

## 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHINA-MALAYSIA DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS: CHINA'S NATIONAL IMAGE IN MAINSTREAM MALAYSIAN NEWSPAPER

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**Abstract.** Despite growing China-Malaysia ties, how Malaysian newspapers portray China's national image in the context of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations remains underexplored. This research study examines three questions: the distribution of coverage across national image dimensions, evaluative attitudes, and differences between two major newspapers, The Star and Sin Chew Daily. Using quantitative content analysis, 112 articles published in 2023 (49 from The Star, 63 from Sin Chew Daily) were analyzed. Results indicate that functional coverage was most prominent, followed by aesthetic and normative dimensions. The Star exhibited a higher proportion of positive evaluations, emphasizing normative and international cooperation themes, while Sin Chew Daily presented a more balanced profile with greater focus on aesthetic aspects and community-relevant concerns regarding Chinese investments. These research findings suggest that Malaysian newspapers shape China's national image not only through evaluative reporting but also via selective dimensional emphasis, reflecting audience, editorial priorities, and socio-political context.

**Keywords:** *China, Malaysia, national image, The Star, Sin Chew Daily*

### Introduction

In the context of globalization and pervasive media influence, national image is pivotal in constructing international relations and public perception (Kunczik, 2003). For instance, the country's national image significantly affects foreign direct investment (Kunczik, 2002), the flourishing of the nation's tourism industry (Kotler and Gertner, 2007), the allure of the domestic labor market and the education system, among other crucial dimensions. Moreover, national image plays a pivotal role in determining export success, shaping how people assess the quality of products and services (Magnusson and Westjohn, 2011) and implicitly influencing their willingness to pay (Kotler and Gertner, 2007). As a key aspect of soft power, the national image drives political leaders to focus on shaping and maintaining their country's reputation in the international arena (Kunczik, 2003). This is equally true for China. In previous studies on national image, newspaper reports are often regarded as an important channel for national image dissemination (Wei, 2022). Fowler (2013) contends that news, as a medium, both reflects and shapes universal societal values within a specific historical context. Therefore, international news reporting can shape the audience's perception of a country (Wu et al., 2022). Over recent decades, China's growing international prominence and its political, economic, and cultural influence have attracted widespread attention in global newspapers (Ng, 2022; Lams, 2016). This attention has been particularly

sustained in Southeast Asian countries, where nations are especially attentive due to their geographical proximity and economic ties (Ng, 2022; Gong, 2019).

Among Southeast Asian nations, Malaysia is one of the countries with especially close exchanges with China. The two countries formally established diplomatic relations in 1974, with Malaysia being the first ASEAN member to do so. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping's leadership, bilateral cooperation has continued to deepen and expand; during Xi's 2013 visit to Malaysia, their relationship was elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership (Yu, 2023) and they became early adopters of the Belt and Road Initiative (Xu et al., 2020). In 2023, the Malaysian head of state visited China twice, further strengthening ties. This deepening relationship coincides with the 50th anniversary of China–Malaysia diplomatic relations in 2024, marking a significant milestone in their partnership. In 2024, to mark the 50th anniversary of China–Malaysia diplomatic relations, the Merdeka Centre conducted a national survey. The results showed that about 77% of Malaysian respondents held a favourable view of China, a significant increase from 39% in 2022. Similarly, 84% of respondents believed that bilateral relations were improving, compared with 70% in the previous survey, indicating a clear positive shift in public perception. Given the positive shift in public perception toward China, and the important role newspapers play in shaping such attitudes, it is necessary to examine how mainstream Malaysian newspapers portrayed China's national image in 2023. This study focuses on two leading Malaysian newspapers, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily*, in the context of the 50th anniversary of China–Malaysia diplomatic relations. *The Star* is the highest-circulating English-language newspaper in Malaysia, while *Sin Chew Daily* is the highest-circulating Chinese-language newspaper (Fong et al., 2020). Using the national image 4D model as a framework, this study employs quantitative content analysis to investigate how these newspapers depict China's national image, including the dimensions emphasized, the attitudes conveyed, and the differences between the two publications.

