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DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES FOR CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIAN NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to investigate how Malaysian newspapers discursively construct the identities for Chinese international students via such methods as the linguistic strategies and framing techniques and thus reveal how media narratives shape prevailing public perceptions of this demographic. To this end, the study utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the newspaper articles appearing in leading Malaysian newspaper. The findings illustrate how these narratives either reinforce or challenge social hierarchies, cultural stereotypes, and national identity within Malaysian society, demonstrating that media representations of Chinese international students are never merely descriptive but are performative acts that actively shape the terms of social inclusion and cultural belonging.

KEYWORDS: identities, discursive construction, Chinese international students, Malaysian newspapers, Critical Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the discourse employed by Malaysian newspapers in constructing the identities of Chinese international students, thereby influencing public perceptions and either reinforcing or questioning prevailing social narratives. In recent years, Malaysia has become one popular destination for Chinese students. Malaysia's appeal lies in its high-quality yet affordable education, more lenient English language entry requirements than traditional study abroad destinations (including Singapore), a low cost of living, and its close geographical, socio-cultural and linguistic ties with China (Koh and Yeoh 2025).

By 2023, Chinese students accounted for 38.4% (44,043) of all international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions (MOHE 2024).

Media is one of the most influential ideological institutions of modern society (van Dijk 2015; 2000). Media discourses, as a distinct form of social and institutional practice (van Dijk 2013: 2), hold significant influence in shaping social identities (Fairclough 1995a) and serve as a critical domain for examining societal perceptions of older individuals (Phelan 2018). The language used to portray people in news articles can profoundly affect how they are perceived within society (Richardson 2017: 49). Consequently, analyzing texts within their socio-political frameworks through a discursive lens can reveal how identities are constructed (Coupland et al. 1991).

This research endeavor employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a methodological framework to scrutinize news articles sourced from prominent Malaysian newspapers, notably The Star, New Straits Times, and Sin Chew Daily. Through a meticulous examination of linguistic characteristics, thematic structures, and ideological orientations, the study endeavors to elucidate responses to the following research inquiries:

In what manner do Malaysian newspapers articulate the identities of Chinese international students?
What linguistic devices and discursive tactics are utilized in the formulation of these identities?
To what extent do these representations resonate with or contest broader societal paradigms pertaining to ethnicity, immigration, and national identity?

The findings of this investigation contribute to an enriched comprehension of the media's function in shaping public perceptions towards immigrant communities within multicultural societies. By dissecting the discursive dynamics at play, the study underscores the media's capacity to either perpetuate narratives of exclusion or advocate for more inclusive portrayals of diversity, thereby contributing to academic discourse on the intersection of media, identity, and multiculturalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the more than ten years since the Belt and Road Initiative was launched, educational cooperation and people-to-people exchanges have become an indispensable and vital dimension of the initiative. Within this framework, academic exchanges between China and Southeast Asian countries have grown increasingly close. Thanks to its unique geographical location, multicultural environment and the growing international reputation of its higher education system, Malaysia has gradually emerged as a new destination for Chinese students seeking to study abroad. In 2023, the number of Chinese students enrolled at Malaysian higher education institutions reached 44,043, accounting for 38.4 per cent of the country's

total international student population. This figure not only reflects the substantial progress of the ‘Belt and Road’ education initiatives in the Southeast Asian region, but also marks a structural shift in the traditional global South–North mobility pattern—the study abroad landscape for Chinese students is extending from Western-centred countries such as the US, the UK and Australia towards ‘Southern’ hubs in Southeast Asia, forming a new pathway of South-South educational mobility that is characteristic of our times. This trend has prompted systematic academic attention to this emerging pattern of mobility; existing literature primarily explores it from the perspectives of cross-cultural adaptation challenges and the negotiation of identity and discourse.

Some studies have explored the psychological adaptation and acculturation of Chinese international students in Malaysia (Chen 2025; Mehar and Xue 2025; Qi and Haladin 2022; Wong and Liu 2025; Xu, et al., 2025; Xue and Singh 2025). Other scholars have probed into the language ideologies in English-medium instruction (Chen 2025; Ma, et tal., 2025; Zhai & Razali 2022). Besides, such topics as the influence of social media on Chinese international students, South-South mobility, and Chinese doctoral mobility and the stigma of Southeast Asian degrees are receiving more and more attention (Xu, et al., 2024; Xu, Tran & Xie 2024; Zhang & Noor 2025; Zhao 2025).

