

From Slogans to Indicators: How Malaysian Chinese Evaluate Chinese-Style Modernization

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Abstract: We conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 Malaysian Chinese (aged 19–62) in Malaysia between June and September 2025. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we show how respondents translate visible material cues in logistics, digital services and manufacturing into judgments about institutional delivery, equity, green industrial upgrading, and predictability in trade, education and mobility. Media multilingualism fosters cross-checking and experience-based calibration. Rather than reproducing official categories, participants assemble pragmatic, context-dependent evaluations that hinge on the alignment between outputs and trust. We contribute an audience-side indicator logic for Chinese-style modernization and specify channels through which diaspora publics render national development narratives credible and actionable.

Keywords: Malaysian Chinese; Chinese-style Modernization; Thematic Analysis

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1.Introduction

“Chinese-style modernization” has moved to the center of contemporary debates on development and global governance. Official texts define it as a path marked by five features: a very large population base, a focus on common prosperity, coordination between material progress and cultural-ethical advancement, harmony between humanity and nature, and a commitment to peaceful development (CPC, 2022).

International scholarship engages with this agenda from different angles. Many studies assess performance outcomes in growth, poverty reduction, and technology, and then link these outcomes to institutional capacity and social goals such as equity and ecological balance (Luo & Ding, 2024; Hu et al., 2024). Others focus on the discourse of modernization itself and ask how audiences interpret key terms and benchmarks (Yang, 2023). A recurring theme is the risk of conceptual slippage when “modernization” is equated with “Westernization” or when categories developed for other cases are applied without adaptation (Keping, 2010). This diversity of approaches reflects distinct analytical traditions and different expectations of China’s role in world affairs.

Regional literatures add important nuance. In Europe, public policy documents frame China simultaneously as a partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival (Wanek, 2024; Chang, 2025). This triad structures scholarly and policy debate

and shapes how observers weigh opportunities in climate cooperation and trade against concerns in security and standards (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2019). In Latin America, the conversation often adopts a pragmatic lens. Analyses emphasize concrete outcomes in infrastructure, trade, industrial upgrading, and social policy learning, while also noting selective misreadings due to inherited interpretive frames and limited local expertise on China (Sun, 2025). In Africa, research based on first-hand commercial, media, and educational channels suggests that perceptions emerge from everyday interactions as much as from elite commentary. These studies point to strong economic linkages and to practical challenges in services, regulation, and social inclusion that shape the evaluation of China's development path (Lin et al., 2016; Jin, 2023).

Southeast Asia deserves specific attention within this comparative map. The region hosts long-standing Chinese diaspora communities whose daily lives connect China's development narrative with local political economies. Malaysia is a strategic case because of its large and diverse ethnic Chinese population, its close economic ties with China, and its multilingual media ecology (Yow, 2016). These conditions can intensify both resonance and friction in cross-border narratives. They also make it possible to observe how ideas about modernization circulate across languages and social networks, and how they are tested against personal experience in education, trade, technology, and mobility.

This study examines how Malaysian Chinese perceive and evaluate Chinese-style modernization. We treat perceptions as situated and negotiated rather than as simple reflections of elite discourse. We consider both cognitive judgments about policy performance and normative judgments about fairness, participation, and international posture. We also attend to the channels that allocate salience to different dimensions of the five-feature framework, including news media, social media, interpersonal networks, schools, business ties, and travel (CPC, 2022). Comparative evidence suggests that audiences often value concrete indicators and policy outcomes over abstract regime typologies, and that they can affirm socioeconomic results while remaining cautious about political form or geopolitical risk (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2019; Sun, 2025).

Methodologically, we employ semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eighteen Malaysian Chinese, aged 19–62, and analyse the material using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is well suited to identify patterned meanings across a small corpus while preserving contextual nuance. It offers a transparent process for coding, theme development, and reflexive interpretation, and it is established in qualitative research across disciplines (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). This design allows us to map how respondents describe, compare, and judge the five defining features of Chinese-style modernization and to trace the trade-offs they perceive between growth, equity, governance, environment, and international orientation (CPC, 2022).

