

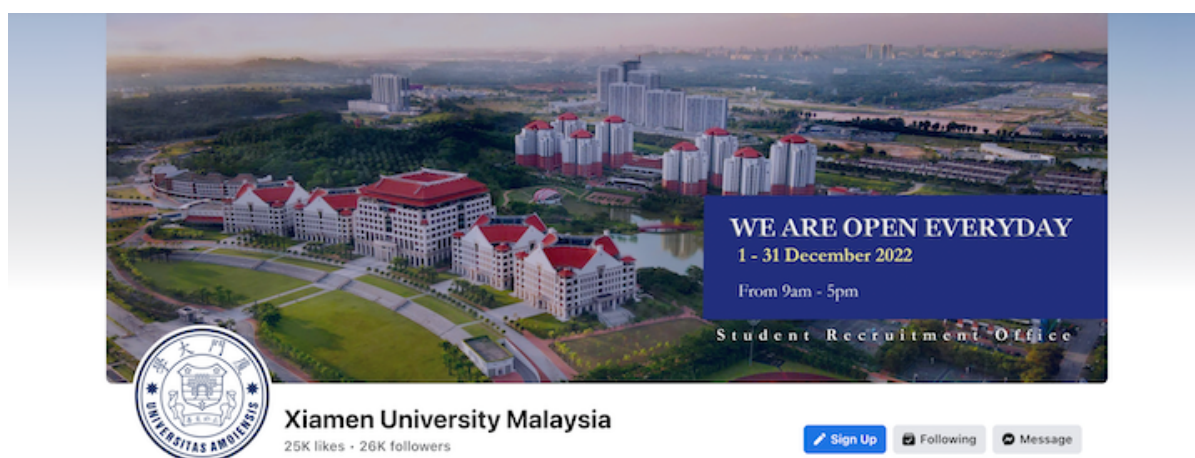
PERSPECTIVE

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Singapore | 27 December 2022

China-educated Malaysians and China's Educational Outreach to Malaysia

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FaceBook Page of Xiamen Univeristy Source: <https://www.facebook.com/xmumalaysia>. Snapshot taken on 22 December 2022.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There are at least four different kinds of China-educated Malaysians: Malaysians pursuing university education in China; Malaysians doing short-term training courses in China; Malaysians learning Chinese language at Confucius Institutes within Malaysia; and Malaysians studying at Xiamen University Malaysia.
- Those Malaysian students studying in China universities are associated with two different circles, the non-Chinese-educated (mostly Malays) and the Chinese-educated (mostly ethnic Chinese Malaysians). Both circles exhibit clear differences in terms of financing, size, social impact, fields of study and career tracts. Due to an active alumni network, the Chinese-educated circle possesses more social influence within Malaysia and stronger connections with China.
- Confucius Institutes and Xiamen University Malaysia provide opportunities for Malaysians to experience China's education in Malaysia. The former focuses on basic language training while the latter is a comprehensive institution offering a wide range of courses.
- Short-term training courses for foreign participants are another cost-effective way for China to project its educational soft power and outreach.
- From the perspective of China's soft power, all categories of "China-educated Malaysians" generally hold positive views of China. However, they remain a minority group among Malaysians receiving foreign education. Additionally, there are still no important political leaders, top civil servants, or think tank analysts in Malaysia that have a China education background.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a “soft power” resource, and China has been investing in its universities for decades, and utilizing its higher education sector for educational outreach. Malaysia is one of the countries which have a large group of students receiving education provided by China. This has especially been the case after 2011, when Malaysia and China signed an educational agreement on mutual recognition of their university degrees.

Malaysians who receive China-provided education are not confined to those who pursue university education in China. Broadly speaking, “China-educated Malaysians” can be grouped into the following categories: Malaysians receiving university education in China; Malaysians undertaking short-term courses in China; Malaysians receiving basic Chinese language training within Malaysia (Confucius Institutes); and Malaysians receiving China’s university education within Malaysia (Xiamen University Malaysia).¹ This paper discusses these “China-educated Malaysians,” their demographic characteristics, their social impacts and their views on China.

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN CHINA

China emerged as an important choice for Malaysian students in the late 2000s. Table 1 below provides data on the numbers of Malaysian students studying in China’s universities in recent years. There are discrepancies between the data provided by Malaysia’s Ministry of Higher Education and China’s Ministry of Education, however; in some years the numbers provided by both countries differ by a wide margin, and in other cases the numbers match, but appear in different years.

