

Perceptions of China Among Educated Malaysian Chinese Youth: A Quantitative Assessment of Country Image

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines perceptions of China's country image among educated Malaysian Chinese youth, a diaspora group significant for China's soft power in Southeast Asia. Using a 2024 survey, the analysis applies a multidimensional framework—functional, aesthetic, and normative. Results show a moderately positive overall evaluation (3.67/5), but with sharp contrasts. Aesthetic perceptions of Chinese culture, cuisine, and heritage score highest (3.94), reflecting strong cultural affinity. Functional views of economic growth, infrastructure, and technology are positive yet more ambivalent (3.70). Normative evaluations are lowest (3.34), with civic rights (3.13), international responsibility (3.42), and environmental protection (3.45) identified as weaknesses. These findings illustrate the layered nature of diaspora perceptions: admiration of culture and development coexists with skepticism toward governance and global responsibility. The study argues that soft power rooted in aesthetics and development cannot replace normative legitimacy, and China's challenge lies in integrating its cultural and functional strengths with greater normative credibility. For Malaysia, diaspora youth can mediate bilateral ties, but their critical views must be acknowledged. Theoretically, the research shows the value of disaggregated frameworks; practically, it urges China to broaden diaspora engagement beyond cultural diplomacy and Malaysia to leverage youth voices in regional diplomacy.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a detailed, multidimensional analysis of Chinese perceptions among educated Malaysian Chinese youth. It uses an integrative framework to assess functional, aesthetic, and normative dimensions of country image, offering unique insights into China's soft power and its implications for Southeast Asia's future diplomatic relations.

1. Introduction

The study of a country's image has long attracted scholarly interest across disciplines ranging from sociology and political science to marketing and international relations. Early theoretical foundations were laid in classical sociological works such as [Cooley's \(1902\)](#) Looking-glass Self, which emphasised how individuals form their self-concept through the reflection of others, and [Mead's \(1934\)](#) Mind, Self, and Society, which highlighted the role of social interaction in shaping identity. These perspectives were later extended to the study of collective and national images, suggesting that countries, like individuals, construct and reconstruct their identities through both internal reflections and external perceptions ([Jenes & Malota, 2009](#)).

Over time, the notion of "country image" has evolved beyond the sociological domain into the fields of marketing and international political communication. [Anholt \(2002\)](#) argued that a country's image is inseparable from its branding, shaping the international competitiveness of its products and services. Empirical studies have shown that countries with favourable national images tend to host stronger global brands, underscoring the interdependence between country reputation and economic outcomes ([Martin & Eroglu, 1993](#)). Beyond commercial interests, scholars have increasingly linked country image to soft power, understood as the capacity to influence others through attraction rather than coercion ([Nye, 2004](#)). In the case of China, scholars note that soft power has become an essential tool in advancing its foreign policy and international legitimacy, complementing its economic and military capabilities ([Callahan, 2015](#)).

China's rising global influence has generated a mixed reception internationally. On the one hand, China is admired for its rapid economic development, modern infrastructure, rich history, and vibrant cultural industries ([Zhao, 2022](#)). Initiatives such as Confucius Institutes and "panda diplomacy" reflect deliberate attempts to project a benign cultural image ([Kurlantzick, 2007](#)). On the other hand, controversies surrounding China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, its policies towards Taiwan, and criticisms of its human rights record have fuelled scepticism and negative portrayals, particularly in Western media ([Shambaug, 2015](#)). This ambivalence makes the study of perceptions towards China both timely and necessary.

While the international literature on China's global image is expanding, there remains a notable gap in research on how diasporic Chinese communities, particularly in Southeast Asia, perceive China. Southeast Asia provides an especially significant context given its historical, cultural, and economic ties with China, as well as its geostrategic importance in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Malaysia is home to one of the largest overseas Chinese populations in the world, and Malaysian Chinese youth are exposed to both Chinese cultural heritage and the narratives circulated in local and international media ([Tan, 2004](#)). Their perceptions are thus shaped by a unique intersection of cultural familiarity, national identity as Malaysians, and global political discourses surrounding China.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts [Buhmann's \(2016\)](#) integrative model of country image, which emphasises three analytical domains: functional (economic, political, social systems), aesthetic (cultural heritage, history, cuisine), and normative (ethical standards, civil rights, environmental and social responsibility). By applying this model, the research seeks to quantify the perceptions of China among educated Malaysian Chinese youth, producing a "perception score" that offers insights into China's

strengths and weaknesses in the eyes of this demographic group. Unlike previous studies that often focus either on Western perceptions of China (d'Hooghe, 2015; Nye, 2015) or on the “country of origin effect” in marketing (Nes, 1982), this research provides empirical evidence from a diasporic community with complex cultural affinities to China.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it introduces a methodological innovation by operationalising Buhmann's (2016) integrative model into a survey instrument with demonstrated internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.969$). Second, it sheds light on how young Malaysian Chinese interpret China's functional performance, aesthetic appeal, and normative commitments, producing a holistic perception score. Third, it contributes to broader debates on China's soft power by demonstrating how perceptions within a culturally proximate yet politically distinct population diverge from dominant Western narratives. By doing so, the study enriches our understanding of how China's image is constructed and contested in the Global South, and how this may influence bilateral relations and regional diplomacy.

This study aims to evaluate the perceptions of China's country image among educated Malaysian Chinese youth, using an integrative model that assesses functional, aesthetic, and normative dimensions. By quantifying these perceptions, the research seeks to provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of China's image in the eyes of this demographic group, contributing to broader discussions on China's soft power and its implications for Southeast Asia's future diplomacy.