Wodak and Meyer (2009: 10) put that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as a methodological tool for examining both overt and covert structural dynamics of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as they are linguistically articulated. CDA seeks to uncover how discursive practices perpetuate “unequal power relations” (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 63), including the formation of identities within broader socio-structural frameworks. CDA emerged in the late 1980s as an interdisciplinary and problem-focused research framework. It encompasses diverse methodologies, theoretical models, and epistemological foundations, united by the goal of analyzing discourse within its social, cultural, and political contexts (Wodak 2013: xx). This approach seeks to uncover the ways in which language shapes and reflects power dynamics, ideologies, and societal structures. The study is particularly anchored in the theoretical contributions of Norman Fairclough (1995a), who conceptualizes CDA as an analytical framework that investigates the interplay between text, discursive practices, and sociocultural practices. Texts, in this context, encompass both written and spoken forms of communication. Discursive practices involve the processes of text production by media professionals, its consumption by audiences, and its dissemination within society. Sociocultural practices, on the other hand, encompass the broader social and cultural activities surrounding communicative events, including the influence of political, ideological, and cultural domains, as well as situational, institutional, and societal practices. In the realm of mass media, and specifically within this study, communicative events are operationalized as newspaper articles (Fairclough 1993).

Fairclough's framework enables a nuanced analysis of the construction of Chinese international students by situating them within the triad of text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice. According to Fairclough, power is inherently embedded in language, and the construction of identities must be critically examined to reveal the inequalities and ideologies it perpetuates. This necessitates meticulous analysis, as ideological representations are rarely explicit; rather, they are subtly naturalized within texts and language use, often reinforced by "taken-for-granted assumptions" (Fairclough 1995b: 44-45).

The concept of 'discourse' is rooted in Foucault's (1978) framework, which examines the connections between socially constructed truths, power dynamics, and their influence on self-identity, knowledge, and behavioral norms (Willig 2000). It is also seen as a framework that shapes the meanings underlying everyday practices, offering insights into how language and social structures interact to define reality. Discursive practices, in this context, focus on how authors utilize existing discourses to generate texts. The analysis of social practices, meanwhile, evaluates whether these discursive practices reproduce or challenge the prevailing order of discourse. This framework provides a robust basis for understanding how societal, institutional, and journalistic practices influence the linguistic strategies employed by journalists in constructing representations of Chinese international students in Malaysia.

Although academia has conducted fruitful research into the experiences of Chinese students studying in Malaysia from multiple perspectives, one key dimension has so far been largely overlooked, namely, how the Malaysian media represents the Chinese student community through discursive practices. Critical discourse analysis, as an effective tool for revealing the complex interconnections between language, power and social structures, has been virtually absent from this field of study. This research gap not only limits our understanding of the host society's attitudes towards acceptance, but also means that the mechanisms underlying the construction of public discourse surrounding the image of Chinese international students have long remained a 'black box'.

METHODOLOGY

The representation of individuals, groups, and sociocultural norms within media discourses plays a significant role in shaping both collective and individual identities (Johnson, David & Huey 2003). Such representations often manifest discursively, encompassing issues such as disproportionate visibility, either excessive or insufficient, or the perpetuation of reductive stereotypes. For instance, Stoenner and Wodak (2016: 193) analyze the discursive strategies employed by the United Kingdom's Daily Mail, revealing how Ralph Miliband was framed as a threatening "Other," a portrayal that was subsequently leveraged in a political campaign targeting his son, Ed Miliband. Similarly, Winch (2005, 85) investigates the evolution of Osama bin Laden's media depiction across global newspapers from 1999 to 2002, highlighting his construction as an archetypal "evil genius" endowed with almost mythical capabilities. Furthermore,