Substantively, our analysis engages three strands of the international conversation. First, we speak to the performance-focused strand by documenting how respondents connect observed changes in China's economy and technology to perceived opportunity structures in Malaysia. Second, we address the equity and welfare strand by examining how respondents interpret "common prosperity" and social mobility and how they compare experiences across regions and sectors. Third, we engage the ecological and global-governance strand by assessing how respondents weigh green transition, interdependence, and the claim of peaceful development against narratives of strategic rivalry (Sun, 2025). We also consider how multi-language media environments shape these judgments and how lived interactions with Chinese firms, products, and institutions recalibrate initial views, as shown in African cases where everyday commerce and service encounters leave a strong imprint on perceptions (Lin et al., 2016; Jin, 2023).

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it provides primary qualitative evidence from a Southeast Asian diaspora community, complementing bodies of work that focus on Europe, Latin America, or Africa. Second, it clarifies the conceptual boundaries that often blur debates, especially the difference between modernization as a plural, context-dependent process and modernization as a single institutional template. Third, it specifies the communication channels through which ideas about Chinese-style modernization travel in a multilingual society, and it identifies where those channels converge or conflict. In doing so, the study speaks to the wider question of how national development narratives become credible, legitimate, and actionable across borders. It also offers an empirical baseline for future mixed-method research on diaspora cognition and

cross-border knowledge flows in Southeast Asia.

2. Methods

We adopted a qualitative design based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. This design is appropriate for exploring patterned meanings while preserving participants' context and nuance (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Purposive and snowball sampling are common and suitable when the population is specific and not readily enumerated (Malterud et al., 2016).

2.1 Participants and sampling

We recruited 18 Malaysian Chinese adults aged 19–62. Inclusion criteria were: (a) self-identified Malaysian Chinese; (b) residence in Malaysia for the past three years; (c) awareness of the term “Chinese-style modernization” through any channel; (d) ability to provide informed consent; and (e) availability for a 60–90-minute interview. Exclusion criteria were: (a) inability to participate in an interview in Mandarin, English, or Malay; and (b) acute cognitive or psychiatric impairment that would preclude informed consent or participation. Recruitment began with key informants in education, SMEs, and technology sectors and proceeded via snowball referrals until thematic saturation was reached, defined as no new codes relevant to study aims in two consecutive interviews (Guest et al., 2020; Hennink et al., 2017).

2.2 Data collection

Interviews were conducted in Malaysia between June and September 2025. We used a semi-structured guide organized into four modules: (1) overall understandings of Chinese-style modernization; (2) value judgements and comparative standards; (3) information sources, media use, and trust; and (4) links to personal life and work. The guide was piloted with two eligible individuals; minor wording changes improved clarity. Interviews were held face-to-face or via secure videoconferencing according to participant preference and feasibility; each session lasted 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Transcripts were produced verbatim in the original language, then meaning-translated into English with key-term back-translation; transcripts were checked against recordings for accuracy. Personally identifying information was removed during transcription. Field notes documented context, nonverbal cues, and reflexive observations for analysis (Tong et al., 2007).

2.3 Data analysis technique

We applied thematic analysis in six phases: familiarization, coding, generating candidate themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Two researchers independently coded an initial subset of transcripts to develop a shared codebook, discussed discrepancies, and reached consensus on code definitions. We used this negotiated approach to enhance transparency and dependability while respecting the reflexive stance of thematic analysis (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2019). The remaining transcripts were coded by one analyst with periodic peer debriefings to interrogate assumptions and refine theme boundaries. We iteratively examined theme coherence and distinctiveness and constructed a theme map to represent relationships among themes.

2.4 Ethics

All participants received an information sheet describing the study purpose, procedures, risks, and rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Procedures followed the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant local institutional norms for social research (World Medical Association, 2013). Data were stored on encrypted drives with access restricted to the research team.