Table 1: Malaysian Students Studying in China's Universities

Year	Source	Statistics from Malaysia			Statistics from China
		Sponsored	Self-sponsored	Total	
1999		--	--	--	454
2000		--	--	--	490
2001		--	--	--	632
2002		--	--	--	840
2003		--	--	--	841
2004		--	--	--	1241
2005		--	--	--	1589
2006		--	--	--	1743
2007		--	--	--	1908
2008		28	1715	1743	2114
2009		--	--	2114	2792
2010		119	2673	2792	3885
2011		--	--	2252	4259
2012		245	544	789	6045
2013		389	543	932	6126
2014		254	210	464	6645
2015		490	324	814	6650
2016		420	6230	6650	6880
2017		614	6266	6880	7948
2018		623	7325	7948	9479
2019		922	1310	2232	9500
2020		3820	953	4773	---
2021		---	---	11920	---

(Sources: For Malaysian statistics, the annual volumes of *Statistik Pendidikan Tinggi* are available at: <https://www.mohe.gov.my/muat-turun/statistik>; For Chinese statistics, these are compiled from sources such as China's Ministry of Education and China Association for International Education)

Malaysian data display two categories: "sponsored" and "self-sponsored". Generally, the Malaysian students who are under the "sponsored" category generally (but not exclusively) come from a non-Chinese-educated background (mostly Malays); they are sponsored by the government, government-owned companies, public universities and private sector companies. In contrast, the students under the "non-sponsored" category are mostly Chinese-educated ethnic Chinese Malaysians. Hence, among Malaysian students receiving higher education in China, there is a clear distinction between the two different circles (see Table 2).

Table 2: Non-Chinese-Educated and Chinese-Educated Malaysian Students Studying in China

	Non-Chinese Educated	Chinese-Educated
Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public and private sector sponsorship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-sponsorship Community sponsorship
Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small, a few hundred at most 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large, at least in the thousands
Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mostly Malays 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overwhelmingly ethnic Chinese (Chinese-educated and Chinese-speaking)
Fields of Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic Chinese language training Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) Economics and business-related 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diverse fields Popular majors: Chinese Studies/Chinese Literature (中文系), Journalism, Business, Engineering, International Relations, Natural Sciences, Medicine
Universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mostly concentrated in these universities: Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More diverse and in different cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Xiamen, Hangzhou, etc.
Social Organization and Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informal connections and circles among graduates of BFSU and BLCU Limited social impact so far 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Associations of Graduates from Universities and Colleges in China, Malaysia Various alumni organizations (Jinan, Peking, Tsinghua, Huaqiao, Zhejiang, etc.) Vibrant participation in community affairs as Chinese community organizations (<i>huatuan/华团</i>) Alumni bodies' continuous engagement with the Chinese government's "Overseas Chinese Affairs System" (<i>侨务系统</i>)
Career prospects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mostly public sector Government schools Chinese language teaching centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mostly private sector Chinese schools

The non-Chinese-educated circle is small compared to the Chinese-educated one. They are mostly funded under several programmes initiated by the Malaysian government, and mostly

study at Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU). These programmes are meant for non-Chinese-educated students to learn the Chinese language as a second language and to specialize in an academic major known as “Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages” (TCSOL). The goal is to train Chinese language teachers to serve in Malaysia’s national primary and secondary schools (but not the local Chinese schools of Malaysia). Some of these students also undertake advanced training (master or even doctoral training in the TCSOL field). The students with post-graduate TCSOL degrees will often come to teach at public universities,² with some opening up private Chinese language tutoring businesses.

The Chinese-educated circle are mostly self-funded or funded by the community (such as clan associations). Because of their natural Chinese language ability, these students are exempted from taking the Chinese language standard test in the admission process for China’s universities. Since the learning of the Chinese language is unnecessary, the fields of study pursued by Chinese-educated Malaysians are much more varied. Unlike the non-Chinese-educated circle, many of the graduates in the Chinese-educated-circle end up working in the private sector.

Another notable and important aspect of this circle is its active alumni network; there are several alumni organizations formed among the graduates of various China’s universities (Peking, Xiamen, Fudan, Jinan, etc.). There is also the umbrella organization known as the Associations of Graduates from Universities and Colleges in China, Malaysia (commonly known as *Liu Hua* 留华).³

Liu Hua is actively involved in Chinese community affairs in Malaysia and plays a major role in maintaining and advancing people-to-people ties between China and Malaysia. It is the main organizer of the “China Winter Camp” activity, which brings thousands of ethnic Chinese Malaysian youths to visit China, especially their ancestral hometowns. *Liu Hua* actively promotes universities in China to the Chinese-educated Malaysians and was one of the most active organizations lobbying for the recognition of Chinese university degrees by the Malaysian government. It also plays a role in connecting the Malaysian educational sector to their Chinese counterparts, for example, by organizing field trips for Malaysia’s education officials, school officials (headmasters), and school board members to China for educational exchanges and collaboration. Several teachers’ training programmes are also conducted under the coordinating role of *Liu Hua*. Moreover, *Liu Hua* maintains a productive working relationship with the Overseas Chinese Affairs organizations of China, including the State Council’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the provincial Overseas Chinese Affairs Offices, and Zhigong Party (致公党). It collaborates with these entities in educational, cultural and youth activities.