Benwell and Stokoe (2006) argue that the favorable discursive construction of public figures in media narratives serves not only to bolster their public image but also to garner support for their associated ideologies, thereby aligning audiences with the ideological positions of the media outlet itself. This interplay between media representation and identity formation underscores the power of discourse in influencing public perception and ideological alignment. CDA seeks to systematically reveal embedded power dynamics and structural inequalities, deconstruct ideological frameworks, and position itself as a mode of “social practice” (Fairclough 1992: 86-89). It rigorously situates language and media within their broader socio-political contexts, emphasizing the interplay between discursive practices and the reproduction of social structures. CDA is particularly suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the linguistic and discursive strategies used in media texts to shape public perceptions and reinforce or challenge societal ideologies

This study employs CDA to examine how Malaysian English-language newspapers construct the identities of Chinese international students. The analytical approach adopted in this study draws on three key dimensions of Fairclough’s model: (1) the description of linguistic features within texts, (2) the interpretation of discursive practices, which examines the relationship between texts and their production processes, and (3) the explanation of how discursive practices intersect with broader social practices (Fairclough 1995a). This three-dimensional framework is particularly effective at a micro-level in identifying the lexical choices used to construct identities for older individuals, which are then linked to institutional and journalistic practices at a meso-level, as well as to political, ideological, and cultural practices at a macro-level.

The analysis focuses on news articles published from January 1, 2013 to December 31, 2025 in the prominent Malaysian Chinese-language newspaper: Sin Chew Daily. The newspaper was selected due to the following reasons: it is Malaysia’s highest-circulation and most influential Chinese-language newspaper. Since its launch in 1929, it has served not only as a news medium but also as one of the three pillars (Chinese associations, Chinese-language newspapers and Chinese education) that are indispensable to Malaysia’s Chinese community. The selection of this newspaper means that this study will be grounded in a platform that best represents the mainstream voices and perspectives of the local Chinese community, ensuring that the sample is fully representative.

The data collection process involved several systematic steps to ensure the relevance and reliability of the sample. The study utilized the Factiva databases, which provide comprehensive archives of news articles from the selected newspapers. The search was conducted using the keywords “中国留学生” to identify articles that explicitly addressed the topic of Chinese immigration in Malaysia. The initial search yielded a total of 157 articles across the three newspapers.

The articles were categorized according to their respective mastheads (Sin Chew Daily) and reviewed again to identify and eliminate duplicates. Duplication occurred in cases where the same story was published across multiple newspapers or where news reports were directly distributed by the government-controlled Malaysia National News Agency (BERNAMA). To maintain the integrity of the dataset, only the first version of each story in the search results was retained, and subsequent duplicates were removed.

After the elimination of irrelevant and duplicate articles, the final dataset consisted of 93 news articles. These articles were then prepared for in-depth analysis, with attention paid to their linguistic features, thematic framing, and ideological positioning. The dataset includes a diverse range of articles, covering topics such as the economic contributions of Chinese international students, their cultural integration, and their role in Malaysia's multicultural society.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An examination of news articles from Sin Chew Daily reveals a dualistic portrayal of Chinese international students in Malaysian newspapers, encompassing three principal discursive strands: numerical quantification that constructs them as demographic and economic resources; friendship discourse that positions them as cultural ambassadors of Sino-Malaysian amity; and resilience narrative that frames them as survivors of adversity worthy of state protection and public sympathy.

Quantifiable Educational Resource: The Scale Myth Manufactured by Numbers

The numerical quantification of Chinese international students in Malaysian newspapers operates as a discursive strategy that transforms complex human mobility into a measurable metric of national success, constructing these students as quantifiable assets whose sheer statistical presence validates both domestic policy efficacy and the nation's standing within global higher education hierarchies.