3. Findings

3.1 Demographic characteristics

The study included 18 Malaysian Chinese participants aged 19–62 years ($M = 36.9$, $SD = 12.7$). Gender was evenly distributed (male: 9; female: 9). Educational attainment was high: most held a bachelor's degree ($n = 11$), followed by master's ($n = 4$), diploma ($n = 2$), and high school ($n = 1$). Occupational roles were diverse, with SME owners forming the largest group ($n = 4$); educators, tech employees, university students, and freelancers each accounted for 16.7% ($n = 3$ per group), and one participant worked in an NGO and one in the civil service (both 5.6%). Residence was reported at a coarse geographic level for anonymity: Klang Valley (38.9%), Penang (22.2%), Johor (16.7%), and single cases in Kedah, Perak,

Sabah/Sarawak, and Malacca (each 5.6%). Interviews were conducted in Mandarin (55.6%), English (38.9%), and Malay (5.6%). Most interviews were face to face (55.6%); the remainder were conducted via video (44.4%). Sessions lasted on average 72.4 minutes (SD = 8.2; range = 60–90).

Table 1: Social demography of participants ($n = 18$)

Variables		Value, n (%) or Mean (SD; range)
Gender	Male	9 (50.0%)
	Female	9 (50.0%)
Age	Years	36.9 (SD = 12.7; range = 19–62)
Education	High school	1 (5.6%)
	Diploma	2 (11.1%)
	Bachelor's	11 (61.1%)
	Master's	4 (22.2%)
Region	Klang Valley	7 (38.9%)
	Penang	4 (22.2%)
	Johor	3 (16.7%)
	Kedah	1 (5.6%)
	Perak	1 (5.6%)
	Sabah/Sarawak	1 (5.6%)
	Malacca	1 (5.6%)
Interview language	Mandarin	10 (55.6%)
	English	7 (38.9%)
	Malay	1 (5.6%)
Interview mode	Face-to-face	10 (55.6%)
	Video	8 (44.4%)
Occupation	University student	3 (16.7%)
	Tech employee	3 (16.7%)
	Educator	3 (16.7%)
	SME owner	4 (22.2%)
	Freelancer	3 (16.7%)
	NGO worker	1 (5.6%)
	Civil servant	1 (5.6%)
Interview duration	Minutes	72.4 (SD = 8.2; range = 60–90)

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. SD = standard deviation. Region is reported at a coarse geographic level for anonymity.

3.2 Thematic findings

Analysis of 18 semi-structured interviews with Malaysian Chinese produced six interrelated themes that trace how Chinese-style modernization is perceived, assessed, and translated into everyday decisions. Themes are presented in order of salience across the corpus. Illustrative excerpts are rendered in plain text and tagged with anonymized identifiers (P01–P18).

Theme 1: Economic performance and the imagination of opportunity

Participants associated Chinese-style modernization with resilient growth, extensive infrastructure, industrial upgrading, and fast cycles of technological change. They treated these features as tangible and as gateways to new opportunities. Education, supply-chain participation, and market access were the most frequently mentioned domains. Respondents grounded their expectations in observable evidence, such as rail networks, factory automation, logistics reliability, and product quality. They then projected these observations onto plans for skills development and collaboration.

I walked the floor at a supplier fair and saw short lead times and clean tooling; if my plant can sync to that rhythm, I can

accept tighter delivery windows (P10)

Release cycles are fast and data driven; our training should add product operations and analytics so new hires can contribute early. (P03)

A visit to an automated line clarified what polytechnic curricula should cover, from preventive maintenance to safety standards. (P04)

E-commerce prices and delivery are predictable, so a small online shop now feels feasible. (P02)

Urban transit and intercity rail make the growth story concrete; people visualize capacity, not only read about it. (P12)

Logistics from the peninsula is still costly; if we align to a regional warehouse network, shipping to Borneo can be faster. (P14)

Theme 2: Common Prosperity and Social Equity

Participants regarded common prosperity as a manifestation of social equity. Social equity was associated with opportunities for social mobility, reductions in poverty, and the expansion of public services.