With a much larger group of students and the support of various alumni organizations, the social impact of Chinese-educated Malaysians is considerably stronger than that of the non-Chinese-educated Malaysians. Interactions between these two circles of China-educated students, however, while growing, appear to be limited.

SHORT-TERM TRAINING COURSES IN CHINA

In addition to the formal multi-year higher education, various entities in China also encourage and provide funding and opportunities for Malaysians to undergo short-term training. These courses last from either a few weeks to a few months in China's universities or other training institutions, and the subjects range from technical/engineering training to language training and political governance (especially under party-to-party cooperation). Due to their diverse and decentralized nature, there is no known total tally of the training programmes that Malaysians participate in.

This kind of short-term training programme is very useful for China's soft power. Compared to the conventional academic scholarships that usually cover tuition fees and stipends that last for several years, sponsoring foreign course participants in short-term training programmes is less costly and easier to organize. Course participants in short-term programmes are mostly mid-career individuals who are not able to undertake a lengthy period of leave to pursue conventional higher education in China. Hence, by sponsoring short-term programmes, China has an opportunity to extend its educational outreach beyond university-age youths. The relatively short duration of these programmes allows participants to experience China in an extended time frame beyond a short tourist visit, allowing them to form a lasting – and hopefully for China – a positive impression of the country.

CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES IN MALAYSIA

China's most popular soft power project is the Confucius Institute. Its main task is to teach the Chinese language to non-native speakers. As of today, six Confucius Institutes have been established in Malaysia.

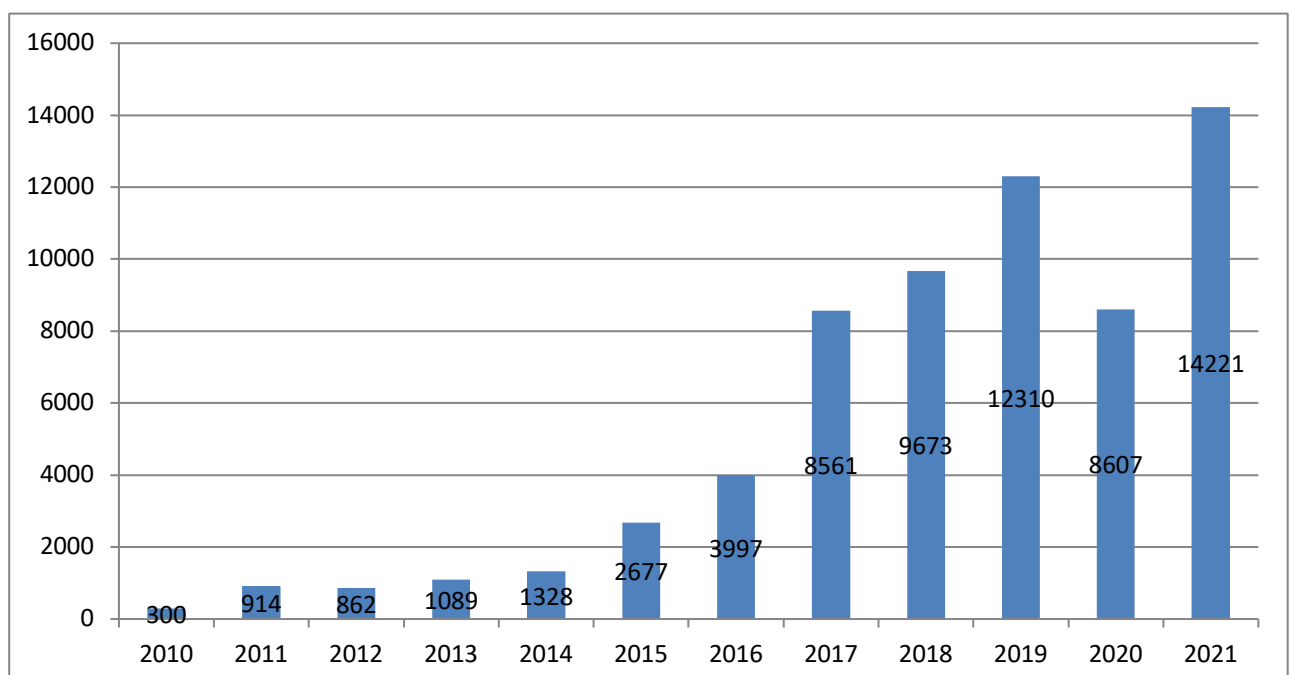
Table 3: Confucius Institutes in Malaysia