## *Literature review*

### *The national image 4D model*

The national image refers to the collective cognition and evaluation formed by the international community toward a nation, reflecting external perceptions of that country (Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015). The concept has been examined across several disciplines, including public relations, business studies, social psychology, and international relations (Kunczik, 2016). Within communication research, scholars have mainly focused on how national images are constructed through media representations and how audiences interpret these portrayals (Tang, 2021a). Recent studies increasingly adopt multidimensional approaches to conceptualize national image (Ingenhoff et al., 2021; Xu and Löffelholz, 2021). Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015) proposed the national image 4D model, which has been widely used as a framework for analyzing national image. This model conceptualizes national image through four dimensions including the functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional dimension. The functional, normative, and aesthetic dimensions represent cognitive evaluations of a country, while the emotional dimension reflects affective responses toward it. According to the national image 4D model, the functional dimension evaluates a country's performance in both political and economic domains. It considers 13 variables, including global economic position, capacity for technological innovation, attractiveness to investors, quality of

products and services, business competence, the state of the labor market, political leadership, political stability, infrastructure, achievements in sports and science, and the quality and accessibility of education (Ingenhoff et al., 2018; Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015).

The normative dimension considers 5 variables, includes protecting the environment, taking global responsibility, respecting other countries, supporting peace and human rights, and being fair in trade and economic policies (Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015; Van Ham, 2001). This dimension reflects a country's role and contributions to global governance, significantly influencing its international image. The aesthetic dimension encompasses 6 variables, includes cultural products, historical heritage, cuisine, traditional customs, notable figures, and natural landscapes, measuring the attractiveness of a country's culture and natural scenery (Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015). Researchers will specifically examine whether these dimensions appear in the sample and how they are manifested in the data. The emotional dimension reflects the public's overall emotional responses and attachment to a country, encompassing their aggregated feelings toward various attributes. Its significance lies in its direct influence on public attitudes and behavioral tendencies toward a country, representing an important aspect of national soft power (Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015). As an important channel for information dissemination, the attitude of news reports can significantly influence the construction of a country's national image (Wu et al., 2022), and the use of emotional language in news may affect audience perceptions through processes of emotional transfer (Wu and Coleman, 2009). In the previous studies, scholars typically assess whether news coverage expresses a clear positive, negative, or neutral attitude (Guo et al., 2019). Following this approach, this study assesses the emotional dimension of China's national image in Malaysian newspapers by examining the coverage attitude.

### ***China's national image in international news coverage***

Indirect experiences primarily construct a national image through the media, as individuals tend to form their perceptions based on the images portrayed rather than through direct interactions with the physical environment (Kunczik, 2003). Given that news information, principally disseminated by mass media, is a primary avenue for comprehending and interpreting real-world issues. Consequently, news media emerges as a crucial force in shaping the images of other countries (Kunczik, 2003). Previous investigations into China's national image have primarily focused on how foreign media portray China as the 'other' and how China's media shapes their self-image (Liu, 2023; Huan and Deng, 2021). These studies integrate theories and practices from history, journalism, communication studies, statistics, and international relations by employing quantitative and qualitative research methods. Their goal is to elucidate China's national image in foreign media and to offer strategic recommendations for improving China's external image (Mokry, 2017). Some studies further indicate that media portrayals of China are closely intertwined with social, political, and ideological factors (Zhang and Wu, 2017). Recent studies suggest that international media portrayals of China are complex and often shaped by geopolitical contexts and media systems. Research on Western news coverage indicates that China is frequently framed within political and security-related narratives, with attention focused on governance, human rights, and strategic competition (Yang and Wang, 2023). For instance, a corpus-based analysis of environmental reporting in *The New York Times* shows that discussions of China are

often embedded within broader discourses of global responsibility and political governance.

At the same time, international coverage does not present a uniformly negative image. Some studies note that global media also highlight China's economic development, technological progress, and its role in international development cooperation (Wang, 2021). Furthermore, scholars emphasize regional variations in media representations of China. Compared with Western media's emphasis on ideological and geopolitical issues, media in developing countries such as some Southeast Asian nations tend to frame China more in terms of economic cooperation and regional partnerships, reflecting local political and economic interests (Zhang and Wu, 2017). In the Malaysian context, prior research has examined how domestic media construct China's national image. Analyses of English-language newspapers such as *The Star* and *New Straits Times* show that news topics, sources, and actors influence reporting tendencies (Hongyu et al., 2024). Studies show that the evaluation of China in international news coverage often varies according to the origin of information sources. Reports drawing on Chinese official or domestic media sources tend to present China in a more positive light, whereas stories relying on Western governmental or media sources are more likely to adopt a critical tone, highlighting the role of sourcing and framing in the construction of media narratives about China (Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011).

