



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

CCP subnational influence in Malaysia

Co-opting Sabah's Chinese elite

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Abstract

The banality of decontextualised CCP influence operations — bestowing titles on individuals, establishing organisations, maintaining personal contact, and organising events — often invites underestimation of their effectiveness. Compared to alternative methods of power projection, such as formal diplomacy, state-linked investment, propaganda and military ties, influence operations are cheap, low-risk and effective.

This paper builds on a growing body of work analysing CCP influence operations conducted overseas at subnational levels. It examines how the CCP conducts influence operations in the Malaysian state of Sabah through cultivating and co-opting local ethnic Chinese elites.

Sabah's strategic importance to the CCP accrues from its rich natural resources such as palm oil and timbre and its proximity to the South China Sea. Further, Sabah's role as a "kingmaker" in national elections gives its politicians and elites considerable sway in shaping national political outcomes.

These Sabah Chinese elite — ranging from business leaders with ties to China, political advisors and former politicians to think-tank analysts and academics — are influential figures with access to politicians, state institutions and media platforms. Their respectability and credibility grant the CCP a systematic hold over key policy debates and media narratives in both Sabah and Malaysia.

By targeting ethnic Chinese elite in Sabah, the CCP aims to shape the distribution of natural resources and shift the needle of discourse on strategic and sensitive issues such as port development, the Belt and Road Initiative, the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and China's presence in the South China Sea.

Overall, CCP influence operations in Sabah appear to be largely successful. The CCP has successfully exerted its influence on politicians even during seismic political shifts in Sabah and Malaysia. Furthermore, through partnerships with key Sabah figures, the CCP has ensured that pro-CCP narratives are kept in circulation in local political and media discourse. This includes promoting narratives that portray China as economically beneficial and its military presence as benign while masking the potential risks of PRC dominance in the region. Left unchecked, the influence of the CCP over Sabah's strategic port development and technology decisions may create ripple effects in the wider Bornean and South-east Asian region.

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0 Introduction

CCP external influence work runs the gamut from cultural exchange, trade, propaganda and diplomacy to intelligence work, interference and espionage, disrupting distinctions of legal/illegal, overt/covert, and benign/malign.¹ More often than not, CCP influence activity abstracted from China’s political system and its objectives appears banal and benign, even. Contrary to appearances, influence operations are cheap, low-risk and effective alternatives to typical means of power projection. The costs of cultivating elites are “just those of setting up platforms, organising events and trips, maintaining personal links, occasionally offering remuneration or employment”.²

In recent years, analysts have paid close attention to influence operations conducted at subnational levels. Localised and decentralised influence work is usually effective because it is shielded from close media, academic, and political scrutiny, while benefiting from a greater knowledge asymmetry between CCP influence agencies and local officials, who possess considerable autonomy in infrastructure and resource allocation decisions.³ Further, the ability of subnational targets to “exert political pressure on the centre” or “graduate” to national platforms in the long-term increases the returns on investment for the CCP in subnational influence operations.⁴

This paper joins earlier efforts to redress the knowledge asymmetry about CCP’s subnational influence operations abroad.⁵ It examines how the CCP conducts influence operations in the Malaysian state of Sabah through cultivating and co-opting local ethnic Chinese elites. Overseas Chinese organisations and targeted ethnic Chinese individuals have become proxies for CCP influence in host countries, as documented in Australia, New Zealand, and Europe.⁶

Cultivating and co-opting local elites — especially in overseas Chinese communities — is a cornerstone of CCP influence operations. As Joske notes in *The Party Speaks for You*, Xi Jinping has emphasised that “the United Front is about working on people”.⁷ In its pursuit of political influence, united front work operates on political actors rather than political systems. Wang and Groot discuss how the Party legitimises certain individuals (or groups) to represent particular interest groups, in order to “de-legitimise by containing, dividing or denouncing others so that critics can be co-opted, neutralized or isolated”.⁸

¹Jichang Lulu, “Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster”, Sinopsis, 26th Nov. 2019.

²Livia Codarin, Laura Harth & Jichang Lulu, “Hijacking the mainstream: CCP influence agencies and their operations in Italian parliamentary and local politics”, Sinopsis, 20th Nov. 2021.

³Jichang Lulu, “Confined discourse management and the PRC’s localised interactions in the Nordics”, Sinopsis, 22nd Oct. 2018; Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*; Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China’s political influence activities under Xi Jinping”, Wilson Center, 16th Sept. 2017.

⁴Clive Hamilton & Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World*, Simon & Schuster, 8th June 2021.

⁵Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*

⁶Alex Joske, “The party speaks for you”, ASPI, 9th June 2020; Jichang Lulu, “United Frontlings Always Win”, *China Heritage* (25th Sept. 2017); Ralph Weber, “Unified message, rhizomatic delivery: A preliminary analysis of PRC/CCP influence and the united front in Switzerland”, Sinopsis, 18th Dec. 2020.

⁷“习近平：巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线”，新华社，30th May 2015; Joske, *op. cit.*

⁸Ray Wang & Gerry Groot, “Who Represents? Xi Jinping’s Grand United Front Work, Legitimation, Participation and Consultative Democracy”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 27.112 (2018).



CCP influence work seeks to control prominent representatives — not as an end in itself, but to influence “common sense” and the political and economic mainstream.⁹ Through cultivating foreign elites, the CCP can shape public discourse, orchestrate policy alignment, extract information on foreign governments’ intentions and strategies, silence criticism, engineer technology transfer, subvert democratic institutions, and forestall resistance to China’s rise.¹⁰

In particular, CCP’s overseas Chinese affairs work (*qiaowu*) seeks to manage and influence Chinese diaspora communities abroad, often leveraging their resources and instrumentalising their loyalties for China’s national interests.¹¹ Key elements of overseas Chinese affairs work include establishing, co-opting or legitimising diaspora organisations that report back to the CCP, appointing trusted individuals to the leadership of these organisations, controlling Chinese-language media, establishing control over Chinese communities’ channels for representation and mobilisation, among other measures.¹²

0.1 CCP political influence agencies

The CCP influence operations in Sabah discussed in this paper primarily involve agencies from the united front and foreign affairs systems. Agencies from the finance and economy, propaganda and military systems are less common but still present in our sample.

0.1.1 United front system

Under Leninist rule, united front tactics refer to strategies for forming alliances with groups outside the Communist Party — usually by co-opting representatives of these groups — to achieve party goals.¹³ The targets of the CCP’s united front work that appear in this paper include religious groups, businesspeople, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, as well as foreigners of Chinese descent.¹⁴

The united front system, coordinated by the **United Front Work Department (UFWD, 中央统一战线统战部)** under the Central Committee, includes a network of party and state agencies that influence groups outside the party. Under Xi’s rule, the united front system has become more powerful, centralised and institutionalised.¹⁵ Since March

⁹Gerry Groot, “Managing transitions: the Chinese Communist Party’s united front work, minor parties and groups, hegemony and corporatism”, PhD thesis, University of Adelaide; Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, “The CCP’s model of social control goes global”, Sinopsis, 20th Dec. 2018; Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*; Lulu, “Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster”.

¹⁰Anne-Marie Brady, *Submission to the Inquiry on Foreign Interference*, via Sinopsis, New Zealand Parliament, Justice Select Committee, 10th May 2019; Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*; Mark Stokes, “Chinese Authoritarian Influence in the United States”, *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, ed. by Hsu Szu-Chien & J. Michael Cole, Eastbridge, 2020; Lulu, *op. cit.*; Hamilton & Ohlberg, *op. cit.*

¹¹James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*, Brill, 2014.

¹²Brady, *op. cit.*; Joske, *op. cit.*; Hamilton & Ohlberg, *op. cit.*

¹³Lulu, *op. cit.*; Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*; Joske, *op. cit.*

¹⁴Lulu, *op. cit.*; Joske, *op. cit.*

¹⁵Lulu, *op. cit.*; Joske, *op. cit.*



2018, the United Front Work Department has absorbed government agencies such as the **Overseas Chinese Affairs Office** and the **National Religious Affairs Administration**.¹⁶ The National Religious Affairs Administration is one of the foreign-facing nameplates for the United Front Work Department.¹⁷ The National Religious Affairs Administration director is also the United Front Work Department deputy head.¹⁸

The **Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中国人民政治协商会议)**, as well as its local committees, is a forum for Party-selected representatives of various groups to interact with the Party. The CPPCC is chaired by Wang Huning, the Politburo Standing Committee member that currently leads the united front system.¹⁹ The **All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (中国侨联海外委员)** represents ethnic Chinese with overseas links at this forum.²⁰

The United Front Work Department controls the **China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Re-unification (CCPPR, 中国和平统一促进会)**, whose chair is the Politburo Standing Committee member that leads the united front system (currently Wang Huning) and vice-chair is the UFWD head (Shi Taifeng).²¹ Oriented toward the CCP's goal of annexing Taiwan, it controls a network of overseas chapters that seek to represent co-opted diaspora groups in each local constituency.²² Also under the United Front Work Department is the **China Overseas Friendship Association (中华海外联谊会理事)**, which subsumed the **China Overseas Exchange Association (中国海外交流协会)** in 2019. It has provincial and lower-level equivalents across the country.²³

0.1.2 Foreign affairs system

The CCP's foreign affairs work exceeds state-to-state engagement and traditional diplomacy. Other than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the State Council, the foreign affairs system includes the **International Liaison Department (ILD, 对外联络部)** as well as the **Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会)**.²⁴

The ILD, under the Central Committee, targets foreign politicians, political parties, think tanks and academics to create greater alignment in discourse and policymaking with CCP objectives.²⁵ It serves as the "national secretariat" to engage overseas think tanks and research centres in Belt and Road countries.²⁶ In 2015, the ILD co-established the **Belt and Road Think Tank Cooperation Alliance** (officially trans-

¹⁶Idem, "The party speaks for you".

¹⁷"中国伊斯兰教协会章程", 国家宗教事务局, 27th Sept. 2023; "中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》", 新华网, 21st Mar. 2018.

¹⁸"领导之窗", 中央统战部.

¹⁹Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*; "本会介绍", 中国和平统一促进会.

²⁰Joske, *op. cit.*

²¹Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*; "本会介绍".

²²Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*; Joske, *op. cit.*

²³Idem, "The party speaks for you"; "在中华海外联谊会五届一次理事大会上的讲话", 侨务工作研究, 2019.

²⁴Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Nadège Rolland, "Mapping the footprint of Belt and Road influence operations", Sinopsis, 12th Aug. 2019.



lated as the Silk Road Think Tank Association), whose chairperson Sun Haiyan is also a deputy head of the ILD.²⁷

The CPAFFC is the main “people’s diplomacy” organ within the foreign affairs system. At the central level, the CPAFFC is managed by — but not administratively subordinate to — the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁸ At subnational levels, local People’s Associations for Friendship with Foreign Countries are typically used as nameplates for local Foreign Affairs Offices.²⁹ The CPAFFC and its local counterparts are crucial to localised influence operations, especially through their administration of sister-city programmes that provide unofficial channels for the CCP’s foreign affairs system to interact with local governments.³⁰ The overseas partners of CPAFFC are typically local “China friendship associations”.³¹

0.1.3 Finance and economics system

Trade promotion activities, overseen by the finance and economics system, provide a platform through which the Party can cultivate support for CCP policies among foreign business interests.³²

The national trade promotion agency **China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT, 中国国际贸易促进会)**, institutionally linked to the Ministry of Commerce, is a trade-oriented “people’s diplomacy” organ. CCPIT has shown itself to be useful for subnational influence operations.³³ Its overseas partners are usually business associations, typically called “China chambers of commerce”.³⁴

0.2 Sabah as an influence target

The reasons discussed above for the CCP’s interest in localised and decentralised influence work also apply to Sabah, a state in East Malaysia in the north of Borneo island.

Sabah (and Sarawak) politicians were considered possible kingmakers in Malaysia’s 2022 elections.³⁵ This entails that successful CCP influence operations within the state could have disproportionate outcomes at the national level.

In addition, Sabah’s location at the southern limits of the South China Sea is key to China’s interest in the state.³⁶ China pursues economic, trade and military interests

²⁷“关于我们”，“一带一路”智库合作联盟。

²⁸Lulu, *op. cit.*; Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*

²⁹Charmian Goh, Audrey Fritz, Petra Ševčíková & Jichang Lulu, “Unbundling systems: Foreign affairs reform in China’s provinces”, Sinopsis, 11th Apr. 2021.

³⁰Lulu, *op. cit.*; Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*

³¹Lulu, *op. cit.*; Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*

³²Idem, “Hijacking the mainstream”.

³³Lulu, *op. cit.*

³⁴Codarin, Harth & Lulu, *op. cit.*

³⁵“Source: Sabah, Sarawak kingmakers present demands to Harapan”, Malaysiakini, 24th Feb. 2020; “认同沙砂是造王者 沙菲益：沙民应支持民兴党”，星洲网，14th Oct. 2022.

³⁶Geoff Wade, “Xi Jinping and the Sabah enigma”, ASPI, 24th Oct. 2013; idem, “Sabah, the PLA Navy and Northern Australia”, ASPI, 18th Nov. 2015.



through its claims to territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea.³⁷

- **Economic:** Besides fishing resources, the waters off Sabah host significant hydrocarbon deposits. According to numbers quoted by the US Energy Information Administration, Malaysia hosts a significant proportion of the South China Sea's resources — about 35.7% of its petroleum and other liquids fuels as well as 71.7% of its natural gas resources.³⁸
- **Trade:** 21% of global trade wound through the South China Sea in 2016, making it a major trade route. Especially for China, for whom 39.5% of its trade and about 80% of its maritime crude oil shipments passed through the South China Sea in 2016.³⁹
- **Military:** In case of a conflict over Taiwan with the US, the South China Sea would be a key theatre of conflict and blockade operations.⁴⁰

As evidence of its recent interest, Beijing has been pushing back against Malaysia's oil and gas exploration efforts in the region, as it did on Anwar's first trip to Beijing at the end of March 2023.⁴¹ On 29 August 2024, *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported on a leaked diplomatic note that the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent the Malaysian Embassy in China on 18 February. PRC authorities expressed "serious concern" and "strong dissatisfaction" about Malaysia's oil and gas exploration projects around Luconia Shoals (Gugusan Beting Raja Jarum) and urged Malaysia to "immediately cease all infringing activity".⁴² The Luconia Shoals, off Sarawak waters, are part of the Spratly Islands within Malaysia's exclusive economic zone.

Onshore, Sabah has rich timbre and palm oil resources. As the country's top palm oil producer, it also accounts for about 25% of the country's raw oil palm exports.⁴³ Deputy Minister of Plantation and Commodities and Kota Kinabalu MP Chan Foong Hin led a trade mission to Shanghai, Nanjing and Beijing in July 2024 to promote higher-value palm oil exports to China.⁴⁴

Despite its abundant resources, Sabah has the highest poverty rate and inadequate infrastructure. In 2022, the "hardcore poverty" rate in Sabah was 1.2% while its absolute poverty rate was 19.7%, far above the national rates of 0.2% and 6.2% respectively.⁴⁵ The unemployment rate for Sabah in Q1 2023 was 7.7%, at more than double the national rate (3.5%).⁴⁶ Ministers and employer associations have attributed the high un-

³⁷M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33.3 (2011).

³⁸"South China Sea", US Energy Information Administration, 21st Mar. 2024.

³⁹"South China Sea"; "More than 30% of global maritime crude oil trade moves through the South China Sea", US Energy Information Administration, 27th Aug. 2019; "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017", US Office of the Secretary of Defense, 15th May 2017.

⁴⁰Fravel, *op. cit.*

⁴¹"Malaysia says Beijing concerned about its energy projects in South China Sea", Reuters, 4th Apr. 2023.

⁴²"Malaysia gets taste of China West Philippine Sea bullying", *Inquirer*, 29th Aug. 2024.

⁴³"Investment Opportunities: Manufacturing", Invest Sabah; "Economy", Sabah State Government.

⁴⁴"Strategic marketing of Malaysian palm oil to China in a soft market", *The Edge* (30th July 2024).

⁴⁵"Poverty by State", OpenDOSM, 2022; "Poverty: Data as of 2022", OpenDOSM, 2022; "Sabah's Hardcore Poverty Six Times The National Rate, Says Rafizi", *Bernama*, 14th Mar. 2024.

⁴⁶"Highest unemployment rate recorded in Sabah", *The Star* (22nd Aug. 2023).



employment rate in the state to poor infrastructure.⁴⁷ Sabah's 2025 budget continues to focus on resolving infrastructure issues such as roads, water and electricity supply.⁴⁸

Partly responsible for this disjuncture between the abundance of resources in the state and widespread poverty is the state's fraught agreement with the federal government.

The Malaysia Agreement (MA63) is an international treaty that the British, Peninsular Malaysia (Malaya), Sabah (then North Borneo), Sarawak and Singapore signed at the founding of the Malaysia federation.⁴⁹ The original agreement granted greater autonomy to the Bornean states in religion, language, immigration, and judicial and legislative authority, and the protection of indigenous persons' privileges and positions.⁵⁰ However, the federal government's erosion of privileges, the persistent underdevelopment in these states and the perceived unequal distribution of petroleum revenue have created discontent.⁵¹ Sabah leaders and political parties continue to clamour for rights lost, even as Deputy Prime Minister Fadillah Yusof announced at a September 2024 meeting that 11 claims out of 21 related to MA63 have been resolved under the current and previous administrations.⁵²

James Chin classifies the contemporary grievances of Sabah and Sarawak people into five buckets.⁵³

1. The marginalisation of indigenous peoples: There is significant ethnic and religious pluralism among indigenous people, who have high rates of inter-marriage with the Chinese. Although indigenous people are the majority in Sabah and Sarawak, they are "actively discriminated against" in political representation.
2. The Malayan political model: The political ideologies of Malay and Islamic supremacy do not resonate in Sabah, but the federal government has continuously sought to export a model of ethnic and religious political mobilisation to the state.
3. Federal intervention in state politics: Similarly, the federal government has sought to "cement Muslim control over state politics".
4. The illegal immigrant issue: There was "more likely than not" a covert operation to give Malaysian citizenship to illegal Filipino and Indonesian Muslim immigrants in Sabah, in order to create Muslim dominance in the state. The operation was referred to as Project M, after Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister Mahathir.

⁴⁷"Scattered population, poor infrastructure among causes of Sabah's high jobless rate", *The Star* (30th Aug. 2023); "Poor infrastructure leads to high unemployment, says Sabah bosses' group", *Free Malaysia Today*, 26th Aug. 2023.

⁴⁸"Hajiji Hails Continued Priority For Sabah In Budget 2025", *Bernama*, 18th Oct. 2024; "Budget 2025: PM Anwar Urges Sabah Gov't To Resolve Infrastructure Issues Efficiently", *Bernama*, 20th Oct. 2024.

⁴⁹"No. 10760: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Federation of Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore", United Nations.

⁵⁰Anantha Raman Govindasamy, "From Pakatan Harapan to Perikatan Nasional: A Missed Opportunity for Reforms for East Malaysia?", ISEAS — Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²"MA63 no longer a political issue, but people's issue –SAPP", *The Borneo Post* (11th Aug. 2024); "Restore Sabah's MA63 rights by July, Madius tells Dewan", *New Straits Times* (29th Feb. 2024); Roger Chin, "The progress so far on MA63 rights", *Daily Express* (15th Sept. 2024).

⁵³James Chin, "The 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63): Sabah And Sarawak and the Politics of Historical Grievances", Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2019.



5. Under-development: In 2017, Sabah and Sarawak produced about 60% of the country's petroleum output, but only received about 5% of oil revenues under the 1974 Petroleum Development Act.⁵⁴ In 2022, the Sabah Law Society filed a judicial review of its claim that MA63 entitles the state to 40% of federal revenue earned from the state between 1974 and 2021.⁵⁵

The CCP's interest in Sabah likely arises from its assessment that the state would be more receptive to — or at least less resistant to — influence operations compared to Peninsular Malaysia.

0.3 Structure of the paper

As with other Southeast Asian states, Malaysia's China policy has often been explained as a small state "hedging" its interests and seeking equidistant diplomacy between China and the United States.⁵⁶ Malaysia's China policy isn't driven solely by big power competition, but also domestic politics and economics. It reflects a balancing act between leveraging China's partnership for developmental benefits, while alleviating domestic concerns about race, debt, and sovereignty.⁵⁷ The country's China policy has shifted under different administrations, especially when Mahathir and his political party unseated the incumbent Barisan Nasional (National Front) in 2018.⁵⁸ Pertinent issues to Malaysia-China relations include the South China Sea, Xinjiang and the Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁹

Although the CCP's local influence efforts have deep explanatory power and profound implications for Malaysia's shifting China policy, they have largely not been treated as a primary subject of inquiry, much less through sustained analysis of Chinese-language material. Notable exceptions include studies of the extent to which Belt and Road Initiative projects in Malaysia have served as effective vehicles for China's influence, an evaluation of Beijing's media influence efforts in Malaysia.⁶⁰

⁵⁴"Fulfilling oil royalty promises involves treading on delicate ground", *The Borneo Post* (28th Apr. 2019).

⁵⁵"Merits of Sabah Law Society's fight for 40% revenue return to state to be heard at High Court", *The Edge* (17th Oct. 2024).