<i>Confucius Institute</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Partnering institution of China</i>	<i>Official Website/social media</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
Kong Zi Institute University of Malaya	2009	Beijing Foreign Studies University	http://www.kongzium.edu.my/ https://www.facebook.com/KZIUM/	In 2021, students totalled 14,221.
Confucius Institute, SEGi University	2015	Hainan Normal University	https://university.segi.edu.my/?page_id=18172 https://www.facebook.com/Segiconfucius/	Each year: 250
Confucius Institute, Universiti Malaysia Pahang	2011/2018	Hebei University	https://ci.ump.edu.my/index.php/en/ https://www.facebook.com/Confucius-Institute-100623258174139/	Around 1,600 students annually registered in both credit and non-credit courses.
Confucius Institute, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)	2019	Changsha University of Technology	https://www.ums.edu.my/ci/ https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064972362454	NA
Confucius Institute, University College of Technology Sarawak	2020	North China University of Water Conservancy and Electric Power	https://confuciusinstitute.uts.edu.my/about-us/	NA
Confucius Institute at Shen Jai Education Group	2022	Xidian University	https://ci.shenjai.edu.my/newsite/?page_id=8	NA

Among these Confucius Institutes, the most well-developed is Kong Zi Institute at the University of Malaya (KZIUM). Established in 2009 with a first batch of 300 students enrolled in 2010, by 2021 the student body had grown to 14,221 in number (see Figure 1).

What is notable about KZIUM is that it has teaching sites all over Malaysia, essentially making itself an equivalent to several functional Confucius Institutes. All teaching sites are hosted within public universities and a handful of secondary national schools, with the number of students ranging in the hundreds and sometimes thousands. Many of these teaching sites are also located in relatively rural or remote areas outside the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan region, within satellite campuses of public universities that otherwise have very little formal engagement with China’s universities or entities. The presence of KZIUM teaching sites in these remote campuses provide opportunities for KZIUM to connect China’s universities with institutions hosting these teaching sites, therefore increasing China’s soft power in the more remote regions of Malaysia.⁴

Figure 1: Annual Numbers of Total Registered Students at KZIUM



(Source: *Annual Report of Kong Zi Institute 2018*, *Annual Report of Kong Zi Institute 2019* and through personal contacts with Kong Zi Institute)

The vast majority of KZIUM students are university students. However, it is worth noting that most of them had only completed HSK 1 or HSK 2, whereas the basic requirement of entry into China’s universities for foreign students is HSK 5. Before the pandemic, KZIUM also provided Chinese language training to selected officials of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Royal Malaysian Police and the Immigration Department. These courses were designed in a specialized way to cater to the professional needs of these agencies and differed from the standard curricula that follows the HSK (*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* or 汉语水平考试) standard and the “Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages” (TCSOL) teaching structure.

KZIUM also engages more with the industry by creating a “Chinese language +” structure where students who have undergone training can be readily hired by China’s enterprises. This structure also allows for local employees of China’s enterprises to undertake basic Chinese language training at KZIUM. In this regard, the Confucius Institute at Universiti Malaysia Pahang has done better. Benefitting from its location (Kuantan), where there is a major China-backed industrial park (the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park) and China-backed railway (the East Coast Rail Link), the Confucius Institute at Universiti Malaysia Pahang is highly involved in several joint degree programmes (with Beijing Jiaotong University) related to engineering.⁵

XIAMEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

Malaysia also hosts the most ambitious international branch campus project undertaken by any Chinese university. This is Xiamen University Malaysia. Xiamen University Malaysia has a 150-acre campus in a town on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, accommodating up to 10,000 students. As of 2022, the student body numbers around 6,000 students, one-third of which come from China. The rest are mostly Malaysian students, predominantly from the ethnic Chinese community. In contrast to the Confucius Institute, Xiamen University Malaysia does not offer Chinese language teaching. Instead, it is a truly comprehensive university, offering a wide range of academic programmes ranging from the humanities and business studies to natural sciences and engineering. More interestingly, most courses are taught in the English language.