Other studies indicate that Malaysian media adopt reciprocal and negotiated strategies when reporting on China's entertainment industry, reflecting the adaptation of news content within cross-cultural communication contexts (Wang et al., 2025). Television news studies show that during Najib Razak's state visit to China, Malaysian media largely presented a positive image of China, influenced by socio-cultural and political factors (Ng, 2022). Recent research further indicates that Malaysian media portrayals of Chinese modernization combine positive and neutral evaluations while employing complex discursive strategies (Wang and Liang, 2024). Additional studies examining Malaysian coverage of Chinese initiatives, including the Belt and Road project, reveal differences in how economic, political, and cultural narratives are constructed (Huang et al., 2024). Although these studies provide valuable empirical evidence, none examine the coverage of China in Malaysia specifically in relation to the 50th anniversary of China-Malaysia diplomatic relations, considering multiple dimensions, evaluative stances, and inter-newspaper differences. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive study to understand how media dynamically construct China's image within the context of a major diplomatic milestone and regional media environment.

## **Materials and Methods**

The study employed a quantitative content analysis to examine how Malaysian newspapers portray China's national image. The coding framework was based on the 4D model of national image (Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015), with each dimension operationalized through explicit coding rules. The cognitive component was coded using 24 predefined variables across the functional, normative, and aesthetic dimensions, with each variable marked as present (1) or absent (0) in an article. The emotional component was coded separately, each report was classified as positive, negative, or neutral based on the overall sentiment of the language used. Positive

attitude included terms such as “excellent” or “powerful,” negative attitude included terms like “dangerous” or “threatening,” and reports with no clear emotional language were coded as neutral. Sample excerpts were used to guide coders and ensure consistency in classification across all articles (Yu, 2023; Rosenson, 2015). Two newspapers, The Star and Sin Chew Daily, were purposively selected for this study due to their wide readership and influence within Malaysia's media landscape. The Star is the leading English-language newspaper (Wui and Wei, 2020), while Sin Chew Daily holds the same status among Chinese-language publications (Fong et al., 2020). Institutional and political-economic factors informed their selection. The Star, owned by Star Media Group, historically aligns with mainstream English-language discourse and is shaped by both commercial and governmental considerations. Sin Chew Daily, a major Chinese-language outlet, serves the Malaysian Chinese community and reflects corporate and cultural interests. These factors affect editorial priorities, agenda-setting, and sourcing practices, making the two newspapers appropriate for examining variations in the portrayal of China's national image.

Both newspapers maintain online versions that mirror their print content. Both print and online versions were cross-checked to ensure consistency. Articles were retrieved from their websites, covering publications between January 1 and December 31, 2023. This study used purposive sampling to focus on media coverage that reflects China's national image in the context of the 50th anniversary of China-Malaysia diplomatic relations (Patton, 2014). A bilingual search strategy was adopted to ensure a comprehensive search across English and Chinese sources (Riffe et al., 2023). Articles were identified using the phrases “50th Anniversary of China-Malaysia Diplomatic Relations” and its Mandarin equivalent, “中马建交五十周年,” which frequently appeared in relevant reports from The Star and Sin Chew Daily. The initial search retrieved 63 articles from The Star and 94 from Sin Chew Daily. To improve sample quality and relevance, each article was reviewed manually following Neuendorf (2017) suggestion, coders carefully looked at the titles, keywords when available, and the full texts to decide whether to include them. This process helped remove articles that mentioned the search terms but were unrelated to the 50th anniversary or China's national image. As a result, 45 articles were excluded for lacking direct relevance to these topics. The excluded samples fell primarily into two categories: first, reports mistakenly retrieved by the search system that focused on the Malaysian Chinese community rather than China itself, and second, articles that mentioned China-Malaysia relations but whose main content focused on other countries. Following these steps, our final sample consists of 49 reports from The Star and 63 from Sin Chew Daily, totaling 112 news texts. Three trained research assistants conducted the coding following a standardized codebook. To assess inter-coder reliability, 10% of the articles (N=12) were coded independently, yielding a Kappa coefficient of 0.683, indicating substantial agreement (Neuendorf, 2017). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the frequency and distribution of news reports across newspapers and national image dimensions. Independent samples t-tests and Fisher's exact tests were conducted to examine differences in reporting tendencies and evaluative attitudes between two newspapers.