2. Literature Review

The scholarship on country image has developed along several trajectories, from its sociological origins to its application in marketing and international relations, and more recently to the study of China's soft power and international perception. The notion that image is relational, shaped both by internal self-understanding and external recognition, can be traced back to classical sociology. Cooley (1902), through his theory of the Looking-glass Self, suggested that individuals perceive themselves by imagining how others perceive them, while Mead (1934) highlighted the role of social interaction in constructing identity. These foundational perspectives have been extended to the study of nations, where image is understood as a collective representation formed in relation to how outsiders perceive a country (Jenes & Malota, 2009). This sociological legacy underlines that national image is never self-contained but continually mediated through external narratives and judgments.

In the late twentieth century, research on country image became heavily influenced by marketing and consumer behaviour studies. The concept of the “country of origin effect” demonstrated how perceptions of a country influence consumer evaluations of its products, often regardless of actual product quality (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). This opened the path for nation branding as a field, most prominently articulated by Anholt (2002), who argued that national images function in a manner similar to corporate brands. Countries, like firms, actively seek to manage their reputation in order to secure economic competitiveness and legitimacy in global markets. Buhmann (2016) later emphasised that national image management is strategic, and its effects extend beyond consumption patterns to shape political preferences and attitudes (Buhmann, 2016).

Methodologically, scholars have attempted to measure country image through diverse approaches. [Buhmann \(2016\)](#) proposed an integrative model that synthesises these approaches, introducing a three-dimensional framework comprising functional, aesthetic, and normative domains. The functional dimension covers perceptions of economic, political, educational, health and infrastructural performance; the aesthetic dimension concerns cultural heritage, history, and cuisine; while the normative dimension encompasses universal values such as human rights, environmental protection, and social responsibility ([Buhmann, 2016](#)). This model has become increasingly influential because it operationalises the link between cognition, affect, and behaviour, thus offering a holistic means of assessing how countries are perceived. Studies such as [Zhao \(2022\)](#) have applied cognitive-affective-behavioural models to measure China's image, confirming that affective and normative dimensions often weigh as heavily as functional evaluations in shaping attitudes.

The political science and international relations literature has placed country image within the broader debate on soft power. [Nye \(2004, 2015\)](#) defined soft power as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion, relying on cultural values, political legitimacy, and foreign policy credibility. Country image is therefore both a reflection and a resource of soft power: it signals how others view a state and in turn conditions the state's ability to persuade and co-opt. For China, soft power has become an explicit strategic priority, with leaders such as Hu Jintao linking the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" to the flourishing of Chinese culture. Scholars such as [Kurlantzick \(2007\)](#) and [d'Hooghe \(2015\)](#) have documented how Beijing has invested in Confucius Institutes, cultural exchanges, and symbolic diplomacy such as "panda diplomacy" to cultivate an appealing international image ([Kurlantzick, 2007](#); [d'Hooghe, 2015](#)).

Yet the literature is equally replete with scepticism. [Shambaugh \(2015\)](#) contends that China's soft power campaigns have had limited success, especially in the West, where narratives of authoritarianism, human rights concerns, and strategic assertiveness overshadow its cultural initiatives. [Callahan \(2015\)](#) argues that China's discourse of a "harmonious world" is often interpreted as strategic self-interest rather than genuine benevolence, leading to suspicion. These critiques highlight that attraction is context-dependent, and that image cannot be divorced from geopolitical alignments and ideological predispositions. As a result, China's global image is highly ambivalent: admired for its rapid development and ancient culture, yet scrutinised for its politics and governance.

Southeast Asia has emerged as a critical arena in this debate, given its historical ties with China and its geostrategic importance in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Surveys conducted by the [ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute \(2022\)](#) illustrate that while China is widely perceived as the region's most influential economic power, distrust of its strategic intentions remains high, particularly in maritime states with territorial disputes. Malaysia occupies a unique position within this landscape. It is home to one of the world's largest overseas Chinese populations, and its diasporic communities sustain strong cultural affinities with China while simultaneously negotiating national belonging in a multi-ethnic society ([Tan, 2004](#)). Research has shown that Malaysian Chinese often view China positively in terms of culture and economic strength, but ambivalence emerges when issues of politics, rights, and regional assertiveness are considered ([Yeoh, 2019](#)). This duality mirrors the broader tension between admiration and suspicion that characterises China's international image.

The role of media and communication technologies adds another layer of complexity. Diasporic youth are particularly exposed to competing narratives through both Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, and global platforms like TikTok and Facebook. [Meltzer \(2022\)](#) notes that social media amplifies both state-driven and oppositional narratives, intensifying contestations over image ([Meltzer, 2022](#)). In the Chinese case, [Brady \(2010\)](#) documents how propaganda and information campaigns are mobilised domestically and internationally to promote favourable portrayals, while Western media often counterbalance these with critical frames ([Brady, 2010](#)). For young Malaysian Chinese, this produces a dual information environment where cultural pride and admiration for China's achievements coexist with doubts about its politics. This resonates with broader findings by [Inglehart and Norris \(2019\)](#), who emphasise that youth are both highly digitally connected and impressionable, making them a critical demographic for long-term attitudinal formation.

