



# Framing the bilateral relations between Malaysia and China: The news coverage of flight MH370

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## ABSTRACT

The mysterious disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 in March 2014 was a test of the bilateral relations between Malaysia and China. Two thirds of passengers on the flight were Chinese citizens. Immediately after the tragedy, many in China accused Malaysia of being incompetent, dubious and even deceitful due to its authorities' missteps and contradictory press statements. Meanwhile, some Malaysians saw China's reactions as unfriendly and hypocritical. Through the professional selection and presentation of news items, the media communicates a host of salience cues that the public can use to organise and determine the importance of these issues, and this subsequently forms the initial stage of public opinion. In light of the events surrounding the missing flight MH370, the critical importance of studying media representations across Malaysia and China has become all the more essential to understand the role of media in bilateral relations. Based on a comparative content analysis, this paper investigated the framing of the MH370 incident as well as Malaysia–China bilateral relations by mainstream Malay-, English- and Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia as well as by mainstream Chinese-language newspapers in China. The findings indicate that the newspapers carried an unequal weighting on the MH370 incident as well as the Malaysia-China bilateral relations. By employing different news sources, the newspapers also allowed different parties to act as opinion leaders to define or interpret the MH370 incident as well as the Malaysia-China bilateral relations. The two salient frames found in this study were “search and rescue operation” as well as “friendship, ties and understanding”. The coverage of the newspapers was also dominated by positive valence towards the Malaysia-China bilateral relations. Implications of the findings to the understanding of the framing and bilateral relations were also discussed.

Keywords: *MH370, bilateral relations, diplomacy, Malaysia-China, framing*

## INTRODUCTION

China has become a major global power at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its multidimensional growth ranging from economic, military, education, scientific to technological. Intellectuals from a variety of backgrounds emphasise that the rise of China will inevitably change the structure of world politics and the global economy (Liow, 2009; Manzenreiter, 2010; Yoshimatsu, 2012). These changes are especially relevant to Malaysia — China is Malaysia's biggest trading partner. Malaysia, on the other hand, is China's third-biggest trading partner in Asia and the biggest trading partner among member countries that make up Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In fact, Malaysia's trade ties with China have grown faster than any other country in the world, particularly since the financial crisis in 1997–98 (Devadason, 2009). In 2018, the bilateral trade between Malaysia and China grew about 14.7% to US\$42.7 billion in the first five months of the year compared with the same period in the previous year. Exports to China accounted for USD\$25 billion, while imports from China to Malaysia stood at USD18 billion (“Bilateral trade”, 2018).

The bilateral ties between Malaysia and China have been shaped not only by economic cooperation, but also by long historical links (tracing back to the Malacca Sultanate and China's Ming dynasty in the 15<sup>th</sup> century), geographical proximity and demographic structure (about 25% of Malaysia's population is ethnic Chinese) (Kuik, 2016). In one of the earliest studies on Malaysia's foreign relations, scholar Peter Boyce (cited in Kuik, 2015) observed in 1968 that relations with China were the key point of reference for Malaysia's foreign policymakers. This observation was true throughout the early decades of Malaysia's existence as a newly independent small state in a volatile international environment, struggling to quell the China-backed Malayan Communist Party (MCP) against the backdrop of the Cold War. Significantly, Kuik (2015) found that this observation has remained generally true to the present day. Although (or precisely because) the external and internal contexts have changed drastically since the end of the Cold War, China has remained a key point of reference for Malaysia's external policy planners. This time, the reference has been cast in a largely positive light, as China has gradually emerged as a key economic and diplomatic partner since the early 1990s (Kuik, 2015). In fact, Malaysia was the first ASEAN member to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1974, thereby subsequently setting a model relationship for the region (Bower & Nguyen, 2015).

In October 2013, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's three-day visit to Malaysia, the two countries elevated their ties to a “comprehensive strategic partnership”. The year 2014 was also designated as “Malaysia–China Friendship Year” to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. However, the bilateral relations were tested by an unprecedented event — the mysterious disappearance of Malaysia Airlines (MAS) flight MH370<sup>1</sup> in March 2014, on which two thirds of the passengers were Chinese citizens.