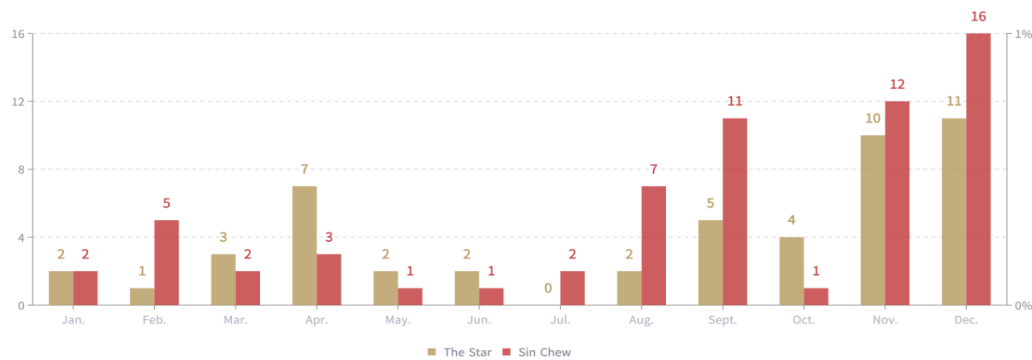
## Results and Discussion

Research findings indicate that from January to December 2023, the two mainstream newspapers in Malaysia, The Star and Sin Chew Daily, published 112 articles on the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia. Among these reports, *Figure 1* clearly illustrates a significant increase in coverage during key diplomatic events in April, August, September, November, and December. Further analysis reveals that The Star exhibited a higher interest in this topic from March to June than Sin Chew Daily. In contrast, Sin Chew Daily reported on the subject matter more extensively from July to December. *Table 1* presents the frequency distribution of reports across different dimensions of China's national image in The Star and Sin Chew Daily. Overall, the functional dimension appears more prominently than the normative and aesthetic dimensions. Within the functional dimension, the most frequently occurring indicators include Business Competence, Products and Services, and Political Leadership. In the normative dimension, International Responsibility appears most frequently, followed by Respect for Other Nations. Within the aesthetic dimension, Cultural Goods occupy a dominant position. Notably, the indicator of Scientific Research does not appear in the sampled reports.

**Table 1.** *The frequency distribution of dimensional occurrences.*

Category	The Star			Sin Chew Daily			T
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Functional Dimension							
Global Economic Position	8	0.16	0.373	11	0.17	0.383	-0.158
Technological Innovation	9	0.18	0.391	10	0.16	0.368	0.343
Investor-Friendly	0	0.00	0.000	13	0.21	0.408	-3.537***
Products and Services	10	0.20	0.407	33	0.52	0.503	-3.618***
Business Competence	34	0.69	0.466	44	0.70	0.463	-0.051
Labor Market	0	0.00	0.000	2	0.03	0.177	-1.256
Political Leadership	10	0.20	0.407	18	0.29	0.455	-0.985
Political Stability	2	0.04	0.200	0	0.00	0.000	1.623
Infrastructure	1	0.02	0.143	6	0.10	0.296	-1.628
Athletes and Sports	2	0.04	0.200	1	0.02	0.126	0.763
Scientific Research	0	0.00	0.000	0	0.00	0.000	N
Educational Opportunities	2	0.04	0.200	17	0.27	0.447	-3.331**
Education Level	3	0.06	0.242	5	0.08	0.272	-0.372
Normative Dimension							
Environmental Protection	1	0.02	0.143	1	0.02	0.126	0.175
International Responsibility	14	0.29	0.456	19	0.30	0.463	-0.181
Respect Other Nations	4	0.08	0.277	14	0.22	0.419	-2.029*
Peace and Human Rights	5	0.10	0.306	7	0.11	0.317	-0.153
Fairness of International Economic and Trade Policies	0	0.00	0.000	5	0.08	0.272	-2.037*
Aesthetic Dimension							
Cultural Goods	2	0.04	0.200	22	0.35	0.481	-4.214***
History	1	0.02	0.143	10	0.16	0.368	-2.485*
Food and Cuisine	2	0.04	0.200	2	0.03	0.177	0.250
Traditions	3	0.06	0.242	9	0.14	0.353	-1.385
People	0	0.00	0.000	12	0.19	0.396	-3.365**
Landscapes	2	0.04	0.200	5	0.08	0.272	-0.863

*Note: Total N=112; NThe Star=49; NSin Chew Daily=63; \*= $p < .05$ ; \*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*= $p < .001$ ; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.*