⁵⁶Cheng-Chwee Kuik & Yew Meng Lai, "Deference and defiance in Malaysia's China policy: determinants of a dualistic diplomacy", *International Journal of Asian Studies* (2023); Jürgen Haacke, "The concept of hedging and its application to Southeast Asia: a critique and a proposal for a modified conceptual and methodological framework", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19.3 (2019); Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia's hedging plus policy in the face of China's rise and the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region", *The Pacific Review* 36.2 (2022).

⁵⁷Kuik & Lai, *op. cit.*; Amrita Malhi, "Race, Debt and Sovereignty –The 'China Factor' in Malaysia's GE14", *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 106.6 (2018).

⁵⁸Kuik & Lai, *op. cit.*; Malhi, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹Yew Ming Lai, "'Sea of Cooperation' or 'Sea of Conflict'?": The South China Sea in the Context of China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation", *International Journal of China Studies* 8.3 (2017); "It's the politics, stupid: China's relations with Muslim countries on the background of Xinjiang crackdown", *Asian Ethnicity* 21.2 (2019).

⁶⁰Xue Gong, "The Belt & Road Initiative and China's influence in Southeast Asia", *The Pacific Review* 32.4 (2018); Hong Liu & Guanle Lim, *The Political Economy of a Rising China in Southeast Asia*, Routledge, 2020; BC Han & Benjamin Loh, "Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022: Malaysia", Freedom House, 2022.



Beginning from the premise that Sabah is potentially important to Beijing, this paper maps CCP influence operations in Sabah.⁶¹ It departs from most of the existing work on CCP influence in Malaysia by adopting a systemic approach to CCP influence (beyond just the Belt and Road Initiative) and a subnational scale of analysis.

The ties of overseas Chinese communities in Malaysian and Southeast Asian communities to the CCP continue to generate anxiety among local communities and leaders. This empirical study of influence operations aims not to stoke fear-mongering or question the loyalty of individuals, but to clarify CCP policy, map and recontextualise otherwise banal interactions, redress gaps in knowledge, and facilitate greater transparency and accountability to the public.

Section 1 maps the Sabah-specific organisation or platform, its leadership, and their ties to the CCP influence system. Subsequent sections discuss specific target domains. Section 2 discusses Sabah politics, beginning with a description of the political capital that the Sabah Chinese elite possess, which make them attractive targets. It argues that the CCP has largely been successful in maintaining influence through a change of administration. Part of the CCP's success stems from the mechanisms of establishing events with a regular cadence and leveraging promised investments. The section ends with a glimpse of how the CCP targets Sabah politicians outside of the Chinese elite – through the International Liaison Department. Section 3 discusses the CCP's interest in Sabah's ports. The Sabah Chinese elite as well as a China SOE variously facilitate visits, propaganda, and partnerships, which create the possibility of greater CCP influence in the state. Section 4 turns to the role of Sabah Chinese elite in advancing the propaganda goals of the CCP. It suggests that the Sabah Chinese elite have blunted the role of Chinese-language media to hold power to account and propagated CCP narratives, especially around issues of the South China Sea. The paper ends (Section 5) with a look at CCP united front efforts to whitewash the genocide of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, particularly through engaging the Malaysia Chinese Muslim Association.

⁶¹Wade, “Xi Jinping and the Sabah enigma”; *idem*, “Sabah, the PLA Navy and Northern Australia”.



1 Targeting Sabah Chinese associations and elites

This section maps Sabah-specific institutional platforms, their leadership (who are the targets of cultivation), and their ties to the CCP external influence system.

The targeted individuals of CCP cooption in Sabah have typical profiles — individuals with business links to China, advisors to political leaders, former politicians, think-tankers who provide expert analysis and media commentary, and academics and educators. While the united front was the predominant system of influence for cultivating these Sabah Chinese elites, the foreign affairs, finance and economics, and propaganda systems were also at play. For the Malaysia Heyuan Hakka Association and Sabah-China Chamber of Commerce, the establishment of a Sabah organisation was carried out at the behest of a Party-state entity.

The targeted Sabah Chinese elite are generally respectable and credible, which grants them significant influence over mainstream discourse and policy options in Sabah and Malaysia. They have received honorifics from the Malaysian heads of state who acknowledge their contributions to the state or country.⁶²

1.1 FCAS and Goh Tian Chuan

The Federation of Chinese Associations Sabah (FCAS, 沙巴中华大会堂) represents ethnic Chinese associations in Sabah. It is one of thirteen member state associations under its parent organisation, the Federation of Chinese Associations Malaysia (Huazong, 马来西亚中华大会堂总会).

Goh Tian Chuan has ascended the rungs of the Chinese associations in Sabah and Malaysia over the past decade. In 2007, he first joined the Federation of Sabah and Labuan Hokkien Associations (沙巴及纳闽福建社团联合会), before becoming chairperson two years later.⁶³ He then became the president of the Federation of Chinese Associations Sabah (FCAS, 沙巴中华大会堂) in 2013, and remains in that position today.⁶⁴ In September 2019, Goh won the election to become national president of Huazong.⁶⁵ China News Service, the publication under the United Front Work Department, reported Goh's election victory.⁶⁶

Goh Tian Chuan's stint in Sabah began with work at the police headquarters. After he graduated from the Royal Malaysian Police College in 1982, he was assigned to a

⁶²Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Goh Tian Chuan ("Director's Profile", Globaltec); Datuk Seri Panglima Yong Teck Lee ("ACA chief among six to get top Sabah award", *The Star* [27th Oct. 2007]); Dato' Sri Wilson Yong Tung Yung, JP ("国际化设计教育与设计师创作都应立足本土文化——马来西亚沙巴艺术学院董事长拿督杨忠勇博士访谈", 艺术中国, 2nd June 2010; "Top Management", Sabah Institute of Art); Datuk Frankie Liew ("6,000 take part in TYT birthday parade", *The Borneo Post* [5th Oct. 2014]); Oh Ei Sun, JP ("州元首华诞封赐六百八十八人 五十八人荣膺拿督", 華僑日報, 24th Oct. 2009).

⁶³【人物】吴添泉 既来之则安之 华总总会长的换位人生", 风采 FEMININE, 19th Jan. 2021; 【企业家大讲堂】吴添泉秉持共享共赢 促进团队行稳致远", 南洋商报, 28th July 2020.

⁶⁴“丹斯里拿督斯里邦里玛吴添泉局绅博士”, 大马华人周刊, 31st Aug. 2019; Geoff Wade, "Malaysia: Sabah-based ex-policeman turned businessman GOH TIAN CHUAN 吴添泉...", Twitter, 9th Jan. 2020.

⁶⁵Ho Wah Foon, "Feature: Huazong's president retires with pride", *The Star* (15th Sept. 2019).

⁶⁶“吴添泉当选马来西亚华总新任总会长”, 中国新闻网, 8th Sept. 2019.



Special Branch Department at police headquarters in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.⁶⁷ A Chinese-language business magazine profile clarifies that he was appointed to handle matters related to Malaysia's Internal Security Act. To "collect intelligence", the profile adds, Goh and his colleagues "traveled to every corner of Sabah, which enabled Goh to become intimately familiar with the situation in Sabah".⁶⁸ In 1994, Goh left the force to enter the business world.⁶⁹

Goh is founder and group executive chairperson of Kuala Lumpur-listed Globaltec Formation Bhd, which was created through a merger of three listed companies — AIC Corporation Berhad, Jotech Holdings Berhad (亿利达控股), and AutoV Corporation Berhad (奥威控股) — completed in 2012.⁷⁰ Globaltec is an integrated manufacturing services provider with businesses in oil and gas exploration and oil palm plantations in Sabah.⁷¹

Goh Tian Chuan both advocated for and participated in China's Belt and Road initiative around 2016 to 2017. In 2016, Goh attended the "Malaysian Chinese Associations Belt and Road Declaration" and "Launch of the MCA Belt and Road Centre" (马来西亚华社一带一路宣言暨马华一带一路中心推介礼), becoming a signatory of the declaration on behalf of Huazong.⁷² He subsequently became the head of Huazong's Belt and Road Centre. In March 2017, Good-Ark Suzhou China (中国苏州固锝电子有限公司) acquired Globaltec's subsidiary AIC Semiconductor Sdn Bhd, as part of a project promoted by Huazong and its Belt and Road Committee. As group executive chairperson of Globaltec, vice-president of Huazong, and chairperson of Huazong's Belt and Road committee, Goh likely played a meaningful role in facilitating the acquisition.⁷³ In July 2017, Goh represented Globaltec subsidiary AutoV in signing Memoranda of Understanding with the Ningbo Auto Components Industry Association (宁波市汽车零部件产业协会) and eight members to form a "strategic alliance and cooperative partnership". The parties reached an agreement to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, establish a production centre in Malaysia, and expand into the Southeast Asia market.⁷⁴

Goh's speeches as FCAS leader appear at times to have been overtly oriented toward addressing Xi Jinping and CCP leadership priorities. In his 2024 Lunar New Year message posted on the FCAS website, he adopted the CCP's policy framework (21st Century Maritime Silk Road) and policy-speak (e.g. "seeking progress amid stability, promoting stability through progress, and first establishing then breaking" — a literal phrase from the CCP Politburo's December meeting on economic work in 2023). He also announced imminent visits to central and local Overseas Chinese Affairs Offices, which would "push FCAS to new heights of innovation".⁷⁵

⁶⁷"Director's Profile"; Clarissa Chung, "Force that arose in Sabah", *The Star* (13th Oct. 2019).

⁶⁸"丹斯里拿督斯里邦里玛吴添泉局绅博士 Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima (Dr.) T.C.Goh JP", 商海数码商业媒体.

⁶⁹"Director's Profile"; Chung, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰"Director's Profile".

⁷¹"Our Profile", Globaltec.

⁷²"【马华一带一路中心推介礼】蔡宝镛：对马中关系充满期许，46 华团首签宣言", 马华公会, 13th Dec. 2016.

⁷³"落实一带一路倡议 马中半导体企业合并", e 南洋, 20th Mar. 2017.

⁷⁴"结盟多家中资 冀营业额倍增 亿利达力攻汽车零件业务", 南洋商报, 28th July 2017.

⁷⁵"认识沙华堂", 沙华堂.

⁷⁶"吴添泉：中国强盛壮大全球华社话语权", 东方日报, 10th May 2023.



Figure 1: Goh Tian Chuan (front row, first from left) applauding Xi Jinping at the 10th Conference for Friendship of Overseas Chinese Associations.⁷⁶

Goh's recent appointments to high-level united front organisations signals his relevance to the CCP. In November 2023, Goh was appointed vice president of the Fujian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China, in addition to his role as honorary president of the Fujian Overseas Friendship Association. The Council was established at the Third Global Conference for Friendship of Fujian Overseas Chinese Associations and the Sixth Council of the Fujian Overseas Friendship Association. Goh gave a speech at the conference encouraging overseas Chinese in Malaysia and abroad – especially Fujian entrepreneurs – to actively participate in the construction of the Belt and Road or Maritime Silk Road.⁷⁷ More recently, in December 2024, Goh was appointed to the standing committee of the China Overseas Friendship Association at the first meeting of the 6th Council in Beijing.⁷⁸

Goh, Huazong and FCAS have also hosted entities from the foreign affairs and finance and economics systems, apart from the united front system.⁷⁹

1.2 Malaysia-China Friendship Association Sabah and Oh Ei Sun

The Malaysia-China Friendship Association Sabah (MCFAS, formerly Sabah Ma-Zhong Friendship Association, 沙巴马中联谊会) was established in 2012.⁸⁰ The Fujian Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese visited Sabah the following year to celebrate 39 years of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations as well as the Association's inauguration.⁸¹

⁷⁷“吴添泉：通过“一带一路”搭建强大“福建经济体””，联合日报，4th Nov. 2023.

⁷⁸“中华海外联谊会 吴添泉当选常务理事”，e 南洋，5th Dec. 2024.

⁷⁹“上海市侨联与马来西亚中华大会堂总会签署《友好侨社协议》”，上海归国华侨联合会，16th Dec. 2019; “吉林省海外联谊会 委吴添泉为名誉会长”，星洲网，27th Dec. 2019; “沙巴福建落实合作·12.5 亿开发“合作园””，星洲人，15th Oct. 2019; “最新活动”，华总。

⁸⁰“福建省人民对外友好协会 与沙巴马中联谊会签合作备忘录”，亚洲时报，5th Mar. 2019.

⁸¹“福建省侨联亲情中华艺术团赴马来西亚慰侨演出”，中国新闻网，25th Jan. 2013.



Figure 2: Oh Ei Sun (front row, right) at the signing of the MoU between MCFAS and the Fujian People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries in 2019.⁹⁰

Oh Ei Sun founded MCFAS and has been its president since.⁸² On his LinkedIn profile, Oh lists MCFAS as an organisation engaged in “Economic Empowerment” under his “Volunteer Experience”.⁸³

The united front system had established contact with Oh Ei Sun by the late 2000s. Oh spoke at a 2008 panel discussion that the Beijing Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese organised on “overseas students serving the country”.⁸⁴ In 2018, Oh Ei Sun was appointed as an overseas member of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese for a five-year term.⁸⁵

Oh has been appointed to positions in the UFWD-run China Overseas Friendship Association and the China Overseas Exchange Association.⁸⁶ In 2013, Oh was appointed to the China Overseas Exchange Association.⁸⁷ In June 2019, he joined the China Overseas Friendship Association.⁸⁸ At the provincial tiers of the association, Oh was vice president of the Sichuan Provincial Overseas Friendship Association in 2016 and was re-appointed to the standing committee in June 2023.⁸⁹

Oh and MCFAS maintain expansive links with entities across the CCP-PRC Party-state systems of influence. When celebrating the tenth anniversary of MCFAS, Oh announced that the association received 82 congratulatory messages from partners across 36 localities.

⁸²“福建省人民对外友好协会 与沙巴马中联谊会签合作备忘录”; Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: Sabah Ma-Zhong [Malaysia-China] Friendship Association 沙巴马中联谊会 president is Ei Sun Oh 胡逸山...”, Twitter, 7th Mar. 2019.

⁸³“EI SUN OH 胡逸山”, LinkedIn.

⁸⁴“北京侨联召开海外留学人员为国服务志愿团座谈会”, 中国侨网, 10th June 2008.

⁸⁵“(受权发布) 第十次全国归侨侨眷代表大会聘请 中国侨联第十届委员会海外委员名单”, 中国侨联, 1st Sept. 2018; “助中国抗疫情·沙马中设捐款账户”, 星洲人, 2nd Feb. 2020.

⁸⁶“在中华海外联谊会五届一次理事大会上的讲话”, 国务院侨务工作研究, 2019.

⁸⁷“胡逸山”, 中国互联网新闻中心, 13th Nov. 2016; “中华海外交流协会第五届理事会理事名单”, 厦门开发区招商引资网, 2013.

⁸⁸“中华海外联谊会第五届理事会人员名单”, 中华海外联谊会, 18th June 2019.

⁸⁹“四川海外联谊会聘胡逸山与廖志国 任理事会常务理事与理事 将加强四川与沙交流互动”, 华僑日報, 23rd June 2023; “华团多名领袖赴成都·出席华侨华团联谊会大会”, 星洲网, 30th May 2016.

⁹⁰Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: Fujian United front body and Sabah Association MoU signing reported by Xinhua...”, Twitter, 7th Mar. 2019.



As of April 2024, Oh had signed 12 cooperation agreements with entities within the united front system and the foreign affairs system on behalf of MCFAS.⁹¹

Oh has noted that while MCFAS has organised largely “cultural, social and educational activity”, it is “gradually expanding its role to the commercial and business sector, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative”.⁹²

1.3 Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), Sabah Hakka organisations and Yong Teck Lee

Yong Teck Lee (杨德利) founded the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) in 1994 and remains as the party’s chairperson. He served as Chief Minister of Sabah from 1996 to 1998.

In August 2007, the Guangdong Provincial Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) invited a delegation of “ethnic Chinese engaged in politics” (参政华人) from Sabah to “seek their ancestral roots” in Heyuan, Meizhou, Chaozhou, and Huizhou. Wu Ruicheng, Party secretary and director of the Guangdong Provincial OCAO, explained that he discovered on a research trip to Sabah that there were many Heyuan Hakkas there. (The article noted that the ancestral homes of more than 70% of the Chinese in Sabah are in Guangdong, chiefly Longchuan in Heyuan, Bao’an in Shenzhen and Chaozhou city.) Wu therefore decided to make Sabah the focus of the Guangdong Provincial OCAO’s external liaison work.⁹³

Yong Teck Lee, as former chief minister of Sabah, helmed the delegation of 26 politicians visiting China in 2007. Liu Xiaohua 刘小华, the mayor of Heyuan city in Guangdong suggested that Yong Teck Lee establish the first overseas Heyuan township association in Malaysia.⁹⁴

In November 2008, the Malaysia Heyuan Hakka Association (马来西亚河源同乡会) was established in Kota Kinabalu with Yong Teck Lee as permanent honorary president. The mayor of Heyuan city attending the opening ceremony donated 50,000 CNY on behalf of the municipal government to the Association’s education fund.⁹⁵ The Malaysia Heyuan Hakka Association president reported in March 2023 that Heyuan municipal government “commissioned” the establishment of the Association in 2008 and sponsored 600,000 CNY for the purchase of a clubhouse.⁹⁶

By then, Yong Teck Lee was plugged into global Hakka networks. Yong Teck Lee attended a global Hakka friendship conference in April 2007 as honorary president of

⁹¹“与河南省对外友协签署合作 沙马中再添姐妹会”, 亚洲时报, 19th Apr. 2024; Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: Fujian Provincial People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries...”, Twitter, 7th Mar. 2019; idem, “Malaysia: Fujian United front body and Sabah Association MoU signing reported by Xinhua...”; idem, “Malaysia: Note the other CCP United Front bodies from Guangdong, Jiangxi, Ningxia, Shanxi, Hangzhou...”, Twitter, 7th Mar. 2019.

⁹²“胡逸山: 吸引更多外國投資進入沙巴 馬中聯誼協會擴展角色 將進軍商業及生意領域”, 華僑日報, 12th Dec. 2022.

⁹³“寻根问祖 马来西亚沙巴州参政华人代表团访河源”, 国务院侨办公室, 17th Aug. 2007.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵“大馬河源同鄉會在亞庇隆重成立”, SAPP, 23rd Nov. 2008.

⁹⁶“河源同乡会有会所了 譚育良: 缺 50 万装修费”, 星洲网, 5th Mar. 2023.



Figure 3: In November 2023, Yong Teck Lee was invited to deliver a speech at the 25th anniversary of the Global Union for Tshung Tsin and Hakka Associations' establishment.⁹⁹

the Global Union for Tshung Tsin and Hakka Associations (GUTTHA, 全球客家、崇正会联合总会).⁹⁷ GUTTHA was established in 1997 at the suggestion of the OCAO. It aims to promote the “unity of Hakkas” and the “reunification of China”.⁹⁸

Yong Teck Lee subsequently took on advisory roles in local Sabah community organisations old and new. In 2013, he became permanent honorary chairperson of the Yongs of Nga-Khi Welfare Association of Sabah, one of the oldest community associations in Sabah registered in 1946.¹⁰⁰ Yong is also honorary consultant of the Sabah Yang Clan Association (est. 2014) and the United Sabah Longchuan Association (est. 2017).¹⁰¹

1.4 Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce (Sabah), Sabah-China Chamber of Commerce and Frankie Liew

The Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce (MCCC, 马来西亚—中国总商会) was founded in 1990 with the aim of promoting cooperation in trade, development, and other commercial sectors between Malaysia and China. The Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce (Sabah) (MCCCS, 马中总商会 (沙巴洲分会)) is one of nine branches across the Malaysian states.

⁹⁷“全球客家“安阳之春”联谊大会开幕 刘怀廉毛增华等到会祝贺”, 河南日报, via 河南省人民政府, 24th Apr. 2007.

⁹⁸“全球客家、崇正会联合总会”, 客家资讯, 20th July 2015.

⁹⁹“全联会换届 沙多名代表当选”, 星洲网, 8th Nov. 2023.

¹⁰⁰“沙雅寄楊氏福利會庇分會舉行三合一盛會”, 華僑日報, 4th Mar. 2013.

¹⁰¹“成立沙巴楊氏宗親會”, Sabah Yang Clan Association, 21st Aug. 2014; “沙巴楊氏宗親會藉長遠計劃吸納宗親人才”, 沙巴絲路網, 5th Feb. 2020; “我會參加沙巴龍川聯合總會第二屆委員會就職典禮暨馬來西亞龍川總會二周年紀念慶典晚宴”, 東莞市龍川商會, 5th Aug. 2019; “馬來西亞沙巴龍川聯合總會成立了!”, 魅力龍川, 6th June 2017.



Frankie Liew was president of MCCCCS from 2017 to 2019.¹⁰² Liew announced the establishment of the Sabah-China Chamber of Commerce (SCCC) in March 2019 when receiving a delegation from Zhuhai.¹⁰³

He is a philanthropist and a businessman involved in retail and wholesale food, real estate and healthcare.¹⁰⁴ He is CEO of Tukim Enterprise Sdn Bhd (东顺集团有限公司) and executive director of Bestamart Development Sdn Bhd and Bestamart Construction Sdn Bhd, according to his biography (that has since been removed from the SCCC website).