(1) 她说，大马拥有20所公立大专和400所私立大专，截至2024年，我国一共有4万7000名中国留学生。

(National News 5/28/2025)

(2) 大马教育全球服务公司 (EMGS) 数据显示，去年申请来马的中国留学生增长近25%。

(National News 4/29/2025)

(3) 以槟城为例，单单是理科大学就有接近6500名中国留学生，这还不包括来自中东以及东南亚其他国家的留学生。

(Northern Region News 8/26/2025)

Numerical data are often presented under the guise of "precision." For instance, "Malaysia has 47,000 Chinese students" in Excerpt 1, a figure rounded to the nearest thousand, which cultivates an authoritative

impression that “statistics equal truth.” Similarly, the “25%” in “10,000 Students Come to Malaysia for Further Studies, Chinese Student Enrollment Increases by 25%” in Excerpt 2 offers what appears to be a rigorous growth rate, thereby directing the reader’s attention toward the striking conclusion of “growth,” rather than prompting questions about its baseline, method of calculation, or the time period of comparison. “Penang has 6,500 Chinese students” in Excerpt 3 presents an equally precise quantitative snapshot at the regional level. The rhetorical effect of such numerical precision lies in its reduction of complex social phenomena to a unidimensional “quantity”. What does 6,500 people in Penang signify? What impact has their arrival had on the local housing market, community relations, and the allocation of educational resources? These societal and structural consequences are entirely supplanted by an isolated number.

(4)大部分攻读硕博学位，这一数字已远远超过美国任何一所大学的中国留学生人数。

(National News 11/27/2025)

(5)砂拉越大学多年来与中国保持着积极而丰硕的合作关系，目前全校共有超过350名中国学生，是东马其中一个中国留学生人数最多的大学。

(Sarawak Section 11/25/2025)

(6)周游斌指出，去年有超5万7000名中国留学生把马来西亚作为出国及世界主要的留学目的地之一。

(Northern Region News 2/10 /2025)

Comparative and superlative constructions in the text further reinforce a competitive narrative. The verb “exceeds” in Excerpt 4 functions as a comparative marker that constructs a binary opposition between China and the United States, reconfiguring students’ educational choices as an embodiment of “national strength.” The superlative modifier “the most” in Excerpt 5 elevates a particular institution to the top of the ranking, rendering it a symbol of “attractiveness,” while substantive issues such as the university’s educational quality, academic environment, and student experience are effectively obscured by this quantitative label.

The number in Excerpt 6 is precise to the hundreds place (7,000), lending it a scientific aura of “exact statistics,” yet the prefix “over” simultaneously preserves a degree of elasticity. This juxtaposition of precision and vagueness produces, in its discursive function, an effect of “rhetorical quantification”, it borrows the authority of mathematical discourse to empower political and educational narratives, thereby endowing an inherently arbitrary figure, determined by statistical criteria (such as whether preparatory students, language program enrollees, short-term exchange students, etc., are included), with the naturalized appearance of “objective fact.” Through the intertextual citation of official statistics, the recontextualization embedded within diplomatic narratives, and the selective omission of key information,

it participates in the collaborative reproduction of the discursive orders of both China and Malaysia.

Through the combination of “numerical data + positive lexical items,” a taken-for-granted sense of “national strength, friendly relations, and policy correctness” is manufactured. First, the large number of students studying abroad is presented as a natural outflow of national power; second, the substantial number of students choosing Malaysia, is constructed as inherent evidence of Sino-Malaysian amity; third, sustained growth is framed as the inevitable outcome of successful relevant policies. These causal relationships are never explicitly articulated, yet they insidiously permeate the reader’s cognitive structure through the reiterated assemblage of discursive elements.

Relationship-Building Participant: The “Cultural Envoy” in Friendship Discourse

This section focuses on headlines in the coverage that portray Chinese international students as positive agents in promoting Sino-Malaysian (or Sino-foreign) amity, cultural exchange, and community integration.

Modality, as a linguistic device, encodes the speaker’s stance toward a proposition, encompassing dimensions of possibility, necessity, obligation, or volition. It serves to express the power of the speaker or the writer (Fairclough 1989). In the headlines under examination, the deployment of modal resources exhibits two salient characteristics. The first is the frequent use of high-value modality, which constructs an unquestionable sense of certainty. Although prototypical modal verbs (such as “must” or “should”) do not appear extensively in these headlines, the propositions are uniformly articulated as declarative factual statements, a formulation that itself constitutes an implicit form of high-value modality, signifying the speaker's maximal commitment to the veracity of the proposition. For instance:

