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Xin Yimin in Malaysia: Trends and Implications

*Ngeow Chow Bing**



Most xin yimin find Malaysia a comfortable place to live in due to its sizable ethnic Chinese community. In this picture, a worker installs traditional Chinese lanterns at the Thean Hou temple ahead of the Lunar New Year celebrations in Kuala Lumpur on 9 January 2020. Photo: Mohd RASFAN/AFP.

Guest writer, Ngeow Chow Bing, is Director at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, Malaysia.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The current size of the *xin yimin* (new Chinese migrants) in Malaysia is estimated to be 82,000. These *xin yimin* are also generally mobile, circulatory, and transitory in nature.
- Students, holders of MM2H scheme, expatriates/workers and spouses constitute the major categories of the *xin yimin* in Malaysia. In recent years, the number of illegal *xin yimin* in Malaysia has declined.
- Although the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the movement of *xin yimin* into Malaysia, it is expected that this trend is temporary and that the number of *xin yimin* will continue to increase in the long term.
- Generally, most *xin yimin* only interact with the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia due to familiarity with the Chinese language and culture. Latent anxiety about the *xin yimin* has emerged among Malaysians but it has as yet not become an explosive issue in Malaysian politics.

INTRODUCTION

The term *xin yimin* (new China migrants) refers to the Chinese migrants of the latest wave—those who ventured out of China since the enactment of Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening-up” policies in the late 1970s. The recent waves of *xin yimin* could be characterized as being of mobile, circulatory, and transitory nature, and is fundamentally different from the early Chinese migration to Southeast Asia. Today, out of the eleven Southeast Asian countries, Singapore is one of the few places where the *xin yimin* can easily obtain legal naturalisation. However, while the *xin yimin* often stay in this region for a sustained period, they rarely remain for permanent settlement.

Malaysia has a sizable *xin yimin* population, yet not much research has been published regarding this community, with the exception of a unique aspect of the *xin yimin* phenomenon in Malaysia—the presence of the ethnic Hui *xin yimin*. The Hui, who are mostly Chinese Muslims, find Malaysia ideal for a combination of reasons—it is a society in which the practice of their religion, Islam, is widely encouraged and it has sufficient Chinese cultural space for them to live comfortably. The Hui were in fact the *xin yimin* pioneers in Malaysia.

This paper provides an updated and comprehensive overview of the *xin yimin* in Malaysia in light of their growing numbers in the country and their potential impact on society.¹ It will discuss their numbers, organisations, and some preliminary implications for Malaysia.

TRENDS AND NUMBERS

It is difficult to estimate the size of the *xin yimin* community in Malaysia as there is no single definition of the term. However, broadly speaking, *xin yimin* comprise of three categories: 1) PRC citizens who have successfully become naturalised citizens of Malaysia; 2) PRC citizens who are staying in Malaysia legally for a sustained period of time, such as students, expatriates, workers, and so forth; and 3) PRC citizens who are staying in Malaysia illegally, mostly by overstaying their visas.

Given Malaysia’s strict naturalisation process, the first category is negligible.² Putting the second and third categories together, a rough estimation of the number of *xin yimin* in Malaysia is 82,000 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Estimating the Number of *Xin Yimin* in Malaysia

Category		Size (rough estimation, see the sections below for each sub-category)
Legal	Students in Tertiary Institutions	29,000
	Applicants of Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) and their Dependents	15,000
	Expatriates/Workers	10,000
	Spouses	6,000
	Students in International Schools and their Guardians	2,000
	Permanent Residents	2,000
Illegal	Overstaying of Tourist Visa	18,000
Total		82,000

Students in Tertiary Institutions

According to the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia, as of 2021, the number of PRC students in Malaysia was 28,593.³ This was a sharp increase from 10,775 in 2015, seeing Malaysia effectively displacing Indonesia and Bangladesh to become the largest source country of international students in Malaysia's higher education institutions (see Table 2). Moreover, compared to the 1990s and 2000s, when PRC students were generally concentrated in private universities and colleges within the Klang Valley region (the area surrounding the metropolitan Kuala Lumpur), students from PRC are today abundantly found in both public and private institutions across different states in Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak. Due to their relatively higher ranking and prestigious status, these public universities are especially popular among PRC students.