Only when individuals can, through their own efforts, earn income and achieve upward mobility can fairness be said to exist. (P02)

Malaysia exhibits a relatively large wealth gap; affluent families may be less affected, whereas low-income households require public services to meet basic subsistence needs. (P11)

Serving low-income groups generates durable benefits, including higher employment, greater subjective well-being among recipients, and improvements in human capital; however, such service provision presupposes national economic development. (P07)

Coordinated development of urban and rural areas is also an important component of common prosperity:

Cities are Malaysia's cities, and rural areas are Malaysia's rural areas; it is not acceptable to prioritize cities while neglecting the countryside. (P01)

Urban areas are changing rapidly, but our rural areas remain largely unchanged. (P13)

Theme 3: Coordinated Development of Material and Spiritual Civilization

Participants argued that modernization should align material advancement with cultural and spiritual development. They emphasized that prosperity at the material level must be matched by cultural growth. Most participants noted that culture involves both subjective fulfillment and the enhancement of civic qualities and human capital, including a sense of social responsibility, civility, and social trust. The following excerpts support these views:

Infrastructure is important, but culture is decisive; a campus acquires a sense of modernity when students respect public space. (P04)

Cultural anchors can alleviate anxiety, whereas new technologies function only as tools. (P12)

Malaysia is ethnically diverse, and its culture should likewise be pluralistic. (P03)

Participants also identified social contradictions:

When culture is developed as an industry, results are difficult and slow to achieve; consequently, most people prefer quick profits rather than invest in developing and transmitting their own culture. (P08)

Malaysia is indeed rich in cultural resources, yet for political and historical reasons some cultural traditions are gradually disappearing. (P03).

Theme 4: Green transition and a technology-oriented pathway

Participants perceived China's ability to integrate environmental protection with economic growth as a defining feature of its modernization. They pointed to renewable energy, the digital economy, and high-tech industrial upgrades as primary windows for observing this shift. Respondents noted a decisive transition from a model of "growth at any cost" to a state-led, technology-driven green development strategy. This deliberate path was viewed not as a limitation on growth, but as a new engine for a more sustainable and globally competitive economy.

Ten years ago, we bought German solar panels; now, we sell Chinese ones to the world. That supply chain reversal says everything about their new development path. (P06)

The old image was cheap toys from a smoky factory. The new one is an electric car, full of tech, rolling off a robotic assembly line. That's a different kind of strength. (P02)

In Shenzhen, you scan a QR code to rent a bike and pay for groceries. The digital convenience is obvious, but it's also subtly promoting a greener, more efficient lifestyle. (P11)

This green shift didn't happen by accident. You see the government's hand setting clear targets for industries like solar and EVs; it's a planned transition, not just market luck. (P07)

They are proving that 'green' isn't just a cost or a sacrifice; it's the next massive economic opportunity. They are betting their future on it. (P14)

Theme 5: Peaceful development and perceptions of regional order

Many participants read the commitment to peaceful development as a stabilizing signal. What mattered was not grand geopolitics but whether the promise translated into predictable trade, education, and mobility. When they believed regional order would hold, they were more willing to plan investments, apply for programs, or sign multi-year contracts.

Offices plan when they expect stability; peaceful development reduces background anxiety. (P11)

Hiring decisions follow supply-chain confidence; if we expect steady parts, we commit. (P03)

Headlines are one thing, and my ledger is another. When the news shows warships, tour bookings get cancelled. For us, peace means steady foot traffic, not long discussions about patrols. (P05)

We are considering expanding a processing plant, but only if predictability holds—no sudden politically driven inspections, no overnight capital-control shifts; peaceful development must equal a stable business environment, or cash stays in the bank. (P18)

Joint degrees survive politics when they deliver value to both sides; graduating cohorts build trust. (P16)