(1) 许多中国留学生在这里学习，许多中国企业也正与马来西亚合作伙伴携手在砂开展项目。

(Sarawak Section 11/26/2025)

(2) 36名在马来西亚的中国留学生走入原住民村落，与当地社群一同下厨、共餐、载歌载舞，互赠包子与木薯竹筒饭。

(Perak Section 8/5/2025)

The declarative formulation “come here to study” in Excerpt 7 presents the purpose of international students as an established fact that requires no deliberation, thereby precluding alternative modal choices such as “may come to study” or “seem to come to study.” Likewise, “Sino-Malaysian relations continue to be friendly” in Excerpt 8 constitutes a universal assertion whose modal force is equivalent to “are necessarily friendly,” leaving no room for doubt or contestation. The verb phrase “走入”(walk into/enter)

in Excerpt 9 implicitly conveys an active inclination toward approach, while “下厨” (cook/enter the kitchen) denotes interaction at the level of everyday life; together, these two lexical choices jointly construct a “depoliticized” and “de-elitized” image of approachability.

„ (9)“这次我们第一次跟工大的中国留学生社团合作，届时中国留学生社团将带来乐队表演。

(Johor Section 9/25/2025)

(10)黃健興来参加婚礼的中国留学生为马来新人送上最真挚的祝福。

(Perak Section 9/17/2025)

The term “带来” (bring) in Excerpt 9 presupposes a benevolent motive of “giving”, positioning international students as carriers and benefactors of cultural resources rather than as claimants. “祝福” (blessing) in Excerpt 10 represents a ritualized expression of interpersonal goodwill, whose semantic prosody evokes warmth, harmony, and connectedness, thereby naturalizing the presence of international students as “an integral part of celebratory occasions.”

The selection of voice determines the syntactic position of the agent, which in turn shapes readers’ perception of the subject’s agency. The most salient feature of the headlines in this group is that all are cast in the active voice, with Chinese international students occupying the subject position in nearly every instance without exception. The active voice constructs international students as the point of initiation for action and the bearers of intentionality, they are subjects who actively “come” to study, actively “visit” indigenous communities, actively “walk into” neighborhoods, and actively “offer” blessings. This syntactic arrangement invests international students with positive moral agency: they are not passively adapting to their environment but are actively forging friendships. It is worth considering, by contrast, that if the headlines were reformulated in the passive voice, for instance, “Indigenous residents were visited by Chinese international students”, the semantic focus would shift onto the indigenous residents, and the agency attributed to the international students would be significantly diminished. It is precisely through the consistent deployment of the active voice that these headlines accomplish the syntactic affirmation of international students’ identity as “cultural ambassadors.”

The most pivotal ideological function of the “cultural ambassador” discourse lies in its capacity to accomplish political work through depoliticized means. Specifically, Sino-Malaysian relations at the macro level are implicated in complex geopolitical negotiations, latent tensions persist across issues such as the South China Sea dispute, economic interdependence, and ethnic politics. Yet discursive framings such as “visiting indigenous communities,” “cooking,” and “dragon boat races” reduce Sino-Malaysian relations to friendly interactions at the individual level, deploying the seemingly innocuous framework of

“friendship” to dissolve public awareness of structural contradictions inherent in bilateral relations. Within this discursive order, any questioning of Chinese international students risks being recursively reinterpreted as an affront to “Sino-Malaysian friendship”, for students have already been discursively constituted as “practitioners of amity,” rendering an attack on the former tantamount to an assault on amity itself.

The “cultural ambassador” discourse maintains an implicit resonance with state-level cultural outreach strategies. By performing Chinese arts, participating in dragon boat races, and showcasing Chinese culture, international students engage, at the micro-level, in a moderate form of cultural nationalist practice. This practice differs from overt political propaganda, for it unfolds within the domain of grassroots interactions and assumes the semblance of “spontaneity.” Nevertheless, it remains logically congruent with official discursive strategies emphasizing “telling China’s story well” and “enhancing cultural soft power.” The selective presentation in media coverage, showcasing only positive cases of “successful integration”, renders this narrative a quotidian extension of China’s cultural diplomacy in Malaysia. In this regard, the “cultural ambassador” discourse is not merely a rhetorical device within news headlines but an institutionalized discursive practice embedded within a broader framework of national cultural strategy and asymmetrical power relations between China and Malaysia.