This is due to several factors. The relatively affordable price and decent quality of Malaysia's higher education, the short distance between Malaysia and China, and the widespread use of the English language are intrinsic appeals to the PRC students. Moreover, the recent deterioration of China's relations with the Western world has had an impact as well, and more and more PRC students are starting to look for alternatives to Western universities. Conversely, the Malaysian government and universities have also been keen to tap into the huge PRC student market, having put many years of effort into marketing themselves.⁴

Table 2: PRC Students in Malaysia's Tertiary Institutions

Year	Total Number of Foreign Students	Total Number of PRC Students	Percentage	Three Largest Source Countries (Ranking by order)
2015	120,398	10,775	8.95	Bangladesh, Nigeria, China
2016	130,277	11,718	8.99	Bangladesh, Nigeria, China
2017	133,860	14,854	11.09	Bangladesh, China, Nigeria
2018	130,245	16,361	12.56	Bangladesh, China, Nigeria
2019	93,570	13,448	14.37	China, Indonesia, Bangladesh
2020	131,300	16,957	12.91	China, Indonesia, Bangladesh
2021	131,255	28,593	21.78	China, Indonesia, Bangladesh

Source: Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia

Malaysia My 2nd Home (MM2H) Scheme Holders

Malaysia My 2nd Home (MM2H) is a scheme to attract foreign citizens (primarily wealthy retirees) to bring financial capital (in the form of a bank fixed deposits), investment, and consumption to Malaysia. MM2H holders are given a ten-year renewable visa, which almost makes them permanent residents of the country. MM2H holders, however, are not allowed to be employed in any form by either the public or private sectors in Malaysia, but are allowed to buy properties and open up businesses to generate income and employment.

When MM2H was first implemented in the early 2000s, the target population was Japanese retirees. However, the rapid rise of the Chinese economy and its affluent middle class have led to PRC citizens becoming the largest group of MM2H holders. According to the MM2H agency, as of 2019, the total number of accumulated MM2H holders was 48,471. Among them, 30.5 percent were PRC citizens (14,541).⁵ Japan was a distant second (11.3 percent).

In 2021, the Malaysian government revised the MM2H criteria with a higher threshold. The revised scheme affects both existing and potential applicants, and the number of MM2H applicants is expected to decline.⁶ However, due to the ongoing COVID-related travel restrictions, it is difficult to ascertain the impact of this new scheme on the current and future applicants from the PRC.⁷

Expatriates/Workers

Malaysia issues several categories of visas for foreigners to be employed legally within the country, ranging from professional visit pass (mostly for skilled professionals/ expatriates) to employment and temporary employment pass (generally for low-skilled workers). In the early 2000s, there were tentative talks about opening the general labour market of Malaysia to PRC workers, but up until now, except for a few selected sectors, Malaysia has not opened its general labour market to China's workers. Therefore, almost all legally employed PRC citizens are

likely to be holders of the professional visit pass. However, an unknown portion of them certainly use this pass to work as labourers, especially in the construction sector.

The number of PRC expatriates/workers has increased over the decades, but it noticeably peaked around 2017-2018. In 2017, the Malaysia’s government disclosed that out of 1.7 million foreign workers in Malaysia, PRC workers accounted for 15,399.⁸ In 2019, that figure had fallen to 13,305 (out of 1.99 million foreign workers).⁹

On the other hand, the figures for PRC expatriates/workers provided in the *Annual Foreign Investment Country Guide: Malaysia*, compiled by the Ministry of Commerce of China, were somewhat higher (Table 3), although the declining trend since 2017-2018 can be similarly observed.¹⁰ Reasons for the decline could be partly political (Malaysia’s political transition in 2018 that created some initial uncertainties), economic (China’s slowing economy) and the pandemic (especially in 2020 and after).