SCCC professes to be born out of the Sabah government's desire for greater state autonomy. SCCC's introduction to its mission on its website says that the "new Malaysian government is striving to implement the agenda of restoring the states of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak as equal partners".¹⁰⁵ This is likely a reference to former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's promises on behalf of the Pakatan Harapan federal government during the celebration of Malaysia Day in September 2018.¹⁰⁶ SCCC was established "under the trajectory of this agenda and to align with the state government's policies and aspirations". It aims to "independently and proactively" facilitate the implementation of trade and investment initiatives, among other things.¹⁰⁷

Frankie Liew has expressed a desire to "directly deal with and manage [a] trade relationship between the different provinces and cities of China".¹⁰⁸



Figure 4: Frankie Liew's VIP card for the Fourth Silk Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Xi'an in November 2023.¹⁰⁹

Details from a Xi'an united front entity's post also suggest that Frankie Liew established SCCC because it was conducive to advancing direct relations between Sabah and China. In December 2018, the Xi'an Silk Road Promotion Society's chairperson

¹⁰²“马来西亚中国总商会沙巴分会 会长 拿督刘顺泰 2018 新年献词”, BorneoNews.net, 30th Dec. 2017.

¹⁰³“以刘顺泰为首·沙中总商会成立”, 星洲网, 21st Mar. 2019.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵“宗旨”, 沙巴中国总商会.

¹⁰⁶“Sabah, Sarawak to be restored as equal partners forming Malaysia, says Dr M”, *The Star* (16th Sept. 2018).

¹⁰⁷“宗旨”.

¹⁰⁸“SCCC relevant in business trade with China investors and tourists”, BorneoNews.net, 24th July 2019; “梁才德 对沙巴中国总商会成立表欢迎 支持推动沙中投资合作”, 亚洲时报, 11th Apr. 2019; Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: “Because we in Sabah are different, we are required to establish our own...””, Twitter, 11th Dec. 2019.

¹⁰⁹“第四届丝路国际合作论坛”, 沙巴中国总商会, 16th Nov. 2023.



Wang Yunzhen 王云珍 suggested that Frankie Liew press for Xi'an and Kota Kinabalu becoming sister cities. (The Xi'an Silk Road Promotion Society is linked to united front entities through Wang's positions as a member Xi'an Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese and as standing committee member of the Xi'an Overseas Friendship Association.¹¹⁰) It was suggested that both Xi'an Silk Road Promotion Society and MCCCCS could become "friendly cooperative organisations that promote Silk Road tourism and trade between both cities". Frankie Liew responded that he needed to report to the central Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce, or he could "directly establish SCCC".¹¹¹

Like the MCCCCS, the SCCC works with both the finance and economics and united front systems.¹¹² In May 2023, the Hubei CCPIT co-organised the China-Hubei Malaysia Enterprise Matchmaking Meeting with SCCC.¹¹³ When the SCCC established a liaison office in Guangdong in March 2024, the vice chair of the Guangzhou Municipal Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese attended the opening ceremony.¹¹⁴

1.5 Sabah and Malaysia Maritime Silk Route Research Society and Wilson Yong

The Sabah Maritime Silk Route Research Society (SMSRRS, 沙巴海上丝绸之路学会) and the Malaysia Maritime Silk Route Research Society were established around 2015.¹¹⁵ In 2019, the new leadership of the Sabah Maritime Silk Route Research Society renamed it Sabah Maritime Silk Route Research and Advancement Society (沙巴海上丝绸之路学会及促进会).¹¹⁶

While Wilson Yong (杨忠勇) was not the founder of either association, he was president of SMSRRS from 2017 to 2019 and is the current president of the Malaysia Maritime Silk Route Research Society.¹¹⁷

Wilson Yong's networks overlap with Yong Teck Lee's. For instance, Wilson Yong is the founding chairperson of the Sabah Yang Clan Association, while Yong Teck Lee has been appointed honorary consultant of the Malaysia and Sabah Maritime Silk Route Research Societies.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰“热烈祝贺陕西科技大学宣传部部长助理林梅副教授加入丝促会”, 西安新丝路国际交流促进会, via 微信, 29th Nov. 2024.

¹¹¹“热烈祝贺西安市与亚比市签署友好合作备忘录”, 西安新丝路国际交流促进会, via WeChat, 26th Sept. 2019.

¹¹²“马中总商会—本会简介”, 马中总商会.

¹¹³“睽违四年再相见, 鄂马企业分外亲”, 中国国际贸易促进委员会湖北省委员会 中国国际商会湖北商会, 19th May 2023.

¹¹⁴“建立经贸互惠互助 沙中总商会驻广东省联络处成立”, 星洲网, 7th Mar. 2024.

¹¹⁵Phin Hung Wong, “沙巴海上丝绸之路研究学会 理事改选会长杨忠勇”, 20th Apr. 2017; “沙大孔学院第二十七期“风下论坛”陈明发博士周日线上分享”, 亚洲时报, 22nd Sept. 2022.

¹¹⁶“杨德利: 修正海丝路地图·婆罗洲应列入郑和航线”, 星洲网, 11th Mar. 2019.

¹¹⁷“马来西亚海上丝绸之路研究学会会长杨忠勇 庚子年新春献辞”, 沙巴丝路网, 22nd Jan. 2020; “马来西亚海上丝绸之路学会总会会长拿督杨忠勇太平绅士博士己亥新春献词”, 沙巴丝路网, 2nd Feb. 2019; Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: Key figure in these Borneo-Guangdong links is Prof Dato' Dr. Wilson Yong Tung Yung...”, Twitter, 17th June 2019.

¹¹⁸“沙楊氏宗親會成立”, 沙巴星洲日報 Sabah Sin Chew Daily, via Facebook, 25th Apr. 2014; “万克集团承办 2018 中马合作金融与科技创新项目对接会”, 商业区块链, 29th Oct. 2018; “杨德利: 修正海丝路



Figure 5: Wilson Yong receiving his appointment certificate as a "distinguished expert" at the Palace Museum in Beijing in November 2023.¹²⁵

Wilson Yong is an artist and an arts educator. He founded the Sabah Institute of Art in the early 90s and is now the Institute's president and CEO.¹¹⁹ In 1996, the Sabah Institute of Art entered China's education market, receiving approval from the Ministry of Education to run a joint program at the Beijing Dongcheng Vocational College. Subsequently, the Sabah Institute of Arts set up joint programs and art exchange activities with 18 more colleges based in China by the end of 2022.¹²⁰

The united front and propaganda systems have conferred on Wilson Yong numerous awards and titles acknowledging his accomplishments as an art educator. By 1999, Yong was awarded the Overseas Chinese Young Art Educator Award by the Jilin Provincial Department of Culture.¹²¹ In May 2017, Wilson Yong was appointed to the Chengdu Overseas Exchange Association Standing Committee (成都海外交流协会常务理事).¹²² More recently, in July 2022, Wilson Yong was appointed a think tank expert in the Talent Education and Training Centre of the Chinese Academy of Management Science.¹²³ In November 2023, Wilson Yong was appointed a "distinguished expert" at the Palace Museum and its training school. Wilson Yong said he would arrange for Malaysian students to attend the Palace Museum's "short traditional Chinese culture training course", which includes the cultural and creative industry initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative.¹²⁴

地图·婆罗洲应列入郑和航线/", 星洲网, 11th Mar. 2019; Geoff Wade, "Malaysia: Note that Yong Teck Lee 杨德利 is an honorary consultant to the Sabah Maritime...", Twitter, 17th June 2019.

¹¹⁹"Top Management Team", Sabah Institute of Art; "推动沙巴艺术教育的摇篮手-拿督杨忠勇博士", 星洲网, 31st Dec. 2022.

¹²⁰"推动沙巴艺术教育的摇篮手-拿督杨忠勇博士".

¹²¹"MMSR president appointed as think tank expert to China centre", *The Borneo Post* (14th July 2022).

¹²²"成都海外交流协会大会 42 国两百余代表出席", 沙巴丝网, 14th May 2017.

¹²³"MMSR president appointed as think tank expert to China centre".

¹²⁴"故宫博物院学校颁证书 杨忠勇受委特聘专家", 星洲网, 20th Nov. 2023.

¹²⁵*ibid.*



2 Politics

What makes members of the Sabah Chinese elite attractive targets of CCP influence are their personal and institutional ties to politics, politicians and policymakers. Generally, targets with a background in politics wield the capacity to “influence, subvert, and if necessary, bypass the policies of their governments [to] promote the interests of the CCP globally”.¹²⁶ Former politicians especially are able to promote CCP interests in their home countries if elected into office. Beijing’s playbook in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and elsewhere, often involves offering donations and mobilising public opinion to deploy votes.¹²⁷

It would be difficult to appreciate the full extent of the CCP’s political influence efforts without taking into account its business and economic initiatives. Hála and Lulu argue using examples in the Czech Republic and Central and Eastern Europe that “economic diplomacy” is often rhetorical cover for the capture of local political elite, who can be mobilised to advance CCP talking points. The net impact of trade and investment initiatives tends to be political rather than economic.¹²⁸ A prime example comes from *Wall Street Journal* reporting on a quid pro quo that Chinese and Malaysian officials negotiated in 2016. Chinese officials offered to pressure the US and other countries to drop their probes into then-Prime Minister Najib Razak’s embezzlement of 1MDB funds. They also offered to bug *Wall Street Journal* reporters in Hong Kong who were investigating the 1MDB fund. In exchange, Malaysia offered profitable stakes in Belt and Road Initiative projects in the country, specifically the East Coast Rail Link and the Trans Sabah Gas Pipeline. Minutes of the meetings say that although the projects were “‘political in nature’ — to shore up Mr. Najib’s government, settle the 1MDB debts and deepen Chinese influence in Malaysia — it was imperative the public see them as market-driven”.¹²⁹

This section opens with a discussion of the backgrounds of CCP’s Chinese targets in Sabah as relevant to politics. We then move to a discussion of Sabah politicians to argue that CCP influence in politics has been broadly successful in weathering changes to the ruling coalition. Their success stems in part from the dense interactions among Sabah Chinese elites and politicians, regular events supported by the Chinese and Malaysian authorities, and promises of investment from China. The section ends with how the CCP targets politicians other than through their overseas Chinese proxies. The ILD’s establishment of contact with Democratic Action Party politicians since 2018 and capacity to weaponise tourism has granted the CCP channels of influence with Sabah politicians.

2.1 The political capital of targeted Sabah Chinese elite

We begin with how specific Chinese targets of the CCP in Sabah exert political force. Oh Ei Sun has retained ties to politicians, including the former Chief Minister of Sabah and senior UMNO member, Musa Aman. Yong Teck Lee is a founder of SAPP and a former chief minister, whose re-election the CCP is invested in. As the voice

¹²⁶Brady, “Magic Weapons”.

¹²⁷Idem, “Magic Weapons”; Hamilton & Ohlberg, *op. cit.*

¹²⁸Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, “Lost in translation: ‘Economic diplomacy’ with Chinese characteristics”, Synopsis, 11th Mar. 2019.

¹²⁹Tom Wright & Bradley Hope, “WSJ Investigation: China Offered to Bail Out Troubled Malaysian Fund in Return for Deals”, *Wall Street Journal* (7th Jan. 2019).



of Chinese communities, Goh Tian Chuan allows the CCP to shape, compromise, or capture political expression in Malaysia.

2.1.1 Former political secretary Oh Ei Sun

Oh Ei Sun was appointed as political secretary to former prime minister Najib Razak from 2009 to 2011.¹³⁰ He quit his post “due to his concern over the lack of transparency in the government” around 1MDB, according to Malaysiakini.¹³¹ Oh’s political ties have given him credentials for his running political commentary (see Section 4.2 below), while propping up his access to Malaysia’s political elite.

He names a wide spectrum of Malaysia’s political figures as “friends” on social media, including former Minister of Finance, current DAP chair and Air Putih (Penang) MP Lim Guan Eng, former Minister of Defence and current Minister of Higher Education Zambry Abdul Kadir, Deputy Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry Liew Chin Tong, Sabah Minister of Industrial Development & Entrepreneurship Phoong Jin Zhe, and former deputy chief minister of Sabah and current Tuaran (Sabah) MP Wilfred Madius Tangau.¹³²



Figure 6: Left and middle: Oh Ei Sun’s social media posts featuring friends in politics.¹³³ Right (L-R): Guangdong Overseas Chinese Affairs Office deputy director Lin Lin, Oh and Musa Aman interacting in May 2013.¹³⁴

Ties to former Sabah chief minister Musa Aman According to a 2009 article from China Qiaowang, an overseas Chinese publication, former Sabah Chief Minister and Najib ally Musa Aman “strongly recommended” Oh.¹³⁵ Musa Aman was Sabah’s longest-serving Chief Minister (2003 to 2018). In 2012, partway through his tenure, Sarawak Report published documents from Hong Kong’s Independent Commission Against Corruption and the Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission that implicated him in timber graft.¹³⁶ Musa Aman, who signed off logging permits granted to timber com-

¹³⁰“EI SUN OH 胡逸山”.

¹³¹“Jho Low helped disburse BN election spending”, Malaysiakini, 29th Dec. 2015.

¹³²“With longtime friends Datuk Wee Kok Tiong & #sabah #deputychiefminister Datuk Seri WTangau after a spectacular #liondance”, Twitter, 4th Feb. 2019; “Honored to be invited to speak first at National Tax Conference”, LinkedIn, EI SUN OH 胡逸山, July 2018; “EC: In Penang, Guan Eng retains Air Putih seat for fourth term”, MalayMail, 12th Aug. 2023; Oh Ei Sun, “He: “Professor Oh!” Me: “O, Minister Liew!..”, Twitter, 22nd Jan. 2020; “YB Liew Chin Tong”, MITI; “Seamless transition: Zambry assumes Higher Education mantle, vows to uphold established policies”, *New Straits Times* (14th Dec. 2023); Oh Ei Sun, “Meeting old friend Malaysian Foreign Minister Dato’ Seri Zambry Abd. Kadir.”, Twitter, 17th Jan. 2023; idem, “Principal adviser ei_sun_oh attending old friend YB gingerphoong’s #CNY”, Twitter, 24th Jan. 2023.

¹³³“Seamless transition: Zambry assumes Higher Education mantle, vows to uphold established policies”; Sun, “Meeting old friend Malaysian Foreign Minister Dato’ Seri Zambry Abd. Kadir.”; idem, “Principal adviser ei_sun_oh attending old friend YB gingerphoong’s #CNY”.

¹³⁴“China journalists visit Sabah”, *The Borneo Post* (2nd May 2013).

¹³⁵“马来西亚时事评论员胡逸山受委纳吉华族政治秘书”, 中国侨网, 28th June 2009.

¹³⁶“Sabah’s Smoking Gun! Bank Statements Show That Musa Aman’s Sons Accessed Dirty Money — National Exclusive!”, Sarawak Report, 9th Apr. 2012.



panies as Chief Minister and head of Yayasan Sabah Group (YSG), was allegedly extracting kickbacks from businessmen seeking timber concessions.¹³⁷

From 2018 to 2019, Musa Aman was charged with 30 counts of corruption and 16 counts of money-laundering for timber deals between 2004 and 2008 in Hong Kong, China and Singapore.¹³⁸ The attorney-general dropped all charges against him in June 2020, a decision that the Perikatan Nasional government supported when questioned a few months later.¹³⁹ Musa Aman's former allies in Umno appear to be rehabilitating his image, which increase the odds of his re-entrance into politics.¹⁴⁰ In May 2023, Malaysia's deputy prime minister, Umno president and Barisan Nasional chair Ahmad Zahid Hamidi renamed a junior science college in Kota Kinabalu after Musa Aman.¹⁴¹ But Sabah Pakatan Harapan leadership quashed rumours in September 2023 that Musa Aman would be leading the party.¹⁴²

Oh continued to broker Musa Aman's contact with the CCP after the allegations surfaced. In 2014, Oh Ei Sun invited Musa Aman to be guest of honour at the Cultural Performance Show in Celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the Malaysia-China Diplomatic Relationship that MCFAS co-organised with the China Overseas Exchange Association and the PRC consulate-general in Kuching, Sarawak. Musa Aman praised MCFAS' efforts, "particularly in making Sabah the first stop in the series of events celebrating the Malaysia-China 40th Diplomatic Anniversary", which was "very important in making sure that Sabah becomes the preferred destination for China tourists and investors".¹⁴³

2.1.2 Former politician Yong Teck Lee

As the founder of SAPP and a former chief minister, Yong Teck Lee has had a long career as a politician. His involvement in united front activity (mentioned above) and interactions with a chamber of commerce platform occurred when he was not a Member of Parliament or a Sabah legislative assemblyman. The CCP's investment in Yong Teck Lee as a former politician paid off when he was re-appointed as a nominated legislative assemblyman.

Yong Teck Lee heads the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), which he founded in 1994.¹⁴⁴ Under the Barisan Nasional system that rotates the post of chief minister every two years among the three significant groups in Sabah — the Christian KDM, the Muslim

¹³⁷"In Malaysia's election, a focus on rainforest graft", Reuters, 3rd Apr. 2013.

¹³⁸"Musa Aman, ally of ex-Malaysian PM Najib Razak, acquitted of corruption, money laundering", SCMP, 9th June 2020; "Report: Musa Aman walks free of 46 corruption, money laundering charges", MalayMail, via Yahoo News, 8th June 2020.

¹³⁹"Perikatan upholds decision of court in acquitting Musa Aman, says Takiyuddin", *The Star* (10th Aug. 2020).

¹⁴⁰"The Future Will Judge Musa's Legacy", Sarawak Report, 5th May 2023.

¹⁴¹"DPM Zahid renames KK junior science college after Musa Aman in tribute, says two more Sabah MRSM to get new names later", MalayMail, 4th May 2023.

¹⁴²"Sabah PH sets the record straight on Musa Aman's leadership speculation", *New Straits Times* (15th Sept. 2023).

¹⁴³"Top China cultural, artistic performers coming to Sabah", *The Borneo Post* (29th Jan. 2014).

¹⁴⁴"Yong returns unopposed as SAPP president", *The Star* (3rd Sept. 2022).



bumiputera and the Chinese, Yong became chief minister from 1996 to 1998.¹⁴⁵ Yong was Member of the Sabah State Legislative Assembly for Likas from 1985 and Member of Parliament for Gaya from 1999 until he lost both seats in 2002, when the federal court found him guilty of a billboard offence.¹⁴⁶ He was barred from contesting in elections for five years. In 2008, SAPP pulled out of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition and became an independent party.¹⁴⁷ Subsequently, SAPP lost in the 2013 and 2018 elections and did not secure a seat through either of the candidates they fielded in 2020.¹⁴⁸



Figure 7: Front row, from left: Chen Yuhe, then Shenzhen Global Business Club chair; Wilson Yong, president of the Sabah Maritime Silk Road Research Society; Suresh Kumar, Trade Commissioner at the Consulate General of Malaysia in Guangzhou; and Yong Teck Lee at the 1st Sabah-Shenzhen External Trade Promotion event.¹⁴⁹

Cultivation through Shenzhen Global Business Club As mentioned earlier, the CCP established early contact with Yong Teck Lee under a program of encouraging the political engagement of overseas Chinese and through global Hakka networks. The Party's continued efforts to cultivate relations with Yong also involved a Shenzhen and Hong Kong-based chamber of commerce platform.¹⁵⁰ The Shenzhen Global Business Club, established by Chen Yuhe in 2014, positions itself as a comprehensive business service platform that promotes cooperation among Chinese and foreign businesses through cultural exchange.¹⁵¹ The Shenzhen Global Business Club hosted

¹⁴⁵James Chin, "Exporting the BN/UMNO Model: Politics in Sabah and Sarawak", University of Tasmania, 2015.

¹⁴⁶"Yong Teck Lee is Sabah's only Chinese rep", *The Star* (9th Oct. 2020); "Yong returns unopposed as SAPP president"; "Yong: Likas flood gates and pumps were functioning, MP Chan went to the wrong place", SAPP, 20th June 2021; "House Speaker: Ex-Sabah CM to vacate parliamentary, state seats", *Malaysiakini*, 11th Sept. 2002.

¹⁴⁷"SAPP pulls out of BN, stays independent", SAPP, 17th Sept. 2008.

¹⁴⁸"6 官委州议员出炉·包括杨德利", 星洲网, 8th Oct. 2020.

¹⁴⁹"首届沙巴-深圳一带一路外贸会在深圳隆重开幕", 每日头条, 25th Apr. 2016.

¹⁵⁰"【俱乐部】亲王驾到 环球商务荟的人脉效应", 南方周末, 24th Oct. 2014.

¹⁵¹"苦荞酒环球商会品鉴现场", 深圳晚报讯, via 全球品牌网, 1st Aug. 2014; "【俱乐部】亲王驾到 环球商务荟的人脉效应".



a dinner in April 2018 to celebrate Yong Teck Lee running for office, which made apparent the political goals of an ostensibly business-oriented association.¹⁵²

One of the earlier collaborations between Yong Teck Lee and the Shenzhen Global Business Club was a trade promotion event. In April 2016, the Sabah Maritime Silk Road Research Society and Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation co-organised the 1st Sabah-Shenzhen External Trade Promotion (首届沙巴深圳一带一路外贸会) event in Shenzhen, with support from the Global Hakka Tshung Tsin Federation and the Shenzhen Global Business Club.¹⁵³

The interactions between Yong Teck Lee and the Shenzhen Global Business Club became very frequent. Shenzhen Global Business Club chairperson Chen Yuhe estimated in April 2017 that the association's members visited Sabah 7 times within the past year.¹⁵⁴



Figure 8: The Shenzhen Global Business Club celebrated Yong Teck Lee contesting the Kota Kinabalu parliamentary seat.¹⁵⁵

In April 2018, the Shenzhen Global Business Club organized a dinner for over 70 overseas Chinese at Nanzhen, Shenzhen to celebrate Yong Teck Lee contesting the Kota Kinabalu parliamentary seat. Chen Yuhe praised Yong as a:

fourth-generation Chinese leader dedicated to the construction of Chinese culture and education, Chinese economic development, and tireless work to help Chinese people secure more rights locally. [...] At a time when the global economy is becoming more integrated, [Yong has] leveraged the Belt and Road Initiative to go back and forth between China and Malaysia, and personally led delegations to China through organizations like the Global Union for Tshung Tsin and Hakka Associations, SMSRRS, and Sabah Yang Clan Association (沙巴杨氏宗亲会), [...] further contribut-

¹⁵²“华人之光——祝贺拿督杨德利竞选亚庇区国会议席”，创新网，28th Apr. 2018; Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: Note that 28 Apr 2018 campaign held in Shenzhen China to promote support...”, Twitter, 17th June 2019.