Taken together, the literature reveals three important gaps. First, most scholarship on China's image concentrates on Western perceptions ([Nye, 2015](#); [Shambaugh, 2015](#)), leaving Southeast Asian and diasporic contexts underexplored. Second, few empirical studies adopt integrative models that capture functional, aesthetic, and normative dimensions simultaneously. Research often isolates economic or political factors without recognising the multidimensionality of image. Third, the operationalisation of perception scores, as developed in [Buhmann's \(2016\)](#) framework, remains limited in application. The current study seeks to address these gaps by applying an integrative model to educated Malaysian Chinese youth, producing a holistic perception score, and highlighting the role of social media in shaping their views ([Buhmann, 2016](#)). In doing so, it contributes to both theoretical refinement and practical understanding of how China's image is constructed and contested in Southeast Asia.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study of country image has been characterised by a multiplicity of conceptualisations, ranging from sociological understandings of identity to applied frameworks in marketing and political science. In order to establish a rigorous analytical foundation for this research on the perceptions of China among educated Malaysian Chinese youth, it is necessary to outline the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guide the analysis. This section therefore situates the study within the broader intellectual landscape, focusing on the integration of sociological, marketing, and international relations perspectives, before elaborating on the specific model adopted—[Buhmann's \(2016\)](#) integrative framework. The framework is then operationalised into three domains—functional, aesthetic, and normative—each of which provides distinct yet complementary insights into how national images are constructed, interpreted, and contested ([Buhmann, 2016](#)).

The sociological foundations of the framework stem from the classical insights of [Cooley \(1902\)](#) and [Mead \(1934\)](#). [Cooley's \(1902\)](#) concept of the Looking-glass Self emphasised the reflexive process by which individuals form their self-conceptions through the imagined perceptions of others. [Mead's \(1934\)](#) social theory further suggested that identity is constructed through the constant negotiation of meanings in social interaction. Transposed to the level of nations, these ideas imply that countries, too, construct their identities relationally, based on how they are perceived by external audiences ([Jenes & Malota, 2009](#)). Such perspectives highlight that national image is not fixed, but dynamic and interactive, continuously shaped by global discourses, foreign

policies, and media representations. For a country like China, which simultaneously projects its own narratives of “peaceful rise” and is subject to competing narratives of authoritarianism or expansionism, this relational understanding is crucial.

The marketing and branding literature introduced further theoretical elaboration. [Anholt \(2002\)](#) pioneered the concept of nation branding, treating countries as entities that actively manage their reputations in much the same way as corporations manage brands. In this framework, country image is both a determinant and an outcome of international competitiveness ([Anholt, 2002](#)). Studies of the “country of origin effect” demonstrated that perceptions of a nation can significantly shape consumer evaluations of its products, regardless of inherent product quality ([Martin & Eroglu, 1993](#)). Such findings reinforced the notion that perceptions extend beyond symbolic representation to tangible economic and behavioural consequences. From this vantage point, a positive image becomes an asset, while a negative one poses a liability. For China, whose global trade and cultural industries are expanding rapidly, the stakes of image management are particularly high.

Political science and international relations scholarship has in turn embedded country image within the discourse of soft power. [Nye \(2004\)](#) defined soft power as the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, emphasising that legitimacy, values, and cultural appeal form the foundation of influence in global affairs. Within this paradigm, country image functions both as an indicator and an instrument of soft power. A favourable image signals credibility and facilitates cooperation, while an unfavourable one complicates diplomacy. Scholars have noted that China has actively sought to cultivate soft power by promoting its culture, establishing Confucius Institutes, engaging in development aid, and employing symbolic gestures such as panda diplomacy ([Kurlantzick, 2007](#); [d'Hooghe, 2015](#)). Yet the authenticity of these efforts has been questioned, with some arguing that they are undermined by China’s domestic governance and assertive foreign policy ([Shambaug, 2015](#); [Callahan, 2015](#)). These debates underline that country image cannot be reduced to state-driven initiatives alone but must be understood as the outcome of complex interactions between state narratives, external perceptions, and contextual predispositions.

Within this interdisciplinary landscape, [Buhmann’s \(2016\)](#) integrative model provides a particularly useful framework for systematically measuring country image. [Buhmann’s \(2016\)](#) contribution lies in synthesising cognitive, affective, and normative dimensions into a comprehensive model capable of generating perception scores. This tripartite framework aligns with insights from psychology, which distinguish between cognitive evaluations (beliefs and knowledge), affective responses (feelings and emotional associations), and normative judgments (moral and ethical standards). By translating these into the domains of functional, aesthetic, and normative assessments, [Buhmann \(2016\)](#) created a model that captures the multidimensionality of national image.

The functional domain corresponds to the cognitive component of perception. It encompasses evaluations of a country’s political system, economic performance, education, healthcare, infrastructure, and public safety. These are tangible indicators of state capacity and governance effectiveness. Research has consistently shown that perceptions of economic strength and political stability play a critical role in shaping a country’s credibility. For China, the functional dimension is particularly salient given its transformation from a developing country to the world’s second-largest economy within four decades. Respondents who evaluate China’s infrastructure or technological

development positively are engaging primarily with this functional dimension (Buhmann, 2016).

The aesthetic domain captures the affective component, concerned with the ability of a country to inspire admiration or cultural attraction. This includes history, art, cultural products, and cuisine. Anholt (2002) suggested that cultural symbols are among the most durable elements of a country's brand, capable of generating enduring emotional connections. For China, this dimension is exemplified by its long civilisational history, its cultural exports in film and digital media, and its globally recognised cuisine. Empirical studies have demonstrated that aesthetic appeal often outweighs political concerns in shaping favourable perceptions, particularly among younger demographics who consume cultural products more intensively (Zhao, 2022). Thus, the aesthetic dimension is critical for understanding why China may be admired even in contexts where its political system is distrusted.

