in a particular depiction of multiculturalism: diverse enough to be recognized and pleasant enough for tourism, friendship, and bilateral relations.

As for RQ1, the representation of Malaysia can be characterized as selective multiculturalism. Malaysia was not reduced to one ethnicity. Plurality was highlighted although some aspects of plurality were granted more explanatory value than others. China’s diasporic background brought some familiarity, hybrid culture indicated compatibility, food and holidays made diversity enjoyable. Thus, other communities and the political conflicts in the country were not presented extensively enough, thereby making multicultural Malaysia appear as an inclusive country without having to represent inequalities and disputes inherent to multiculturalism negotiation process.

4.2 The Civilizational Bridge as Historical and Strategic Intermediation

The second theme addresses RQ2 by demonstrating that Malaysia was portrayed as a bridge between two complementary forms of intermediation. Malaysia was symbolized as existing between the civilizations of Chinese and Islamic/Southeast Asia, and at the same time, it functioned as a conduit for the circulation of objects, people, infrastructure, and consensus in its modern economic and diplomatic roles.

4.2.1 Malacca, Zheng He, and the Historical Legitimation of Connection

The civilizational bridge was first constructed through historical memory. Malacca and Zheng He kept cropping up as examples of the fact that Chinese-Malaysian relations had much more history and substance behind them than merely their modern diplomatic relationship. In an article entitled “Bright Future Ahead for China-Malaysia Unity, Which Has Fine History”, the period of interaction between China and Malaysia was described as dating back around two thousand years.

This continuity in time lent legitimacy to the modern-day bilateral ties. Zheng He served as a symbol of maritime interaction, diplomacy, peaceful relations, and the Chinese people’s familiarity with the Malays. Through the Malacca heritage article, museum artifacts and historical places allowed the Chinese visitors to feel a part of history that they knew through schooling before. History was portrayed as coming alive in Malaysia.

However, the history of bridge identity was not restricted to China and the ethnic Chinese populations. The framework also included interaction between the civilizations of Islam and Confucianism, shared culture of Asia and intercivilizational dialogue. Malaysia’s predominantly Muslim cultural identity allowed it to extend the definition of bilateral relationship beyond that of Chinese diasporic relations. Malaysia could maintain cultural proximity to China but still remain part of a larger Islamic civilization. Hence, the bridging identity of Malaysia relied both on similarity and difference. In the event that Malaysia was portrayed as purely culturally Chinese, it would have been unable to serve as a bridge.

However, there was great orderliness in such historical narrative. The bridge was exceedingly harmonious, seamless, and beneficial for both sides. Ruptures and asymmetry were not present here. The transition from Zheng He through diplomacy, cultural heritage cooperation, tourism, and modern infrastructure showed that the current cooperation was following a certain historical pattern. Here comes the help of the theory of Hall who explains such continuity via selection and connection of corresponding signs into one chain of relations.

4.2.2 ASEAN Leadership, Halal Trade, and Material Circulation

The second form of bridge-building was practical rather than purely symbolic. The idea that Malaysia is a regional player that can help connect institutions, markets, transport links, and people was presented. In connection with its ASEAN chairmanship for 2025, it was emphasized how inclusive, sustainable, consensual, neutral, ASEAN-centered, and the managing of the

relations with China, the USA, Japan, and the European Union was. An important role was given to Malaysia, but it was more about leading, balancing, negotiating, and integration.

The role of intermediary made Malaysia a useful state for regional purposes. Its agency existed in the texts through its selection of ASEAN's agenda, promoting dialogue and economic integration. The agency of Malaysia was most apparent when it was helping to make compatible the actions of other larger states politically and economically. Malaysia was not seen as an autonomous agent that causes conflict in the region but rather a state that maintains consensus.

Halal trade extended this intermediary role to the Muslim world. "Malaysia's Halal Trade Reaching Far and Wide" portrayed Malaysia as a major player in halal trade, while China was a significant market. The meaning of Halal was articulated not only in terms of prohibitive religion but rather in terms of quality, hygiene, health, fairness, sharing risks, and consumer trust. Thus, the terminology rendered the Islamic economic principles meaningful both for Muslim and non-Muslim markets.

Although the article was not about removing religion from the halal trade industry, it introduced religious significance into commercial and ethical significance. Representationally, there was now mobility in terms of how Islam could move via shows, certification, financial services, ingredients, supplements, and trade across borders. Malaysia was the institution that had the ability to authorize and organize this mobility because of its Muslim majority population and connection with China.

Tourism and infrastructure were two additional building blocks of this material connection. East Coast Rail Link project was called "land bridge linking the eastern and western coasts of Malaysia, helping industry and logistics connections with China and Southeast Asia." Tourism coverage referred to the connection of flights, visa exemptions, multilingual signs, familiar cuisine, mobile money transactions, and historical sites as tools for people-to-people connectivity.

The answer for RQ2 can be derived by defining civilizational bridge as a mixed historical and functional subject position of Malaysia which is said to connect China to the history of Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Muslim markets, and multicultural experiences. Civilizational bridge was justified through such symbols as Zheng He, Malacca, common history, and inter-civilization communication, and such material resources as halal certification, rail connectivity, trade fairs, tourism, education, and visa-free movement. This construction gave Malaysia an important role in the region; however, its most obvious agency was about circulation, consensus, and mutual connection.

5. Discussion

In other words, the results demonstrate that positive representation may be selective while granting its partner nation agency. Instead of removing Malaysia's diversity altogether, China Daily selectively emphasized signs of multiculturalism that would be particularly comprehensible to a China-oriented audience, such as Chinese pioneers, diasporic heritage, Malacca, Zheng He, Jonker Street, Baba-Nyonya culture, lion dancing, cuisine, and festivals. This is consistent with research showing that Malaysian multiculturalism involves a combination of conviviality and structural inequalities[8-10]. Thus, one can say that selective multiculturalism is an intentionally curated representation where Chinese heritage provides a sense of historical intimacy, while food and tourism turn cultural difference into something enjoyable. Meanwhile, the Indian Malaysian and indigenous cultures are relatively less developed, illustrating that meaning is generated not only through visibility but also through invisibility. Similarly, the use of the bridge metaphor ascribes agency to Malaysia in its capacities as an ASEAN chair, halal authority, multicultural destination, heritage partner, and logistical center, though mostly because of its capacity to facilitate circulation among China, Southeast Asia, and the Muslim world. Mentioning Zheng He and Malacca historically legitimizes this role of the country, whereas ASEAN consensus, halal certification, infrastructure, education, visa exemptions, and tourism provide material foundations for this agency. In this case, the research complements the existing literature on the nature of Chinese international communication and demonstrates that positive discourse is capable of structuring foreign identity, visibility, and agency as effectively as any negative representation.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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