Young and Promising: New Generation and the Resilience of Taiwan-Malaysia Relations

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia. The focus is on the growing importance of people-to-people diplomacy, particularly through youth engagement. They have become central in fostering exchanges related to democratic values and popular culture, bridging the two societies in significant ways. Using literature and interview data, the paper analyzes the mutual exchanges between Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese youth, exploring the driving factors behind the rise of youth power and their tangible actions. Furthermore, the concept of a *new ethnicity* is examined, highlighting how their identities and behaviors diverge from traditional Chinese communities. This shift in identity, shaped by global influences and local contexts, marks a significant transformation in how these youth relate to one another and the broader Chinese diaspora. This evolving identity is expected to play a crucial role in shaping the future of Taiwan-Malaysia relations, suggesting that the younger generation will continue to play a vital role in strengthening bilateral ties and promoting cross-cultural understanding in the years to come.

Keywords: *Taiwan-Malaysia Relationship, Youth Power, Democratic Values, Pop Culture, New Ethnicity.*

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1. Introduction

The relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia has changed significantly since 1974. In 1974, Malaysia established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and ended its official ties with the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan (Jing, 2016). In response, Taiwan quickly set up the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Kuala Lumpur to keep unofficial communication open. In 1987, Malaysia countered by opening the Malaysia Friendship and Trade Center in Taipei, which helped maintain informal exchanges in trade and culture (Ku, 2000).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Taiwan and Malaysia had a relatively quiet relationship with little official interaction. However, this changed in the mid-1990s when Taiwan launched its Go South Policy (Hsu, 2017) to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia. This led to increased investment from Taiwanese manufacturers in Malaysia, taking advantage of currency benefits and technology. Soon, Taiwanese businesses became one of the largest foreign investors in Malaysia.

Malaysia's diverse society includes Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities, each with unique cultural and political needs, which has shaped its foreign relations. The government primarily focuses on Malay interests, leading to policies like the quota system that limits access for the Chinese community to public education, economic, and professional opportunities (Koon, 1997; Chin, 2022). As a result, many Malaysian Chinese have turned to the private sector and sought education abroad to avoid these restrictions.

Historically, Malaysia's strong Chinese-language education system has strengthened ties with Taiwan. Since the 1950s, studying in Taiwan has been popular among ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. Taiwanese students often encounter Malaysian Chinese as peers. The Overseas Youth Vocational Training School program, supported by Taiwan's Overseas Community Affairs Council, sees a majority of Malaysian participants compared to other countries. In 2016, there were 16,051 Malaysian students in Taiwan, making up 54 percent of students from the ten ASEAN countries and reinforcing Taiwan's role as Malaysia's top educational partner in Southeast Asia. However, recent trends show a shift toward English as the primary language of instruction, with local private universities becoming more prominent.

Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) aims to strengthen ties with the Malaysian Chinese community by fostering diaspora relations and supporting

engagement in Southeast Asia. However, Taiwan faces diplomatic challenges and geopolitical tensions with China, especially due to the competition from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Chao, 2016). Malaysia must navigate these issues within its domestic policies, affecting future bilateral relations.

Looking ahead, the future of Taiwan-Malaysia relations will depend on the involvement of Taiwanese businesses, alumni, and pro-Taiwan networks in Malaysia. The younger generation will play a vital role in deepening these ties. Their collaboration will be important for enhancing international relations between the two communities. They are likely to have the most significant influence in areas such as business, education, and cultural exchanges.

2.   Review of Taiwan-Malaysia Exchange Development and Analytical Framework

Over the past fifty years, key topics in Taiwan-Malaysia relations include education, international marriage, and economic investment. During the Cold War, Taiwan's alignment with the U.S. encouraged Malaysian Chinese youth to study in Taiwan, partly due to Malaysia's quota system (Lee, 2023). By 2022, over 12,000 Malaysian students were enrolled in Taiwan, making them the third-largest group of international students from ASEAN (MOE Taiwan, 2023). Many alumni return to Malaysia as influential leaders, helping strengthen ties through networks like the Federation of Alumni Associations of Taiwan Universities in Malaysia (Yeoh et al., 2018).

International marriage has also been prominent in research. Toyota (2008) examines how international marriages intersect with state control and individual rights, while Jones and Shen (2008) highlight trends and social integration related to these marriages in East and Southeast Asia. Specifically, Chee, Lu, and Yeoh (2014) analyze the challenges Taiwanese wives face in securing citizenship in Malaysia, showing the impact of ethnicity and nationality on cross-national family rights. Researchers like Ku (2006) and Tai and Ku (2001) explore Taiwanese immigration and investment patterns and their intersection with Malaysia's diverse ethnic relations.