**Figure 1.** The frequency distribution of reported occurrences.

In the functional dimension, Business Competence ranked highest among all indicators in the reporting distribution (The Star:  $N = 34$ ,  $M = 0.69$ ; Sin Chew Daily:  $N = 44$ ,  $M = 0.70$ ). This pronounced concentration is not coincidental and reflects how China's economic identity has become an almost taken-for-granted framework in the Malaysian media context. Previous studies have demonstrated a significant relationship between media agenda setting and the degree of economic interdependence between countries, with intensive bilateral trade often directly influencing the priority given to economic issues of partner states (Golan, 2006). When one country remains another country's largest trading partner for an extended period, economic narratives cease to be merely editorial choices and instead emerge as the inevitable outcome of structurally determined agendas. Products and Services also appeared frequently in the coverage (total  $N = 43$ ), further confirming the central role of commercial competence narratives within the overall framework. This suggests that Malaysian media coverage of China is fundamentally anchored in the intensive economic and trade relations between the two countries. Regardless of the specific topic, economic dimensions remain the gravitational core of the narrative. Research on national image similarly indicates that functional economic dimensions often constitute the primary lens through which media present a country in contexts characterized by intensive bilateral trade (Anholt, 2009). Within this economically dominated framework, technological innovation serves as an important extension of functional narratives. Technological Innovation recorded a substantial number of references (total  $N = 19$ ), with both newspapers portraying China as a global leader in areas such as artificial intelligence, big data, 5G technology, high-speed rail, and new energy. Coverage of Chinese high-tech investments in Malaysia integrates technological and economic narratives, reinforcing China's overall image as a modern economic power.

Notably, Scientific Research was entirely absent in the sample ( $N = 0$ ), suggesting that science-related narratives in the Malaysian reporting context do not appear as independent portrayals of knowledge production but are consistently embedded within frameworks of economic cooperation and industrial development. This observation aligns with the notion of the instrumentalization of media science narratives, whereby research capacity is framed primarily as a means to support economic competitiveness rather than as a distinct dimension of national image (Flew, 2018). Political Leadership also received considerable coverage (total  $N = 28$ ), indicating that political narratives function as a complementary component within the functional dimension. This is consistent with the discussion of the visibility of political actors in the construction of

national images (Entman, 2009). In the normative dimension, International Responsibility was the central focus (total N = 33), with China frequently portrayed as a responsible actor in international affairs. Respect for Other Nations also appeared regularly (total N = 18), with reports often citing diplomatic discourses such as the concept of a “community with a shared future for humanity,” the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. These narratives depict China as an active promoter of inclusive development and multilateral cooperation. At the same time, issues such as carbon peaking, carbon neutrality goals, and the construction of new energy systems were reported. Although Environmental Protection appeared relatively infrequently (total N = 2), these references nonetheless contributed to reinforcing China's normative image in the field of sustainable development. However, the overall frequency of normative reporting was markedly lower than that of functional coverage. This pattern is consistent with the internal logic of the 4D model of national image, which posits that normative attributes are difficult to translate into discrete, newsworthy events, and their visibility is constrained by the event-driven logic of news production (Buhmann, 2016).

Reporting in the aesthetic dimension primarily emphasized Cultural Goods (total N = 24), with traditional festivals, cultural customs, and historical connections serving as key narrative resources for China's cultural image. History (total N = 11) and People (total N = 12) were also frequently referenced, with coverage highlighting the Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, tea culture, calligraphy, martial arts, and traditional dress. Traditions (total N = 12) and Landscapes (total N = 7) functioned as supporting narrative elements, enriching China's cultural and aesthetic image. References to historical figures and events, such as the voyages of Zheng He, further traced cultural links between Malaysia and China back in time, providing contemporary bilateral relations with deeper historical legitimacy. The activation of the aesthetic dimension was largely supported by the longstanding emotional bonds between the Malaysian Chinese community and Chinese culture. Wang (2011) noted that cultural proximity serves as an important mediating variable in audience reception and the media construction of foreign images, with ethnic cultural identity often reinforcing media attention to culturally relevant content. Cultural reporting thus functions not only to convey information but also to strengthen social and ethnic identity. Taken together, the distribution across the three dimensions shows that Malaysian newspapers construct China's national image with a hierarchical structure in which economic functional narratives are primary, cultural aesthetic narratives are secondary, and normative moral narratives form a background context. This structure does not merely reflect editorial preferences but is deeply rooted in the realities of Malaysia–China bilateral relations: intensive economic and trade interdependence determines the dominance of functional dimensions, the cultural identity of the Chinese community activates aesthetic narratives, and international agendas and diplomatic discourse provide a limited but ongoing space for normative reporting. These dimensions together shape the overall narrative ecology of China's national image in the Malaysian media, and this internal logic arises not only from news production practices but also from the interplay of geopolitics, economic interdependence, and cultural identity.