¹⁵³“杨忠勇：「一带一路」战略有效推行区域合作”，诗华日报，16th Feb. 2016; “首届沙巴-深圳一带一路外贸会在深圳隆重开幕”。

¹⁵⁴Phin Hung Wong, “深圳环球商务荟考察团访沙 海丝会设宴尽地主之谊”，亚洲时报，1st Apr. 2017.

¹⁵⁵“华人之光——祝贺拿督杨德利竞选亚庇区国会议席”。



ing to cultural exchange and economic development for both China and Malaysia.¹⁵⁶

Even though Yong Teck Lee lost the Kota Kinabalu seat to Chan Foong Hin, a DAP candidate who interacted with the ILD (see Section 2.4), Yong became a nominated member of the Sabah legislative assembly in October 2020.

2.1.3 Representative of Chinese communities Goh Tian Chuan

Goh Tian Chuan heads Huazong, the “leading organisation of Chinese associations in Malaysia with a focus on cultural, educational, economic, social and livelihood issues in Chinese communities”.¹⁵⁷

Since his appointment to a leading national Chinese association, Goh also became director of the Malaysia-China Business Council and chairperson of the Malaysia-China Bilateral Governmental/Diplomacy Policy committee in December 2020.¹⁵⁸ In July 2023, he became chairperson of the Malaysia-China Business Council Executive Committee.¹⁵⁹

Joske notes that the overseas expansion of the united front system is an export of the CCP’s political system, allowing the CCP to exert undue influence on political representation and expression overseas.¹⁶⁰ Brady has documented the success of the united front system in New Zealand, where Beijing has a strong hand in shaping the elected representatives of the ethnic Chinese community.¹⁶¹ If “the Chinese community can only realistically aspire to political representation [...] through individuals approved by Beijing”, then the situation “effectively allows the extraterritorial implementation of PRC policy”.¹⁶²

Although Goh Tian Chuan is not an elected politician, he is purportedly the voice of Chinese communities in Malaysia. As a function of his roles, Goh speaks about a broad swathe of political and economic issues at the federal level, including Chinese representation in politics and geopolitical relations with China. He has advocated for more Chinese representation in Hajiji’s cabinet (see later section) and for more Sabah politicians in the federal cabinet.¹⁶³

Goh endorsed Anwar’s comments during a joint news conference at an ASEAN summit in Melbourne in March 2024. Anwar said:¹⁶⁴

Right now, China seems to be the leading investor into Malaysia. [...] So while we remain ... an important friend to the United States and Europe and here in Australia, they should not preclude us from being friendly to one of our important neighbors, precisely China. [...] If they have problems with China, they should not impose it upon us. We do not have a problem with China.

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

¹⁵⁷“华总简介”, 华总.

¹⁵⁸“马中商务理事会董事局名单出炉”, e 南洋, 19th Dec. 2020.

¹⁵⁹“董事局成员”, Malaysia — China Business Council.

¹⁶⁰Joske, *op. cit.*

¹⁶¹Brady, *op. cit.*

¹⁶²Lulu, “United Frontlings Always Win”.

¹⁶³“Goh: There should be more ministers and deputies from Sabah in the new cabinet lineup”, Jesselton Times, 14th Dec. 2023.

¹⁶⁴“Malaysia’s prime minister resists US pressure and says Malaysians don’t have a problem with China”, AP, 4th Mar. 2024.



Goh added that the “China-phobia” of Western countries should not be imposed on countries like Malaysia, which has always maintained a close and friendly relationship with China.¹⁶⁵

We noted earlier that Goh Tian Chuan is an active proponent and participant of the Belt and Road Initiative, an exemplar of China’s efforts to cultivate overseas political elite. Chinese officials said that these projects in Malaysia, specifically, are deeply political but should present as market-driven to the public, according to *Wall Street Journal* reporting. In July 2020, Goh Tian Chuan led Huazong leaders in a dialogue with then-Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to present concerns from Chinese communities in Malaysia and a set of recommendations. Huazong suggested that the government “comprehensively promote” BRI projects — such as the East Coast Rail Link and the Pan-Borneo Highway — and prepare allocations in the following year’s budget.¹⁶⁶

More broadly, Goh Tian Chuan has recommended greater economic engagement with China. At the 16th Annual Meeting of the Malaysia-China Joint Business Council in January 2024 co-hosted with CCPIT, Goh said he looked forward to both governments rolling out a greater number of major economic and trade policies at the government-to-government level.¹⁶⁷

2.2 Maintaining influence through change of government

Through a focus on candidates from both sides of New Zealand politics, Jichang Lulu demonstrated “how successful united-front tactics have been in ensuring permanent control of the Chinese community politics by hedging against democratic power shifts”.¹⁶⁸

We adopt a similar lens to argue that CCP influence operations in Sabah politics are broadly successful. The CCP’s Chinese targets in Sabah maintained relations with the Sabah administration (broadly defined) even through changes in the ruling coalition during the 2020 snap election and the cabinet reshuffle in 2022. Since there were no Chinese state ministers in Hajiji’s cabinet initially, Goh Tian Chuan among others called on the Sabah government to appoint a nominated assemblyman, leading to the appointment of Yong Teck Lee. Goh Tian Chuan was eventually appointed to the Sabah Economic Advisory Council. Subsequently, two additional Chinese politicians were appointed as Sabah state ministers.

2.2.1 Warisan alliance and Shafie Apdal’s cabinet

The Parti Warisan Sabah (Sabah Heritage Party) and Pakatan Harapan alliance unseated the incumbent Sabah UMNO during the May 2018 Sabah elections involving

¹⁶⁵“Huazong supports PM’s stance of not taking sides while continue to maintain close rapport with China”, BorneoNews.net, 3rd May 2024.

¹⁶⁶“反映华社面对难题与建议 华总呈备忘录予首相”, 诗华日报, 16th July 2020.

¹⁶⁷“马中联合商务理事会年度会议暨论坛 | 欧阳玉靖：建交 50 周年为契机 中马稳步推进合作共赢”, 星洲网, 30th Jan. 2024.

¹⁶⁸Lulu, *op. cit.*



a tumultuous transition.¹⁶⁹ Shafie Apdal became chief minister, ending Musa Aman's 15-year reign in the state. China News reported that there were four Chinese ministers and four deputy ministers in Shafie's cabinet, which was the greatest number of Chinese appointments in Sabah's political history.¹⁷⁰

Within the Warisan-Pakatan Harapan administration (2018-2020), these politicians regularly attended events organised by the CCP's Chinese targets in Sabah:

- Shafie Apdal (沙菲益阿达), Chief Minister, Warisan president.¹⁷¹ According to the PRC consulate in Kota Kinabalu, in February 2020, Shafie initiated the fundraiser concert Caring for China (关爱中华) that raised 2 million MYR, making the Sabah state a pioneer in its support for China in its fight against Covid-19. The Sabah state government co-sponsored and co-organised the event with FCAS, whose president Goh Tian Chuan was also in attendance.¹⁷²
- Christina Liew (刘静芝), Deputy Chief Minister (Chinese), Sabah Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment. Liew was chair of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, People's Justice Party) Sabah from 2016 to 2022. PKR is a component party of Pakatan Harapan, of which Liew was appointed chair in 2017.¹⁷³ Tourism, crucial to Sabah's economy, comes under Christina Liew's purview.¹⁷⁴ This means that her political legitimacy depends in part on how successful she is in generating tourist arrivals.¹⁷⁵ The CCP's capacity to support or weaponise sizeable PRC tourism flows creates structural incentives for Christina Liew to be in alignment with CCP policy. Christina Liew visited Hangzhou and Xi'an and signed sister-city agreements on behalf of Kota Kinabalu in 2019.¹⁷⁶ Frankie Liew appears to have facilitated Christina Liew's participation in the signing of both sister-city agreements.¹⁷⁷
- Wilfred Madius Tangau (马迪乌斯登敖), Deputy Chief Minister (Kadazan-dusun), Minister of Science, Tech and Innovation. President of United Pasokmomogun KadazanDusun Murut Organization (UPKO) since October 2018 and honorary president since January 2023.¹⁷⁸ In the immediate aftermath of the

¹⁶⁹“Warisan now has 35 seats, enough to form state government: Shafie [NSTV]”, *New Straits Times* (11th May 2019); “Two more Upko reps join Shafie”, *The Star* (14th May 2018).

¹⁷⁰“马来西亚沙巴州组建 10 人内阁 4 华裔部部长受委任”, 中国新闻, 17th May 2018.

¹⁷¹“Shafie's party to be called Warisan Sabah”, *MalayMail*, 17th Oct. 2016.

¹⁷²“沙巴州政府举办“关爱中华”大型筹款晚会支持中国抗击疫情”, 中华人民共和国驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事馆, 19th Feb. 2020.

¹⁷³“Liew has no problem being replaced as Sabah PKR chief”, *The Star* (6th Aug. 2022); “Christina Liew named Sabah Pakatan Harapan chairman”, *New Straits Times* (30th Aug. 2017).

¹⁷⁴Frankie Liew joked that three ‘oils’ prop up Sabah's economy: petroleum, palm oil, and tourism (旅游). See 陈盈妮, “专访马中总商会沙巴州分会会长拿督刘顺泰 2017 年沙巴州旅游业: 旅游大棋怎么下?”, *China ASEAN Business*, 5th Apr. 2017.

¹⁷⁵Christina Liew received recognition for her proactive role as Minister of Tourism, particularly on the campaign trail for Sabah 2020 elections (“We can't build nation if people divided — Shafie”, *The Borneo Post* [19th Sept. 2020]; “沙菲益续向慕沙开炮轰 把资源拿去发展西马”, 亚洲日报, 18th Sept. 2020; “Selangor MB stumps for Christina”, *The Borneo Post* [24th Sept. 2020]).

¹⁷⁶“驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事梁才德在 2020 年新春招待会上的致辞”, 驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事馆, 17th Jan. 2020.

¹⁷⁷“沙巴旅游部长将访问西安 / 丝促会将赴马参加文化节”, 西安新丝路国际交流促进会, via WeChat, 3rd Aug. 2019; “热烈祝贺西安市与亚比市签署友好合作备忘录”; “我市与马来西亚沙巴州哥打基纳巴卢市签署友好合作谅解备忘录”, 西安网 V, via WeChat, 23rd Sept. 2019; “愿全力配合与协助 市政厅欢迎外企投资”, 诗华日报, 23rd Dec. 2019.

¹⁷⁸“Tangau wins UPKO presidency uncontested”, *The Borneo Post* (15th Oct. 2018); “Madius continues to contribute to Upko after passing presidency to Ewon”, *New Straits Times* (15th Jan. 2023).



Figure 9: Left: Shafie and then-consul-general Liang Caide locked in embrace. Right (front row, L-R): Sabah DAP chair and then-Minister of People's Health and Well-Being Frankie Poon, then-Minister of Agriculture and Food Industries Junz Wong, Deputy Chief Minister Wilfred Madius Tangau, Huazong and FCAS president Goh Tian Chuan, PRC consul-general Liang Caide, then-Chief Minister Shafie Apdal, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment Christina Liew, and SCCC president Frankie Liew.¹⁸³

elections, UPKO left the Barisan Nasional to join the Warisan-Pakatan Harapan coalition government.¹⁷⁹

- Junz Wong (王鸿俊), Minister of Agriculture and Food Industries. Junz Wong was a member of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) before joining Warisan in October 2016.¹⁸⁰ At the New Silk Roads World Forum press conference organised in 2019 by the SMSRRS, Junz Wong announced that the Sabah state government was setting up a special committee to promote Belt and Road activities.¹⁸¹
- Phoong Jin Zhe (冯晋哲), Minister of Youth and Sports from May 2019. Phoong is from the DAP, a component party of Pakatan Harapan.¹⁸²

2.2.2 Sabah snap elections

On 24 February 2020, Mahathir Mohamad resigned first as prime minister, and then from his political party Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), right after Bersatu president Muhyiddin Yassin announced that the party was leaving the ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition.¹⁸⁴ This led to the collapse of Pakatan Harapan and the appointment of Muhyiddin Yassin as prime minister, backed by the Perikatan Nasional alliance.¹⁸⁵

The change of the ruling party at the federal level paved the way for snap elections in Sabah about half a year later. Perikatan Nasional was incentivised to gain support from Warisan to strengthen its slim majority in the capital, but Warisan remained allied to the Pakatan Harapan coalition.¹⁸⁶

After former Chief Minister Musa Aman was acquitted in June 2020, he began canvassing support, announcing in late July that he had obtained enough of a majority (from assemblymen who switched parties) to form a state government and be in-

¹⁷⁹“Sabah musical chairs begin as Upko quits BN while STAR hops over”, MalayMail, 10th May 2018.

¹⁸⁰“Shafie’s party to be called Warisan Sabah”.

¹⁸¹“王鸿俊：州政府设委员会 专门对接一带一路”。亚洲日报, 23rd Nov. 2019.

¹⁸²“潘明丰料调任掌州卫生部 冯晋哲青体部长”，诗华日报, 15th May 2019.

¹⁸³“沙巴州政府举办“关爱中华”大型筹款晚会支持中国抗击疫情”。

¹⁸⁴“Dr M resigns as PM”, MalayMail, via Yahoo, 24th Feb. 2020; “From stillborn Perikatan Nasional to GE15 call — How BN, PAS U-turned in three days”, Malaysiakini, 25th Feb. 2020.

¹⁸⁵“Muhyiddin is Malaysia’s 8th Prime Minister [NSTTV]”, *New Straits Times* (29th Feb. 2020).

¹⁸⁶James Chin, “Sabah Heads to the Polls for Snap State Election”, *The Diplomat*, 25th Sept. 2020.

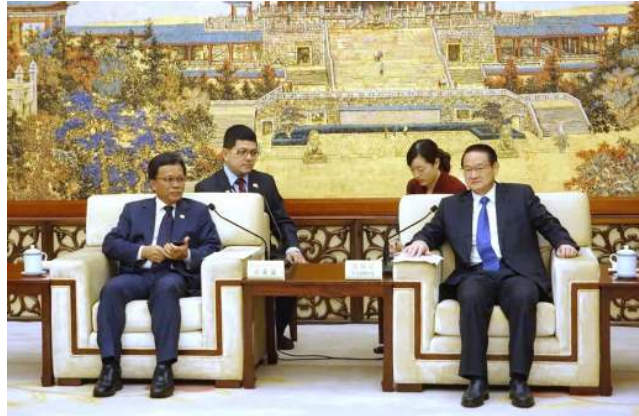


Figure 10: Shafie Apdal meets then-Jiangxi deputy Party secretary (current Jiangxi Party secretary) Yi Lianhong, Oh Ei Sun at hand to support Shafie.¹⁹²

stalled as new chief minister. To neutralise the coup, Shafie Apdal sought support from the governor to dissolve the Sabah state assembly before snap elections in September.¹⁸⁷

2.2.3 Chinese representation in Gabungan Rakyat Sabah

The federal government alliance, Perikatan Nasional, informally comprised Barisan Nasional (BN) and Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), and Bersatu, PAS, Parti Bersatu Sabah and Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku (STAR) by May 2020.¹⁸⁸ By the end of August, SAPP joined the Perikatan Nasional alliance.¹⁸⁹ In September 2020, just before the elections, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced that the informal alliance among coalitions Perikatan Nasional (PN), Barisan Nasional (BN) and Parti Bersatu Sabah would be known as Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS).¹⁹⁰

On 26 September, GRS won more seats than Warisan in the elections, and Perikatan Nasional chief Hajiji Noor was named the new chief minister a few days later.¹⁹¹

After the elections, several politicians and journalists commented on the lack of Chinese representation (and diversity) among elected officials of the ruling coalition, GRS.¹⁹³ The nine Chinese politicians who were voted in were in the opposition, so Hajiji broke with 34 years of tradition in failing to appoint a Chinese deputy chief minister.¹⁹⁴ Goh Tian Chuan therefore called on the Sabah government to appoint a nominated Chinese representative to the legislative assembly.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁷“LIVE | Assembly dissolution gazetted, Musa shows he has the numbers”, Malaysiakini, 31st July 2020.

¹⁸⁸“BN, Bersatu, PAS and three others agree to form Perikatan Nasional”, MalayMail, 17th May 2020.

¹⁸⁹“杨德利：有机会上达民意·重返执政联盟负担沉重”，星洲网，30th Aug. 2020.

¹⁹⁰“Perikatan, BN and PBS to be known as Gabungan Rakyat Sabah”, *New Straits Times* (12th Sept. 2021).

¹⁹¹“Sabah Election 2020: Official final tally — GRS secures 38 seats to Warisan’s 32”, MalayMail, 26th Sept. 2020; “GRS says Hajiji new Sabah CM after BN makes way”, Malaysiakini, 28th Sept. 2020.

¹⁹²“易炼红会见沙巴州州长沙菲益·阿达，并签署缔结友好省州关系意向书”，江西外事，21st Apr. 2019.

¹⁹³“余佩妮：没有华人的内阁”，中国报，13th Oct. 2020; “冯晋哲：沙新内阁“四个没有””，东方日报，8th Oct. 2020; “公平对待各族赢华裔支持 王鸿俊冀哈芝芝当全民首长”，诗华日报，9th Oct. 2020.

¹⁹⁴“As Sabah Cabinet takes oath, sole Chinese rep Yong Teck Lee missing”, MalayMail, 9th Oct. 2020.

¹⁹⁵“吴添泉冀沙巴政府·委华裔代表入阁”，沙洲网，28th Sept. 2020.



In the context of scarce Chinese representation within the state cabinet, Hajiji appointed Yong Teck Lee as one of six nominated assemblymen. Yong became the only ethnic Chinese representative within GRS for a time.¹⁹⁶

Further, in January 2021, the Sabah state government under GRS announced the establishment of the Sabah Economic Advisory Council to support the state's economic recovery.¹⁹⁷ Goh Tian Chuan was appointed a member of the Council, while the chair of the council David Chu later became honorary advisor of SCCC.¹⁹⁸

The elections improved the party ranking of Yong Teck Lee and CCP-targeted Sabah politicians. In January 2021, Perikatan Nasional appointed Yong Teck Lee and Jeffrey Kitingan deputy chairs of the national coalition.¹⁹⁹ In March 2022, Yong Teck Lee and Jeffrey Kitingan were confirmed as deputy presidents of GRS upon the coalition's registration with the Registrar of Societies.²⁰⁰

2.2.4 Cabinet reshuffle and Hajiji's cabinet

After Malaysia's 15th General Elections in November 2022, the king appointed Pakatan Harapan chair and PKR president Anwar Ibrahim as prime minister.²⁰¹ Weeks later, on 10 December, Hajiji announced that Bersatu Sabah's leaders were leaving the party to become part of the local coalition, GRS, "because at the federal level Bersatu is in the opposition whilst GRS has pledged support to the unity government led by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim". Hajiji was confident that this move would promote "political unity and stability in Sabah".²⁰² Barely a month later, on 6 January 2023, Sabah Umno and Barisan Nasional withdrew their support for the state government. Sabah BN chair and then-deputy chief minister Bung Moktar pronounced a "loss of confidence" in chief minister Hajiji Noor due to the departure of Bersatu Sabah's leaders from the party.²⁰³ The local press reported that Sabah BN's Bung Moktar ganged up with Warsian's Shafie Apdal to try to oust Hajiji, but Hajiji had managed to regain support from the state assemblymen.²⁰⁴

Days later, Hajiji announced a cabinet reshuffle that dropped Bung Moktar, promoted Jeffrey Kitingan and re-appointed two Chinese ministers, Christina Liew and Phoong Jin Zhe.²⁰⁵

Under the current GRS administration, these politicians regularly attend events organised by the CCP's Chinese targets in Sabah:

¹⁹⁶"6 官委州议员出炉·包括杨德利"; "As Sabah Cabinet takes oath, sole Chinese rep Yong Teck Lee missing".

¹⁹⁷"Sabah State Govt Sets Up Economic Advisory Council", Bernama, via Malaysia Investment Development Authority, 11th Jan. 2021.

¹⁹⁸"Council to help Sabah economic recovery", *The Borneo Post* (11th Jan. 2021); "刘顺泰率理事拜会朱瑞强 探讨数项经济复苏计划", 亚洲时报, 29th Apr. 2022.

¹⁹⁹"Explain Yong's position: Umno Youth", Daily Express, 26th July 2023.

²⁰⁰"Sabah politics stable with GRS formalised", Daily Express, 19th Mar. 2022.