Taiwan's policies, including the Go South Policy and the New Southbound Policy, focus on human-centered exchanges in areas like healthcare and youth engagement, emphasizing social connections over mere trade. Recent research has shifted to explore the socio-economic

impacts of the New Southbound Policy on diaspora communities and cultural exchanges (Soong & Claire, 2021; Yang, 2017; Wu, 2020). Hsu (2019) looks at Taiwan's soft power strategies, while Russell Hsiao (2023) highlights the importance of Taiwan-Malaysia relations amid U.S.-China competition under Anwar Ibrahim's leadership. New research avenues are multidimensional, examining Chinese female intellectuals' roles in Malaysia's political landscape (He & Chen, 2021) and the "Milk Tea Alliance" youth movement, which promotes democratic values through social media (Phalapong, 2023; Meesomboonpoonsuk, 2023). Karl Lee (2020; 2023) discusses Taiwanese soft power and its global influence.

Overall, while ethnic relations and government policies have traditionally shaped Taiwan-Malaysia relations, contemporary research increasingly examines technology, socio-cultural exchanges, and NGOs in promoting transnational communities. Ngu and Chai (2017) and Yang (2023) focusing on cultural belonging and contemporary food practices that reflect modern identities. This article emphasizes the younger generation's role in shaping relations through democratic values and popular culture, viewing transnationalism as a grassroots globalization process that offers new insights into Taiwan-Malaysia relations.

Table 1. Comparative Key Areas on Taiwan-Malaysia Relations

Key Area	Traditional	Young
1	Economic and Investment	Democratic Values
2	International Marriage	Pop Culture
3	Education	New Ethnicity

Source: The authors.

2.1 *Transnationalism*

Transnationalism is a key framework for understanding cross-border movements of people, ideas, and goods, challenging traditional nation-state views. Early scholars like Cristina Szanton Blanc, Linda Basch, and Nina Glick Schiller (1995) described transnationalism as the process through which immigrants create and maintain multi-stranded social relations between their home and host countries. This results in "social fields" that allow individuals to stay engaged with their countries of origin while living abroad. Faist (2020) further explores how migrant communities sustain

social, economic, and political ties across borders, leading to "transnational social spaces."

In the context of Taiwan-Malaysia youth cooperation, transnationalism reveals how young people connect through informal networks and digital platforms. These connections, driven by shared cultural interests like pop culture and democratic values, facilitate collaborative projects beyond formal diplomatic channels. Scholars like Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) emphasize the role of transnational social fields in maintaining cross-border relationships. Malaysian and Taiwanese youth build networks that promote the exchange of ideas and cultural products, highlighting grassroots movements in globalization.

Several Malaysian artists, such as Fish Leong, have gained international recognition; Leong made her mark in the Taiwanese market in 1997 and has since released 12 albums, becoming a prominent figure in the Mandopop scene. She has enjoyed successful tours across Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

2.2 Flexible Citizenship

The concept of flexible citizenship, introduced by Aihwa Ong (1999), She argues that flexible citizenship acts as a survival strategy, enabling individuals to adjust their national affiliations to benefit from global flows of capital, labor, and culture. For Taiwanese and Malaysian youth, this concept is especially relevant as they form complex identities shaped by transnational experiences. Ong's framework also highlights the rise of new ethnicities, as youth blend their backgrounds with influences from Taiwan's entertainment industry, promoting political and cultural cooperation across borders.

Scholars like Steven Vertovec (2004) stress the importance of transnationalism and flexible citizenship in helping diaspora communities, such as the Chinese in Southeast Asia, navigate economic and political challenges. For many younger Malaysian Chinese, their identity is primarily Malaysian rather than Chinese, showcasing a complex negotiation of cultural and national identities.

Zhou and Li (2018) further explore how cultural gifts and exchanges help maintain cultural identities and social status in the host country. Their study sheds light on how communities navigate their social standing through cultural practices, particularly highlighting the experiences of the Malaysian Chinese community in relation to Taiwan.

2.3   The China Factor

The "China factor" has become an important aspect of Taiwan-Malaysia relations, especially with China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia. Scholars like David Shambaugh (2013) have examined China's rising global power and its implications for the region. While this growing presence offers opportunities for Southeast Asian nations, it also poses challenges for countries like Malaysia, which have deep historical and cultural ties to China.

In shaping the identities and political values of youth in both Malaysia and Taiwan. Yeoh (2019) notes that Malaysian perceptions of China are shaped by various economic and societal factors, influencing how the younger generation views their cultural heritage. Ren (2021) highlights that Malaysian Chinese youth are increasingly reconnecting with China through transnational networks, creating a dynamic interplay between their Malaysian identity and ancestral roots. Benton and Gomez (2016) discuss how younger generations of the Chinese diaspora are redefining their sense of belonging amid shifting geopolitical landscapes, blending both Chinese and Taiwanese cultural expressions while navigating their ties to China.

While elder Malaysian Chinese maintain strong ties to China, younger generations tend to engage more with Taiwanese pop culture and democratic ideals, reflecting a generational shift in cultural engagement. This evolution impacts youth cooperation between Taiwan and Malaysia, as young individuals embrace both Taiwan's soft power and China's pop culture.

Despite advancements under Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, challenges remain due to competition from China's Belt and Road Initiative and escalating tensions between China and the West. Some Southeast Asian nations, like Vietnam and the Philippines, have resisted China's expansion, but Malaysia's traditional Chinese community, with its close ties to China, continues to advocate for strong relations with the Chinese government. This balance of influences makes Malaysia's stance on China particularly significant in the context of Taiwan-Malaysia relations.