Agentive Subject in Adversity: The “Resilience Narrative” in Negative Events

If the discourse of numerical scale constructs the “resource” attribute of international students through the accumulation of “quantity,” and the discourse of friendship constructs their “virtue” attribute through the qualification of “quality,” then the “resilience narrative” in negative events accomplishes a third discursive positioning of this group through a more complex discursive operation, one that, while acknowledging “harm,” simultaneously constructs “fortitude”: international students are cast as both bearers of adversity and practitioners of resilience, as well as legitimate objects of state protection.

Fairclough (2003) argues that generic structure analysis contributes to understanding purpose-driven discourses. In negative event reporting, the structural arrangement often constructs a “resilience narrative” by positioning affected actors as agentive subjects who actively negotiate adversity rather than merely suffering from it.

(11)“英中透视”报告指出一些大学过度依赖中国留学生学费，而不愿正视中国干预问题。

(*National News* 8/6/2025)

(12)留日学生忧歧视蔓延中国留学生说：“走过竞选告示板，写着‘日本人优先’...”

(*National News* 7/18/2025)

In Excerpt (11), the generic structure initially frames universities as passive economic beneficiaries (过度依赖). However, the conjectural predicate (不愿正视) inadvertently introduces a counter-narrative of resilience: by embedding this interpretive clause within an attributed report, the text structurally allows universities to be perceived not as helpless victims of dependency, but as strategic actors who exercise institutional agency by choosing not to engage with external political pressures. This structural juxtaposition, financial reliance versus deliberate ignorance, transforms the university into an agentive subject that actively manages its institutional boundaries, even if through denial, thereby constructing a negative yet resilient posture of institutional self-preservation.

In Excerpt (12), the generic structure explicitly elevates the international student to the role of agentive subject. Rather than passively reporting statistical data on discrimination, the text employs a direct quotation as its structural climax, which empowers the student with narrative authority. The low-value modal verb “忧” (worry) does not signify weakness; instead, within this structure, it introduces a subjective cognitive framework through which the student actively interprets and articulates environmental hostility. The act of walking past and reading the signboard positions the student as an embodied observer whose direct testimony constitutes a performative act of resilience, vocalizing personal experience transforms private anxiety into public discourse. Thus, the generic structure strategically delegates judgment to the reader while simultaneously showcasing the student’s agentive capacity to confront and name discrimination, fulfilling the purpose-driven discourse of resilience through subjective testimony.

The lexical selections in headlines concerning negative events exhibit more intricate semantic operations than those found in the discourses of numerical data and friendship, within a single utterance, there frequently coexists a juxtaposition and tension between negative and positive semantic prosody.

(13)中媒《红星新闻》报道，近日，再有一名中国留学生在霍巴特市区购物中心无故遭到数名未成年人群殴，造成重伤被送医救治。

(National News 8/9/2025)

(14)鲁比奥曾矢言针对中国留学生这名官员表示，其中约4000份签证因违法行为被撤销。

(National News 8/20/2025)

The character “遭” (suffer) in Excerpt 13 functions as a marker of unfortunate experience, which in Chinese is almost invariably collocated with negative events; “围殴” (gang-beating) implies a multi-against-one act of violence, semantically foregrounding the victim’s isolation and helplessness; “针对” (targeted at) in Excerpt 14 suggests hostility and directed aggression; “违法” (illegal) carries the negative

marking of legal condemnation; and “撤销” (revocation) signifies the deprivation of rights, the cumulative effect of these five lexical items constructs international students as objects of institutional discrimination. Embedded within this cluster of negative lexicons, the headlines simultaneously incorporate vocabulary that insinuates “resilience,” “resistance,” or “protection,” thereby engendering a semantic tension: the core rhetorical maneuver of the “resilience narrative” consists in recasting structural predicaments as challenges that individuals can and ought to confront through “fortitude.” Issues such as discrimination, visa revocation, and violent assault, which are inherently matters implicating macro-structural factors including international relations, foreign policy, and legal systems, are reconfigured within the resilience narrative as tests of international students’ individual character. Headlines such as “Chinese international student says,” “Chinese international student gang-beaten,” and “Chinese international student prosecuted”, syntactically positioning the student at the epicenter of events, direct the reader’s gaze toward “how the student responds” rather than “why the system operates in this manner.” The ideological consequence of this discursive operation lies in its partial displacement of responsibility for resolving systemic problems from the state and institutional levels onto the individual level. International students are expected to be “resilient”, to maintain dignity, continue their studies, and fulfill their missions in the face of adversity, and while such expectations are morally commendable, they risk obscuring fundamental interrogations of structural injustice.