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<sup>1</sup>On March 8, 2014, Malaysia Airlines (MAS) flight MH370 had taken off from the KL International Airport (KLIA) at 12.41 am and was scheduled to land in Beijing at 6.30 am on the same day. However, the aircraft lost contact and disappeared from aviation radar screens about an hour into the flight. There was no indication of a distress signal from the plane with 239 people on board. The passengers comprised Malaysians (38), Chinese nationals (153), Indonesians (7), Australians (7), and nationals from France (3), USA (3), New Zealand (2), Ukraine (2), Canada (2), Russia (1), Italy (1), Taiwan (1), Holland (1) and Austria (1). Following the incident, Malaysia and various other countries launched a massive international search and rescue (SAR) operation. Based on reports and calculations from the International Maritime Satellite (Inmarsat), the plane was approximated to have ended in the Southern Indian Ocean (*The Star*, 18 March 2014). The search is still ongoing today, and the latest developments include the discovery of two pieces of debris in Mozambique, which allegedly belonged to flight MH370 (*The Star*, 26 March 2016).

Immediately after the tragedy, many in China accused Malaysia of being incompetent, dubious, and even deceitful due to its authorities' missteps and contradictory press statements. Some Malaysians saw China's reactions, including the state-sanctioned protest at the Malaysian embassy in Beijing, as unfriendly and hypocritical. Consequently, governmental decisions were delayed, including China's proposal to open a consulate in Sabah's capital Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia's plan to open a consulate in Guangxi's capital Nanning, and China sending two giant pandas to Kuala Lumpur (Kuik, 2014).

Later, in an apparent attempt to repair the damage to the bilateral ties, the then Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia Huang Huikang held a press conference in Kuala Lumpur, telling reporters that "radical and irresponsible opinions aired by some Chinese families, internet users and celebrities do not represent the views of Chinese people and the Chinese government", and that "China and Malaysia are sincerely co-operating with and trust each other" (Kuik, 2014, p. 5). The then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak also visited China from May 27 to June 1, 2014, and the troubled relations, subsequently, appeared to have recovered from a low point (Kuik, 2014).

Numerous surveys and experimental studies have found strong correlations between media coverage and public opinion about foreign nations (e.g. Frensley & Michaud, 2006; Semetko, Brzinski, Weaver, & Willnat, 1992). One of the mediating variables is the salience of an issue, in particular, the mass media have the ability to establish the salience of an issue with the public (McCombs, 2005). Through the professional selection and presentation of news items, the media communicates a host of salience cues that the public can use to organise and determine the importance of these issues, and this subsequently forms the initial stage of public opinion. Similarly, by comparing media coverage and public opinion in the context of international public relations, Kiousis and Wu (2008) found that public salience regarding foreign nations is influenced by media salience, i.e. a nation would be perceived as more important by the public if it received a greater amount of coverage in the media. For example, the visibility of foreign countries in the media has been found to vary with differences in public opinion (Semetko et al., 1992).

The media not only influences perceptions and opinions but also plays a role in shaping public attitude towards the portrayed foreign nations. In light of the above discussion, this study aims to examine the framing of the MH370 incident as well as Malaysia-China relations by mainstream Malay-, English- and Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia as well as mainstream Chinese-language newspapers in China. Using a framing analysis, this study asks the following questions: What was the intensity of coverage of the MH370 incident by the newspapers in Malaysia and China? What were the news sources used by the newspapers in Malaysia and China? What were the news frames used by the newspapers in Malaysia and China? What was the valence of the news articles published by the newspapers in Malaysia and China?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed framing as the theoretical framework. Scholars (Bosman & d'Haenens, 2008; McCombs, 2005) pointed out that the most frequently cited definition of framing comes from Entman (1993):

“Framing is selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in the communication of text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

In examining diplomacy coverage in the media, three dimensions have been frequently included: visibility, valence and frame genres (Manheim & Albritton, 1984). Visibility refers to both the amount and prominence level of an event/issue or a nation receives in news coverage. Prominence is usually demonstrated by some typical elements such as the article's placement in the newspaper or websites, the headline, the visual tools associated with the text, the mention on the evening television news etc. Valence or slant is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames. It is believed to have the potential to generate behavioural effects. These two dimensions combine to form the overall national image of a country. As such, a negative national image results from negative valence and low visibility, while a positive national image results from positive valence and high visibility (Manheim & Albritton, 1984). In agenda-setting studies, the visibility of a country in the media is likely to be identified in first-level agenda-setting research as determined by news frequency, while the valence of a country can be identified in second-level agenda-setting research as determined by the positive or negative framing of the news story. Entman (2007) also stressed that agenda setting, priming and framing fit together as tools of power, and he connected them to the explicit definitions of news slant and bias.