Table 3: PRC Expatriates/Workers in Malaysia According to China’s Ministry of Commerce)

Year	Annual	Accumulative
2016	12,900	19,200
2017	18,339	27,919
2018	14,500	24,300
2019	7,578	19,613
2020	3,757	8,639

Source: Ministry of Commerce, China

It is safe to assume that the data from both China and Malaysia only include workers with legal status. There are however occasional reports of PRC workers being illegally employed (and exploited) in Malaysia, especially in construction projects contracted to private enterprises from China.¹¹ The exact number of illegal workers however, is difficult-to-calculate (see later discussion). Nevertheless, it is very unlikely that the number of illegal PRC workers exceeds the legal one, and based on the declining press reports on this issue, the trend suggests that the number of illegal PRC workers in Malaysia has lessened, although they are by no means completely absent.

Spouses, Students in Private International Schools and Their Guardians, Permanent Residents

PRC spouses of Malaysian citizens (mostly wives) staying in Malaysia are estimated to number around 6,000.¹² They possess a “long-term social visit pass” for their stay, which is renewable every five years. Additionally, they are allowed to work, but subject to certain conditions.

Private international schools have sprung up in Malaysia in the past few years and have attracted many affluent families within Malaysia and internationally. These international schools can issue their own student visas to international students. As of 2021, there were 924 PRC students attending these schools using student visas, ranking second to South Korea, which has 1,717 students).¹³ Given that most PRC students are below the legal age of eighteen,

they would likely have at least one guardian (parent or grandparent, widely known as *peidu mama* or *peidu nainai*) staying with them. As such, the total number of these students and guardians is estimated to be 2,000.

As of June 2022, 2,346 PRC citizens have obtained Permanent Resident (PR) status in Malaysia. China is the seventh largest source country for PRs in Malaysia.¹⁴

Illegal Xin Yimin

Overstaying their visas is one of the main ways for PRC citizens to reside in Malaysia illegally. In 2004, a deputy consul at the Embassy of China in Malaysia suggested that possibly a whopping 185,000 PRC citizens had overstayed their visa periods in Malaysia. However, it was later clarified that the number could be between 20,000 and 40,000. Most of these came from rural areas in China and were deceived by fraudulent companies and agents. They were promised legal working permits and manual labour work in Malaysia but suffered serious exploitation once they arrived.¹⁵

Other than manual work, a few of these illegal PRC citizens were also entrepreneurial enough to open small businesses on their own, often as food stall operators, hawkers and small traders. Female prostitution is also another line of illicit/illegal work. Not all prostitutes were illegal; some had proper visas such as student pass or social visit pass. However, many of them were victims of criminal gangs who had deceived and manipulated them into prostitution.

In 2019, the director general of the immigration department of Malaysia disclosed that between 2016 and 2018, 18,341 PRC citizens who entered Malaysia via tourist visas did not have exit records.¹⁶ This could be taken as a rough estimation of the number of PRC citizens staying illegally in Malaysia.¹⁷ Despite the lack of consistent data, the long-term trend is almost certainly a declining one. As China becomes richer, the outward drive for its poorer citizens to do manual labour legally or illegally outside the country also declined. Furthermore, the Chinese government has always warned its citizens against taking up illegal jobs in Malaysia, and both Malaysia and China have collaborated to resolve the issue.¹⁸

ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS

In terms of formal organisations, *xin yimin* organisations are mostly concentrated in two sectors: the business sector and the student body (Table 4).

Table 4: Organisations Related to *Xin Yimin* in Malaysia

Sub-communities	Organisations	Relationship with the Embassy of China
Business	China Enterprises Chamber of Commerce in Malaysia	Close relationship
	China Enterprises Association of Malaysia	Moderate interaction
	Provincial/regional business associations	Depends
Students	China Students Association Malaysia	Close relationship
	Malaysia Association of China Students Alumni	Relatively weak
Hui	Overseas Chinese Muslim Association ¹⁹	Relatively weak
Assistance-based for PRC citizens	Malaysia China Welfare Advisory Society	Cooperative relationship