### ***Evaluative attitudes in Malaysian newspaper coverage***

Through Fisher's exact test analysis of 112 news reports, a nuanced pattern of media attitudes emerged, indicating that positive evaluations dominated the coverage (56.3%), followed by neutral evaluations (42.9%), with negative evaluations accounting for only 0.9%. Fisher's exact test yielded a total value of  $X^2=2.295$ , with  $p>0.05$ . This finding indicates that, despite some variation in evaluative attitudes across dimensions, the general portrayal of China's national image in Malaysia's mainstream Chinese and English-language newspapers remained consistent. The functional dimension, which emphasized economic cooperation and technological exchanges, showed that 58.8% of reports are positive, 40.0% remained neutral, and only 1.3% were negative. This favorable portrayal reflects the importance attributed to bilateral collaboration. In the normative dimension, which focused on values and political alignment, 53.3% of reports were positive, and 46.7% were neutral, with no negative evaluations identified. The absence of adverse reporting suggests the media's tendency to emphasize alignment in social and political values while avoiding critical stances. The aesthetic dimension presented a slightly more balanced pattern, with 47.1% of positive reports and 52.9% remaining neutral, again with no negative coverage (*Table 2*).

**Table 2.** *Evaluative attitudes.*

Category		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total	Description
Dimension	Functional	58.8% (47)	40% (32)	1.3% (1)	100% (80)	$X^2=1.289$ , $p>0.05$ ,
	Normative	53.3% (8)	46.7% (7)	0	100% (15)	$X^2=0.749$ , $p>0.05$ ,
	Aesthetic	47.1% (8)	52.9% (9)	0	100% (17)	$X^2=1.354$ , $p>0.05$ ,
Total		56.3% (63)	42.9% (48)	0.9% (1)	100% (112)	$X^2=2.295$ , $p>0.05$

These findings reveal a distinctive evaluative pattern in Malaysian newspaper coverage of China, characterized by a predominance of positive evaluations accompanied by a substantial proportion of neutral reporting. Such a distribution reflects a broader tendency observed in international news coverage, where countries with strong economic ties to China often frame the country through pragmatic and development-oriented narratives rather than confrontational ideological frames. Previous research has demonstrated that media representations of China frequently vary across geopolitical contexts, with developing countries tending to emphasize cooperation and economic engagement (Repnikova, 2022). The prominence of positive evaluations in the functional dimension in the present study is therefore consistent with earlier studies examining how China is portrayed in the media of developing regions. For instance, research on China–Africa media relations shows that China is often represented through narratives highlighting infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and investment partnerships (Umejei, 2018). These studies suggest that development-oriented narratives frequently dominate media coverage because they correspond with tangible economic projects and align with national development priorities. Similar patterns have also been identified in studies of international news coverage of China, which indicate that economic themes often receive greater emphasis than political or ideological narratives in regions with strong economic interdependence with China (Wasserman, 2020). At the same time, the relatively high proportion of neutral reporting identified in this study suggests that Malaysian newspapers maintain a degree of journalistic caution when reporting on major international actors. Neutral evaluations allow media outlets to present factual information while avoiding explicit endorsement or criticism of foreign governments. Such reporting strategies are consistent with broader findings in international journalism studies, which indicate that

news organizations often employ neutral or descriptive language when addressing politically sensitive international relationships.

The near absence of negative evaluations in the findings highlights the largely favorable portrayal of China in Malaysian media. This trend can be partly explained by China's position as one of Malaysia's most important economic partners, playing a key role in trade, investment, and regional development initiatives. While the majority of coverage was positive, a few reports captured apprehensions from certain groups and individuals who perceive China's rise as a potential threat. The inclusion of these dissenting perspectives indicates that Malaysian media, while predominantly positive, still acknowledge underlying social concerns, offering a more nuanced depiction of public sentiment. Consistent with previous research, media narratives in countries with strong economic ties to China tend to emphasize pragmatic cooperation and shared development interests rather than geopolitical rivalry (Repnikova, 2022; Thussu, 2018). In this sense, the predominance of positive and neutral evaluations observed in the present study may reflect the broader diplomatic and economic environment in which Malaysian media operate. Taken together, these findings suggest that Malaysian newspapers construct a relatively stable and largely positive representation of China's national image while simultaneously maintaining journalistic balance through neutral reporting practices. Rather than reflecting an uncritical endorsement, this pattern indicates a pragmatic media approach that acknowledges China's economic importance while maintaining professional norms of balanced reporting.

### ***Differences in the portrayal of China's national image by Sin Chew Daily and The Star***

This study utilized Fisher's exact test to examine the differences in reporting dimensions and evaluative attitudes between two major Malaysian newspapers. Statistical results show that the test value for reporting dimensions was  $X^2=3.271$  ( $p>0.05$ ), while that for evaluative attitudes was  $X^2=3.148$  ( $p>0.05$ ). Although these differences did not reach statistical significance, observable variations remain in the patterns of topic selection and evaluative tone between the two newspapers. These variations provide useful insights into how different media outlets frame China's national image within the Malaysian media landscape. One hundred twelve news reports were analyzed, with The Star contributing 49 articles (43.75%) and Sin Chew Daily 63 articles (56.25%). Both newspapers focused firmly on the functional dimension. The Star was slightly ahead at 73.5% (36 articles), while Sin Chew Daily had 69.8%. This indicates a shared priority on content that is both useful and factual. Distinct differences appeared when examining the normative dimension. The Star published more articles under this category 22.4%, whereas Sin Chew Daily included only 6.35%. In contrast, Sin Chew Daily devoted more attention to the aesthetic dimension 23.8% than just 4.1% in The Star (Table 3).