Other definitions for framing include “the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions” (Griffin, 2003, p.56); and “the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p.17).

According to Spratt, Bullock and Baldasty (2007), while previous research has exposed media frames that support the status quo on social and political issues, almost no attention has been paid to how newsgathering practices (such as choice of sources) and journalistic norms differ between types of news media, and how these differences affect framing. News is socially constructed and it reflects not just what happens but also the context within which it was gathered and processed (Spratt et al., 2007). It is a common understanding that the type of events covered (or not) and how they are covered are influenced by many considerations, including legal factors, economics, political forces, power relations, culture, race, organisational structure of media and work routine of journalists (Gan, Teo & Detenber, 2005; Tankard, 2008; Van Gorp, 2007).

Bruggemann (2014) stressed that the framing approach is a powerful tool to analyse journalistic practices. The author also argued that the coverage resulting from journalistic framing can be divided into three categories. Firstly, if a journalist mostly employs frames that are consonant with his or her own views, it will result in filtered accounts of a social problem. The journalist's interpretations will therefore dominate the coverage. Secondly, an interpretive account is a middle path where the journalist presents different ways of framing an issue, some of them in line and others in conflict with his or her own views. Then, the journalist frames the frames provided by external actors. Thirdly, if the journalist mostly

practises frame-sending and refrains from the different ways of reframing advocacy frames, this leads to conduit accounts. This pattern of news-making presents different frames on a given issue and does not provide cues as to which interpretations are more adequate.

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads etc. Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or issues that are included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (tone of the picture).

In 2011, Seo examined the conceptions of the journalist' role in their coverage of diplomatic issues, based on a survey of South Korean, US, and European journalists who covered the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear programme. The author found that South Korean journalists believed more strongly (than their US and European counterparts) that they are participants in the negotiation process and that news sources have a significant influence on their judgment of the newsworthiness of issues related to the talks.

Entman's analysis of editorial pages on self-identified liberals, conservatives and moderates discovered a significant relationship between the media and public attitudes. Specifically, depending on the amount of media attention, people were more likely to change their attitudes toward unfamiliar topics or foreign nations (Entman, 1989). Consequently, Entman (1989) argued that, in addition to influencing what people think about an issue, the media also makes a significant contribution to shaping how they think about it (p. 361). In addition, in their analysis of the Singapore-Malaysia water agreement, Tortajada and Pobre (2011) found that the media slowly evolved from being mainly a reporter to becoming an active platform for communication between the interested parties, officially and unofficially, as well as directly and subtly, subsequently shaping public opinion in both countries.

## METHOD

### *The Selected Newspapers*

The chosen Malaysian newspapers were *Utusan Malaysia*, a daily in Bahasa Malaysia or the national language; *The Star*, an English-language daily; and *Sin Chew Daily*, a Chinese-language daily. *Utusan* is considered the mouthpiece of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which is the dominant political party in the then ruling alliance *Barisan Nasional* (BN) or the National Front. In addition, *The Star* and *Sin Chew* enjoy the highest circulation among their counterparts in the respective vernacular stream. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) Malaysia 2018 Report, the respective average daily circulation of *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* are 107,609, 175,986 and 288,920, respectively.

The chosen Chinese newspapers were *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) and *Global Times* (*Huanqiu Shibao*). *People's Daily* is a leading newspaper in China and it enjoys a daily circulation of more than 2.4 million (Lin, 2010). More importantly, it is considered as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and has been the primary agenda setter in China (Huang & Chen, 2009). According to Zhou (2007), the *People's Daily* acts as the chief conduit of official interpretations of important political, economic, social and cultural events to party members and ordinary people across the country. In addition, *Global Times* is a daily newspaper under the auspices of the *People's Daily*, focusing on international issues. With its daily circulation of over 2 million, *Global Times* is considered as the link between China and the world ("Global Times", 2013).

## *Sampling and Coding Procedures*

The sample of this study was drawn from March 9 to June 30, 2014 as it represented the peak period of the MH370 incident. This study used a census sample as scholars agree that a census often makes the most sense for research that examines a particular event or series of events (Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). The unit of analysis was the article, which included straight news, editorials, columns, opinions and letters. The articles were collected via database search, namely extracting from the respective newspaper's online service by using "MH370" as the keyword.