The discourse of numerical scale establishes the proposition that “the population of Chinese international students is considerable in size”; the resilience narrative foregrounds the adversities they encounter overseas and the fortitude they demonstrate; and the discourse of friendship solidifies their identity as “cultural ambassadors.” Collectively, these three discursive strands converge to accomplish a comprehensive positioning of the international student community: they are rendered simultaneously worthy of sympathy and praise, deserving of protection and trust. This holistic image construction ultimately serves a broader ideological project that transcends individual narratives, one that, while acknowledging the complexities of globalization, reaffirms the irreplaceable role of the nation-state as the ultimate protector and legitimate authority.

The linguistic strategies deployed in Malaysian Chinese newspaper, Sin Chew Daily, reveal a complex and often contradictory apparatus of representation concerning Chinese international students. This study, through a critical discourse analytical lens, has demonstrated that these representations are far from neutral or objective; rather, they constitute a discursive field wherein identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested in ways that carry profound ideological implications for Malaysia’s multicultural social fabric.

The three discursive strands identified in this study, numerical scale, friendship, and resilience, operate in concert to produce a comprehensive and ideologically cohesive positioning of Chinese international

students in Malaysian newspapers. Through the discourse of numerical scale, students are constructed as demographic and economic resources whose sheer quantitative presence validates national strength and policy efficacy; through the discourse of friendship, they are cast as cultural ambassadors whose interpersonal virtues embody Sino-Malaysian amity and render their presence inherently beneficial; and through the resilience narrative, they emerge as subjects whose capacity to endure hardship affirms their worthiness of state protection and public sympathy. This tripartite discursive architecture engenders a form of discursive closure wherein Chinese international students are simultaneously rendered worthy of sympathy and praise, deserving of protection and trust. The ideological effect of this representational regime is twofold: on one hand, it systematically circumvents critical interrogation of structural inequalities, policy contradictions, and the complex power asymmetries embedded in cross-border educational mobility; on the other, it reaffirms the nation-state as the ultimate guarantor of security and legitimacy in an era of global movement, subtly reinstating state authority precisely at the moment when transnational flows might otherwise call it into question.

The representations examined carry significant ideological weight for Malaysia's social cohesion and interethnic relations, as the oscillation between inclusive language, positioning students as integral to national development, and exclusionary language, subtly marginalizing them as cultural outsiders, mirrors deeper societal tensions between multiculturalism and nationalism that have long characterized the Malaysian polity. While inclusive formulations such as “esteemed societal members” and “collaborators in progress” resonate with Malaysia’s official multicultural narrative and its embrace of diversity as a national attribute, exclusionary tropes, “cultural ghettos,” “non-assimilative groups,” “divided allegiances”, perpetuate a hierarchical ordering of belonging wherein Chinese international students are conditionally accepted primarily for their economic utility rather than their cultural or social integration. This ambivalence reflects what might be termed a "conditional hospitality" that welcomes the contributions these students bring while simultaneously holding them at arm's length, never fully conceding their place within the national imaginary. Moreover, the resilience narrative's individualizing tendency risks obscuring the structural dimensions of discrimination and institutional inequity, for by framing adversity as a test of personal character, this discourse implicitly absolves systemic actors of responsibility while generating expectations that students embody stoic endurance, a moral burden that further complicates their already precarious position as transient residents navigating foreign legal, social, and political terrains over which they exercise little control.