Xiamen University Malaysia enrolled its first batch of students in 2016. From 2019 to 2021, three batches of students – totaling 2,140 students – graduated from the university. Among them, 1,285 are Malaysians (see Table 4). In his convocation speech in 2022, Professor Wang Ruifang, the president of Xiamen University Malaysia, said that after graduation, many of its graduates had been able to join renowned private sector enterprises (some of which are Chinese companies such as Huawei or Bank of China) or to continue post-graduate studies in other prestigious universities in the world such as Oxford, Columbia, London School of Economics or others.⁶ As of now, not many graduates of Xiamen University Malaysia have joined the public sector, an employment pattern similar to that of the ethnic Chinese students graduating from universities in China.

Table 4 Number of Graduates of Xiamen University of Malaysia⁷

Year	Malaysian Students	International Students (mostly from China)	Total
2019	242	129	371
2020 & 2021	1,043	726	1,769
Total	1,285	855	2,140

(Source: *Sina News* 2019; *Sinchew Daily* 2022)

CONCLUSION: CHINA-EDUCATED MALAYSIANS, THEIR INFLUENCE AND CHINA'S SOFT POWER

Among the four groups of “China-educated Malaysians.”, the largest and the most transformative group (in terms of personal immersion in China) are those who pursue higher education to obtain a university degree. There are two different circles within this group: the non-Chinese-educated (mostly Malays) and the Chinese-educated (mostly ethnic Chinese). Each circle has its own characteristics, demography, career track, social impacts, and influences. The most influential “China-educated Malaysians” almost certainly are those from the Chinese-educated circle; this circle possesses a longer history, has a larger community, and boasts an active alumni network vigorously engaged in community affairs and in people-to-people ties between China and Malaysia. The most influential alumni organization is *Liu Hua*, which serves as an organizational platform to connect members, articulate and magnify their voices and interests, mobilize resources, and liaise with other bodies and entities, including those from China.

All these categories of “China-educated Malaysians” generally (though not necessarily entirely) hold positive views about China. Particularly those who have been to China are in general impressed by China’s rapid development economically and technologically, the orderliness of its cities, and the dynamism of its people and society. Some, however, do note the growing political restrictions within China and feel uncomfortable about this trend. For the Malaysians who experience China’s education within Malaysia (Confucius Institutes and Xiamen University Malaysia), although the exposure to China at the personal level is limited, China is still largely perceived positively, albeit at a more superficial level.

Although increasing, “China-educated Malaysians” remains a minority group among the many Malaysians receiving foreign education. Notably, there are still no important political leaders, top civil servants, or think tank analysts in Malaysia who have a China education background. Outside of the ethnic Chinese community, no notable Malaysian businesspersons are known to have a China education background. However, this could change in the future.

ENDNOTES

¹ There is also a fifth category that is not covered: the Malaysians who receive short-term training within Malaysia provided by China’s companies such as Huawei or through the Chinese government initiative known as Luban Workshop.

² A focus group interview with current and former students of this programme, 23 September 2022.

³ The website of this organization is <https://www.liuhua.org.my/home/>, where some of its activities are reported.

⁴ Anonymous interview with a former Kong Zi Institute director, 3 October 2022.

⁵ See the announcement here: <https://kkej.ump.edu.my/index.php/en/news-home/ump-bjtu>.

⁶ *Sinchew Daily*, “Ouyang Yujing: Zizhu dama youyisheng, Xiada fenxiao xushe dashi jiangxuejin (Ouyang Yujiing: Financial Supporting Excellent Malaysian Students, Continuation of Ambassador Scholarship at Xiamen University Malaysia),” 13 August 2022, <https://www.sinchew.com.my/20220813/%E6%AC%A7%E9%98%B3%E7%8E%89%E9%9D%96%EF%BC%9A%E8%B5%84%E5%8A%A9%E5%A4%A7%E9%A9%AC%E4%BC%98%E5%BC%82%E7%94%9F-%E5%8E%A6%E5%A4%A7%E5%88%86%E6%A0%A1%E7%BB%AD%E8%AE%BE%E5%A4%A7%E4%BD%BF%E5%A5%96%E5%AD%A6/>

⁷ *Ibid.*; and also *Sina News*, “Malaixiya fenxiao shoujie biye dianli juxing (The First Convocation of an Overseas Branch in Malaysia).” 29 September 2019, <https://news.sina.cn/2019-09-29/detail-iiwezueu9069566.d.html>.

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