To further sort out the articles that would be qualified for the study, the "30%-relevant" rule proposed by Yu (1996) was used to gauge the relevance of each article. To enable closer scrutiny, the articles were broken down to a smaller unit of observation, which was the sentence. Yu (1996) argued that the sentence was the most appropriate unit for judging relevance because it led to a greater degree of accuracy in analysis.

The data gathering exercise involved careful reading of the collected articles. Any article with 30% or more sentences relating to MH370 and Malaysia–China diplomacy was deemed qualified for analysis. The sample consisted of 364 articles derived from the abovementioned five newspapers. The articles used for the writing of this paper are listed in the Appendix.

The framing of the MH370 incident was examined from four different dimensions: 1) intensity of coverage, 2) news sources, 3) news frames, and 4) valence of the articles. The intensity of coverage was studied from two angles: 1) number of news items, and 2) type of news items.

There are two possible approaches to content analysing frames in the news: inductive and deductive (Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The inductive approach involves analysing a news story with an open view to attempt to reveal the array of possible frames, beginning with very loosely defined preconceptions of these themes. This approach can detect the many possible ways in which an issue can be framed, but this method is labour-intensive, often based on small samples, and can be difficult to replicate.

A deductive approach involves predefining certain frames as content analytic variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news. This approach makes it necessary to have a clear idea of the kinds of frames likely to be in the news, because the frames that are not defined a priori may be overlooked. This approach can be replicated easily, can cope with large samples, and can easily detect differences in framing between media (e.g. television vs. press) and within media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Similarly, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) stated that there are two ways to establish coding categories for content analysis. The first is known as priori coding, where the researcher establishes the categories before the data is collected, based on some theoretical or conceptual rationale. The second is called emergent coding, where the researcher establishes categories after a preliminary examination of the data.

This study employed the inductive or emergent coding approach for analysing news sources and news frames. The researchers outlined the following coding categories after a preliminary examination of the news articles: 1) Malaysian officials, 2) Chinese officials, 3) Chinese families, 4) non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and 5) others.

The following were the frames used in this study with their operational definitions:

1. Search and rescue (SAR) operation—reports about the cooperation between Malaysia and China, as well as other countries, in the search and rescue operation as well as reports about assistance and compensation given to the passengers' families and relatives.
2. Friendship, ties and understanding—emphasizes the long-time friendship, strong bonds and ties between Malaysia and China. Calls for understanding, patience, calmness and rational thinking of the people in Malaysia and China.
3. Criticism — presents the grievances, anger, disappointment or accusations of the Chinese passengers' families and relatives, or of the Chinese people in general. Reports on Beijing's demand and criticism toward Kuala Lumpur's handling of the MH370 disaster.
4. Trade and tourism — reports the impact of the MH370 incident on trade and industrial cooperation between Malaysia and China as well as the impact on tourism in Malaysia. Presents news on future cooperation between Malaysia and China in trade, industry, education, military, technology, etc.
5. Others – any other frames that do not fit into the above-mentioned categories.

Valence of the articles refers to the attitude expressed towards any individual, group, party or institution by its user (Baumgartner & Wirth, 2012; Feeley & Frederick, 2007). This study used the following categories of supportive, critical and neutral for the analysis of attitude expressed towards the bilateral relations between Malaysia and China:

1. Supportive—conveyed a favourable impression towards the bilateral relations between Malaysia and China; contained quotes from individuals who supported or encouraged cooperation, friendship and ties between Malaysia and China.
2. Critical — conveyed a negative impression towards the bilateral relations between Malaysia and China; contained quotes from individuals who criticised either Malaysia or China; caused readers to form a negative opinion towards either Malaysia or China.
3. Neutral — neither favourably nor unfavourably portrayed Malaysia-China bilateral relations.

### *Data Analysis and Inter-Coder Reliability*

The 364 articles collected from the five identified newspapers were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentage. To ensure the reliability of this study, a communication graduate was chosen as the second coder. During the training session, the first author (who was also the first coder) and the second coder coded 50 articles that were chosen randomly from the sample of this study. Disagreements were analysed and some additional explanations were included to the coding instructions in the code book.