### 2.4   Youth Generational Shifts

Generational changes in Taiwan are influencing how youth engage with political and cultural issues. Scholars like Dafydd Fell (2018) and Ryan Brading (2017) highlight the role of Taiwanese youth in promoting political

change, especially within Taiwan's evolving democracy. The 2014 Sunflower Movement, led by youth activists, aimed to protect Taiwan's democratic institutions from perceived Chinese influence. This shift towards activism is evident in how Taiwanese youth interact with their Malaysian peers, sharing experiences related to democracy and governance. Additionally, Chang Mau-Kuei (2005) discusses how younger generations in Taiwan are redefining their identities beyond traditional ethnic and national boundaries. This trend parallels developments in Malaysia, where youth of Chinese descent encounter different political models and cultural influences through their connections with Taiwan. Understanding these generational shifts is crucial for grasping how youth in both regions engage with democratic values, popular culture, and evolving ethnic identities.

Existing literature, particularly from Taiwan, often emphasizes a "people-to-people" approach in Taiwan-Malaysia relations. However, much of this research focuses on government actions and policies, overlooking the role of civil society, especially among youth. Moreover, Malaysian scholars rarely address this topic, likely due to political sensitivities. This study aims to fill that gap by highlighting the political and cultural ties between Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese communities. It seeks to move beyond binary narratives in current discussions and provide new perspectives on these relationships. The research also offers insights for future policy considerations, though it does not extensively cover the views of non-Chinese communities, which remains an area for further exploration.

In the absence of formal diplomatic relations between Taiwan and Malaysia, how can youth strengthen bilateral ties? This research will explore why key areas of interaction can deepen Taiwan-Malaysia relations. Given the shared pluralistic values in both societies, what opportunities do these areas present for youth engagement? How can youth drive future collaborations while addressing gaps in the literature on multi-track diplomacy in international relations? What policy recommendations can be made for both Taiwan and Malaysia?

Figure 1. Analytical Framework
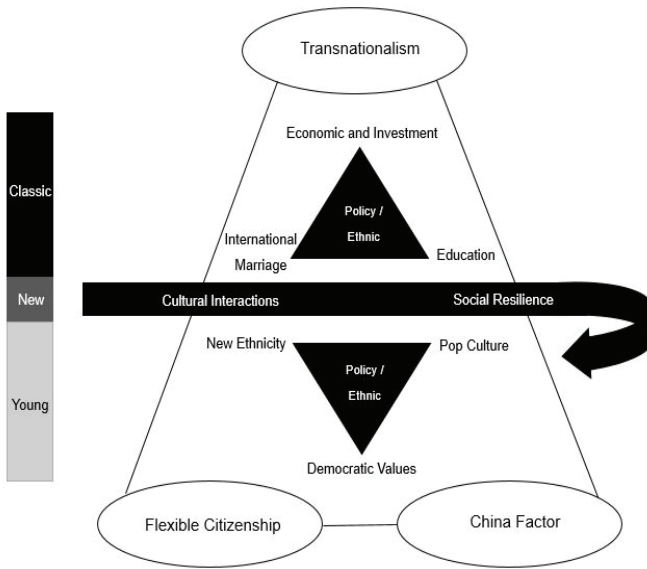
Source: Compiled by authors.

3. Three Key Areas of Youth Interactions between Taiwan and Malaysia

3.1 Democratic Values

The democratic values of Malaysian Chinese have been shaped mainly by policies promoting segregation and inequality. Both British colonial authorities and post-independence Malay leaders created legal frameworks that classified ethnic groups and treated non-Malay communities differently. The Malaysian Constitution, established after independence, guarantees special privileges for the Malay majority, and UMNO-led government policies have aimed at redistributing resources, reducing Chinese economic power (Jomo, 2017; Neo, 2006; Koon, 1997).

For over fifty years, the Malaysian Chinese community maintained a conservative political stance. However, generational shifts have led to increasing support for opposition parties, particularly in urban areas during the 2013 elections, which were described by authorities as a "Chinese tsunami" (Ng et al., 2021). The 2018 elections saw the rise of young voters

as a significant force, resulting in Malaysia's first political transition. While this indicated a resurgence of democratic awareness, it did not lead to substantial changes in the national system.

These generational shifts have produced varying political orientations across age groups in both Malaysia and Taiwan. Youth in both communities share a challenge: the difficulty of achieving their democratic values and desired changes through official channels. As a result, they are increasingly turning to alternative methods, forming connections with like-minded groups to promote dialogue and collaboration.

(I) The Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) Abolition

The demand for the abolition of the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA) reflects the youth's growing aspirations for democratic values. Enacted in Malaysia, the UUCA regulates the administration of universities and university colleges, granting the government significant control over the management and policies of higher education institutions (Wan, 2019). One of the most contentious aspects of the law has been its restrictions on student political participation, limiting their ability to engage in political activities (Wan & Morshidi, 2018). Over time, this law has faced increasing criticism for curbing student activism and suppressing freedom of expression, prompting calls for its repeal or reform (Aun, 2019; Weiss, 2003; Malaysiakini, 2023, March 7).