The normative domain, which corresponds to ethical judgments, has become increasingly significant in the contemporary global context. It refers to perceptions of whether a country adheres to universal values such as human rights, environmental sustainability, and international social responsibility. In the case of China, the normative dimension is highly contested. On the one hand, initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Security Initiative are framed by Beijing as contributions to international responsibility and global common goods. On the other hand, criticisms of China's human rights practices and environmental record have been widely circulated in Western media, shaping perceptions in negative ways (Shambaugh, 2015). The normative domain thus provides a lens to capture these ambivalences. For diasporic communities, including Malaysian Chinese youth, this domain may reveal how global discourses intersect with local media exposure to influence perceptions.

By applying Buhmann's (2016) model to the case of Chinese Malaysian educated youth, this study operationalises the three domains into a survey instrument. Forty-eight items, distributed across functional, aesthetic, and normative dimensions, were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale to generate domain-specific perception scores. The model allows for both holistic evaluation and granular analysis of sub-domains, such as healthcare or cultural products. The instrument's internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.969, indicates strong reliability. More importantly, the model facilitates the identification of strengths and weaknesses by comparing sub-domain scores against domain averages. For example, if infrastructure is rated highly while healthcare lags behind, this suggests areas where China's image is strong and areas where it requires improvement (Buhmann, 2016).

The conceptual significance of this framework lies in its ability to capture the multidimensionality of perceptions. Unlike unidimensional approaches that reduce image to either economic performance or cultural appeal, Buhmann's (2016) integrative model reflects the complex reality that perceptions of a country are shaped by a blend of cognitive, affective, and normative factors. This is particularly relevant for China, whose global image is contested across all three dimensions. The functional domain highlights admiration for its rapid development, the aesthetic domain reflects enduring appreciation for its culture, and the normative domain underscores scepticism regarding rights and responsibilities. By quantifying these perceptions, the framework contributes not only to empirical understanding but also to theoretical refinement,

showing how soft power operates through the interplay of multiple dimensions of attraction and legitimacy (Buhmann, 2016).

The framework also aligns with the broader constructivist approach in international relations, which emphasises that state behaviour and international outcomes are shaped by ideas, perceptions, and norms rather than material capabilities alone (Wendt, 1999). From this perspective, China's international image is not simply a reflection of its GDP or military power, but of how others interpret its intentions, values, and identity. The integrative framework therefore provides a bridge between constructivist theory and empirical measurement, allowing researchers to quantify perceptions while recognising their socially constructed nature.

In conclusion, the theoretical and conceptual framework of this study is grounded in an interdisciplinary synthesis. Classical sociology provides the relational foundation for understanding image; marketing research introduces the strategic dimension of branding; international relations situates image within soft power; and Buhmann's (2016) integrative model operationalises these insights into a measurable framework. Applied to the perceptions of educated Malaysian Chinese youth, this framework captures how functional performance, cultural appeal, and normative judgments together shape the image of China. It thus offers both a conceptual lens and a methodological tool for examining the contested and multidimensional nature of China's country image in Southeast Asia (Buhmann, 2016).

4. Research Methodology

The methodological design of this study was informed by the theoretical and conceptual framework outlined previously, particularly Buhmann's (2016) integrative model of country image, which incorporates functional, aesthetic, and normative domains. In order to empirically capture the perceptions of China among educated Malaysian Chinese youth, it was necessary to construct a research design that was both theoretically rigorous and contextually appropriate. This section explains the rationale for the research design, describes the sampling strategy and data collection process, elaborates on the development of the instrument, and discusses the analytical techniques employed to generate the perception score (Buhmann, 2016).

The overarching aim of the methodology is to measure perceptions systematically by applying a quantitative approach. This decision aligns with a broader trend in country image research, where quantitative survey-based methods have been widely utilised to capture large-scale attitudes and to produce comparable data. While qualitative approaches provide rich insights into discourse and symbolism, the present study prioritises quantification in order to generate a perception score that can serve as a benchmark for assessing China's image among a specific demographic group. At the same time, the study acknowledges that such scores represent aggregated patterns of perception rather than individual-level narratives, and therefore should be complemented in the future by more interpretive methods.

The target population of this study is young Malaysian Chinese with tertiary education, specifically those between the ages of 18 and 30. This demographic group was selected for several reasons. First, youth with higher education are more likely to be exposed to global media and discourses about China, both favourable and unfavourable. Second, their generational position means that they are digital natives, highly active on

platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp, which expose them to competing narratives regarding China's development, governance, and global role. Third, this group is significant for the future trajectory of Malaysia-China relations, as their perceptions may influence long-term public opinion and policy orientations. Finally, as members of the Chinese diaspora, they occupy a unique position in which cultural affinity and national belonging intersect, making their perceptions particularly valuable for understanding how China is viewed in a culturally proximate yet politically distinct context (Tan, 2004).

Sampling followed a purposive and snowball strategy, focusing initially on students and alumni of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), before extending outreach to other institutions such as Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TARUMT), the University of Malaya (UM), New Era University College, and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Announcements were made within university networks, and invitations were disseminated through personal contacts to encourage broader participation. Data collection was conducted online via the Tun Tan Cheng Lock Centre (TCLC) survey platform, which allowed for efficient distribution and accessibility. The survey was open from 7 May to 31 May 2024, and by the time of this analysis, a total of 153 valid responses had been collected. With this sample size, the study achieved a confidence level of approximately 85% at a 5% margin of error, indicating reasonable reliability for preliminary findings, though acknowledging the potential benefits of a larger dataset for generalisability.