²⁰¹"Anwar named PM, ending decades-long wait for Malaysia's top job", MalayMail, 24th Nov. 2022.

²⁰²"Sabah Bersatu leaders to exit party, to be with local coalition under GRS", MalayMail, 10th Dec. 2022.

²⁰³"BN exits from Sabah government, says Bung Moktar [NSTTV]", *New Straits Times* (6th Jan. 2023).

²⁰⁴"Sabah announces state Cabinet reshuffle after yesterday's attempted coup", MalayMail, via Yahoo, 6th Jan. 2023.

²⁰⁵"Hajiji announces Sabah state Cabinet reshuffle, Bung Moktar dropped", Bernama, via The Edge, 11th Jan. 2023.



- Hajiji Noor, Chief Minister, Chairperson of GRS. Hajiji has emphasised the need for Sabah to remain close to China. During a visit from then-PRC Consul General in Kota Kinabalu, Liang Caide, Hajiji said that Sabah “needs help and support from China, particularly in tourism, real estate investment, and (development in) infrastructure and agriculture sectors, to boost [its] economic growth”.²⁰⁶ At the 2024 Lunar New Year celebrations, Hajiji reiterated that the Sabah state government “attaches great importance to [a] good relationship with China”.²⁰⁷
- Jeffrey Kitingan, Deputy Chief Minister (Kadazandusun), Minister of Agriculture and Food Industries, founder and president of Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku (STAR). In June 2022, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi dropped by Sabah to speak to Kitingan about bilateral trade, potential investments in Borneo, and tech transfer in agriculture and fisheries.²⁰⁸ Just a month prior, Kitingan had urged the federal government to take stronger steps against China’s maritime and airspace incursions around Sabah and the South China Sea.²⁰⁹ When Kitingan was asked if he had brought these concerns up with Wang Yi, he responded that Wang Yi had arrived in Sabah for a “private visit”, not in an official capacity.²¹⁰ Wang Yi only visited the capital Kuala Lumpur and Sabah, signalling that his visit with Kitingan was unusual and likely strategic.²¹¹
- Christina Liew, Sabah Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, PKR.
- Phoong Jin Zhe, Sabah Minister of Industrial Development and Entrepreneurship, DAP. Since Phoong’s appointment, he has taken an active role in courting investment. In December 2023, Phoong announced that Sabah would be organising the first Sabah-China Business Summit. He invited Huazong and FCAS president Goh Tian Chuan, Sabah Economic Advisory Council chair David Chu, and SCCC representatives to begin organising the summit, which should catalyse “increased investment, trade, and strengthened relationships”.²¹²

2.3 Ties among Sabah Chinese elite and Sabah politicians

In general, the CCP-targeted Sabah Chinese elite have become good proxies to the Sabah political elite through a regular cadence of organising visits, hosting events and arranging trips abroad to China. A list of selected meetings is included in the appendix.

We discuss two distinct characteristics of these events. First, regular events funded and supported by PRC and Malaysian authorities. Second, announcements of large sums of investments from the PRC usually on the back of a trip to China or a trade event.

²⁰⁶“Sabah needs China’s help, support for economic growth: Hajiji”, *The Vibes*, 28th Dec. 2020.

²⁰⁷“Good relationship with China matters, Chief Minister says”, *Daily Express*, 4th Feb. 2024.

²⁰⁸“傑菲里與中國外長王毅在庇會商 中沙同意建立更緊密經濟與文化交流”, *華僑日報*, 4th June 2022; Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: A telling example of China’s subnational diplomacy. Wang Yi...”, *Twitter*, 6th June 2022.

²⁰⁹“Govt must act against China’s maritime, airspace intrusions: Jeffrey”, *The Vibes*, 4th May 2022.

²¹⁰“China foreign minister’s visit to Sabah private, not official”, *New Straits Times* (6th June 2022).

²¹¹“The official visit of the State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, His Excellency Wang Yi, to Malaysia 11–12 July 2022”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia*, 12th July 2022.

²¹²“First ever Sabah-China Business Summit in 2024”, *The Borneo Post* (2nd Dec. 2023).



2.3.1 Regular events

Annual events, such as the friendship run organised by MCFAS and the dragon boat races organised by FCAS, depend on support from China's Party-state entities and from Malaysia's state entities.

In 2018, former PRC consul-general in Kota Kinabalu Liang Caide presented a cheque of 50,000 CNY to FCAS chair Goh Tian Chuan, to support the association in continuing to organise the dragon boat race.²¹³ In 2022, FCAS received 250,000 MYR from the Sabah state government and 800,000 MYR from the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture.²¹⁴

The PRC consulate in Kota Kinabalu co-organised "Run for Ma-Zhong 2019" with MCFAS, while the 2022 edition (Jom! Malaysia-China 2022, 马中友谊跑) received support from the Sabah Ministry of Youth and Sports, the PRC consulate in Kota Kinabalu, as well as sponsorship from the Guangdong, Zhongshan and Shanghai People's Associations for Friendship with Foreign Countries.²¹⁵

2.3.2 Promised investments from China

Politicians and the targeted Sabah Chinese elite have announced large sums of investments from the PRC state and enterprises, usually on the back of trips to China. Critics have levelled the charge that these huge sums of money never materialised. Sidestepping the issue of whether these MoUs transpired, these announcements serve to justify pro-CCP positions and policies for the administration and the Sabah elite.²¹⁶

Former chief minister Shafie Apdal led a trade mission to Jiangxi and Shenzhen in April 2019, signing 12 MoUs with enterprises from both provinces worth close to 20 billion MYR.²¹⁷ Shafie Apdal signed an agreement on behalf of Sabah to establish sister province relations with Jiangxi, while Oh on behalf of MCFAS signed a friendly cooperation agreement with the Jiangxi People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries.²¹⁸

In October 2019, Wilfred Tangau was guest of honour at the Sabah-Fujian Investment and Trade Cooperation Project that also served as the Fujian-Sabah Economic and Trade Promotion Conference (福建—沙巴经贸合作推介会). Both Goh Tian Chuan and Frankie Liew attended this conference co-organised by the Fujian Department of Commerce and the Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce. Tangau announced that the trade cooperation projects between the Sabah and Fujian governments under the auspices of the Belt and Road totalled 1.25 billion MYR in investment.²¹⁹

²¹³“梁才德总领事出席第五届沙华堂国际龙舟赛”, 中华人民共和国驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事馆, 14th May 2018.

²¹⁴“沙华堂国际龙舟赛筹获 80 万 吴添泉: 州政府拨 25 万联邦拨 30 万”, 联合日报, 18th June 2022.

²¹⁵““2019 马中友谊跑”活动成功举行”, 中华人民共和国驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事馆, 25th Nov. 2019; “由沙巴马中联谊会协会主办, 黄文彬集团沙巴婆罗木业有限公司总赞助 为欢庆马中建交 48 周年的『马中友谊跑』今天在沙巴亚庇成功举行”, 国际时报, 4th Dec. 2022.

²¹⁶Lulu, “Confined discourse management...”

²¹⁷“驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事梁才德在 2020 年新春招待会上的致辞”.

²¹⁸“易炼红会见沙巴州州长沙菲益·阿达, 并签署缔结友好省州关系意向书”; Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: Sabah Chief Minister Shafie Apdal journeys to Nanchang, Jiangxi...”, Twitter, 20th Apr. 2019.

²¹⁹“沙巴福建落实合作·12.5 亿 开发“合作园””; “星城广场华丽变身 沙巴-福建经贸合作园 沙巴福建双边经贸掀新页”, 亚洲时报, 15th Oct. 2019.



Figure 11: Goh Tian Chuan receives Anwar at the Beijing China World Hotel in March 2023.²²¹

Yong Teck Lee criticised Shafie’s administration in August 2020 for announcing they had solicited investment worth hundreds of millions of ringgit without the money materialising.²²⁰

This doesn’t seem limited to the Shafie administration. In March 2023, Goh and other Huazong leaders accompanied Anwar on a trip to China. At the end of the trip, Goh revealed that the delegation signed 19 MoUs worth 170 billion MYR.²²²

Soon after Anwar’s trip, Sabah Minister of Industrial Development and Entrepreneurship Phoong Jin Zhe arranged a trip to Beijing and Xiamen with the PRC consul-general’s assistance. He hoped to secure 30 billion MYR by following up with existing Chinese investment in Sabah and “explor[ing] opportunities for them to expand as well as pump more money into the state”. When announcing the details of his trip, Phoong told reporters, “It is important for Sabah to establish a closer strategic relationship with provincial governments in China.”²²³

While it seems uncertain if the money from more recent trips will materialise, what is more probable is that the investment will continue to serve as pretext for continuing political engagement with China.

2.4 ILD targeting DAP

Besides targeting politicians through Sabah Chinese elite, the CCP conducts influence operations through the International Liaison Department (ILD).

²²⁰“杨德利：非一味怪罪冠病政治·经济低迷需解决方案”，星洲人，14th Aug. 2020.

²²¹“安华抵达北京中国大饭店 吴添泉等华总领袖迎接”，光华网，30th Mar. 2023.

²²²“安华访华 马中签署 1700 亿投资 吴添泉：加速疫后复苏”，中国报，1st Apr. 2023.

²²³“Sabah minister hopes to secure RM30 bil in investments from China”，The Vibes，12th Apr. 2023；“Sabah team to visit China to secure more multi-billion ringgit investments”，Malaysian Investment Development Authority，12th Apr. 2023.



Up until 2018, the ILD was almost exclusively in touch with political parties in the coalition Barisan Nasional (National Front) in Malaysia, especially the component party the Malaysian Chinese Association that caters to Chinese voters. In 2018, Barisan Nasional became the opposition coalition for the first time in half a century.

In September 2018, the ILD invited a delegation from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) to visit Song Tao, former head of the ILD. This was the first time that the CCP established party relations with the Democratic Action Party in its 52 years. Chan Foong Hin (陈泓缣), Secretary of Sabah Democratic Action Party and Member of Parliament for Kota Kinabalu (beating out Yong Teck Lee in 2018 elections), was part of the delegation.²²⁴ When Sabah DAP members of parliament including Chan Foong Hin and Phoong Jin Zhe visited consul-general Huang Shifang in July 2022, Chan noted that the ILD had invited the DAP to “watch and learn” from the Central Party School.²²⁵

Chan was made Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Food Security in December 2022 and then Deputy Minister of Plantation and Commodities a year later, both under Anwar’s cabinet.²²⁶

In June 2022, Chan shut down concerns another MP raised about China “colonising” Sabah through investing in its palm oil industry. Chan said that China’s palm oil investments would not engender indebtedness in Sabah (unlike other BRI cases) and had nothing to do with the South China Sea.²²⁷

²²⁴“行动党应中共之邀由林吉祥率团访华 火箭中共历史性建交 陈泓缣随团归来表示收获丰富”, 亚洲时报, 31st Aug. 2018.

²²⁵“行动党议员拜会黄世芳 期待马中友谊再升华”, 星洲网, 7th July 2022.

²²⁶“Chan pledges to do his best in new post”, *New Straits Times* (12th Dec. 2023); “Anwar names 27 deputy ministers”, Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia, 9th Dec. 2022.

²²⁷“陈泓缣欢迎中国投资沙巴, 批沙拉胡丁深具成见”, *Malaysiakini*, 10th June 2022.



3 Ports

China's global port infrastructure investments support its strategic interests in becoming a "strong maritime power".²²⁸ Thorn and Spevack make the case that the CCP views China's port investments as "vehicles [to] cultivate political influence to constrain recipient countries and build dual-use infrastructure to facilitate Beijing's long-range naval operations". They infer from a review of fifteen PRC port investments that the CCP aims to "generate political influence, stealthily expand China's military presence, and create an advantageous strategic environment in the region".²²⁹

Sabah's naval ports are of interest to the CCP because of their proximity to the South China Sea. Their strategic locations enable the docking of submarines and logistics supply support for operations in the region. *Conmilit*, a PRC military magazine for domestic and international audiences under the China Defence Science and Technology Information Centre, published an article in 2015 on an overview of naval bases and ports in countries surrounding the South China Sea.²³⁰ For Malaysia, the article identified the major naval bases in Sabah as well as their strategic significance:

- Labuan naval base is the "closest to the Malaysia-occupied islands and reefs in the South China Sea".
- Sepanggar naval base is Malaysia's first submarine base.
- Kota Kinabalu port is an "important logistics supply base" for the Malaysian navy's operations in the South China Sea.
- Semporna is the frontline for the Malaysian navy's special forces.
- Tawau port is the logistics supply base for Malaysian ships monitoring borders with Indonesia and the Philippines.

Beijing has obliquely indicated its interest in Sabah's ports. According to *Wall Street Journal* reporting on China's offer to bail out the 1MDB fund, former Prime Minister Najib Razak "embarked on secret talks with China's leadership to let Chinese navy ships dock at two Malaysian ports ... Such permission would have been a significant concession to Beijing, which seeks greater influence across contested waters of the South China Sea, but it didn't come to pass."²³¹

In this section, we examine how some members of the Chinese elite in Sabah facilitate visits, partnerships and propaganda that enable greater CCP influence over Sabah ports. MCFAS has facilitated visits from the PLA Navy to Sabah's ports while Oh Ei Sun has echoed CCP propaganda that PLA naval visits in the region are a stabilising force. The US-sanctioned China Communications Construction Company is involved in infrastructure projects near Sabah's military bases and has co-founded a Confucius Institute at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, giving rise to the CCP's expanded strategic

²²⁸“习近平：向海洋进军，加快建设海洋强国”，党建网微平台，via 人民网，8th June 2022.

²²⁹Devin Thorne & Ben Spevack, "Harbored Ambitions: How China's Port Investments Are Strategically Reshaping the Indo-Pacific", C4ADS, 17th Apr. 2018.

²³⁰“现代军事”，新浪军事；“中央军委装备发展部成立 总装备部成为历史”，东方网，via 南方网，11th Jan. 2016；“南海周边国家海军基地与港口概要”，现代军事，2015.

²³¹Wright & Hope, *op. cit.*



presence in the region, a platform for CCP-friendly narratives, and a conduit to fostering closer ties with local Sabah authorities.

The appointment of Yong Teck Lee as the head of the Palm Oil Industry Cluster (Sabah), in particular, has given the CCP inroads into strategic decisions around port development and technology. By leveraging partnerships with Chinese state-linked entities like China Construction Bank, Shandong Port Group, and CRRC, Yong Teck Lee's leadership at Palm Oil Industry Cluster Sabah facilitates Chinese investments in strategic sectors, such as port development, logistics, and potential rail infrastructure. These partnerships enable China to gain influence over critical infrastructure that play a vital role in regional trade and connectivity, particularly in the Lombok and Makassar Straits, a crucial shipping route. A recent cooperation agreement between the maritime academy established by Palm Oil Industry Cluster (Sabah) and a training college for naval surface personnel also potentially embeds military influence in ostensibly civilian maritime training and grants access or insight to local logistics operations.

Through the Sabah-Chinese Economic Conference, the Chinese elite in Sabah have been facilitating cooperation with military-linked PRC companies, particularly those offering underwater drones. These interactions are significant for CCP influence efforts in strategic infrastructure and technology, particularly in the areas of drone and underwater technology. By promoting cooperation with companies like Geneinno that has ties to coastal security and military equipment, these events and partnerships pave the way for embedding China's dual-use technology into Sabah infrastructure. The involvement of the Shenzhen UAV Industry Association, which retains close ties to China's military, highlights the strategic nature of these collaborations.

3.1 MCFAS facilitated visits from the PLA Navy

The MCFAS and Oh Ei Sun have advocated for and facilitated visits from the PLA Navy to Sabah's ports. Oh has propagated the idea that China's military presence is benign and contributes to regional stability, rather than being a cause for concern. His emphasis on reducing "misunderstandings" and "incorrect judgments" mirrors the CCP's portrayal of its military activities — particularly in sensitive regions like the South China Sea — as peaceful and cooperative, rather than aggressive or expansionist. By suggesting that such visits would lower regional tensions, Oh implicitly supports the CCP's narrative that its growing military influence in the region is aimed at fostering mutual understanding, a perspective that often contradicts the concerns of other nations regarding China's aggression.

By depending on credible Sabah Chinese elite such as Oh Ei Sun to advance its propaganda efforts, the CCP is able to normalise and legitimise its military presence in the region (under the guise of routine and friendly visits), obfuscate its expansionist goals, and portray its actions as stabilising. By invoking the historical figure of Ming admiral Zheng He, the CCP can frame China's naval activities as a continuation of peaceful engagement and whitewash its military and political ambitions.

In 2013, the MCFAS organised welcome and departure receptions for the China People's Liberation Army Navy Ship *Zheng He*. The receptions were a platform for exchange among the Sabah Chinese community leaders and 200 PRC soldiers and students. As chairperson of MCFAS, Oh Ei Sun spoke at the welcome reception and gave voice to the fictive history of Zheng He; he noted that while Malaysia and China had estab-



lished diplomatic relations only 40 years ago, Zheng He had led large naval fleets to the Western Ocean on seven voyages more than 600 years, passing Malaysia multiple times and building friendly relations.²³²

The CCP has sought to propagate the myth of Zheng He as a historical figure that embodies China's peaceful development, in Sabah as elsewhere. In 2018, Liang Caide, former PRC consul-general in Kota Kinabalu, wrote a commentary that was published in multiple mainstream newspapers that Zheng He and his ships "visited Sabah with peaceful and kind intentions 600 years ago, leaving behind several beautiful legends". He emphasised Zheng He's peaceful intentions. "On Zheng He's seven voyages, he never once colonised an inch of land, nor plundered the property of another. He treated all countries and ethnicities with respect and equality."²³³

In response to the orthodox view of Zheng He within Chinese traditions as a Ming envoy who was sent by the Yong-le emperor to "develop relations of peace and friendship with the rulers of [distant] lands", historian and China observer Geoff Wade concludes from his examination of Ming sources that Zheng He's voyages aimed to "achieve the recognition of Ming dominance". Coercion, an "important element of the voyages", aimed to "obtain control of ports and shipping lanes", amounting to a "maritime pro-colonialism" comparable to later Portuguese voyages.²³⁴

In November 2015, the Royal Malaysian Navy offered the PLA Navy permission to dock at Kota Kinabalu during Admiral Wu Shengli's visit.²³⁵ Oh Ei Sun said MCFAS supported the Royal Malaysian Navy's invitation to the PLA Navy. He explained that more visits from the navy ships of various countries would "reduce various misunderstandings and incorrect judgements, helping everyone become more familiar with each party's mode of operation, which would decrease tension in the region".²³⁶

In January 2017, a Chinese submarine docked at a port at Sepanggar, Kota Kinabalu for rest and replenishment on its return journey on escort duties.²³⁷ This was the first visit by a PLA Navy submarine to Malaysia and the second time that the PLA Navy publicly reported on its submarine activity abroad.²³⁸ MCFAS members were at the port to receive the PLA Navy personnel from the submarine.²³⁹

MCFAS chair Oh Ei Sun was at the 90th Anniversary of the Founding of the PLA in 2017 at Kuala Lumpur and its 96th Anniversary in 2023 in Kota Kinabalu.²⁴¹

²³²“中国海军郑和号访沙巴”, 东方日报, 22nd Aug. 2013; ““郑和号”开往下一站”, 东方日报, 22nd Aug. 2013.

²³³“梁才德总领事发表署名文章《风起正是扬帆时, 共书合作新篇章》”, 中华人民共和国驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事馆, 6th Aug. 2018.

²³⁴Geoff Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment”, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 78.1 (2005).

²³⁵“Kota Kinabalu offered as port of call to chinese naval ships — RMN”, *The Borneo Post* (10th Nov. 2015).

²³⁶“建议中国舰艇停泊实邦加湾 沙马中联谊会表欢迎”, 诗华日报, 12th Nov. 2015.

²³⁷Geoff Wade, “PRC Submarine (part of 861 formation 861 编队) makes call at Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysia”, Twitter.

²³⁸“国防部证实: 中国潜艇亚丁湾护航返程中停靠马来西亚”, *Global Times* (8th Jan. 2017), via CCTV.

²³⁹“建议中国舰艇停泊实邦加湾 沙马中联谊会表欢迎”.

²⁴⁰“沙马中联谊会会长胡逸山秘书长廖志国受邀出席中驻马大使馆建军 96 周年招待会”, 诗华日报, 4th Aug. 2023.

²⁴¹“沙马中联谊会会长胡逸山秘书长廖志国受邀出席中驻马大使馆建军 96 周年招待会”; Oh Ei Sun, “With #China #defenseattaché at China #PLA 90th Anniversary KL reception.”, Twitter, 1st Aug. 2017.



Figure 12: MCFAS chair Oh Ei Sun (second from right) was invited to attend the 96th Anniversary of the Founding of the PLA in 2023 in Kota Kinabalu.²⁴⁰

3.2 China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) in Sabah

China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), under China’s State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, and its subsidiary CCCC Dredging Group are active in Sabah. The US Bureau of Industry and Security added CCCC Dredging to its Entity List in August 2020 for enabling China to “reclaim and militarise disputed outposts in the South China Sea”.²⁴²

CCCC’s involvement in Sabah’s infrastructure projects, such as the expansion of Sepangar Bay Container Port and dredging operations, in the proximity of military bases align with China’s broader strategy of using global port investments to serve its geopolitical goals. These infrastructure projects that are ostensibly economic may also serve China’s military and strategic ambitions.