Riffe et al. (2005) advocated random selection of content samples for inter-coder reliability testing while Wimmer and Dominick (2006) suggested that between 10% and 25% of the body of content should be tested. Therefore, the inter-coder reliability for this study was established by randomly selecting 25% of the news items, which was equivalent to 91 articles. Using Holsti's formula (cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), it was found that the inter-coder reliability for news frames was 0.92 and for valence, 0.97.

## FINDINGS

### *Intensity of Coverage*

*Sin Chew* contributed the most number of articles (159), followed by *The Star* (93), *Utusan* (69), *Global Times* (28) and *People's Daily* (15). As indicated in Table 1, the majority of the articles were straight news. In fact, both *Utusan* and *People's Daily* published all of their coverage in the form of straight news. A finding of interest was that only *Sin Chew* published editorial articles, while *The Star* published other forms of articles like Q&A and letters.

**Table 1.** Types of articles (%)

	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (n = 69)	<i>The Star</i> (n = 93)	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 159)	<i>Global Times</i> (n = 28)	<i>People's Daily</i> (n = 15)
Straight news	100.00	91.40	91.19	96.43	100.00
Columns	0	6.45	6.92	3.57	0
Editorials	0	0	1.89	0	0
Others	0	2.15	0	0	0

### News Sources

Table 2 reveals that Malaysian officials were attributed as the most salient news sources for *Utusan* and *The Star*. The Malaysian officials quoted by these two newspapers included the then Prime Minister Najib Razak, the then Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, former Prime Ministers Mahathir Mohammad and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the then acting Transport Minister Hishammuddin Hussein, various ministers and members of parliament, MAS representatives, etc.

**Table 2.** News sources (%)

	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (n = 69)	<i>The Star</i> (n = 93)	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 159)	<i>Global Times</i> (n = 28)	<i>People's Daily</i> (n = 15)
Malaysian officials	71.93	32.37	31.08	21.62	25.00
Chinese officials	17.54	17.27	46.62	48.65	50.00
Chinese families	3.51	19.42	1.35	10.81	5.00
NGOs	3.51	12.95	11.49	0	20.00
Others	3.51	17.99	9.46	18.92	0

In contrast, Chinese officials were employed as the most important news sources for *Sin Chew*, *Global Times* and *People's Daily*. The Chinese officials that were often cited included Chinese President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia Huang Huikang, foreign minister, foreign ministry spokesperson, etc.

### News Frames

As Table 3 demonstrates, “search and rescue operation” was the most salient frame in *Utusan*, *Global Times* and *People's Daily*, while “friendship, ties and understanding” dominated the coverage in *The Star* and *Sin Chew*. An important finding is that *Global Times* and *People's Daily* focused more on “Criticism” than “Friendships, ties and understanding” in contrast to the Malaysian newspapers.

**Table 3.** News frames (%)

	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (n = 69)	<i>The Star</i> (n = 93)	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 159)	<i>Global Times</i> (n = 28)	<i>People's Daily</i> (n = 15)
Search and rescue (SAR) operation	38.89	11.76	30.36	55.88	50.00
Friendships, ties and understanding	31.94	39.22	52.38	8.82	22.22
Criticism	13.89	18.63	7.14	35.29	27.78
Trade, industry and tourism	9.72	19.61	8.33	0	0
Others	5.56	10.78	1.79	0	0

### *Search and Rescue (SAR) Operation*

*Utusan* reported that the then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak stated that Malaysia and China will work closely in the search for flight MH370. Najib also held a meeting with China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhang Yesui at the Parliament House to discuss further action in locating the lost aircraft (*Utusan Malaysia*, 27 March 2014). In addition, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang made an urgent call to Najib, urging both sides to search for the missing plane and launch immediate rescue work. He also assured that China would do its best to relay information to the Chinese passengers' families as soon as possible and to appease them (*Utusan Malaysia*, 9 March 2014).

The then Malaysian Deputy Foreign Minister Hamzah Zainuddin was reported by *Sin Chew* as saying that financial aid would be given to the families of the crew and passengers on board the MH370 plane. The financial assistance would be provided by MAS and the Malaysian government would bear some of the cost (*Sin Chew Daily*, 21 April 2014).