Notwithstanding the dominance of these discursive patterns, emergent counter-narratives within Malaysian media indicate a growing awareness of the necessity to transcend ethnic-centric frameworks and embrace more inclusive representational practices. Some journalistic endeavors have begun foregrounding narratives of collaboration, mutual respect, and shared experiences across ethnic

communities, thereby humanizing Chinese international students and acknowledging the hybrid, multifaceted nature of identity in a multicultural society. These counter-discourses, though still marginal relative to the dominant representational regime, hold potential for dismantling ethnic hierarchies and fostering a more inclusive national imaginary, one that values diversity not as a source of tension but as a constitutive strength of the nation. Ultimately, this study underscores the potency of language in shaping public perceptions of immigrant communities and, by extension, the broader social relations within which they are embedded. The discursive representation of Chinese international students in Malaysian newspapers is never merely descriptive; it is performative, constructing the very realities it purports to report. By critically interrogating these linguistic strategies, this analysis advocates for more equitable, nuanced, and contextually grounded media practices that recognize the complex interplay of agency, structure, and identity in Malaysia's ongoing negotiation of its multicultural destiny. The ways in which a society represents its "others" reveal as much about its own anxieties, aspirations, and contradictions as they do about the subjects of representation themselves, and in this sense, the case of Chinese international students in Malaysia offers a revealing window into the broader challenges of managing diversity, belonging, and national identity in an increasingly interconnected but persistently divided world.

CONCLUSION

This study has systematically elucidated the discursive mechanisms through which Malaysian newspapers construct the identities of Chinese international students, demonstrating that these representational practices are far from neutral or innocuous but are, rather, deeply enmeshed with prevailing societal ideologies concerning ethnicity, immigration, and national belonging. By deploying a Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the research has foregrounded the constitutive role of linguistic and media practices in shaping public perceptions of immigrant communities, revealing how numerical quantification, friendship framing, and resilience narratives collectively produce a circumscribed and ideologically charged image of Chinese students as simultaneously valuable resources, cultural ambassadors, and resilient survivors. These discursive operations, while ostensibly descriptive, perform a series of ideological functions: they naturalize the presence of Chinese students as a self-evident good while circumventing critical scrutiny of structural inequalities; they construct an idealized vision of cross-cultural amity that depoliticizes complex geopolitical and social realities; and they individualize systemic adversity, implicitly displacing responsibility from institutional actors onto the students themselves. In doing so, the representations examined in this study not only reflect but actively participate in the ongoing negotiation of Malaysia's multicultural identity, mirroring deeper tensions between inclusive multiculturalism and exclusionary nationalism that have long characterized the national polity.

The findings carry significant implications for social cohesion and interethnic relations in Malaysia, as the ambivalent positioning of Chinese international students, welcomed for their economic contributions

yet subtly marginalized as cultural outsiders, risks perpetuating conditional forms of hospitality that undermine genuine integration and belonging. This study therefore advocates for more equitable, nuanced, and contextually sensitive media practices that recognize the multifaceted identities and experiences of Chinese students, moving beyond stereotypical framings toward representations that acknowledge their full humanity and complex agency within the Malaysian social fabric. Such representational reform, however, requires not only journalistic reflexivity but also sustained public deliberation regarding the terms of inclusion and the meaning of national identity in an increasingly interconnected yet persistently stratified world.

Future investigations could fruitfully extend this inquiry by examining the broader socio-political ramifications of such media narratives, particularly their influence on interethnic dynamics, policy formation, and the everyday lived experiences of Chinese international students themselves. Comparative studies across different media platforms, linguistic registers, and historical periods would further illuminate the evolution of these discursive practices and their entanglement with shifting geopolitical configurations and domestic political exigencies. Additionally, ethnographic research that centers the voices and perspectives of Chinese students, their own negotiations of identity, belonging, and marginalization, would provide a crucial counterpoint to the predominantly top-down, institutionally generated discourse analyzed in this study, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the reciprocal relationship between media representation and subjective experience. Ultimately, the case of Chinese international students in Malaysia serves as a revealing lens through which to examine the broader challenges and possibilities of managing cultural diversity in contemporary nation-states, challenges that demand ongoing critical attention from scholars, practitioners, and citizens alike if more inclusive and just social imaginaries are to be realized.

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