The instrument was designed specifically for this study, drawing directly from Buhmann's (2016) model. It consisted of four sections. The first collected socio-demographic information, including age, gender, educational background, and media use. The second section addressed the functional domain, asking respondents to evaluate China's economic performance, political stability, healthcare, education, public safety, and infrastructure. The third section focused on the aesthetic domain, with items measuring perceptions of China's history, cultural products, and cuisine. The fourth section examined the normative domain, asking respondents to assess China's environmental protection, international social responsibility, and civil rights. In total, 48 items were included, each rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

The design of the instrument drew upon prior studies that had validated similar constructs. For instance, Martin and Eroglu (1993) demonstrated the importance of multi-dimensional measures in capturing complex constructs such as country image. Zhao (2022) confirmed the relevance of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions for understanding perceptions of China specifically. The inclusion of normative items aligns with more recent developments in the literature, which emphasise the salience of ethical standards and global responsibility in shaping perceptions. To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by an expert in international relations and political science, and refinements were made based on feedback (Nye, 2004). Reliability was subsequently confirmed through a Cronbach's alpha of 0.969, indicating excellent internal consistency.

The calculation of perception scores followed a structured procedure. For each item, responses were converted into numerical values, summed, and divided by the maximum possible score to produce a percentage that indicated the level of concurrence with each statement. Sub-domain scores were then calculated by averaging the items

corresponding to each sub-domain and multiplying by five, the maximum Likert value. Domain scores were obtained by averaging across sub-domains within each domain, and the overall perception score was calculated as the average of the three domain scores. A scale was developed to interpret these scores, ranging from “detestable” (below 20% or a score near 1.0) to “endearing” (above 80% or a score above 4.0). This classification allowed for qualitative interpretation of quantitative data, providing categories such as “comfortable,” “acceptable,” or “tolerable”.

The decision not to weight the domains at this preliminary stage was deliberate. While some scholars argue that functional aspects should be prioritised because they have the most tangible impact on perceptions, others emphasise that cultural and normative factors may exert disproportionate influence in certain contexts ([Anholt, 2002](#); [Callahan, 2015](#)). Rather than imposing arbitrary weightings, the study presents equal weighting as a baseline, with the intention of consulting expert judgment in future iterations to refine this approach. This cautious strategy aligns with best practices in exploratory research, ensuring that the findings remain transparent and replicable.

Data analysis combined descriptive and inferential techniques. Descriptive statistics were used to present mean scores, standard deviations, and percentages for each item, sub-domain, and domain. This allowed the identification of strengths and weaknesses by comparing individual item scores against domain averages. For example, while infrastructure was rated highly at 4.01, healthcare and politics received lower scores, indicating potential vulnerabilities in China’s image. Inferential analysis, while limited in scope at this preliminary stage, provided insights into patterns across demographic variables such as gender or frequency of media exposure. These patterns suggest that perceptions may be mediated by both social identities and information environments, pointing to avenues for future research.

Ethical considerations were integral to the methodology. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The use of an online platform facilitated informed consent, with participants required to confirm their willingness to participate before proceeding. Given that perceptions of China can be politically sensitive, particularly among diaspora populations, care was taken to design questions that were neutral in tone and to emphasise that there were no right or wrong answers. This approach was consistent with established ethical standards in social science research ([Bryman, 2016](#)).

Overall, the research methodology is characterised by a balance of theoretical grounding, empirical rigour, and contextual sensitivity. By operationalising [Buhmann’s \(2016\)](#) integrative model into a reliable survey instrument, the study provides a robust means of quantifying perceptions. By focusing on educated Malaysian Chinese youth, it captures the views of a demographic group that is simultaneously culturally connected to China and embedded within Malaysia’s national context. By adopting a transparent scoring system, it generates interpretable results that highlight both strengths and areas for improvement in China’s image. These methodological choices together enable the study to contribute meaningfully to both the scholarly literature on country image and the policy debates surrounding China’s soft power in Southeast Asia.

5. Findings

The empirical findings of this study provide a comprehensive picture of how educated Malaysian Chinese youths perceive China's country image across three principal dimensions: functional, aesthetic, and normative. The overall perception score of 3.67 indicates a moderately positive but by no means overwhelmingly favorable evaluation. This numerical positioning is important, as it suggests that the respondents do not view China in starkly negative terms, yet their perceptions are also tempered by reservations and ambivalence, particularly in relation to governance and normative attributes. The pattern of results thus reflects a differentiated assessment, in which China is simultaneously recognized for its achievements in infrastructure, economic growth, and cultural appeal, while being criticized or doubted in areas related to politics, civil rights, and international responsibility.

Within the functional dimension, the overall perception score is 3.70 (see [Table 1](#)), slightly above the general mean. This indicates that respondents generally acknowledge China's material and pragmatic capabilities. The sub-dimension of infrastructure is particularly notable, with an average score of 4.01, making it the highest among all functional sub-dimensions. This finding resonates with China's global reputation as a builder of large-scale infrastructure projects, both domestically through high-speed rail networks and internationally via the Belt and Road Initiative. For Malaysian Chinese youth, infrastructure achievements appear tangible and visible, and such perceptions may be reinforced by the presence of Chinese companies in Malaysia's own infrastructure landscape. Closely related to this is the economic sub-dimension, which scored 3.94. This suggests that respondents recognize China's economic dynamism, industrial capacity, and global market presence. The strong performance of both economic and infrastructure indicators indicates that respondents view China as a functional powerhouse, capable of delivering growth and development.