Figure 2. University Student's Group Call to Abolish UCCA

Source: Malaysiakini

Figure 3. Ho Chi Yang's Announcement Supporting the Abolishment of the UUCA

Source: Official Page of Ho Chi Yang, State Assembly Representative of Tanah Rata, DAPSY National Varsity Affairs Bureau Director.

Before the enforcement of the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA) in 1971, Malaysian youth actively participated in political movements and social activism, advocating for independence and addressing national issues (Mohd, 2017). They played a key role in the struggle for Malaysia's freedom from colonial rule, engaging in rallies, student organizations, and political parties. This involvement instilled a sense of responsibility among university students, who managed their own governance, helping to prevent corruption and ensure transparency in decision-making. Youth activism during this time significantly shaped the nation's political landscape and promoted democratic values.

There are growing calls to abolish or reform the UUCA due to concerns about its restrictions on student activism, control over academic freedom, and outdated provisions. Critics argue that the UUCA limits students' rights to free speech and participation in political activities, inhibiting civic engagement (Weiss, 2005). The Act is viewed as incompatible with the evolving political landscape and the youth's increasing desire for greater democracy (Zuan, 2021; Rathore, 2016). Advocates for reform seek to create an environment that fosters critical thinking, aligns Malaysian higher education with international standards, and empowers students to engage with important social and political issues.

(II)   Sunflower Student Movement

The Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan in 2014 was a significant political protest mainly led by students and youth activists (Rowen, 2015; Meesomboonpoonsuk, 2023; Phalapong, 2023). It arose in response to the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) between Taiwan and China, which many viewed as a threat to Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic processes (Hsu, 2017). Protesters occupied Taiwan's legislature for 24 days, demanding greater transparency in government dealings and increased public participation in decision-making. This movement marked a pivotal moment in Taiwanese political history, reshaping political discourse.

The Sunflower Movement greatly impacted Taiwan's political landscape by raising awareness and encouraging youth participation in civic matters. The movement also led to the creation of various civic organizations advocating for social justice and labor rights. Today, it remains a symbol of youth activism in Taiwan, influencing ongoing discussions about democracy, civil rights, and governance, and inspiring similar movements throughout the region.

Figure 4. Protesters Occupied the Legislature

Source: CommonWealth Magazine

During the Sunflower Student Movement, young activists gathered around democratic values, showcasing the transformative power of collective action enabled by social media (Meesomboonpoonsuk, 2023). Their involvement not only impacted Taiwan's democratic processes but also cultivated a strong political identity among youth. The movement

demonstrated how young people could challenge authority, advocate for their beliefs, and play a vital role in shaping political discourse. By forming coalitions and effectively using digital platforms, the activists established a significant precedent for future generations of activists in Taiwan and beyond, highlighting the importance of youth participation in political movements and democratic change.

(III) How Does the Milk Tea Alliance Inspire the Youth of Malaysia and Taiwan?

The Milk Tea Alliance is a loose coalition of pro-democracy movements and activists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and other regions, brought together by their love for milk tea and opposition to authoritarianism (Huang & Svetanant, 2022; Asia Centre, 2021). It emerged in 2020 in response to perceived threats to democratic freedoms and human rights, particularly from increasing Chinese influence and political repression. The alliance effectively uses social media to foster solidarity among youth, with the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance serving as a rallying cry for democracy, freedom, and social justice (Chan, 2024; Dedman & Lai, 2021). This movement highlights cross-border cooperation among Asian youth and emphasizes the importance of shared cultural ties in resisting authoritarianism.

Figure 5. Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy Held On and Attended the Protests in Taiwan

Source: Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy's Facebook Page.

For Taiwanese youth, the Milk Tea Alliance strengthens their commitment to political activism and social justice, inspired by other youth movements in the region. This shift indicates a departure from the more conservative views of older generations, who often prioritize stability and traditional values. Taiwanese youth seek greater autonomy from China's influence while advocating for their democratic rights. The alliance encourages them to engage in conversations about identity and governance, demonstrating how youth-led initiatives can shape political discourse and promote democratic change.

For Malaysian Chinese youth, the Milk Tea Alliance offers a chance to connect with like-minded individuals in Taiwan and beyond, fostering a shared understanding of cultural and political challenges. This connection is especially important given the China factor, as Malaysian Chinese youth navigate their identities in a multicultural society while addressing historical ties to China. By learning from Taiwanese experiences, they feel empowered to engage in discussions about their rights, racial equality, and representation.

This enables them to better navigate their socio-political environments while advocating for democratic values. Ultimately, the Milk Tea Alliance inspires individual youth and strengthens the relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia through shared democratic ideals. Democracy is not just about parliamentary actions or social protests; it is also practiced in everyday life, fostering creativity and encouraging innovation—an aspect that both Taiwan and Malaysia must value and protect.