In July 2021, CCCC Malaysia’s joint venture with a Malaysian real estate company won a 899.8 million MYR contract from the Sabah Economic Development and Investment Authority to expand the Sepangar Bay Container Port.²⁴³ In October 2023, CCCC completed a dredging project at the bulk cargo terminal in Seppangar for China’s Kibing group.²⁴⁴ Kibing specialises in photovoltaic glass.

The establishment of a Confucius Institute at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, co-founded by CCCC Dredging, further provides a platform for CCP-friendly narratives and for fostering ties with Sabah government departments.

In December 2019, CCCC Dredging was a founding partner of the world’s first Confucius Institute “with technological and engineering characteristics” at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah.²⁴⁵ As Vice Chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Sabah then, Taufiq Yap attended the inauguration ceremony and delivered a speech.²⁴⁶

In August 2023, the executive director of the CCCC Dredging Group’s Propaganda and Culture Department – mistranslated in English as the “Culture Publication Department” – was invited to speak at a Confucius Institute lecture series on the “history

²⁴² “Addition of Entities to the Entity List, and Revision of Entries on the Entity List”, Bureau of Industry and Security, Commerce, 27th Aug. 2020.

²⁴³ “WCT 中国交建联营 获颁近 9 亿令吉合约”, e 南洋, 8th July 2021.

²⁴⁴ “马来沙巴旗滨散货码头疏浚工程顺利完工”, 中交国际, via 国复咨询, 23rd Oct. 2023.

²⁴⁵ “马来西亚沙巴大学孔子学院揭牌”, 国家汉办, 16th Dec. 2019; “组织机构”, 中国交建.

²⁴⁶ “马来西亚沙巴大学孔子学院揭牌”.



and culture of CCCC Dredging”.²⁴⁷ When the Malaysia and China directors of the Confucius Institute at Universiti Malaysia Sabah visited the Southeast Asia Regional Centre of CCCC Dredging (Malaysia) in Kuala Lumpur in June 2024, the chairperson of the latter expressed hope that “as a bridge of friendship between China and Malaysia, the Confucius Institute could build an interaction platform between CCCC Dredging and Sabah government departments and other stakeholders, to better serve the local dredging industry”.²⁴⁸

3.3 Palm Oil Industry Cluster (POIC)

Since Yong Teck Lee began heading POIC Sabah in December 2020, he has been courting partners and investment from China.

By leveraging partnerships with Chinese state-linked entities like China Construction Bank, Shandong Port Group, and China Railway Rolling Stock Corporation (CRRC) Yong Teck Lee’s leadership at POIC Sabah facilitates Chinese investments in strategic sectors, such as port development, logistics, and potential rail infrastructure. These partnerships enable China to gain influence over critical infrastructure that play a vital role in regional trade and connectivity, particularly in the Lombok and Makassar Straits, a crucial shipping route.

In December 2020, Yong Teck Lee became the chair of state-owned Palm Oil Industry Cluster (POIC) Sabah Sdn Bhd, the developer of POIC Lahad Datu.²⁴⁹ The Sabah state government set up POIC Lahad Datu in 2005 to promote economic diversification through palm oil downstream processing. Apart from palm oil, POIC invites investment in the Lahad Datu port and logistics, biomass, biorefineries, and oil and gas. POIC owns and operates the port at Lahad Datu, which it describes as the “most comprehensive port facilities in the Lombok and Makassar Straits”.²⁵⁰

In April 2022, POIC signed a strategic cooperation agreement with the Labuan branch of the China Construction Bank (CCB). Under the agreement, CCB will provide financial services to POIC companies and allow them to participate in the bank’s cross-border business-matching platform, CCB Match Plus. For companies recommended by the bank, POIC will provide one-stop services.²⁵¹ POIC Sabah CEO Fredian Gan explained that the agreement “aims to attract investors from China and all over the world through the bank’s network”.²⁵²

That same month, POIC signed a strategic cooperation agreement with the Shandong Port Overseas Development Group, the biggest port operator in the world. Yong Teck Lee explained, “The sheer size and business reach of the Shandong Port Overseas Development Group are invaluable assets for us. What we believe we can offer is a good industrial park with a comprehensive port infrastructure, located in a region with extremely rich resources, promising markets and served by an increasingly important

²⁴⁷“Land Below the Wind Talk 21: Sejarah dan Budaya CCCC Dredging History and Culture of CCCC Dredging”, Confucius Institute UMS, 22nd Aug. 2023.

²⁴⁸“2024年6月25日, 沙巴大学孔子学院马方院长张钦平教授...”, Confucius Institute UMS, via Facebook, 25th June 2024.

²⁴⁹“Yong assumes POIC chairmanship”, *The Borneo Post* (11th Dec. 2020); “Yong Teck Lee appointed POIC Sabah Chairman”, *New Sabah Times* (11th Dec. 2020), via POIC.

²⁵⁰“POIC SABAH SDN BHD”, POIC.

²⁵¹“POIC 与中行建行签合作协议 优先关注来沙投资者”, 诗华日报, 9th Apr. 2022.

²⁵²“POIC Lahad Datu Port to be made public”, Sabah Ports Authority, 22nd June 2022.



Lombok-Makassar shipping super highway. [...] We are looking to develop our port as a network port of the Shandong Port Group.”²⁵³

POIC leadership reiterated months later that its strategic location and rich natural resources were key to Shandong Port’s interest. Both parties signed a “friendship port agreement” in December 2022, when a Shandong Port delegation visited Sabah. POIC Sabah CEO Fredian Gan added, “Seen together with POIC’s strategic position in our part of Asean, our rich natural resources and untold market and shipping growth potentials, there are innumerable areas to explore.”²⁵⁴

In June 2022, the National Development and Reform Commission-guided China Overseas Development Association (CODA) co-organised an online forum with the Beijing-based chapter of the Malaysia Investment Development Authority to introduce investment opportunities in Malaysia. During that session, Yong Teck Lee expressed that the POIC Lahad Datu investment committee hopes to become a hub for Chinese investor interest in the resource-rich Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA).²⁵⁵

In August 2023, Yong Teck Lee announced that POIC Sabah was looking into building rail infrastructure, after a discussion with the officials of CRRC Changchun Railway Vehicles Company from Jilin Province.²⁵⁶ The US Department of Defense has included parent company China Railway Rolling Stock Corporation on its entity list of “Chinese military companies”.²⁵⁷

In October 2023, Shanghai media reported that Beidou Aerospace Science and Technology Development Group met Yong Teck Lee in his capacity as POIC chairperson and signed a cooperation agreement, likely in building intelligent ports.²⁵⁸

Most recently, Yong Teck Lee as well as Wilson Yong witnessed the signing between a POIC Sabah-established maritime academy and the Zhejiang Institute of Communications in November 2024. POIC Sabah established the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East Asean Growth Area (BIMP–EAGA) Maritime Academy (BEMA) to support Sabah’s “blue economy” plans, according to Yong Teck Lee.²⁵⁹ BEMA, where Wilson Yong is a director, signed a strategic framework agreement with the Zhejiang Institute of Communications. According to the meeting readout from the Zhejiang Institute of Communications, the partnership will “invigorate training, navigational technology, port operations and marine science for China, Malaysia and even the whole of the ASEAN region”.²⁶⁰ Local media from Sabah and Malaysia neglect to mention that the Zhejiang Institute of Communications has a focus on defence

²⁵³“POIC now on business-rich map of China’s giant port group”, *The Borneo Post* (14th Apr. 2022), via POIC.

²⁵⁴“POIC now on business-rich map of China’s giant port group”, *Jesselton Times*, 13th Apr. 2022.

²⁵⁵“杨德利: POIC 多项优势”, *诗华日报*, 1st July 2022.

²⁵⁶“POIC Lahad Datu plans rail infrastructure: Yong”, *Daily Express*, 2nd Aug. 2023.

²⁵⁷“DOD Releases List of People’s Republic of China (PRC) Military Companies in Accordance With Section 1260H of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021”, US Department of Defense, 31st Jan. 2024; “Entities Identified as Chinese Military Companies Operating in the United States in accordance with Section 1260H of the William M. (“Mac”) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283)”, US Department of Defense, 31st Jan. 2024.

²⁵⁸“北斗航天科技发展集团有限公司出海马来西亚, 促进科技合作, 共享创新成果”, *Eastday*, via *China Daily*, 25th Oct. 2023.

²⁵⁹“POIC Sabah keen to set up maritime academy to support state’s Blue Economy aspirations”, *The Star* (23rd Oct. 2024).

²⁶⁰“学校与马来西亚东盟海事学院签署战略框架协议”, *浙江交通职业技术学院*, 25th Nov. 2024.



education, houses an academy that trains technical personnel for the military, and facilitates China's military-civil fusion policy. Its main specialisations include modern communications technology, automotive inspections, and maintenance technology.²⁶¹ According to an enrollment plan that the Zhejiang conscription office issued in June 2023, Zhejiang Institute of Communications was to recruit surface ship personnel for the PLA Navy and the People's Armed Police as well as personnel for the PLA's Joint Logistics Support Force.²⁶²

3.4 Underwater drones

In August 2023, six Chinese Sabah associations co-organised the Sabah-Chinese Economic Conference. The conference aimed to “bring together top leaders from various fields, both domestic and international, to jointly discuss the challenges of Sabah's economic development”, then “draft directions and goals for achieving more prosperous economic development, which will be presented to the state government”.²⁶³

Yong Teck Lee chaired the organising committee, which brought together SCCC, the Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce (Sabah), the Malaysia Maritime Silk Route Research Society and the Sabah Maritime Silk Route Research and Advancement Society, among others.²⁶⁴ SCCC President Frankie Liew gave a speech during the conference on the economic development of agriculture while Malaysia Maritime Silk Road Research Society President Wilson Yong spoke on the economics of education.²⁶⁵

One of the key themes of the conference was artificial intelligence and drone technology. World UAV Federation Executive Chair and President of the Shenzhen UAV Industry Association Yang Jincai was invited to deliver the keynote speech on the current state and the future of global drone system development.²⁶⁶

Yang Jincai had an “in-depth exchange” with Yong Teck Lee and Sabah Finance Minister Masidi Manjun during the conference, then with deputy speakers of the Sabah State assembly days later.²⁶⁷ Other prominent attendees included Sabah Chief Minister Hajiji Noor, who delivered the opening speech at the conference and toured an exhibition of drones and technological products.²⁶⁸

Geneinno (吉影科技), a member of the Shenzhen UAV Industry Association specialising in intelligent underwater equipment, sent representatives who accompanied the association chair to Sabah. Geneinno was one of three PRC companies that signed three UAV distribution and cooperation agreements with a local Sabah company, Drone Eutopia (航优科技有限公司), in August 2023.²⁶⁹ Drone Eutopia and Geneinno would “join hands to create an intelligent era of unmanned systems in Southeast Asian waters”.²⁷⁰

²⁶¹“立德树人育英才 矢志强军向复兴”, 中国教育报, 20th Dec. 2023.

²⁶²“转发中华人民共和国教育部 中央军委政治工作部 中央军委国防动员部关于做好 2023 年招收定向培养军士工作的通知”, 浙江省人民政府征兵办公室, 14th June 2023.

²⁶³“世界各地百人抵达 参加 2023 年沙巴华人经济大会”, 诗华日报, 22nd Aug. 2023.

²⁶⁴Ibid.

²⁶⁵Ibid.

²⁶⁶“世界无人机大会主席杨金才受邀参加沙巴华人经济大会”, Shenzhen UAV Industry Association, 24th Aug. 2023.

²⁶⁷“深圳市无人机行业协会周动态 (8.21-8.27)”, Shenzhen UAV Industry Association, 27th Aug. 2023.

²⁶⁸“新起点 新思维 | 吉影科技与 RONE EUTOPIA 携手共创东南亚水域无人系统智时代!!”, Geneinno, 10th Oct. 2023.

²⁶⁹“沙巴华人经济大会 海内外企业签定 12 项合约”, 星洲网, 24th Aug. 2023.

²⁷⁰“新起点 新思维 | 吉影科技与 RONE EUTOPIA 携手共创东南亚水域无人系统智时代!!”.



The Shenzhen UAV Industry Association as well as its member companies retain ties to China's military and defence industry, and more generally, to the Party-state's development of drone technology for integrated military and civilian purposes. In December 2021, Yang Jincai visited a local military unit in Shenzhen to participate in a "military support and appreciation symposium". The symposium "promotes the glorious tradition of supporting the military and patriotism and demonstrates the positive significance of private enterprises in supporting the military with technology", according to the meeting readout.²⁷¹ More recently, in April 2024, Yang Jincai signed an agreement on behalf of the Shenzhen UAV Industry Association with the government of Beichuan Qiang Autonomous County in Sichuan Province to establish a comprehensive UAV testing base. The signing occurred at an investment promotion symposium hosted by the Mianyang Municipal Party Committee Military-Civil Integration Office and the People's Government of Beichuan Qiang Autonomous County, indicating the imbrication of the military in drone development efforts.²⁷²

Geneinno's company description notes that its products and services involve "coastal security and military equipment".²⁷³ In January 2021, the Shenzhen Security and Protection Industry Association, the Shenzhen UAV Industry Association and the Police Equipment Network Expert Committee jointly hosted an "expert review meeting" for Geneinno's new "multi-purpose lightweight underwater work robot" and "multi-purpose water propeller". The expert review panel included experts in police equipment from the Ministry of Public Security. After discussion and review, the expert panel unanimously concluded that the multi-purpose lightweight underwater work robot would be useful for underwater security inspections and anti-explosion work, with good application prospects in police and emergency work. China News, the united front outlet, reported that as China's marine development strategy shifts focus from coastal to deep-sea areas, the demand for marine exploration, particularly in deep-water regions, has intensified. The article assessed that Geneinno's multipurpose lightweight underwater robots have found widespread applications in "underwater emergency rescue, search and rescue exploration, maintenance inspection, and research and investigation", which align with China's maritime strategy and the trends and needs of Shenzhen's marine economic development strategy.²⁷⁴

It bears noting that Drone Eutopia's CEO is Yong Yit Yoong (杨奕勇), Yong Teck Lee's son.²⁷⁵ Yong Yit Yoong shares membership with his father in many Sabah organisations. As of 2023, he was secretary of the Sabah Maritime Silk Route Research and Advancement Society and appointed "liaison ambassador" to attend the World Hakka Youth Development Conference.²⁷⁶ He was also third vice chairman and treasurer of the Sabah Progressive Party Youth Exco (2014 to 2018).²⁷⁷ According to Sabah media reporting, Drone Eutopia was established in Sabah in May 2024.²⁷⁸

²⁷¹ "深圳市无人机行业协会、中智卫安出席拥军慰问座谈会", Shenzhen UAV Industry Association, 17th Dec. 2021.

²⁷² "北川携手深圳无人机行业协会 开启低空经济与无人机创新基地发展新纪元!", Shenzhen UAV Industry Association, 13th Apr. 2024.

²⁷³ "新起点 新思维 | 吉影科技与 RONE EUTOPIA 携手共创东南亚水域无人系统智时代!!".

²⁷⁴ "引领行业立企标 吉影科技 AI 水下装备专家评审会圆满召开", China News, 13th Jan. 2021.

²⁷⁵ "Hi-tech drones at Sabah's doorstep", Daily Express, 17th May 2024.

²⁷⁶ "第十七届中国安防论坛之全球市场论坛顺利举办", SZ News, 2nd Nov. 2023; "沙河源代表杨奕勇任世客青联络大使", 星洲网, 17th Nov. 2023.

²⁷⁷ "SAPP Youth Exco (2014-2018)", SAPP.

²⁷⁸ "Hi-tech drones at Sabah's doorstep".



4 Think tanks and media

Malaysia's media landscape, particularly its Chinese language outlets, is fertile ground for the dissemination of CCP propaganda. Freedom House assessed that major outlets in Malaysia's Chinese-language media "have a fairly pro-Beijing editorial line when it comes to original content" and "generally provide positive coverage of economic cooperation between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing and consistently cover Xi Jinping's speeches".²⁷⁹

This is not merely a reflection of journalistic alignment but a structural issue tied to the ownership and control of the media by elites with deep business ties to China, such as Sarawak timber magnate Tiong Hiew King. He owns Media Chinese International Limited, the parent company of major Chinese-language outlets in Malaysia and Sabah including *Sin Chew Daily*.²⁸⁰

There are signals that PRC authorities especially value the guidance of propaganda work in Sabah. The current Consul-General at the PRC embassy stationed in Kota Kinabalu, Huang Shifang, is not a career diplomat — as is usually the case for holders of that post — but previously headed the Propaganda Department of Laibin city in Guangxi (a southern province bordering Vietnam).²⁸¹ In April 2024, at a media briefing, Huang spoke at great length to dispel the "allegations of 'forced labour' in Xinjiang". She denounced a few Western countries and "anti-China forces" for "fabricat[ing] lies like 'forced labor' to create 'forced industrial decoupling' and 'forced unemployment' in Xinjiang", to "suppress Chinese companies and industries" and to "serve their malicious agenda to mess up Xinjiang and contain China".²⁸² (See Section 5 on religion.) Huang's background in propaganda underscores China's prioritisation in shaping narratives over traditional diplomacy. This raises important questions about how to preserve media autonomy in Sabah and Malaysia more broadly.

This section examines how targeted Sabah Chinese elite advance the propaganda goals of the CCP. It starts with Goh Tian Chuan and Yong Teck Lee's comments on Chinese-language media in Sabah. Their celebration of the media's role in fostering bilateral relations with China entrench these outlets' propensity to adopt a pro-Beijing stance. This arguably blunts the capacity of Chinese-language media in Sabah and Malaysia to critique the role of the CCP, defend the interests of Chinese communities in Malaysia and hold power to account. As long as media outlets and influential voices continue to emphasise bilateral ties over accountability, the Chinese-Malaysian community's interests will be subordinated to the broader geopolitical goals of the CCP.

Oh Ei Sun's role in this ecosystem further exemplifies how the CCP's influence extends beyond media into intellectual and policy circles. Oh frequently participates in think tank events and weighs in on geopolitics and economic cooperation in media commentaries. His strategic silence on his membership in CCP influence organisations allows Oh to appear as an independent voice, reinforcing CCP narratives under the guise of neutral expertise. In a continuous trajectory from MCFAS and Oh facilit-

²⁷⁹Han & Loh, *op. cit.*

²⁸⁰"Cover Story: Sarawak's long-standing business rivalry", *The Edge*, 4th May 2017; Han & Loh, *op. cit.*; "2023/24 Annual Report", Media Chinese International Limited, 2024; Han & Loh, *op. cit.*; "公司简介", 世界华文媒体有限公司.

²⁸¹"黄世芳抵达马来西亚履新, 曾长期在广西工作", 广西头条 News, via 微信, 5th June 2022; Geoff Wade, "Malaysia: A particularly interesting CV for new Consul-general Huang Shifang 黄世芳...", Twitter, 2nd June 2022.

²⁸²"China contributes greatly to Sabah's economy –Consul General", *The Borneo Post* (5th June 2022).



ating visits from the navy, Oh's commentary on the South China Sea regularly downplays territorial disputes and emphasises economic cooperation, deflecting attention from China's assertive actions in the region.

Similarly, Yong Teck Lee has rejected security concerns and reframed the South China Sea issue as a potential economic boon for Sabah. This reframing positions China's growing influence not as a threat but as an integral part of Sabah's economic development, creating alignment with CCP objectives while allowing Yong to maintain a veneer of local autonomy and economic interest.

4.1 Chinese media in Sabah and Malaysia

Goh Tian Chuan valorises the role of Chinese-language media in representing the interests of Chinese communities in Sabah and Malaysia, while also celebrating its role in improving bilateral relations with China. However, this dual role reveals an inherent tension, especially when the interests of Chinese communities in Sabah and Malaysia diverge from those of the CCP. By promoting narratives that align with China's geopolitical agenda, these media outlets may be eroding their capacity to act as independent watchdogs, particularly in articulating critical perspectives or dissent within the Chinese community.

Goh Tian Chuan and Yong Teck Lee, visible leaders in the Chinese Sabah community, have repeated CCP propaganda by criticising Western media and advocating the need for positive China coverage. Their rhetoric reinforces the idea that Chinese-language media should serve as a counterbalance to what they perceive as biased Western reporting, especially on issues like Covid-19 or China's global initiatives.

At the 2020/2021 Datuk Wong Kee Tat Journalism Awards, organised by the Editors' Association of Chinese Medium of Malaysia, Goh emphasised the importance of Chinese-language newspapers to safeguard the rights of the Chinese community in Malaysia and foster communication with the government. He said,²⁸³

Our Chinese-language newspapers and journalists [...] serve as an active and effective communication bridge between the community and the government. [...] They mobilise daily to reflect the public opinion and sentiment of the Chinese community, defending the rights of the Chinese community by upholding neutrality and objectivity, and prioritising the interests of Malaysia and its people.