While scholarships and high-tech campuses are appealing, parents also seek assurance that students will be welcomed and kept safe, rather than entangled in diplomatic tensions. Clear and friendly signals between governments can facilitate decision-making. (P01)

Theme 6: Media ecologies, knowledge sources, and cognitive divergence

Participants, as multilingual consumers of diverse media, inhabit a complex information environment that fosters divergent cognitions and uneven trust in narratives about China. They report a sharp contrast between Chinese-language media, which typically frame developments in terms of cooperation and shared opportunity, and English-language media, which often emphasize systemic comparison and strategic competition. To navigate this polarized landscape, respondents described a process of cross-channel verification and placed a high premium on personal experience, using firsthand observations to calibrate and challenge abstract media portrayals.

Watch the news on a Chinese channel, and a project is about building bridges. Switch to an English Channel, and the same project is about building influence. It's like they're reporting on two different worlds. (P08)

My rule is to read the reports from both Beijing and New York, strip out the adjectives, and see what facts are left. You have to be your own editor. (P05)

In our family WhatsApp group, one uncle shares articles from a Chinese news portal, other shares from the BBC. The arguments are endless because their information sources are from different planets. (P16)

Trust is the real casualty. You learn to be sceptical of everything—the enthusiastic praise and the dire warnings. Your own judgment becomes your only guide. (P01)

4. Discussion

Our analysis suggests that Malaysian Chinese participants treat “Chinese-style modernization” less as a distant geopolitical slogan and more as a practical evaluative frame for everyday planning. Reasoning proceeds from concrete observations in transport, logistics, and digital services to broader judgments about growth, equity, governance, ecology, and regional order. This micro-to-macro logic addresses our research questions by showing how observed performances, institutional delivery,

and interpersonal trust jointly shape evaluations. It aligns with performance-oriented strands in the literature while adding a grounded Southeast Asian perspective on how audiences translate practices into expectations and choices (Luo & Ding, 2024; Hu et al., 2024). It also complements regional work that documents pragmatic appraisals in Latin America and perception formation through quotidian interaction in Africa (Sun, 2025; Lin et al., 2016; Jin, 2023).

First, the theme on economic performance indicates that technological upgrading and infrastructure are read as actionable opportunity structures. Participants connected factory automation, delivery reliability, and rail connectivity with plans for skills acquisition and supply-chain participation (for example, “short lead times make tighter delivery windows feasible,” P10). They privileged visible outcomes over abstract regime typologies, which is consistent with comparative evidence on how audiences weigh growth and capability signals in cross-national evaluation (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2019). This refines performance-focused debate by specifying the cognitive pathway through which material indicators become vocational and entrepreneurial intentions. It also identifies concrete frictions, such as logistics costs and uneven East–West Malaysia integration, which condition how external models are localized.

Second, interpretations of “common prosperity” were anchored in social mobility, poverty reduction, and the breadth of public services. Fairness was seen as contingent on opportunities for upward movement through one’s own effort, supported by targeted welfare and balanced urban–rural provision. This resonates with the official five-feature framework and equity-oriented international discussion while refracting through local concerns about wealth gaps and service coverage (CPC, 2022). The theme advances debate by showing that equity is judged not only by redistributive intent but also by perceived institutional capacity to deliver mobility at scale.

Third, coordination between material and spiritual civilization emerged as a normative expectation that modernization should cultivate civic qualities, cultural pluralism, and social trust alongside material gains. Participants endorsed culture as both subjective fulfillment and a public good, while acknowledging tensions when culture is treated primarily as an industry (for example, “fast money crowds out heritage,” P08). These views counter the slippage that equates modernization with a single civilizational template and support a plural, context-dependent understanding emphasized in discourse-analytic scholarship (Yang, 2023; Keping, 2010).

Fourth, the green transition was interpreted as a technology-driven pathway that couples ecological targets with industrial strategy. Respondents identified renewable energy, electric vehicles, and the digital economy as the main windows into this shift, and they described state coordination as decisive. Rather than a constraint, environmental policy appeared as a new engine of competitiveness. This adds audience-level detail to ecological and global-governance debates by showing how green industrial policy becomes credible when embodied in products, supply chains, and everyday digital conveniences (Sun, 2025).