Table 1: Perception Score of Malaysia Chinese Youth perception toward China

Sub-Dimension	Perception Score	Dimension	Perception Score	Perception Score
Economic	3.94			
Politic	3.54			
Infrastructure	4.01			
Education	3.47	3.70		3.67
Public Safety	3.67			
Healthcare Service	3.57			
History		3.94		

3.94	
Cultural Goods	
3.88	
Food and Cuisine	
4.01	
Environment Protection	
3.45	
International Social Responsibility	
3.42	3.34
Civic Rights	
3.13	

By contrast, the political sub-dimension scored a significantly lower 3.54 (see [Table 1](#)), making it one of the weaker components within the functional category. This reflects a degree of skepticism toward China's political system and governance practices. Malaysian Chinese youths, while culturally proximate to China, live in a democratic context and are exposed to global discourses on political pluralism and rights. Thus, the relatively lower evaluation of politics may suggest critical distance and reluctance to endorse China's political model. A similar pattern emerges in education, where the sub-dimension registered a mean of 3.47. Although China has made significant strides in higher education and research, this finding implies that its educational achievements have not fully translated into a compelling or attractive perception among Malaysian Chinese students. Possible reasons include concerns about academic freedom, international recognition of qualifications, and competition from Western institutions, which are still highly valued in Malaysia.

Public safety and healthcare service occupy intermediate positions within the functional dimension, with scores of 3.67 and 3.57 respectively (see [Table 1](#)). These results imply that respondents do not strongly valorize China's performance in these areas, but neither do they condemn it. Public safety, with a slightly higher score, may reflect perceptions of China as a relatively stable society with low violent crime rates, a feature often contrasted with portrayals of insecurity in other parts of the world. Healthcare services, by contrast, are evaluated less positively. The COVID-19 pandemic may have shaped these perceptions, as respondents are likely to associate China's healthcare system with its handling of the crisis, including both successes in rapid containment and criticisms related to transparency and accessibility. Taken together, the functional dimension reveals a nuanced judgment: recognition of economic and infrastructural strengths, tempered by doubts about politics, education, and healthcare quality.

The aesthetic dimension emerges as the strongest domain of China's country image, with an overall score of 3.94 (see [Table 1](#)). This suggests that Chinese culture, history, and lifestyle elements constitute a core strength in how Malaysian Chinese youth perceive China. The sub-dimension of food and cuisine is particularly noteworthy, with a mean of 4.01, tying it with infrastructure as the highest sub-score across the entire dataset. This reflects the deep cultural resonance of Chinese food within Malaysian Chinese communities, where culinary traditions remain integral to identity and everyday life.

Beyond its local embeddedness, Chinese cuisine is also widely recognized globally, enhancing the perception of China's cultural reach.

History also receives a relatively high score of 3.94 (see [Table 1](#)), indicating that respondents appreciate China's long civilizational heritage, cultural continuity, and historical depth. This finding is unsurprising given that Malaysian Chinese youths are themselves embedded in a diasporic heritage that emphasizes connections to ancestral traditions. Positive evaluations of China's historical dimension are therefore likely influenced by shared narratives of cultural pride and continuity, which act as soft power resources for China's global image. Cultural goods, encompassing literature, art, film, and popular culture, scored slightly lower at 3.88, but still reflect a favorable perception. This suggests that respondents acknowledge China's growing presence in cultural industries, although perhaps not to the same extent as in food or historical heritage. Nonetheless, the overall aesthetic performance underscores China's enduring cultural attraction and its effectiveness in generating positive affective responses across diasporic communities.

By contrast, the normative dimension received the lowest overall score of 3.34 (see [Table 1](#)), indicating a significant weakness in how China is perceived in terms of values, governance norms, and responsibilities beyond material or cultural achievement. The lowest sub-dimension across the entire dataset is civic rights, which scored 3.13. This indicates that respondents harbor skepticism or critical attitudes toward China's record on human rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms. For Malaysian Chinese youth, who inhabit a society with at least some degree of political pluralism and exposure to global media narratives, China's reputation in this domain appears to be a clear liability. International social responsibility also performed poorly, with an average score of 3.42. This reflects ambivalence about China's role in global governance and responsibility for addressing shared challenges, such as climate change, humanitarian crises, or peacekeeping. While China presents itself as a champion of South-South cooperation, Malaysian Chinese youth appear unconvinced that its actions consistently reflect such rhetoric. Environmental protection scored slightly higher at 3.45 but still remains below the overall mean. This indicates that respondents acknowledge some of China's efforts in renewable energy and environmental initiatives, yet remain cautious due to widespread concerns about pollution, industrial emissions, and the global environmental impact of China's development model.