At face value, Goh's speech celebrates the role of the media in reflecting the opinions and defending the interests of local Chinese communities in Malaysia. The Editors' Association of Chinese Medium of Malaysia was established with the aim of "uniting the editors of major Chinese-language newspapers in the country" to, among other things, "safeguard the freedom of press and speech".²⁸⁴

However, the ownership of the association and origins of the award reveal competing interests. The Association's leadership come from the Sin Chew Daily, whose parent company is owned by Tiong Hiew King.²⁸⁵ The Association also explains that they named the journalism awards after Wong Kee Tat, who donated more than 500,000

²⁸³“吴添泉：华社须持续支持华文报”，马来西亚华文媒体编辑人协会（编协），29th May 2022；“创会史略”，马来西亚华文媒体编辑人协会（编协）。

²⁸⁴“创会史略”。

²⁸⁵“2022-2024 年度理事会名单”，马来西亚华文媒体编辑人协会。



RMB between 1984 and 1994, then sought out sponsors for the Association.²⁸⁶ Wong's daughter Linda Wong Davies founded the KT Wong Foundation in 2007 in honour of her father to “foster bridges between China and the wider world, through innovative cross-cultural collaboration across the arts and education”.²⁸⁷ Wong, in his daughter's words, was a “patriotic businessman who was most proud of being invited to the PRC 50th National Day Celebration”. He “felt immense pride when he stood in front of Tiananmen”.²⁸⁸

Goh has celebrated the role of the media in promoting relations between Malaysia and China. When Goh Tian Chuan led Huazong to receive a delegation from Xinhua News Agency in December 2023, he praised colleagues in Chinese-language media from Malaysia and China for their positive contributions to shaping “Malaysia-China public opinion”, fostering closer ties among people from both countries, and “building a community with a shared future”. Goh emphasised that an important factor in the continuous deepening and advancing of bilateral relations is the spontaneous and sustained joint efforts of media from both countries.²⁸⁹

Both Goh Tian Chuan and Yong Teck Lee have criticised Western media and asserted the need for positive China coverage.

When Malaysia's local broadcaster Astro TV and PRC-controlled Phoenix TV announced that they would continue cooperating in 2020, Goh Tian Chuan spoke out in favour of the agreement. He asserted that “China and global Chinese society need platforms [...] like Phoenix TV to safeguard the common interests of the East and the West, while striving for balance in news selection and public opinion reporting”. Goh criticised Western media for distorting the truth, especially in relation to Covid-19:²⁹⁰

With the rise of Western hegemonism, some Western-controlled media have deliberately distorted issues related to China and the global Chinese community, intentionally suppressing and provoking them. [...] For example, the US-led Western powers and some media have repeatedly pointed fingers at China on the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. They attack China by distorting facts and using pseudo-democratic rhetoric and public opinion.

Phoenix TV is a state-controlled TV network from Hong Kong. The largest shareholder of Phoenix TV holding group, Phoenix Media Investment (Holdings) Limited, is Bauhinia HK, a subsidiary of state-owned Bauhinia Culture Group Corporation Limited.²⁹¹ Right before Xu Wei was appointed chairperson and executive director of Phoenix Media Investment (Holdings) Limited, he was Party secretary of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences from August 2020 to January 2021.²⁹² Sun Yusheng, the Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Editor-in-Chief of Phoenix Media Investment

²⁸⁶“创会史略”，马来西亚华文媒体编辑人协会。

²⁸⁷“About”，KT Wong Foundation。

²⁸⁸“黄铃玳 东方牡丹的艺术仙境”，Target 杂志，4th June 2012。

²⁸⁹“吴添泉赞扬中文媒体 正面“马中舆论”促进关系”，e 南洋，28th Dec. 2023。

²⁹⁰“华总会长吴添泉：凤凰卫视与寰宇电视合作可协助扩大世界华人社会话语权”，BorneoNews.Net，7th July 2020。

²⁹¹“立法會：署理民政事務局長就「制訂未來五年文化藝術政策及發展藍圖」議員議案總結發言”，香港特別行政區政府，11th May 2022；“2023 年度報告”，鳳凰衛視投資（控股）有限公司，via HKEX，24th Apr. 2024。

²⁹²“历任领导”，上海社会科学院。



(Holdings) Limited, was formerly vice president and deputy editor-in-chief of China Central Television.²⁹³

Similarly, Yong Teck Lee has publicly criticised Western media for their negative portrayals of China, arguing that Chinese-language outlets provide more “balanced” reporting on China’s policies and initiatives.²⁹⁴ Yong Teck Lee gave a speech in June 2019 at the inauguration ceremony of the Sabah Chinese Writers Association’s 13th council. He said, “Western news agencies are increasingly likely to portray China negatively. Such imbalanced reporting will lead to resistance against China in Asia and other regions.” In contrast, he says, “Chinese-language media report on China’s positive policies and initiatives in a balanced and moderate manner. However, such news and analysis are rarely seen in non-Chinese-language media.”

Therefore, he takes it upon himself to publish on the Belt and Road Initiative and Huawei in all languages. Yong said, “If [decision-makers in Malaysia] view China’s peaceful rise as a threat and fail to seize opportunities, they will stagnate. This is why I have put so much effort into ensuring that all statements and speeches related to the Belt and Road Initiative, the “Look North” policy towards China, and issues concerning Huawei are published in Chinese, English and even Malay.”

Ultimately, Goh and Yong’s comments on the media as prominent voices within the Sabah Chinese community arguably contribute to a media environment that prioritises China’s political agenda over the independent representation of local community concerns. As a result, Chinese-language media in Sabah and Malaysia may be increasingly constrained in their ability to challenge or diverge from CCP narratives.

4.2 Oh’s links to think tanks in China

Oh Ei Sun is principal advisor and founder of the Pacific Research Center in Malaysia and senior fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs.²⁹⁵ He is currently listed as a speaker at KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific on its website but was Senior Fellow at the institute as recently as August 2023.²⁹⁶ These institutions that seem independent from the CCP lend him a veneer of neutrality and intellectual credibility, which he has leveraged to become a commentator on economic cooperation and geopolitics within the region.

However, a closer look at his affiliations and speaking engagements reveals a strategic alignment with CCP-backed organisations. Over the past decade, Oh Ei Sun has spoken at PRC think tank events organised by key entities in China’s external influence system:

- China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) and the united front system: In November 2023, Sabah Chief Minister Hajiji led a trade delegation – including Sabah Minister of Industrial Development and Entrepreneurship Phoong Jin Zhe – to attend the Global Chinese Economic & Technology

²⁹³“2023 年度報告”.

²⁹⁴Geoff Wade, “Malaysia: Former Sabah chief minister Yong Teck Lee 杨德利 has called for more balanced coverage...”, Twitter, 17th June 2019.

²⁹⁵“EI SUN OH 胡逸山”; Oh Ei Sun, “Ei Sun OH 胡逸山”, Twitter; “Our People”, Singapore Institute of International Affairs.

²⁹⁶“Dr. Oh Ei Sun”, KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific; “AEES 2023 –Session 1: The Green Reset: Future Ready Asia”, KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific, via Youtube, 30th Aug. 2023.



Summit in Shenzhen. Hajji delivered a speech on “business and investment opportunities in Sabah”, while Oh Ei Sun joined Wang Huiyao and other speakers in the China Greater Bay Area-ASEAN Roundtable.²⁹⁷ Oh also spoke at the 2020 World Chinese Economic Summit.²⁹⁸

- The Global Chinese Economic & Technology Summit, formerly the World Chinese Economic Summit, is co-organised by the KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific (where Oh is speaker and senior fellow) and the China Development Institute, which comes under the leadership of the Shenzhen city government.²⁹⁹ The Summit is supported by the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade Shenzhen Municipal Committee (Shenzhen CCPIT).³⁰⁰ The Center for China & Globalization is also listed as a supporter of the Summit.³⁰¹ Wang Huiyao, founder and chairperson of the Center for China & Globalization and honorary chairperson of the Summit, holds several united front positions. One of his roles is a member of the Central Committee of the Jiusan Society, one of China’s eight ‘democratic parties’.³⁰² Government-linked company Invest Sabah was a corporate partner of the Summit.³⁰³
- National Institute for South China Sea Studies: Oh Ei Sun has repeatedly spoken at events organised by the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, including the 2020 to 2023 editions of the China (Hainan)-ASEAN Think Tank Forum.³⁰⁴ The National Institute for South China Sea Studies comes under the leadership of the Hainan Provincial Government and receives policy and operational guidance from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “[G]uided by the goals of serving China’s overall diplomacy and maritime power construction”, the institute “provides intellectual support for safeguarding China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea, peacefully resolving disputes, and promoting regional maritime governance and cooperation”.³⁰⁵
- International Liaison Department: In November 2016, Oh Ei Sun was a speaker at Silk Road Economic Belt Cities International Forum, organised by the Silk Road Think Tank Association.³⁰⁶ The Belt and Road Think Tank Cooperation Alliance (translated as the Silk Road Think Tank Association) was co-established by the CCP Central Committee’s International Liaison Department in 2015. A deputy head of the International Liaison Department Sun Haiyan is simultaneously chairperson of the Belt and Road Think Tank Cooperation Alliance.³⁰⁷

²⁹⁷“首长：深受中国启发 通过数字技术带动经济”，星洲网，8th Nov. 2023; “首长：深受中国启发 通过数字技术带动经济”。

²⁹⁸“2020 世界华人经济峰会”，KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific, 21st Dec. 2020.

²⁹⁹“赞助商与合作伙伴”，Global Chinese Economic & Technology Summit; “关于研究院”，综合开发研究院（中国·深圳）

³⁰⁰“赞助商与合作伙伴”。

³⁰¹Ibid.

³⁰²“王辉耀”，CCG.

³⁰³“赞助商与合作伙伴”。

³⁰⁴“黄田园博士赴中国南海研究院参加中国（海南）-东盟 2023 智库论坛”，海南热带海洋学院马来西亚研究中心，21st Dec. 2023; “中国（海南）-东盟 2022 智库论坛在海口举行”，中国南海研究院，20th Dec. 2022; “中国（海南）-东盟 2021 智库论坛在海口举行”，中国南海研究院，25th Dec. 2021; “专家：海南自贸港可作为中国-东盟深化合作的新平台”，中新网，via 新浪，23rd Dec. 2020.

³⁰⁵“我院简介”，中国南海研究院。

³⁰⁶“促进互联互通 共建贸易繁荣”，中国网智库中国，Nov. 2016.

³⁰⁷“关于我们”。



In general, Oh's commentaries on economic cooperation and geopolitics in English and Chinese language media usually do not mention that he is involved in CCP influence organisations in order to grant him the veneer of "neutrality". For instance, he describes a "strong natural predilection toward economic concerns" as a matter of "Malaysian national psyche" in a S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) commentary.³⁰⁸ RSIS is a graduate school and think tank focusing on strategic studies and security affairs affiliated to the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.³⁰⁹ After the Boao Forum in 2023, Oh went on a Malaysian Chinese-language radio show, asserting that Malaysia "needs to cooperate with China because of the economy".³¹⁰ He has asserted that economics and trade relations are paramount, even when it comes to territorial disputes around the South China Sea.³¹¹

These commentaries usually do not acknowledge Oh's institutional interest in facilitating China's influence work and closer bilateral economic cooperation. His assertion that economics outweigh politics "naturally" in Malaysia also belies his role in creating this state of affairs. As discussed, this rhetoric paves the way for more "economic diplomacy" with China, where initiatives with little economic effect provide "rhetorical cover for the extensive capture of local political elites".³¹²

4.3 South China Sea

In the context of well-documented Chinese maritime incursions into the region and the broader militarisation of the South China Sea region,³¹³ Oh Ei Sun has maintained a running commentary on the South China Sea since 2014.

One could draw a straight line between Oh's participation in National Institute for South China Sea Studies activities and his commentary that depoliticises South China Sea disputes. Although Oh acknowledges the territorial disputes, he has generally downplayed their importance and deflected attention by praising China's maritime initiatives, suggesting greater cooperation in other areas, and emphasised the importance of economic and trade relations. These lines of reasoning hew closely to China's propaganda messaging that economic cooperation takes precedence over political and territorial conflict.

- *People's Daily*, 2014: He emphasised China's contributions to the Maritime Cooperation Fund and South China Sea Code of Conduct.³¹⁴
- *Global Times*, 2015: He suggested deepening cooperation in non-traditional security issues like piracy, drug smuggling, and human trafficking.³¹⁵
- Xinhua, 2015: He said some at the Shangri-La security dialogue focus too much on the South China Sea issue, while paying insufficient attention to issues like terrorism, security cooperation, and humanitarian assistance. He added that Deputy Chief of Joint Staff Admiral Sun Jianguo "spent a considerable amount

³⁰⁸Oh Ei Sun, "More Nuanced than Just "Hedging": Malaysia and the South China Sea Disputes", RSIS Commentary, 16th Jan. 2015.

³⁰⁹"Introduction", RSIS.

³¹⁰"疫情后首次博鳌论坛 胡逸山：为了经济须与中国合作", BFM 财今, 5th Apr. 2023.

³¹¹"新加坡学者：希望中菲就南海问题举行双边谈判", 新华社, 19th July 2016.

³¹²Hála & Lulu, *op. cit.*

³¹³"China's Maritime Disputes 1895–2020", Council on Foreign Relations.

³¹⁴"人民日报：中国是亚洲安全的重要维护者", 人民日报 (17th June 2014).

³¹⁵胡逸山, "胡逸山：'海上丝路' 拓宽中马合作空间", 环球时报, 19th Jan. 2015.



of time explaining the international public service purposes of these islands and reefs, such as maritime search and rescue, disaster prevention and mitigation, navigation safety, and scientific research”, which conveys China’s position that “the construction of these reefs contributes to regional and global peace and stability”.³¹⁶

- Xinhua, 2016: At a think tank academic seminar that the Institute of Chinese Borderland Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences organised in Singapore, Oh said that “economic and trade relations are the most important relations between China and ASEAN countries. All parties should temporarily shelve the South China Sea dispute and focus on developing more comprehensive bilateral and multilateral relations”.³¹⁷

Besides Oh Ei Sun, Yong Teck Lee has rejected the security concerns around the South China Sea and reframed the issue as a matter of benefiting from China’s Belt and Road Initiative. In March 2018, Yong Teck Lee’s comments on South China Sea were published in Sabah Chinese-language publication Asia Times. He said:³¹⁸

Sabah’s strategic geographic location in the South China Sea should be seen as an opportunity for peace and prosperity, not a cause for concern. [...] Although some people consider the South China Sea issue to be sensitive, there is no need to worry that China’s claims of jurisdiction over the South China Sea will affect Sabah’s relationship with China. [...] Malaysia and China share common interests in the South China Sea and will adopt harmonious and constructive solutions. [...] For this reason, I am optimistic about the South China Sea issue and confident that the Belt and Road Initiative will greatly benefit Sabah. We can expect better economic opportunities, business prospects, and an improved quality of life.

Two months later, Yong spoke at a press conference at SAPP headquarters, announcing that SAPP would “enter parliament to reclaim Sabah’s maritime sovereignty and secure the trillions in economic benefits from economic activities in the South China Sea”. He added that “China’s Belt and Road initiative could create immense economic potential for the regions surrounding the South China Sea”. Yong assessed that the unrealised benefits of the Belt and Road initiative are orders of magnitude larger than the historical debt owed to Sabah. He said, although the federal government has owed Sabah hundreds of millions since 1974, “the economic benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative for Sabah are much greater, amounting to trillions”.³¹⁹

This reframing positions China’s growing influence not as a threat but as an integral part of Sabah’s economic development, creating alignment with CCP objectives while allowing Yong to maintain a veneer of local autonomy and economic interest.

³¹⁶“香格里拉对话会闭幕 渲染分歧和矛盾者被批”, 新华社, 1st June 2015.

³¹⁷“新加坡学者: 希望中菲就南海问题举行双边谈判”.

³¹⁸“杨德利: 乐观看待南海课题 一带一路让沙巴受惠”, 亚洲时报, via 沙巴进步党, 22nd Mar. 2019.

³¹⁹“杨德利: 数以兆计经济效应 沙进步党要索回沙领海主权”, 诗华日报, 4th May 2018.



Figure 13: Taufiq Yap (front row, third from right) leads a Muslim NGO and Malaysian delegation to China in April 2019.³²¹

5 Religion

The CCP wants to whitewash its genocide of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. It appears to be especially invested in forestalling criticism and resistance from predominantly Muslim countries like Malaysia where politicians, journalists and the public have espoused solidarity with Uyghur Muslims.

To this end, the China Islamic Association, which comes under the United Front Work Department’s supervision, found in the Malaysia Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) and its Sabah-born leader a sympathetic audience to its propaganda. CCP’s united front interlocutors emphasise the ethnic equality and religious freedoms of Muslims in Xinjiang, and the disjuncture between “the real Xinjiang” and Western media portrayals.

The China Islamic Association has hosted MACMA on at least one sponsored trip to Xinjiang. The interactions between both organisations have continued beyond August 2022, when the UN Human Rights Council assessed that the “arbitrary and discriminatory detention of members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim groups [...] may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity.”³²⁰

5.1 Malaysia Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA)

MACMA, established in 1994, had 19 branches and activity centres across Malaysia by 2016. Taufiq Yap Yun Hin (叶永兴), MACMA president since 2015, explained at the opening ceremony of a branch in Muar, Johor that the association wants to “improve cultural and religious exchange between Chinese and Malay Muslims in Malaysia, and reduce misunderstandings”.³²²

³²⁰“OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China”, UNHCR, 31st Aug. 2022.

³²¹“In Malaysia, China’s PR blitz on Uygurs in Xinjiang sparks anger”, SCMP, 20th Dec. 2019.

³²²“华裔穆斯林分会促进文化交流”, 马来西亚东方日报, 2nd Oct. 2016; “About Us”, MACMA; “MACMA Malaysia AGM”<https://macma.my/main/macma-malaysia-agm/>, MACMA, June 2015.



Figure 14: President of MACMA Taufiq Yap interviewed by Xinjiang state media.³²⁹

Taufiq Yap, born in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah to a Hakka family, was appointed Vice Chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) from 2019 till 2022.³²³ He became the first Chinese Muslim to serve as Vice Chancellor of UMS in its 25-year history.³²⁴

By July 2014, the China Islamic Association had established contact with MACMA. According to the constitution of the China Islamic Association, it comes under the supervision (主管) of the National Religious Affairs Administration.³²⁵ The National Religious Affairs Administration cadres overseeing the Islamic association likely moved to the United Front Work Department's 12th bureau during the 2018 institutional reform. Cadres from the United Front Work Department's 12th bureau (which has an Islam Division) regularly attend China Islamic Association events.³²⁶

The China Islamic Association was the main organiser of the 2014 China-Malaysia Islamic Culture Expo in Malaysia, where MACMA was a supporting organisation.³²⁷ Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad who gave a speech at the event affirmed that he had learned through the cultural exchange how “religions in China are protected by the government, people have religious freedom and [...] Muslims and non-Muslims live harmoniously”.³²⁸

PRC authorities had launched a “special campaign to crack down on violent terrorism” by May 2014 following an attack in Ürümqi, but the worst was yet to come.³³⁰ Chen

³²³“UMS Vice Chancellor Biography”, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 23rd Nov. 2020; “叶永兴任期届满 沙大将迎新校长”, 星洲网, 1st Aug. 2022; “亚庇客籍叶永兴 受委沙大副校长”, 亚洲时报, 28th July 2019.

³²⁴“首位华裔穆斯林·叶永兴任沙大校长”, 星洲网, 27th July 2019.

³²⁵“中国伊斯兰教协会章程”, 中国伊斯兰教协会, via 国家宗教事务局, 27th Sept. 2023.

³²⁶“中国伊斯兰教协会举办 2024 年朝觐团工作人员骨干培训班”, 中国伊斯兰教协会, 19th Apr. 2024; “中国伊斯兰教协会召开全体职工大会”, 中国伊斯兰教协会, 28th Feb. 2024; “张风雷随全国政协民族宗教调研组在中央社会主义学院就“加强宗教人才培养”问题进行专题调研”, 中国人民大学, 17th Jan. 2020.

³²⁷“中国·马来西亚伊斯兰文化交流会在吉隆坡举行”, 中国伊斯兰教协会, 4th July 2014.

³²⁸“中马伊斯兰文化交流会暨中国伊斯兰文化展”大型开斋晚宴隆重举行”, 中国伊斯兰教协会, 7th July 2014.

³²⁹“[新疆新闻联播] 马来西亚华人穆斯林协会参访团参访新疆”, 中央电视台, 22nd Apr. 2024.

³³⁰“Eradicating Ideological Viruses”: China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims”, Human Rights Watch, 9th Sept. 2018.



Quanguo's appointment as Xinjiang Party chief in 2016 preceded the systematic mass detention of ethnic Uyghur Muslims by 2017.³³¹

By early 2019, Taufiq Yap was at the helm of MACMA and had interacted with the China Islamic Association and its Shaanxi subsidiary.³³²

In April, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited a "Muslim NGO and Malaysian Delegation to China" on a working visit, headed by Taufiq Yap.³³³ The Malaysian Youth Council, which was represented in the delegation, reported that the trip was fully sponsored by the Chinese embassy in Malaysia and coordinated by an Islamic organization under the Malaysian government.³³⁴ According to Malaysia's Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGO (ACCIN), the objective of the trip was a "fact-finding mission where the heads of the Islamic NGOs visit Xinjiang to ascertain if the ethnic Uyghurs are oppressed, as reported by international media".³³⁵ Taufiq Yap told Yang Faming 杨发明, president of the China Islamic Association, that the delegation wanted to "understand China's experience and approach in various aspects".³³⁶ If indeed the delegation was on a "fact-finding mission", the Chinese embassy's sponsorship would have posed a major conflict of interest.