Fifth, “peaceful development” functioned in participants’ reasoning as a proxy for predictability in trade, education, and mobility. Peace was assessed not in abstract strategic terms but in the stability of bookings, contracts, and hiring plans (for example, “stable visas and flights shape semester planning,” P03). The result echoes the European policy triad that frames China as partner, competitor, and systemic rival, while clarifying how small actors translate these categories into risk tolerance and timing decisions (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2019; Wanek, 2024; Chang, 2025). For this audience, credible assurances of order enable longer-horizon choices, whereas signals of confrontation depress everyday transactions.

Sixth, a multilingual media ecology generated divergent readings and a reported trust deficit. Participants contrasted cooperation-oriented narratives in Chinese-language outlets with competition-oriented narratives in English-language media and responded by cross-checking sources and privileging personal experience (for example, “I verify through the platforms I use,” P12). This mirrors African cases in which direct encounters recalibrate media-driven priors (Lin et al., 2016; Jin, 2023). The theme specifies the channels through which ideas about modernization travel in Malaysia’s information environment and identifies experiential validation as a key mechanism of belief updating.

Taken together, the themes support three conceptual claims. First, within our sample, “Chinese-style modernization”

operates as an embedded referential system applied to personal developmental horizons. Second, audience judgments are pragmatically assembled from material cues, institutional delivery, and interpersonal trust rather than from allegiance to a single ideological frame. Third, credibility and legitimacy emerge where policy claims are repeatedly corroborated by lived interactions and consistent signals across media. These claims distinguish modernization as a plural process rather than a fixed institutional template and locate diaspora communities as epistemic brokers who translate external models into local calculus (CPC, 2022; Yang, 2023; Keping, 2010).

5. Limitations and future recommendations

Our purposive, urban-leaning sample, which has relatively high educational attainment and greater exposure to China-related sectors and media, likely over-represents informationally advantaged respondents; therefore, the findings aim for analytic transferability rather than statistical generalization. Requiring awareness of “Chinese-style modernization” as an inclusion criterion may have selected politically attentive individuals. The cross-sectional design cannot capture time-varying influences (e.g., visa/customs procedures, logistics cadence, price shocks, salient media events). Mode and language may have shaped disclosure; despite translation checks, minor translation drift is possible. As a reflexive thematic analysis, theme boundaries are interpretive and alternative readings remain plausible. We did not triangulate interview claims with administrative or behavioural indicators (e.g., visa or customs statistics, logistics KPIs, transaction logs) or systematic multilingual media content analysis, which would sharpen measurement.

Future work should broaden coverage across Malaysian regions and major ethnic groups (Malay and Indian Malaysians), add rural/low-connectivity settings, and incorporate longitudinal designs (panel re-contacts around policy or market events). To strengthen measurement and causal inference, combine interviews with administrative and transaction data, platform or supply-chain analytics, and survey/conjoint experiments on message framing. In educational contexts, co-develop practice-oriented modules with industry and civic partners and evaluate them with pre-registered designs that track skills, ethical reasoning, service, and partnership outcomes.

Conclusion

This study shows how Malaysian Chinese evaluate Chinese-style modernization through routine judgments of performance, equity, culture, ecology, and regional order. Credibility is inferred from visible outputs in logistics, technology, and services, and from the alignment of material cues with institutional delivery and interpersonal trust within a multilingual media ecology. Peaceful development is interpreted as a signal of policy predictability, the green transition as an industrial strategy aligned with ecological targets, and common prosperity through mobility prospects and the reach of public services. The evidence supports modernization as a plural and context-dependent process, with diaspora actors brokering national narratives into local opportunities. Policy and communication should emphasize verifiable standards, reliable service metrics, and safety assurances. Future research should use longitudinal and behavioural data to test durability and scope.

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Conflict of Interests

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

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