3.2   Pop Culture

Before the 2000s, Taiwanese popular culture, especially music and drama, deeply influenced Southeast Asia (Meesomboonpoonsuk, 2019). In recent years, however, Chinese pop culture has gained significant popularity in Malaysia due to platforms like Douyin, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), as well as various streaming services (Bong, 2024). These digital platforms have facilitated the widespread sharing of Chinese music, dramas, films, and variety shows. Movements such as the Hanfu Movement, which promotes traditional Chinese clothing, have gained popularity among young Malaysians, merging traditional customs with modern fashion and identity (Chen, 2020). The appeal of these cultural products lies in their entertainment value and their connection to the Malaysian Chinese community's shared cultural heritage (Yang, 2022).

At the same time, Taiwanese pop culture continues to attract younger generations in Malaysia. Taiwanese dramas and music, known for their relatable themes and engaging storytelling, resonate with many Malaysian youth. Works by Malaysian artists and filmmakers, like Tsai Ming-liang and Namewee, have received recognition in Taiwan and internationally (TaiwanPlus, 2023). This cultural exchange highlights the dynamic nature of hybridization and the growing interconnectedness between Taiwan and Malaysia in popular culture.

Figure 6. *Abang Adik*, A Collaborative Film between Taiwan and Malaysia, Represents Malaysia's Bid for the Best International Feature Film Category at the 97th Oscars Awards in 2025

Source: GOXUAN's Official Facebook Page.

A significant aspect of the cultural exchange between Taiwan and Malaysia is the contemporary food culture that has emerged from blending Chinese and Taiwanese culinary traditions (Khoo et al., 2016). For instance, dishes like bak kut teh, traditionally linked to Malaysia, have gained popularity in Taiwan (Yang & Khoo, 2015), while numerous Malaysian restaurants have opened in Taiwan to cater to local tastes. In both regions, food culture is primarily a source of enjoyment, contrasting with China's regulatory approach, exemplified by campaigns like the "Clean Plate Initiative," which aims to reduce food waste. Such government interventions are less common in Taiwan or Malaysia.

The rise of Taiwanese bubble tea shops, the vibrant night markets offering a variety of street food, and the popularity of traditional Chinese dishes reflect a dynamic culinary landscape that attracts younger generations. Furthermore, Taiwanese companies seeking halal certification to enter the Malaysian market exemplify the growing mutual influence of these cultures (BERNAMA, 2023, August 27). This fusion of traditional and modern culinary elements enhances the visibility and acceptance of both Chinese and Taiwanese pop cultures, leading to increased interaction.

As youth embrace these cultural forms, they engage in a vibrant cultural dialogue that celebrates their shared heritage while fostering a sense of belonging in Malaysia's multicultural society. This interaction reinforces cultural ties among Malaysia, Taiwan, and China. Before 2000, Taiwan's pop culture significantly influenced Southeast Asia, but China's increasing presence has altered these dynamics. However, China's political controls on its creative industries have stifled the development of a more open and diverse cultural environment (Staats, 2011), making it less conducive to the multicultural, democratic context seen in Taiwan and Malaysia. This situation highlights the need for both Taiwan and Malaysia to nurture open, diverse cultural environments that promote creativity and innovation.

(I)   The Food Culture of Contemporary Young Malaysian Chinese

The contemporary food culture of young Malaysian Chinese is a unique blend of traditional Chinese influences, local flavors, and modern trends. Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, share many dishes with southern China, such as spring rolls, oyster omelets, and festive foods like rice dumplings for the Dragon Boat Festival and mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival. However, these dishes often incorporate local ingredients and tastes, with Malaysia's preference for spicy food distinguishing its culinary offerings. For instance, Hainanese chicken rice, bak kut teh, and laksa are adapted to include distinctly Malaysian flavors. The large Chinese population in Malaysia fosters culinary innovation and commercialization, enabling the global spread of Malaysian Chinese dishes through local restaurants. These dishes represent not only the effects of migration and settlement but also a transformation process involving food reproduction, localization, innovation, and globalization (Tan, 2012).

Youth embrace traditional foods but also seek modern culinary experiences that blend Western flavors and new cooking techniques. Social

gatherings around food are vital for identity and cultural preservation, nurturing a sense of belonging and continuity in Malaysia's multicultural society. Popular Chinese cuisines like hotpot have become a communal dining experience in Malaysia, reflecting cultural values of sharing and community. Additionally, regional specialties such as Sichuan dishes highlight the strong presence of Chinese cuisine, augmented by customizable dining trends and fusion street foods.

Figure 7. The Image of Two Pesos Restaurant Shared on Social Media Platform Shows its Popularity

Source: Facebook Page

The younger generation today often shares their food experiences on social media as part of their daily digital behavior (Khalid et al. 2018). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) are filled with food content, showcasing beautifully plated dishes, dining experiences, and recipes. This trend goes beyond merely showing off meals; it's a form of self-expression and a way to build a personal brand or identity (Duruz & Khoo, 2014). Food posts create engagement, as people seek recommendations, reviews, and culinary inspiration. Sharing food pictures also connects users across cultural boundaries, fostering a global exchange of food trends and appreciation.