The most important and authoritative *xin yimin* business organisation in Malaysia is the China Enterprises Chamber of Commerce in Malaysia (CECCM), founded in 2002. Its secretariat is housed at the Bank of China in Malaysia and its current chairperson is the president of Malaysia's Bank of China. The chairperson of CECCM, by convention, always comes from the banking industry. It has over 250 members (corporate members only, individuals as associate members), and a majority of the membership consists of China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs). CECCM maintains close ties with the Embassy of China, particularly the Trade and Economic department. It has two autonomous branches: Northern Malaysia (Penang) and Sarawak. It serves as a platform for the PRC's SOEs to discuss business collaborations and also as a channel of interaction with relevant government departments of Malaysia. Other than business activities, it also organises charity and corporate social responsibility events on behalf of its members.²⁰

One of the non-“mainstream” *xin yimin* business organisations in Malaysia is the China Enterprises Association of Malaysia (CEAM). Founded in 2015, it caters to China's small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia, and currently has a membership of 160 SMEs. The founding of CEAM was somewhat a contentious affair, especially with the presence of CECCM. On top of that, it was not officially endorsed by the Embassy of China in its early years. However, in recent years, CEAM has been accepted as the secondary *xin yimin* business organisation by the Chinese Embassy.²¹

A new phenomenon in Malaysia is the rise of various PRC provincial and regional business associations, consisting of PRC business entities or persons from the same province or region (such as Hebei, Shandong, etc). As of today, there are eight of them. These organisations provide new linkages between Malaysia and different provinces of China, beyond Guangdong and Fujian.

For PRC students, the major organisation is the China Students Association Malaysia (CSAM). There have been disputes over its founding year (2002 or 2008) but it was formally registered in 2013 in Malaysia, serving as the national organisation connecting all PRC student

associations in over 20 Malaysian higher education institutions (public and private, mostly in the Klang Valley). CSAM also serves as a network for taking care of PRC students, liaises with the Embassy of China (supporting Embassy activities such as festivals of leaders' visits), and organises social, educational, and youth exchange activities between Malaysia and China.²² Another student-related organisation, although not directly, is the Malaysia Association of China Students Alumni (MACSA). Founded in 2012, it has about 1,000 members. These are PRC citizens who studied in Malaysia's universities and have stayed on to work in Malaysia after graduation.

The president of MACSA (Huang Bin) also founded a non-governmental organisation (NGO) known as the Malaysia China Welfare Advisory Society to help distressed PRC citizens in Malaysia.²³ It has a cooperative relationship with the Consular Protection Department of the Embassy of China and operates a hotline and a WeChat account. The Malaysia China Welfare Advisory Society has been praised by the Chinese government as being exemplary in providing assistance to *xin yimin*.²⁴

IMPLICATIONS

Overall, despite the pandemic temporary changing migration patterns, the number of *xin yimin* in Malaysia is expected to increase. Most *xin yimin* find Malaysia a comfortable place to live in due to its sizable ethnic Chinese community. As a *xin yimin* said, "there are so many Chinese that you can integrate into the society easily."²⁵ In fact, *xin yimin*-styled "Chinatowns" have emerged in Kuala Lumpur such as Nanjing Street at Sunway Velocity Mall. However, the comfort that the *xin yimin* feel about the sizable Malaysian Chinese community also suggests that most of the *xin yimin* have an asymmetrical pattern of interaction with the broader Malaysian society. Apart from the Hui, most *xin yimin* have relatively limited interaction with the non-Chinese communities in Malaysia. In this sense, whatever impact that the *xin yimin* may create in the future would be first absorbed by the Malaysian Chinese community—the community that is effectively a buffer between the *xin yimin* and other circles of Malaysian society. So far, the ethnic Chinese do not perceive the *xin yimin* as a threat, nor does their presence significantly shape the way they practise their culture.²⁶

Some Malaysians are worried that the *xin yimin* are economic competitors to the local population and that they do not bring economic benefits. A Malaysian academic once commented that Malaysians may "not be comfortable with a glut of foreigners coming to Malaysia and potentially doing business or eating into the market. If this happens, it may strain the relations between Malaysians—regardless of race—and Chinese nationals."²⁷ However, the economic impact of the *xin yimin* in Malaysia has never actually been properly studied. While they could certainly bring competition to the locals and may not provide economic spillover effects, they could generate consumption, employment, capital inflows, and new business opportunities for Malaysians.

