

Malaysia-China Relations: Progress, Partnership, Prospects.
Edited by Chow Bing Ngeow. Singapore: World Scientific, 2025.
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The fiftieth anniversary of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations in 2024 provided their governments, business associations and corporations with a timely opportunity to celebrate the two countries' deepening ties. This volume, edited by Chow Bing Ngeow, director of the Institute of China Studies at Universiti Malaya, captures the evolution and current state of this relationship across diplomatic, commercial and socio-cultural dimensions. With 15 chapters covering a broad thematic range, it offers a valuable reference point for scholars of China-Southeast Asia relations, using Malaysia as a case study.

The volume begins with Abdul Majid Ahmad Khan, a former Malaysian ambassador to Beijing, charting the highlights of government-to-government ties under successive Malaysian administrations. In the next chapter, Chow Bing Ngeow and Muhammad Ali Ridha bin Norma analyse the strategic challenges and opportunities posed by Chinese investment under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the ambitious East Coast Rail Link project, and explore Malaysia's responses to Beijing's newer global initiatives, such as the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilizational Initiative. While acknowledging the challenges associated with BRI projects, especially during the 2018 leadership transition in Malaysia, the authors argue that there has been positive momentum since 2022 under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who regards China's narrative of "common prosperity" as resonating with his own "*Madani*" framework of governing for the common good. Kuik Cheng-Chwee and Nur Shahadah Jamil offer a nuanced explanation of Malaysia's "hedging" strategy *vis-à-vis* China and the United States, moving beyond the simplistic notion of "keeping everyone guessing" (p. 37) to examine conditions under which Malaysia's foreign policy might shift in response to structural changes. On the contentious South China Sea dispute, Zhang Mingliang and Lam Choong Wah provide contrasting Chinese and Malaysian perspectives, illustrating how both sides have tried to prevent the dispute from derailing their broader relationship.

The rapid growth of economic ties, with China becoming Malaysia's largest trading partner in 2009, has undoubtedly strengthened other aspects of bilateral relations, and Tham Siew-

Yean and Andrew Kam Jia-Yi dissect these trends, particularly in the electronics and electrical sector, which is undergoing a major supply chain restructuring amid the US-China trade war. Zhang Miao and Li Ran trace investment flows, from Malaysia's more dominant role in the 1980s to the surge of Chinese investment since the 1990s, as well as the recent shift in financing away from manufacturing sectors towards digital production and services. They also investigate new areas of supply chain integration, such as the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park, a flagship BRI project. Guanie Lim and Ooi Yat-Ming explore Chinese investments in Malaysia's Digital Free Trade Zone (DFTZ), an initiative by Chinese tech giant Alibaba that promises to open up the Chinese market to Malaysian e-commerce exporters, while Ong Shue-Li examines the opportunities and risks involved in Malaysia's engagement with the Digital Silk Road, the Chinese government's scheme to enhance digital connectivity with its trading partners in areas such as telecommunications and cybersecurity. Lee Pei-May draws attention to climate cooperation, especially in renewable energy and electric vehicles, an area where China will play an increasingly significant role in regional policy frameworks.

Socio-cultural relations are also addressed. Tee Boon Chuan revisits the three-decade-long Islamic-Confucian dialogue pioneered by Osman Bakar and Tu Wei-Ming, a theme resonant with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar's promotion of "inter-civilizational dialogue" (p. 180). Fo Congcong and Li Gengrun provide a lengthy and instructive chapter on the development of Malay language studies in China, while Yap Hon-Lun explores the significance of Xiamen University Malaysia, the first overseas branch of a Chinese university. Fan Pik-Shy and Choo Kim-Fong present survey findings on the opinions of Chinese students in Malaysia, underscoring the growing importance of Chinese educational institutions. Meanwhile, Ling Tek-Soon and Karl Lee Chee-Leong assess the influence of the social media platform TikTok on Malaysian public opinion about China, finding largely positive attitudes.

While comprehensive in scope, the volume does have gaps. There is an aversion to discussing some historical tensions between the two countries, including Beijing's support for Malaya's communist insurgency after the Second World War. This could limit a reader's understanding of how such contentious legacies shape present-day dynamics. More noticeably, recent controversies are only lightly touched upon. For example, there is little discussion on the alleged misappropriation of funds in the Trans-Sabah Gas

Pipeline project, which was backed by the Export-Import Bank of China. Also quickly bypassed are the allegations in the run-up to Malaysia's 2018 general elections that the Chinese government had helped bail out the scandal-plagued 1MDB fund. The challenges of integrating Chinese investment with Malaysia's local supply chain are also underexplored, despite their obvious importance.

These omissions make the discussion of Malaysia-China relations less nuanced and engaging, particularly when it comes to the long-term trajectory of economic ties. Moreover, most chapters—with the exception of those written by Kuik and Nur, and Kam and Tham—adopt an overly descriptive approach, which means there is limited hypothesis testing or theoretical engagement to demonstrate how this bilateral relationship contributes to the existing literature.

Despite these gaps, the volume succeeds as a timely stocktaking exercise. It emphasizes a relationship that is largely positive, respectful and mutually beneficial. Yet it also leaves open questions about structural asymmetry, local absorption of Chinese capital and political sensitivities that deserve deeper scrutiny. Ideally, a future collection, perhaps one marking the sixtieth anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2034, will take on these challenges more directly.

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