(II)   Comfort Food and Cultural Identity in Taiwan's Young Generation

Taiwan's culinary heritage has transformed significantly over the past century, shaping the comfort food preferences of its younger generation. For

Taiwan's youth, food goes beyond mere sustenance; it is deeply connected to cultural identity and personal comfort. Comfort foods like bubble tea and night market snacks are especially meaningful, linking young people to their roots while symbolizing the dynamic, modern society they inhabit (Erway, 2015). Many share their dining experiences on social media platforms like Instagram or Threads, reflecting a desire for community and validation that reinforces their connection to Taiwanese culture in a globalized digital space.

Milk tea, in particular, has become a symbol of Taiwanese identity both locally and internationally (Putri & Baskoro, 2023). Originally a street drink, it has evolved into a global phenomenon that represents Taiwan's fusion of tradition and innovation. Taiwanese youth embrace milk tea as part of their cultural heritage, while its global popularity serves as a form of Taiwan's soft power. Sharing images of milk tea or street food online allows young people to engage in cultural exchange, asserting their belonging within a global trend while maintaining connections to their homeland.

Comfort food is crucial for Taiwanese youth, providing emotional support, cultural heritage, and a sense of belonging (Lin, 2024). In today's fast-paced world, comfort foods like beef noodle soup, milk tea, or pork rice evoke familiarity and warmth, often reminding them of home, family, and personal experiences. These foods serve as cultural touchstones, reflecting Taiwan's unique food traditions and helping young people navigate modern challenges while remaining grounded in their cultural roots.

(III) What Potential Does the Comfort Food Culture Hold for the Young Generation in Taiwan and Malaysia?

Comfort foods like milk tea and hotpot play a vital role in the emotional well-being of young people in both Taiwan and Malaysia, symbolizing more than just nourishment. Phrases such as "There's nothing a hotpot meal can't fix" and "If you're feeling down, drink a milk tea, and if that doesn't work, have two" illustrate the deep emotional connection younger generations have with these foods, viewing them as sources of joy, solace, and comfort in their daily lives. These foods are essential not just for sustenance but also as emotional anchors in a fast-paced and often challenging world.

By shifting from competitive to cooperative approaches, Taiwan and Malaysia can improve communication and collaboration with China, positively influencing global food culture. Comfort food, being a universal necessity and a source of emotional connection for youth worldwide, serves as a powerful

tool for cultural exchange and influence. Through these collaborative efforts, Taiwan and Malaysia can integrate their culinary traditions into global trends, contributing to a shared and evolving food culture.

Figure 8. Taiwanese Global Franchise, Chatime's Official Announcement of its Halal Certification in Malaysia

Source: Chatime's Official Facebook Page.

In today's digital era, the food culture of the younger generation goes beyond just the food itself. Behaviors such as sharing meals on social media and creating content around culinary experiences have become increasingly significant. These actions reflect cultural connections and values, emphasizing that the meaning behind them is more important than ever. This evolution shows how food culture serves not only as a source of comfort but also as a powerful medium for expressing identity and strengthening community ties.

Taiwan is well-positioned to lead in creating innovative food trends and redefining food culture due to its culinary creativity. In contrast, while young Malaysian Chinese may not have the same level of creative expertise, they are very open to foreign cultures. The inclusive nature of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia makes Malaysia a strong candidate for promoting diverse food cultures. This cultural richness allows Malaysia to potentially act as a facilitator in the global culinary landscape, fostering an exchange of ideas and flavors that resonate with young people across the region.

The synergy between Taiwan and Malaysia, especially in comfort food, presents an opportunity to enhance their bilateral ties. Collaborative food

festivals, culinary exchanges, and joint ventures in the food industry could promote mutual understanding and appreciation. By recognizing China's influence while establishing their unique identities, Taiwan and Malaysia can strengthen their partnership, using comfort food culture as a bridge to cultivate lasting ties and a shared cultural heritage for the future.

3.3   *New Ethnicity*

(I)   The Emerging Hakka New Ethnicity in Taiwan and Malaysia

Michael Novak's (2003) concept of "new ethnicity" highlights a shift in identity formation among immigrant descendants, moving away from traditional focuses on language, community ties, and cultural practices. Instead, this new identity emphasizes civic rights, social justice, and personal autonomy, reflecting broader changes in how ethnic identities are constructed in a globalized world.

In Malaysia, the Chinese community's identity is shaped not only by its linguistic and cultural heritage but also by its engagement with other ethnic groups in specific historical and social contexts (Tan, 2000; Vollmann & Soon, 2018). The formation of Malaysian Chinese identity often explores how this minority group navigates its ethnic identity within a multi-ethnic society.

In today's globalized context, constructing ethnic identity extends beyond local or historical factors; it also involves evolving relationships with ancestral homelands. For instance, Malaysia's Chinese community, which holds substantial economic influence and is increasingly involved in China's affairs, illustrates how global connections shape contemporary identity (Lean & Smyth, 2016). China's growing influence, supported by initiatives like the Confucius Institutes, has instilled pride and confidence within Malaysia's Chinese population. The rise of China has also changed perceptions of the Chinese community, shifting from past stigmas associated with communism to views of the community as economically powerful and culturally vibrant.