Finally, Malaysian politics is hypersensitive to ethnic issues and there is latent anxiety, especially among the Malays, that the *xin yimin* will upset the delicate ethnic balance in the

country. The asymmetrical pattern of interaction between the *xin yimin* and the Malaysian society suggests that outside of the ethnic Chinese circle, much is unknown about this community. Populist fear of large-scale Chinese “colonisation” that may undermine the local Malay majority and upset the delicate balance is an easily exploitable myth. Furthermore, anti-*xin yimin* fake news has also emerged after 2018.²⁸ Some insensitive *xin yimin* have also been oblivious to sensitive historical and ethnic issues in Malaysia, and may behave in ways that fuel suspicion and hostility.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Over the last 20 years, the *xin yimin* have become more proper (with fewer illegal *xin yimin*), organised, and resourceful. Once the pandemic-related restrictions are lifted in China, the upward trend of the *xin yimin* in Malaysia is likely to resume. In one sense, this is the real manifestation of the “people-to-people exchanges” between Malaysia and China and it should not be feared. Rather, the *xin yimin*’s potential to contribute to the well-being of Malaysian society and bilateral ties should be harnessed and welcomed. Nonetheless, more efforts to understand and study their potential social, cultural, economic, and even political implications are needed.

ENDNOTES

¹ The only work that provides a general picture of the *xin yimin* in Malaysia is Yao Zhulin, *Shengcun yu fazhan: Zhongguo xinyimin zai Malaixiya* (Survival and Development: The New Chinese Migrants in Malaysia), (Master Thesis, Xiamen University, 2007).

² According to Malaysia’s National Registration Department, from 2018 to 2019, only 37 persons from China were granted citizenship. It is safe to assume that the numbers for other years are fairly similar. See “Home Ministry denies allegations that 100,000 Chinese nationals were granted citizenship under Pakatan govt,” *The Malaya Mail*, 30 May, 2019.

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/05/30/home-ministry-denies-allegations-that-100000-chinese-nationals-were-granted/1757870>

³ See <https://www.mohe.gov.my/muat-turun/statistik>.

⁴ Interview with a PRC student leader from China Students Association Malaysia, 18 April 2022.

⁵ See <https://www.mm2h.com/mm2h-statistics/>. Successful applicants can bring in family dependents too, so the potential number could be higher.

⁶ Nur Hanani Azman, “Tougher new requirements may see fewer MM2H applicants,” *The Malaysian Reserve*, 24 August 2021. <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2021/08/24/tougher-new-requirements-may-see-fewer-mm2h-applicants/>

⁷ Many MM2H applicants from the PRC were aiming to buy properties built by PRC companies, in Malaysia. The collapse of PRC-linked property projects in Malaysia, such as the Forest City in southern Johor, also could impact the number of PRC applicants of MM2H.

⁸ Aina Nasa, “More than 1.7 million foreign workers in Malaysia; majority from Indonesia,” *New Straits Times*, 27 July 2017. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/07/261418/more-17-million-foreign-workers-malaysia-majority-indonesia>

⁹ Ida Lim, “Are fears over China’s citizens in Malaysia justified? What the numbers tell us,” *The Malay Mail*, 22 January 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/01/22/are-fears-over-chinas-citizens-in-malaysia-justified-what-the-numbers-tell/1830360>

¹⁰ *Annual Foreign Investment Country Guide: Malaysia* is available at: <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/dl/gbdqzn/upload/malaxiya.pdf>. The latest edition is 2021, which covered the figure in 2020.

¹¹ “108 Chinese Workers Cheated to Malaysia,” *China.org*, 20 May 2004; <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2004/May/95995.htm>; Kow Gah Chie and Adrian Wong, “Broken dreams - the plight of Forest City’s migrant workers,” *Malaysiakini*, 8 May 2017. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/381555>

¹² This is a rough estimation. Twenty years ago, the Malaysian government disclosed that there were about 2,700 PRC spouses living in Malaysia. A conservative estimation roughly doubling the size in twenty years is acceptable. See. Yao Zhulin, *Shengcun yu fazhan*, p. 20.