The China Islamic Association's readout of the meeting said Yang "propagandised and introduced (宣介) the policies that the PRC government implemented to create ethnic equality and religious freedom". Yang hoped that the delegation would visit various parts of China, then convey to Muslims in Malaysia the "glorious results of 40 years of China's reform and opening, and the real situation of Islam in China".³³⁷

This propaganda appears to have been well-received, given Taufiq Yap and MACMA's continued trips to visit the China Islamic Association in August 2019, January 2020 and August 2023.³³⁸

Most recently, in April 2024, the China Islamic Association invited MACMA and Taufiq Yap for a visit, during which he highly commended the PRC government's "respect and guarantees for the religious freedom of the Muslim communities". Yap shared the delegation's "personal experiences" in Xinjiang, noting the region's "socioeconomic development, social stability, cultural prosperity, religious harmony, and that people live in peace and work in contentment".³³⁹ State media propaganda outlets covered the MACMA delegation's visit to Xinjiang, foregrounding Taufiq Yap's comment that, "Xinjiang China is a good place and people of all ethnic groups live good lives." Members of the delegation "personally experienced that the real Xinjiang

³³¹ Magnus Fiskesjö, "Uyghur Human Rights Project Bibliography", Uyghur Human Rights Project, 17th Apr. 2024; "Xinjiang specialist Darren Byler for Sinopsis: A project far more extreme than the Stanford Prison Experiment", Sinopsis, 21st Nov. 2018.

³³² "金汝彬副会长会见 马来西亚华人穆斯林协会会长一行", 中国伊斯兰教协会, 7th Nov. 2018; "马来西亚华人穆斯林协会代表团一行到访省伊协", 陕西省伊斯兰教协会, 20th Mar. 2018.

³³³ "马来西亚宗教领袖代表团拜会中国伊协", 中国伊协, 3rd Apr. 2019.

³³⁴ "LAWATAN KERJA NGO ISLAM KE CHINA: MISI MENYEBARLUASKAN RAHMATAN LIL ALAMIN", Majlis Belia Malaysia, 19th Apr. 2019.

³³⁵ "Mesyuarat Agung Tahunan ke-12: Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN) 2020", ACCIN, 25th July 2020.

³³⁶ "马来西亚宗教领袖代表团拜会中国伊协".

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ "资讯 | 中国伊协代表团出访马来西亚", 中国伊协在线, via WeChat, 9th Aug. 2019; "马来西亚华人穆斯林协会代表团 拜会中国伊协", 中国伊斯兰教协会, 13th Jan. 2020; "穆可发副会长率团赴马来西亚出席 第二届华人穆斯林国际会议", 中国伊斯兰教协会, 31st Aug. 2023.

³³⁹ "杨发明会长会见马来西亚华人穆斯林协会参访团", 中国伊斯兰教协会, 23rd Apr. 2024.



is completely different from the Xinjiang that some media in the US and the West have spread rumours about and besmirched”³⁴⁰.

5.2 Malaysia’s protests and government policy

Public protests in Malaysia against the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the ambivalent policy of Malaysian government in extraditing ethnic Uyghurs highlight the stakes of the CCP’s influence efforts.

Malaysians have organised protests at the Chinese embassy against the treatment of fellow Muslims in Xinjiang (or East Turkestan). For instance, in December 2019, the Beautiful Xinjiang Cultural Show organised by the Chinese embassy drew silent protests organised by Malay Muslim non-profits such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (Abim) and the Global Peace Mission, as well as the Islamic political party PAS.³⁴¹ About a week after, Abim and pro-caliphate Islamist group Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia (HTM) organised separate protests against the “re-education” of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.³⁴² Compared to the moderate position of the former, HTM took a more confrontational approach, demanding that Putrajaya cut diplomatic ties with China, suspend trade, and expel its ambassador.³⁴³



Figure 15: Kota Kinabalu MP Chan Foong Hin explains his question in Parliament about whether Malaysia would extradite ethnic Uyghurs. He raised concerns about the consistency of government policy and policy change potentially jeopardising Malaysia-China relations.³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰“新疆是个好地方，我们还会再来”，新疆日报，21st Apr. 2024.

³⁴¹“At Chinese embassy’s Xinjiang show, Muslim groups, PAS protest in support of Uighurs”, MalayMail, 21st Dec. 2019.

³⁴²“In KL, hundreds of Muslims protest against China’s treatment of Uighurs”, Malay Mail, 27th Dec. 2019.

³⁴³“Three things we learnt from: Muslim groups’ protest against Chinese embassy”, Malay Mail, 28th Dec. 2019.

³⁴⁴Chan Foong Hin, “In the first place, I was concerned with the consistency of Malaysia’s government policy on Uyghur”, Facebook, 5th Sept. 2020.



Whether Malaysia's leaders deport Uyghurs is an issue of contention. It was known that the administration under Najib deported 11 Uyghurs to China in 2011 and 6 in 2012, and detained 155 Uyghurs in 2014.³⁴⁵ (Malaysian authorities found the 155 Uyghurs crammed into two apartments in Kuala Lumpur; it is unclear whether Malaysian authorities deported them back to China.³⁴⁶) The administration may also have released ethnic Uyghurs without a formal announcement.³⁴⁷

In October 2018, Mahathir and his cabinet released 11 ethnic Uyghur Muslims (who escaped from a detention centre in southern Thailand) and allowed their travel to Turkey.³⁴⁸

After Muhyiddin became prime minister, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department for Special Functions clarified in September 2020 that the government would not extradite Uyghur Muslims in Malaysia despite pressures from China. He was responding to a question from DAP's Kota Kinabalu MP Chan Foong Hin, who raised concerns about the implications of the issue on bilateral relations with China.³⁴⁹

Anwar has taken an ambivalent position since becoming prime minister. In 2018, he called for formal talks on China's internment of Uyghurs.³⁵⁰ When he hosted a Uyghur activist in April 2023, his speech affirmed protection for all oppressed Muslims and expressed sympathy for the Uyghur people.³⁵¹ However, on his trip to China weeks before, he told Premier Li Qiang that "Malaysia upholds a one-China policy and believes that Xinjiang-related issues are China's internal affairs".³⁵²

³⁴⁵"No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs", UHRP, 24th June 2021; "Rights group urges Malaysia not to deport Uyghur migrants to China", Agence France-Presse, via SCMP, 6th Oct. 2014.

³⁴⁶"Malaysia discovers 155 Uighurs crammed into two apartments", Reuters, 4th Oct. 2024.

³⁴⁷"Malaysian Leader Mahathir Confirms Decision to Free Uyghurs", Radio Free Asia, 15th Oct. 2018.

³⁴⁸Ibid.

³⁴⁹"M'sia won't extradite Uighur refugees, even if China requests — minister", Malaysiakini, via Yahoo News, 4th Sept. 2020.

³⁵⁰"Anwar 'Appalled' by Suu Kyi, Criticizes China's Muslim Camps", Bloomberg, 12th Sept. 2018.

³⁵¹"Activist appeals to Malaysian prime minister to support the Uyghur cause", Radio Free Asia, 25th Apr. 2023.

³⁵²"李强同马来西亚总理安瓦尔举行会谈", 外交部, 2nd Apr. 2023.



6 Conclusion

The individuals targeted for CCP cooption in Sabah have typical profiles — individuals with business links to China, advisors to political leaders, former politicians, think-tankers who provide expert analysis and media commentary, and academics and educators with influence over the young. Most notably:

- Goh Tian Chuan moved from leading the Federation of Chinese Associations at the state level to leading its national parent organisation. Formerly a police officer involved in Malaysia’s internal security affairs, he became founder and chairperson of a KL-listed integrated manufacturing services solutions provider with ventures into oil and gas and oil palm plantations. His leadership in Chinese associations and business involvement in China have lent to his advocacy for and participation in China’s Belt and Road Initiative within Malaysia. Goh’s business cooperation with PRC entities creates an avenue of political leverage, through which the CCP assert alignment with their policy objectives and advance CCP interests. His speeches as FCAS leadership appear at times to be overtly oriented towards addressing Xi Jinping and CCP leadership priorities, even though the association professes to represent the interests of local Chinese communities. This conflict of interest also plays out in the role that Goh prescribes to Chinese language media. Goh’s recent additional appointment in a high-level Fujian united front organisation signals his continued relevance to the CCP.
- Oh Ei Sun, who founded the Malaysia-China Friendship Association Sabah in 2012 and continues to chair the association, misleadingly characterises the association’s work as “economic empowerment” on his LinkedIn profile. He has been appointed to positions in entities in the united front system such as the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese and the China Overseas Friendship Association. His platform, MCFAS, maintains extensive links with entities across the Party-state systems of influence.
- Founder of Sabah Progressive Party and former Sabah chief minister (1996-1998) Yong Teck Lee was invited to lead a delegation of “ethnic Chinese engaged in politics” to visit Guangdong province in 2007. After the mayor of Heyuan city in Guangdong suggested that Yong Teck Lee establish the first overseas Heyuan township association in Malaysia in 2007, the Malaysia Heyuan Hakka Association was established the year after with Yong as permanent honorary president. The Heyuan municipal government provided funding to support the association’s establishment. By 2007, Yong was appointed honorary president of a global Hakka association that was established at the suggestion of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, to promote the “unity of Hakkas” and the “reunification of China”.

What makes members of the Sabah Chinese elite attractive targets of CCP influence are their personal and institutional ties to politics, politicians and policymakers. Goh Tian Chuan purportedly serves as the voice of Chinese communities. Oh Ei Sun has retained ties to politicians, including the former Chief Minister of Sabah and senior UMNO member, Musa Aman. He regularly pens commentaries and participates in local and national discussions on geopolitics. Yong Teck Lee is a founder of SAPP and a former chief minister, whose re-election the CCP is invested in through a Shenzhen



chamber of commerce platform. The CCP's ties to these figures allows them to shape, capture, or compromise political expression in Malaysia.

CCP influence in politics has been broadly successful in weathering changes to the ruling coalition. Since there were no Chinese state ministers in Hajiji's cabinet initially, Goh Tian Chuan among others called on the Sabah government to appoint a nominated assemblyman, leading to the appointment of Yong Teck Lee. Goh Tian Chuan was eventually appointed to the Sabah Economic Advisory Council. Subsequently, two additional Chinese politicians were appointed as Sabah state ministers. The success of influence ops stems in part from the dense interactions among Sabah Chinese elites and politicians, regular events supported by the Chinese and Malaysian authorities, and promises of investment from China.

Apart from exerting influence on state and national politics through targeting Sabah Chinese elite, the CCP has also sought to exert direct influence. After the 2018 elections that unseated the incumbent ruling coalition Barisan Nasional that had been in power for half a century, the ILD established contact with the Democratic Action Party. Chan Foong Hin, member of the Sabah DAP and Malaysia's Deputy Minister of Plantation and Commodities, was part of the delegation to China. He has sought to downplay concerns that China might be "colonising" Sabah and seeking influence in the South China Sea through palm oil investments in Sabah. Further, the CCP's capacity to support or weaponise sizeable PRC tourism flows creates structural incentives for policy alignment for Sabah's tourism minister. The political legitimacy of Christina Liew, Sabah Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, depends on how successful she is in generating tourist arrivals. Christina Liew visited Hangzhou and Xi'an and signed sister-city agreements on behalf of Kota Kinabalu in 2019. Frankie Liew appears to have facilitated Christina Liew's participation in the signing of both sister-city agreements.

Sabah's ports, particularly Sepanggar Bay, are strategically important to China due to their proximity to the South China Sea, a region of significant geopolitical interest. Through the mediation and propaganda efforts of local elites like Oh Ei Sun, who has facilitated PLA Navy visits, China has sought to normalise its presence in the region. The expansion of Sepanggar Bay and other development initiatives involving PRC companies further serve China's broader geopolitical aims.

Yong Teck Lee's leadership in Sabah's Palm Oil Industry Cluster (POIC) has also given China significant inroads into influencing Sabah's infrastructure and port development. By forging partnerships with Chinese state-linked entities like China Construction Bank and Shandong Port Group and military training institutions while at the helm of POIC, Yong has enabled China to exert stronger influence over critical infrastructure pivotal to trade and connectivity. Through events like the Sabah-Chinese Economic Conference, local elite and influence platforms in Sabah facilitate the introduction of China's dual-use technology, such as underwater drones tied to coastal security.

Sabah Chinese elites, such as Goh Tian Chuan and Yong Teck Lee, play a pivotal role in advancing CCP propaganda through Chinese-language media. Their support for these outlets' focus on bilateral relations over accountability weakens the media's ability to critique the CCP or defend the interests of Malaysia's Chinese community. This dynamic subordinates local concerns to China's geopolitical objectives, allowing Beijing to project influence with minimal resistance.



Beyond media, figures like Oh Ei Sun extend CCP influence into policy and academic circles, leveraging think tank platforms and media commentaries to present China's actions – such as military presence in the South China Sea – as benign. By framing China's growing influence as beneficial to Sabah's economic development, local elites like Oh and Yong Teck Lee align local discourse with CCP goals, while obscuring the strategic risks of China's expanding regional dominance.

Finally, China's influence operations in Malaysia, particularly through the Malaysia Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), highlight the CCP's broader strategy to whitewash its treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and mitigate criticism from influential Muslim-majority countries. By leveraging the China Islamic Association and leaders like Taufiq Yap, the president of MACMA and former Vice Chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Beijing has worked to propagate a narrative of ethnic equality and religious freedom to counter accusations of genocide and human rights abuses. Even after credible evidence of the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang, Yap has led delegations to Xinjiang, where he publicly praised China's policies and repeated propaganda on the stark difference between “the real Xinjiang” and Western media portrayals. The public protests in Malaysia against the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the wavering policy of Malaysian administrations in extraditing ethnic Uyghurs highlight the stakes of successful influence operations.

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Appendix

Table 1: Selected meetings among Sabah Chinese targets, Sabah politicians, and PRC personnel

Sabah Chinese target	Event	Date	Sabah political elite	PRC personnel
Goh Tian Chuan, FCAS	2023 Sabah FCAS International Dragon Boat Race ³⁵³	June 2023	Deputy Chief Minister Jeffrey Kitingan (on behalf of Hajiji)	PRC ambassador Ouyang Yujing
Goh Tian Chuan, FCAS	2022 Sabah FCAS International Dragon Boat Race ³⁵⁴	July 2022	Chief Minister Hajiji Noor	Consul-general Huang Shifang
Goh Tian Chuan, FCAS	2019 Sabah FCAS International Dragon Boat Race ³⁵⁵	June 2019	Deputy Chief Minister Christina Liew	Consul-general Liang Caide
Goh Tian Chuan, FCAS	2018 Sabah FCAS International Dragon Boat Race ³⁵⁶	June 2018	Then-Chief Minister Shafie Apdal	Consul-general Liang Caide
Goh Tian Chuan, FCAS	2024 Lunar New Year Celebration co-organised by FCAS ³⁵⁷	February 2024	Phoong Jin Zhe	
Oh Ei Sun, MCFAS	2023 Malaysia-China Friendship Run ³⁵⁸	November 2023	Phoong Jin Zhe	Consul-general Huang Shifang
Oh Ei Sun, MCFAS	2022 Malaysia-China Friendship Run ³⁵⁹	December 2022	Chan Foong Hin, Phoong Jin Zhe	Consul-general Huang Shifang
Oh Ei Sun, MCFAS	2019 Malaysia-China Friendship Run ³⁶⁰	November 2019	Phoong Jin Zhe	Consul-general Liang Caide
Oh Ei Sun, MCFAS	2018 Malaysia-China Friendship Run ³⁶¹	November 2018	Chan Foong Hin	Consul-general Liang Caide
Oh Ei Sun, MCFAS	10th Anniversary Celebration of MCFAS ³⁶²	September 2022	Jeffrey Kitingan (on behalf of Hajiji)	Consul-general Huang Shifang
Oh Ei Sun, MCFAS	2022 Fujian-Sabah Youth Camp ³⁶³	September 2022	Chan Foong Hin, Christina Liu, Junz Wong, Phoong Jin Zhe	Fujian Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese chair (online), Consul-general Huang Shifang
Oh Ei Sun, MCFAS	MoU establishing friendly cooperation with the Fujian People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries ³⁶⁴	March 2019	Wilfred Madius Tangau	Fujian People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries vice president

³⁵³“欧阳玉靖大使出席第 8 届沙巴华堂国际龙舟赛决赛活动”，驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事，21st June 2023.

³⁵⁴“黄世芳总领事出席 2022 沙华堂国际龙舟赛”，驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事，4th July 2022.

³⁵⁵“梁才德总领事出席第六届沙华堂国际龙舟赛”，驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事，17th June 2019.

³⁵⁶“梁才德总领事出席第五届沙华堂国际龙舟赛”，驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事，14th May 2018.

³⁵⁷“吴添泉冀提升沙巴制造业生产 以减少依赖西马及海外供应”，东方日报，13th Feb. 2024.

³⁵⁸“马来西亚沙巴举行马中谊跑活动 冀增进沙中联系”，中国新闻网，12th Nov. 2023.

³⁵⁹“由沙巴马中联谊协会主办，黄文彬集团沙巴婆罗木业有限公司总赞助 为欢庆马中建交 48 周年的『马中谊跑』今天在沙巴亚庇成功举行”。

³⁶⁰“2019 马中谊跑”活动成功举行”。

³⁶¹“赵占建议移师中国·马中谊跑扩大举行”，星洲网，26th Nov. 2018.

³⁶²“Three areas China can help: CM”，Daily Express，12th Dec. 2022.

³⁶³“2022“亲情中华·为你讲故事”网上营福建营沙巴营开营”，中国新闻网，via Sina，6th Sept. 2022.

³⁶⁴“马来西亚沙巴州与闽深化合作”，人民日报（9th Mar. 2019）.



Table 1 (cont.): Selected meetings

Target	Event	Date	Elite	PRC personnel
Oh Ei Sun	Photo exhibition "Building a better future Together" ³⁶⁵	November 2018	Junz Wong, Phoong Jin Zhe	Consul-general Liang Caide
Frankie Liew, SCCC	Visit to the Hubei Provincial Foreign Affairs Office ³⁶⁶	May 2024	Phoong Jin Zhe	Deputy Director of the Hubei Provincial Foreign Affairs Office Zhu Xiaobin
Frankie Liew, SCCC	2024 Lunar New Year celebration ³⁶⁷	March 2024	Phoong Jin Zhe, Junz Wong	
Frankie Liew, SCCC	Invitation to Lunar New Year celebration ³⁶⁸	February 2024	Christina Liew	
Frankie Liew, SCCC	Invitation to Lunar New Year celebration ³⁶⁹	February 2024	Phoong Jin Zhe	
Frankie Liew, SCCC	Shafie Apdal visit ³⁷⁰	June 2019	Shafie Apdal	
Frankie Liew, SCCC	Invitation to inauguration ³⁷¹	June 2019	Christina Liew	
Frankie Liew, SCCC (Wilson Yong also present)	A Sabah agriculture and food business delegation visited Hangzhou and Shanghai ³⁷²	November 2018	Sabah Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry	Representatives of the Yancheng Economic and Technological Development Zone, Fujian Chamber of Commerce
Frankie Liew, MCCC (Goh Tian Chuan and Wilson Yong also present)	Mid-Autumn Festival celebration ³⁷³	October 2018	Christina Liew, Junz Wong, Phoong Jin Zhe	Liang Caide
Frankie Liew, MCCC	Courtesy visit ³⁷⁴	September 2018	Junz Wong	
Frankie Liew, MCCC (Wilson Yong also present)	Business inspection delegation visited Wuhan, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Macau, and Zhuhai ³⁷⁵	March 2017	Sabah Minister of Special Tasks Teo Chee Kang, Assistant Minister of Tourism, Culture, and Environment, Pang Yuk Ming, Deputy Speaker of the State Legislative Assembly Johnson Tee	

³⁶⁵“中国驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事馆成功举办“共建美好未来”大型主题图片展”，驻哥打基纳巴卢总领事，19th Nov. 2018.

³⁶⁶“马来西亚沙巴中国企业家协会组织 代表团拜访省外办”，湖北省委外事工作委员会，21st May 2024.

³⁶⁷“沙中总商会迈新里程碑 广州联络处 成立”，星洲网，4th Mar. 2024.

³⁶⁸“Chamber praised for fostering ties”，Daily Express, 24th Feb. 2024.

³⁶⁹“冯晋哲：基建差外资缺信心-沙工业化荆棘满途”，星洲网，10th May 2023.

³⁷⁰“CM supports SCCC's investment promotion between Sabah, China”，*The Borneo Post* (29th June 2019).

³⁷¹“沙中总商会首届就职礼 刘静芝应邀任特别嘉宾 刘顺泰亲自拜会呈邀请函”，亚洲时报，9th June 2019.

³⁷²“马中总商会沙分会联同州农业部代表 赴中国上海参加“中国国际上海进口博览会“探讨商机”，沙巴丝路网，23rd Nov. 2018; “【商会动态】马来西亚沙巴州农业及食品工业部考察团访问我会”，上海市福建商会官方号，via WeChat, 8th Nov. 2018.

³⁷³“Uncooperative civil servants to be replaced — DCM”，*The Borneo Post* (5th Oct. 2018).

³⁷⁴“马中总沙分会会长刘顺泰率领代表团 礼貌拜会州农业及食品工业部长王鸿俊”，马来西亚-中国总商会，4th Sept. 2018.

³⁷⁵“热烈欢迎马来西亚中国总商会沙巴分会访问团 莅会指导”，澄海商会，10th Mar. 2017.