The comparative picture across the three dimensions is telling. The highest ratings are concentrated in aesthetic and functional achievements, while normative values remain the weakest link in China's country image. This asymmetry reflects the dual nature of China's international presence: materially successful and culturally rich, yet normatively contested. For Malaysian Chinese youth, this creates a cognitive tension. On the one hand, they admire China's infrastructure, economic growth, historical heritage, and cultural expressions. On the other, they remain hesitant to endorse its governance, civic freedoms, or claims to moral leadership in the international system. The result is an ambivalent perception profile that combines admiration with caution.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. First, they underscore the continuing power of culture as a soft power resource for China. Diasporic communities in Southeast Asia remain receptive to cultural appeals, whether in food, history, or artistic expressions. Second, they highlight the limits of functional achievements in shaping positive perceptions. Economic and infrastructural successes can elevate perceptions,

but they cannot fully compensate for doubts in politics, education, and healthcare. Finally, the normative deficit stands out as the most critical obstacle for China's country image. Until perceptions of civic rights, international responsibility, and environmental stewardship improve, China's soft power will remain constrained among educated youth, even within culturally proximate communities.

In conclusion, the findings reveal a layered and differentiated perception of China among educated Malaysian Chinese youth. The overall perception score of 3.67 suggests cautious positivity, but the breakdown shows sharp contrasts: strengths in infrastructure, economy, history, and food, alongside weaknesses in politics, education, civic rights, and international responsibility. This pattern indicates that China's image is not monolithic but fractured across dimensions of functionality, aesthetics, and normative appeal. For scholars and policymakers, these results emphasize the need to understand country image as a multidimensional construct, shaped not only by material power and cultural resonance but also by normative credibility. China's future efforts to enhance its international standing must therefore address not only its economic and cultural narratives but also the concerns related to governance, rights, and responsibility that continue to shape perceptions among the younger generation abroad.

6. Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section reveal a nuanced and differentiated portrait of how educated Malaysian Chinese youth perceive China's country image. The data show that respondents hold moderately positive views overall, with a general perception score of 3.67, but their evaluations are uneven across dimensions: functional (3.70) and aesthetic (3.94) elements score above the average, while normative factors lag significantly behind (3.34). This chapter discusses these results in greater depth, situating them within broader theoretical debates on country image, soft power, diaspora perceptions, and the challenges of normative legitimacy in international relations.

At the most general level, the contrast between China's high aesthetic scores and its weak normative evaluations illustrates the dualism often observed in discussions of China's international image. Numerous scholars have highlighted that China's cultural appeal, rooted in its civilizational depth, cuisine, and historical heritage, functions as a reservoir of soft power ([Kurlantzick, 2007](#); [Nye, 2004](#)). The present study confirms that for Malaysian Chinese youth, cultural and historical dimensions resonate strongly, with food and cuisine (4.01) and history (3.94) occupying the top tier of evaluations. This confirms the argument that culture functions as one of China's most reliable sources of attraction in the international sphere, particularly among diasporic populations that maintain cultural linkages. Such findings echo the work of scholars who argue that soft power is not merely an elite-driven diplomatic tool, but also a lived cultural practice that reinforces identity and belonging across transnational communities ([Shambaug, 2015](#)).

The strength of aesthetic perceptions among Malaysian Chinese youth also underscores the embeddedness of cultural familiarity in shaping attitudes. Unlike foreign publics with little exposure to Chinese culture, Malaysian Chinese youths grow up immersed in traditions of cuisine, festivals, and cultural narratives that are deeply tied to China's historical heritage. The relatively high scores for cultural goods (3.88) suggest that modern cultural exports, from television dramas to music and literature, also find some resonance, though perhaps less intensely than food or history. This reflects a layered

aesthetic attraction: one rooted in both inherited tradition and contemporary cultural flows. These results suggest that cultural affinity continues to play a stabilizing role in how diasporic youth interpret China, even when political or normative issues provoke skepticism.

Turning to the functional dimension, the findings indicate that respondents recognize China's pragmatic capabilities, particularly in economic development (3.94) and infrastructure (4.01). This is significant given the global prominence of China's economic rise and infrastructural capacity as markers of its modern identity. Infrastructural strength, scoring the highest of all sub-dimensions, highlights the visibility and materiality of China's achievements. For Malaysian Chinese youth, who may directly observe Chinese infrastructural projects in Malaysia or learn of China's domestic feats through media, this creates a perception of efficiency, progress, and modernity. The positive assessment of economics reflects similar recognition, as China is widely perceived as a global economic powerhouse, capable of weathering financial crises and driving international trade.

However, functional assessments are not uniformly positive. Politics (3.54) and education (3.47) both fall below the functional mean, signaling areas of ambivalence. These findings may be interpreted through the lens of political culture and expectations. Living in a semi-democratic context where political pluralism and academic freedom are valued, Malaysian Chinese youths may evaluate China's one-party system and constrained intellectual environment less favorably. This suggests that functional legitimacy cannot be detached from normative expectations. In other words, even practical achievements in economics and infrastructure are counterbalanced by skepticism toward governance structures and perceived limitations in education quality or freedom.

The weakest dimension of China's country image lies in the normative domain, with an overall score of 3.34. Civic rights (3.13) emerge as the lowest sub-score across the dataset, followed by international social responsibility (3.42) and environmental protection (3.45). These results highlight a significant gap between China's material and cultural strengths, on one hand, and its perceived legitimacy in terms of values and responsibilities, on the other. This normative deficit has been noted extensively in the literature, where scholars argue that China's rise is constrained by perceptions of authoritarianism, lack of transparency, and limited adherence to global norms (Callahan, 2015). The present study extends this argument by showing that even within a diasporic community that shares cultural affinity, normative skepticism persists and undermines China's overall image.