In this context, ethnic identity is becoming more individualistic, confident, and open to integration, advocating for equal opportunities for all cultural groups while maintaining awareness of ethnic roots. This transformation is particularly evident in the emergence of the Hakka "new ethnic" identity in both Taiwan and Malaysia. Supported by Taiwan's Hakka Affairs Council and related academic communities, the concept of "Global Hakka" is gaining prominence alongside the traditional "Central Plains

Hakka," serving as a key platform for promoting youth interactions and fostering a shared sense of Hakka identity across borders (Leo, 2015; Lim & Hsiao, 2009).

(II)   Understanding Hakka Identity among Youths in Sarawak

To explore the emerging Hakka identity, a survey was conducted between July and August 2022 with Chinese students in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. A total of 178 valid responses were gathered from participants aged 13 to 21 years. Among the respondents, 65.7% were female and 34.3% were male. Most identified as part of the Hakka dialect group, with 74.4% of fathers and 53.3% of mothers being Hakka. Additionally, 86.5% reported having Hakka ancestry.

In terms of language usage at home, 94.3% of respondents primarily spoke Mandarin, followed by Hakka (53.3%), Hokkien (19.1%), English (17.4%), and Malay (7.8%). The family environment was the main setting for learning the Hakka language, with 84.8% indicating this as their primary avenue for acquisition.

Respondents were also asked to choose words that best represented the qualities or spirit of the Hakka people, selecting up to five words. As shown in Table 1, the top 10 words were largely associated with economic and work-related traits, emphasizing a strong connection between Hakka identity and characteristics like resilience, industriousness, and determination.

Table 2. Perceived Hakka Traits among Respondents

Rank	Option	Responses	Percentage
1	Frugal	72	40.4 %
2	Generous	60	33.7 %
3	Hospitable	49	27.5 %
4	Hardworking	46	25.8 %
5	Mutual Assistance	44	24.7 %
6	Friendly	42	23.5 %
7	Kind	31	17.4 %
8	United	30	16.8 %
9	Enthusiastic	27	15.1 %
10	Optimistic	26	14.6 %

Source: Survey by authors.

The final survey question allowed respondents to share their views on the significance of Hakka identity, language, and culture. Many noted that Malaysian Chinese often identify simply as Chinese, with little emphasis on specific ethnic roots like being Hakka. The dominance of Mandarin and English, combined with a historical lack of encouragement for dialect learning, has restricted opportunities to learn Hakka, which is often gained through listening to elders. Despite their limited knowledge, some Hakka youth express interest in exploring and sharing aspects of their culture.

Here are representative responses from the survey:

1. "*I believe Hakka represents a tradition. During the Hakka Festival, I feel a sense of reunion among Hakka people. The Hakka language serves as a medium for communication. Without a unique language, it would be difficult to connect. Its significance, like that of any ethnic origin, is to unite Hakka individuals, reminding them they are not alone, and that Hakka will always be their home.*"

2. "*I'm not particularly clear about Hakka culture, perhaps due to educational policies (our school prohibited speaking dialects in elementary school). I feel there are fewer young people fluent in Hakka among our generation. My grandparents passed away early (before I was born), and the other elders were busy with work, so I received little explanation about Hakka culture. However, we do observe some traditional customs, like eating Lei Cha and ancestral worship, but I don't fully understand these practices. The elders seldom mention them, creating a gap in knowledge. I feel it's quite unfortunate; I didn't see the practicality of learning Hakka during my schooling years, and now I regret not having pursued it.*"

The emerging Hakka new ethnic group in Taiwan and Malaysia represents a transformative phase in Hakka identity, reflecting a broader trend toward cultural revival and globalization. This movement is closely related to the concept of "Global Hakka," which fosters connections among Hakka communities worldwide and emphasizes cultural continuity while adapting to contemporary challenges.

In both Taiwan and Malaysia, Hakka youth face the dual challenge of embracing their heritage while integrating into multicultural societies. Survey responses indicate a significant disconnect among younger Hakka

individuals regarding their cultural identity, often influenced by historical factors like language suppression and limited exposure to traditional practices. Through participation in cultural events, use of social media, and exploration of educational initiatives, they can cultivate a sense of belonging and cultural pride that transcends geographical boundaries.

These initiatives help the younger generation connect with their roots and each other, reinforcing a shared identity that is both rooted in tradition and adaptable to modern contexts. The "Global Hakka" movement encourages cultural hybridity, making Hakka identity a dynamic construct that incorporates diverse influences while maintaining core traditions. By embracing local traditions and global influences, Hakka youth contribute to a rich and evolving cultural landscape that honors their history while looking toward the future.