***Table 3. Comparative portrayal of China's national image.***

Category		The Star	Sin Chew Daily
Dimension	Functional	43.75% (49)	56.25% (63)
	Normative	73.5% (36)	69.8% (44)
	Aesthetic	22.4% (11)	6.35% (4)
		4.1% (2)	23.8% (15)
Attitude	Negative	0	1.6% (1)
	Neutral	32.7% (16)	50.8% (32)
	Positive	67.3% (33)	47.6% (30)
Total		$X^2 = 3.271, p > 0.05$	$X^2 = 3.148, p > 0.05$

Framing theory holds that media organizations selectively emphasize certain aspects of reality to promote particular problem definitions and interpretive logics (Entman, 2007). The present data suggest that *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* operate according to distinct framing strategies rooted in their respective audience structures. *The Star*'s coverage concentrates on macro-level economic and technological narratives, consistent with serving an English-language, multi-ethnic readership for whom China's rise is primarily relevant as a geopolitical and commercial phenomenon. *Sin Chew Daily*, by contrast, exhibits significantly higher reporting tendencies in Investor-Friendly ( $t = -3.537, p < .001$ ), Products and Services ( $t = -3.618, p < .001$ ), and Educational Opportunities ( $t = -3.331, p < .01$ ), suggesting a deliberate translation of China's macroeconomic significance into audience-proximate implications. Wang and Liang (2024) also finding that Chinese-oriented media outlets systematically adapt economic narratives to foreground practical relevance for their readership, rather than relying on abstract geopolitical framing. Audience orientation thus functions not merely as an editorial preference but as a structural determinant of which dimensions of national image receive salience and which remain latent. The divergence in the aesthetic dimension warrants particular attention. *Sin Chew Daily*'s significantly higher coverage of Cultural Goods ( $t = -4.214, p < .001$ ), History ( $t = -2.485, p < .05$ ), and People ( $t = -3.365, p < .01$ ) cannot be attributed to differential news access or topic availability, given that both newspapers operate within the same national media environment. Rather, this pattern reflects the sociocultural function that ethnic-language media perform in diasporic communities. Luan and Beng (2018) demonstrated that Chinese-language media in Malaysia serve as primary vehicles for the construction and maintenance of Chinese cultural identity among Malaysian Chinese communities, with heritage-oriented content reinforcing intergenerational cultural continuity.

The near-absence of corresponding coverage in *The Star* (Cultural Goods:  $M = 0.04$ ; People:  $M = 0.00$ ) further underscores that the aesthetic dimension is not a universal frame for covering China but a culturally specific one, activated when the audience shares an affective investment in Chinese heritage. In this respect, *Sin Chew Daily*'s editorial emphasis on traditional festivals, cultural practices, and historical bilateral ties functions as a form of symbolic mediation through which the newspaper reproduces the cultural belonging of its readership, a dynamic consistent with Hall (1997) account of media as a constitutive site of identity production. Importantly, this framing logic generates a version of China's national image that is qualitatively distinct from the one produced by *The Star*: not merely different in emphasis, but different in the relational meaning that China holds for each newspaper's audience. The normative dimension, while comparatively underrepresented in aggregate coverage, reveals a further dimension of this divergence. *Sin Chew Daily*'s significantly higher reporting tendencies in Respect for Other Nations ( $t = -2.029, p < .05$ ) and Fairness of International Economic and Trade Policies ( $t = -2.037, p < .05$ ) indicate a more sustained effort to frame China as a normatively legitimate actor in international affairs. From the perspective of soft power theory, narratives attributing normative attributes to a state can enhance its international legitimacy independently of material capabilities (Nye, 2004). Research suggests that *Sin Chew Daily* plays an active role in framing topics related to China's global image, often presenting it in constructive or positive terms to its primarily Malaysian Chinese readership (Daily, 2025). *The Star*'s more restrained normative coverage may reflect a broader editorial caution toward value-

laden representations of a foreign power among a generalist, multi-ethnic readership less invested in China's international standing. Taken together, the relative scarcity of normative narratives across both newspapers points to a persistent tendency to frame China primarily as an economic partner, with its role in global governance remaining structurally secondary. This imbalance has implications for public knowledge formation because audiences whose exposure to China is mediated predominantly through functional frames may develop a truncated perception of China's international identity, one that underrepresents ongoing debates regarding governance norms, multilateral commitments, and the contested terms of China's integration into the international order (Tang, 2021).