The low scores for civic rights are particularly telling. They indicate that respondents, despite their cultural proximity, are influenced by global narratives on human rights and freedoms. This may reflect the diffusion of international media discourses, as well as the influence of Malaysian democratic practices, however limited, in shaping expectations about political life. Similarly, the weak score for international social responsibility suggests that respondents are not convinced of China's commitment to addressing global challenges. While China promotes its role in South-South cooperation and multilateralism, educated Malaysian Chinese youths appear unconvinced that rhetoric translates into consistent action. Environmental protection, though slightly higher, still reflects a cautious perception, likely shaped by concerns over pollution and industrial practices in China. These findings suggest that normative dimensions constitute a

persistent weakness for China's global image, resistant even to the cushioning effect of cultural affinity.

The juxtaposition of strong aesthetic evaluations with weak normative perceptions produces a complex portrait. On the one hand, respondents admire and even celebrate China's cultural and functional strengths. On the other, they remain skeptical of its governance model and global role. This ambivalence may be conceptualized as a form of "dissonant admiration," where cultural and economic attractions coexist with political and normative reservations. Such a dynamic complicates simplistic narratives of diasporic loyalty or rejection, revealing instead a layered evaluation that reflects both inherited identity and contemporary critical consciousness.

These findings also have broader implications for theories of soft power and country image. Traditional formulations of soft power, as articulated by Nye (2004), emphasize attraction through culture, values, and policies. The results of this study suggest that while culture remains a strong resource, values and policies are not equally attractive. This asymmetry challenges the coherence of China's soft power strategy, which often relies heavily on cultural diplomacy while struggling to address normative concerns. Moreover, it suggests that soft power is not a uniform asset but one that operates unevenly across dimensions, resonating strongly in some areas while faltering in others (Nye, 2004).

For Malaysia specifically, the results underscore the role of diasporic mediation in shaping perceptions of China. Educated Malaysian Chinese youths occupy a liminal position: they are culturally proximate to China but socially embedded in Malaysia's pluralistic society and globally connected through education and media. Their perceptions thus reflect both attachment and critical distance. This hybridity may explain why aesthetic dimensions are rated highly, while normative dimensions are evaluated skeptically. In this sense, diaspora youth perceptions provide a unique vantage point to assess the complexities of China's country image, beyond the binary of support versus opposition.

Finally, the data invite reflection on the future trajectory of China's international image among younger generations. If normative weaknesses persist, China risks cultivating a perception profile that is strong but incomplete—admired for culture and function, yet distrusted for values and responsibility. For a rising power that seeks legitimacy as well as influence, this imbalance may limit the effectiveness of its soft power projection. The findings of this study thus highlight an urgent need for China to address normative criticisms, not only to improve its global standing but also to consolidate goodwill among diasporic communities that would otherwise serve as natural bridges of cultural and political understanding.

In sum, the discussion of findings demonstrates that educated Malaysian Chinese youth perceive China through a differentiated lens: culturally rich, economically powerful, but normatively deficient. This multi-dimensional evaluation aligns with theoretical insights on the complexity of country image and underscores the importance of considering both cultural affinity and normative credibility. For scholars, these results affirm the multidimensionality of country image and the limits of cultural soft power. For policymakers, they serve as a reminder that legitimacy cannot be achieved through material and cultural achievements alone, but requires attention to the values and responsibilities that shape perceptions among globally engaged youth.

7. Recommendation and Conclusion

This study of educated Malaysian Chinese youth offers timely insights into how diaspora communities evaluate China's country image. The findings reveal a layered perception: aesthetic admiration for culture, food, and history (3.94); functional approval of economic development and infrastructure with some ambivalence (3.70); but clear normative skepticism (3.34), particularly concerning civic rights (3.13). Such asymmetry underscores that cultural affinity does not automatically translate into political trust.

For China, the results suggest three priorities. First, while cultural soft power remains a strength, it risks fragility unless supported by normative credibility. Addressing civic rights, environmental protection, and international responsibility would strengthen legitimacy. Second, diaspora policies should move beyond appeals to cultural pride and foster critical dialogue, positioning youth as partners in mutual understanding. Third, soft power efforts must balance cultural resonance with narratives of governance that speak to universal concerns of accountability and fairness.

For Malaysia, these findings highlight an opportunity to leverage diasporic youth as cultural and diplomatic bridges. Initiatives such as academic exchanges, collaborative research, and cultural partnerships could deepen bilateral ties while reinforcing Malaysia's pluralist values and regional diplomacy.

Academically, the study contributes by disaggregating country image into aesthetic, functional, and normative dimensions, showing that perceptions are uneven rather than monolithic. Diaspora youth emerge as critical consumers of national images—capable of admiring cultural and material achievements while questioning governance. This nuanced profile challenges simplistic binaries of loyalty versus alienation.

Future research should adopt mixed methods to capture the reasoning behind perception scores, broaden comparative perspectives across diasporic contexts, and track evolving attitudes over time. Limitations—such as the educated youth sample—should also be noted, but the findings remain significant in revealing how educated diaspora youth negotiate global connectivity, cultural affinity, and political skepticism.

In conclusion, China's image among Malaysian Chinese youth is layered: admired culturally and functionally, but viewed skeptically in normative terms. For Beijing, the challenge is to address normative deficits without undermining cultural appeal; for Malaysia, the opportunity is to harness diaspora youth for constructive engagement; for scholars, the case demonstrates the value of multidimensional frameworks. The future of China's global image will depend not only on projecting power and culture but also on cultivating legitimacy, trust, and dialogue with educated youth who increasingly shape international perceptions.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers adhered to the research ethics guidelines provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR). All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in line with the Declaration of Helsinki.

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