¹³ Parliamentary written replies, 8 August 2022, Question # 103.

¹⁴ Parliamentary written replies, 8 August 2022, Question # 102.

¹⁵ “185,000 Chinese Overstayed Their Visas in Two Years,” *Sina News*, 15 April 2004. <https://news.sina.cn/sa/2004-04-15/detail-ikkntiak9809828.d.html>; Yao Zhulin, *Shengcun yu fazhan*, p. 20.

¹⁶ He was actually correcting the erroneous figure (76.258) that was reported in an Auditor General report in 2019. See “High number of overstaying Chinese, Indian tourists worries ministry,” *The Malay Mail*, 3 December 2019. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/12/03/high-number-of-overstaying-chinese-indian-tourists-worries-ministry/1815783>

¹⁷ In August 2022, the Minister of Home Affairs of Malaysia refuted the number of 1.2 million PRC citizens who had entered the country but had no exit record in from 2018 to 2021, which was reported earlier in the media, claiming that this was a false number. See “Home Ministry will clarify on claims that 1.2 million Chinese nationals still in the country, says minister,” *The Malay Mail*, 26 August 2022.

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/08/26/home-ministry-will-clarify-on-claims-that-12-million-chinese-nationals-still-in-country-says-minister/24973>

¹⁸ “Malaysia, China are collaborating on immigration breach,” *Malaysiakini*, 19 September 2019. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/492467>

¹⁹ Overseas Chinese Muslim Association is briefly discussed in this article. See Ngeow Chow Bing and Ma Hailing, “More Islamic, No Less Chinese: Explorations into the Overseas Chinese Muslim Identities in Malaysia” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39: 12 (2016), pp. 2108-2128.

²⁰ Interview with a member of CECCM, 26 April 2022.

²¹ Interview with a *Xin Yimin* who is familiar with the matter, 11 May 2022.

²² Interview with a PRC student leader from China Students Association Malaysia, 18 April 2022.

²³ “Malaysia China Welfare Advisory Society to help the fellow nationals: Language and communication difficulties causing problems in seeking help,” *Sinchew Daily*, 3 October 2019. <https://www.sinchew.com.my/20191003/%E9%A9%AC%E4%B8%AD%E6%8F%B4%E5%8D%8F%E4%BC%9A%E4%B8%BA%E5%90%8C%E8%83%9E%E8%A7%A3%E5%9B%B0%C2%B7%E8%AF%AD%E8%A8%80%E6%B2%9F%E9%80%9A%E9%9A%9C%E7%A2%8D%E5%9C%A8%E9%A9%AC%E6%B1%82%E5%8A%A9%E6%97%A0/>

²⁴ Discussion with a *Xin Yimin* who is familiar with the matter, 6 May 2022.

²⁵ Tashny Sukumaran and Coco Liu, “Why are Chinese moving to Malaysia by the thousands?” *South China Morning Post*, 25 March 2017. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2080869/why-are-chinese-moving-malaysia-thousands>

²⁶ For example, the increasingly ubiquitous *xin yimin* Chinese restaurants in Malaysia have by no means diluted or threatened the distinctly Malaysian Chinese restaurants. See Du Jingxuan “Mainland

Chinese restaurants coming in big in Malaysia; Will they change the food culture of local Chinese?" *The News Lens*, 19 August 2021. <https://www.thenewslens.com/feature/aseanpodcast/155205>

²⁷ Sukumaran and Liu, "Why are Chinese moving to Malaysia by the thousands?"

²⁸ Ida Lim, "In Malaysia, are China's citizens becoming the new bogeyman?" *The Malay Mail*, 22 January 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/01/22/in-malaysia-are-chinas-citizens-becoming-the-new-bogeyman/1830299>

²⁹ In early 2021, a *xin yimin*-linked Chinese restaurant that was decorated with Maoist and communist themes was raided and investigated by the police. See Imran Hilmy, "Cops raid restaurant decorated with Communism-inspired wallpaper," *The Star*, 3 January 2021.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/01/03/cops-raid-restaurant-decorated-with-communism-inspired-wallpaper>

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