As for evaluative reporting attitude, The Star showed a stronger inclination towards positive reporting 67.3%, while Sin Chew Daily was more balanced, with 47.6% categorized as positive and 50.8% as neutral. The Star had fewer neutral reports 32.7%. Notably, both newspapers had very few adverse reports, with Sin Chew Daily having only minimal adverse reporting 1.6%. In contrast, The Star had no adverse reports within the sample. These patterns cannot be attributed to differential access to information or topic availability, as both newspapers operate within the same national media environment. Their explanation requires a structural account that moves beyond surface-level editorial preference toward the institutional, ownership-related, and audience-structural conditions that differentially shape each outlet's representational choices. The Star has been controlled since 1977 by the Malaysian Chinese Association, a political party historically embedded within Malaysia's governing coalition, a relationship that has long positioned the newspaper within a political framework supportive of stable China–Malaysia diplomatic and economic relations (Connors, 2011). Within this institutional context, the normative framing of China through themes such as international responsibility and multilateral cooperation serves a dual function: it aligns editorial narratives with Malaysia's broader diplomatic orientation while appealing to a multiethnic English-language readership whose engagement with China is often mediated through geopolitical and economic policy discourse. The comparatively high rate of positive evaluation in The Star (67.3%) may also reflect the relative social distance between its readership and the direct economic impacts of Chinese investment. For audiences whose interaction with China is largely abstract and policy-oriented rather than grounded in immediate economic competition, sustained positive framing remains both editorially consistent and commercially viable.

Sin Chew Daily operates within a distinct but similarly constraining institutional environment shaped by ownership structure and audience expectations. As part of Media Chinese International Limited, a major transnational Chinese-language media conglomerate, the newspaper is embedded in commercial networks with strong cross-border business interests. Previous studies suggest that ownership concentration and transnational media markets can influence editorial positioning, particularly in reporting on China-related economic issues (Zhang and Wu, 2017). Such reporting patterns do not necessarily result from direct political intervention. Scholars highlight indirect mechanisms including market incentives, diplomatic signaling, and advertising dependencies that can shape editorial decisions without explicit coercion (Cook, 2021). These structural conditions encourage broadly favorable coverage of China's economic development while maintaining caution on issues directly affecting local communities. This institutional configuration helps explain why Sin Chew Daily shows a lower proportion of positive evaluations of China (47.6%) compared with The Star (67.3%).

The difference likely reflects a balancing process between commercial exposure to China-related economic networks and accountability to the Malaysian Chinese readership.

## **Conclusion**

This study applied the national image 4D model to examine how Malaysia's mainstream Chinese- and English-language newspapers portrayed China's national image in their coverage of the 50th anniversary of China–Malaysia diplomatic relations in 2023. In terms of dimensional distribution, the functional dimension appeared most frequently, followed by the aesthetic and normative dimensions. Reports within the functional dimension mainly highlighted China's economic engagement with ASEAN as well as its expanding influence in areas such as technology and education. Coverage related to the normative dimension tended to focus on China's international responsibilities and its role in promoting regional peace and cooperation. Meanwhile, aesthetic portrayals often emphasized China's historical heritage and cultural traditions. Regarding evaluative attitudes, both newspapers generally presented China in a positive or neutral manner. Negative evaluations were relatively limited. Nevertheless, a small number of reports raised certain concerns. For instance, *Sin Chew Daily* mentioned perceptions that discussions surrounding China's rise may sometimes involve elements of racism. Although such viewpoints appeared only occasionally, their presence suggests that critical perspectives were not entirely absent from the coverage. At the same time, differences between the two newspapers were also evident. *The Star* placed relatively greater emphasis on the normative dimension, whereas *Sin Chew Daily* devoted more attention to aesthetic representations. These differences may reflect variations in readership profiles and editorial orientations. Overall, the pattern of dimensional emphasis and evaluative attitudes indicates that media representations of national image are shaped not only by reporting practices but also by audience characteristics, editorial priorities, and the broader socio-political environment. The study also has limitations, as the sample is restricted to 2023 and to English and Chinese newspapers, which may limit comprehensiveness. Future research could expand the temporal scope, include Malay-language and other media, and conduct cross-country comparisons to gain a broader understanding of global perceptions. Investigating audience perspectives could further clarify how media narratives shape public views of China's national image.

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## **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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