Table 3. Key Areas for Taiwan-Malaysia Youth Interactions

Factors	Democratic Values	Pop Culture	New Ethnicity
Generational Differences	Older generations believe that China's strength helps elevate the status of the Chinese community, reducing discrimination. Youth prioritize equality and civil rights, viewing interactions with China as mutually beneficial.	Older generations have nostalgic sentiments, ethnic identity, and seek connections with Chinese culture. Youth are drawn to novelty, innovation, and multiculturalism, seeking self-expression and personalized entertainment.	Older generations participate in Chinese tours, seeking family roots and engaging in business, linking ethnicity directly to China. Youth engage in studying abroad, influencer culture, and various scholarships, with ethnicity forming part of their identity.
Impact on Taiwan-Malaysia Relations	Difficult to expand cooperation to official levels or scale. Enhancing social resilience by empowering youth to collectively tackle societal challenges and advocate for transparency and inclusivity in governance.	Taiwan's lack of funding and resources compared to China diminishes its influence unless creative approaches are taken.	Except for Kinmen, Taiwan is not considered a "hometown" for overseas Chinese; global Hakka narratives align more with local realities, allowing for cooperation in more fields.

Factors	Democratic Values	Pop Culture	New Ethnicity
Potential Role of Youth	Democratic ideals are similar, drawing inspiration from Taiwan for political engagement and social movements.	Taiwan's multiculturalism and freedom of speech offer more space for living and creativity, making it conducive for youth entrepreneurship.	Harnessing the flexible advantages of new ethnicities to construct diverse and resilient transnational networks.

Source: Compiled by authors.

Figure 9: Three Key Areas Providing Strength and Support for Taiwan-Malaysia Relations
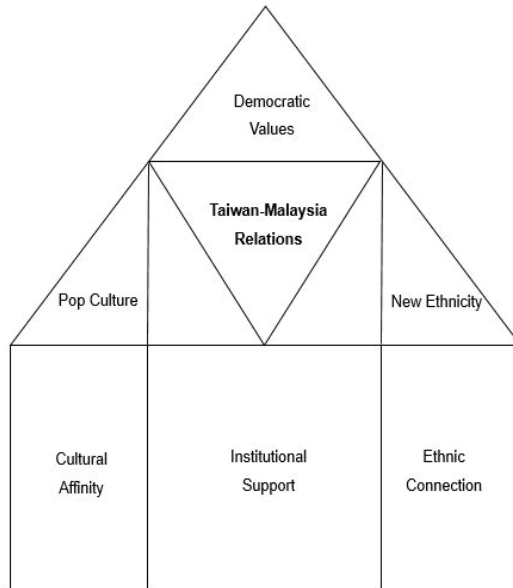
Source: Compiled by authors.

Conclusion: Youth as Catalysts in Taiwan-Malaysia Relations

This research highlights the important role youth play in shaping the informal relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia. Engaging young people offers a promising opportunity for fostering deeper cooperation, despite existing challenges. While there have been advances in cultural exchanges and economic interactions, significant potential remains untapped, especially among younger generations who are increasingly influential in contemporary discussions.

One key finding is that youth act as essential agents in promoting cultural interactions and social resilience within Taiwan-Malaysia relations. Through cultural exchanges, they create social bonds that enhance mutual understanding and collaboration. Engaging in cultural expressions such as art, food, and digital platforms allows young people to break down barriers and foster fluid identities that transcend national borders. This shared culture strengthens social resilience by encouraging collective action and solidarity in the face of external influences from larger powers like China and the U.S.

The study also reveals unique characteristics of Taiwan-Malaysia youth interactions. Embracing multiculturalism and using digital platforms as mediators facilitate transnational dialogues and exchanges. This openness to diverse cultural influences enriches the experiences of youth on both sides, enabling them to develop hybrid identities that reflect both local and transnational elements. Such interactions promote understanding and create networks that serve as vital channels for communication and collaboration.

However, it is important to recognize the limitations of youth engagement in this context. Currently, youth are not at the political core, and while their efforts are impactful, they may not lead to formal political influence or the resumption of official diplomatic ties. This reality underscores the need to manage expectations regarding the capacity of youth to drive significant political changes.

By focusing on grassroots experiences, this article provides a fresh perspective that highlights the importance of social and cultural factors in international relations. It suggests that meaningful relationships can develop outside traditional diplomatic channels, paving the way for more inclusive forms of cooperation. To establishing a collaborative framework that prioritizes youth engagement will be essential. By fostering dialogue, understanding, and joint initiatives, both countries can strengthen their relationship, benefiting themselves and serving as a model for other Southeast Asian nations looking to enhance their cooperative efforts. Ultimately, proactive engagement from both sides, along with a commitment to mutual understanding, will be crucial in realizing the full potential of Taiwan-Malaysia relations.

Notes

[1] Shihlin Taiwan Street Snacks® is everybody's favourite Taiwanese food chain featuring popular snacks from the alleys of Taiwan's night markets. Prepared the way they do over in Taiwan, the menu features authentic favorites such as XXL Crispy Chicken, Crispy Floss Egg Crepe, Handmade Oyster Mee Sua and Seafood Tempura.

[2] Taiwan's Hakka culture industry, "Burst Dragon" culture in Miaoli, the Hakka Museum, Hakka imagery, the development trend of the Hakka leisure industry, and innovative elements to promote Hakka culture industry, Malaysia's Hakka clans and associations and culture industry in Kampar, Hakka leaders, community interaction among Hakka clans in Kampar, the connotation and extension of Hakka folk songs.

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