Subsequently, *The Star* reported that the search for the missing MH370 plane would enter a new phase with an intensified probe over a larger area of the southern Indian Ocean following a tripartite meeting in Canberra between Malaysia, China and Australia. The then acting Malaysian Transport Minister Hishammuddin said that all countries expressed a sense of urgency to continue with the new phase of the search, citing it as an opportunity for other nations and research institutes to join in. On the country's handling of the search and response, Hishammuddin quoted Najib that there were things that Malaysia did right and others that Malaysia could have done better (*The Star*, 6 May 2014).

In employing the "SAR operation" frame, the study found that *Global Times* reported that Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei commended that Malaysia had made tremendous SAR efforts since the loss of the flight. Nonetheless, China urged Malaysia to disseminate information on the search in the Straits of Malacca and the Andaman Sea in a timely manner. Premier Li reiterated that China would not give up its search for the aircraft with 154 Chinese aboard as long as there was a glimmer of hope (*Global Times*, 14 March 2014).

*People's Daily* reported that the Chinese government sent a working group to Malaysia to handle the aftermath of the missing MH370. The 13-member group composed of officials with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation Administration of China (*People's Daily*, 10 March 2014).

### *Friendship, Ties and Understanding*

During his visit to China in May 2014, the then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib expressed that he would fulfil his father's legacy in maintaining the friendship between Malaysia and China. At the same time, he also recognised that the relationship had its up and downs, and the MH370 mystery has been very painful and testing; nonetheless, he stressed that Malaysia and China remained trusting and patient friends (*Utusan Malaysia*, 31 May 2014).

In a column article published by *The Star*, the author wrote that not many are aware that a must-do for every Chinese ambassador to Malaysia is to pay a courtesy call to Tun Abdul Razak's widow, Tun Rahah Mohammad Noah. The Chinese explain their high regard for the Tun Razak family with reference to a famous Chinese saying, "drinking the water from a well, one should never forget who dug it". It is the Chinese way of saying that they will always remember that Tun Abdul Razak was the first to visit and establish diplomatic ties with China, a move that led other countries in Asia to follow. In addition, the columnist highlighted that this was significant given the events following the MH370 tragedy where Chinese citizens had vented their anger and aggression in public protests against the Malaysian government. Nonetheless, the author was glad that it did not shake the relations between the two countries which have remained intact (*The Star*, 1 June 2014).

Interestingly, *The Star* published an article titled *FAQs about bilateral relations*, which was compiled with the assistance of Wisma Putra. The article answered questions like "How does the bilateral relationship in 1974 compare to now, 40 years later?", "How big a role has trade and investment played in driving the bilateral relationship?", "How has Malaysia handled the issue of the South China Sea in terms of its relationship with China?". The article also mentioned that China was the first foreign country that dispatched naval vessels, aircraft and experts to assist Malaysia in the SAR operations after the MH370 disaster. The article stressed that Malaysia strongly believed that China would have extended similar assistance even if most of the victims were not Chinese citizens. In summary, the article reiterated the strong ties between Malaysia and China (*The Star*, 26 May 2014).

Using the "friendship, ties and understanding" frame, *Sin Chew* reported that the Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia Huang Huikang mentioned that China remained good friends with Malaysia despite reports that relatives of Chinese passengers on board MH370 were upset with the Malaysian government. Huang added that Beijing was satisfied with all the joint efforts and he stressed that China and Malaysia are family, good friends, good neighbours and that the tragedy would never affect the good relationship. While emphasising that real friendship is found in adversity, Huang admitted that the Malaysian government was not doing enough as MAS did not adhere to standard operating procedures and inconsistent facts were reported. Nevertheless, he also admitted that the MH370 incident was an unprecedented large-scale event, and hence no one was perfect in handling the matter. He urged various parties to not push all the blame to Malaysia. Moreover, Huang claimed that some irresponsible Western media had spread rumours that were untrue, in the attempt to create tension between China and Malaysia (*Sin Chew Daily*, 3 April 2014).

*Sin Chew* also published a column article written by Huang. In the article, Huang spoke about how the bilateral relations between China and Malaysia have developed smoothly since the establishment of diplomatic relations 40 years ago. He also emphasised that the two countries got to know each other better, further deepening the bonds of mutual trust. The two countries also sought common ground while reserving differences in the spirit of inclusion and win-win. When Chinese President Xi visited Malaysia in October 2013, he and Najib elevated the bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership, which was a historical highlight for China and Malaysia. It is noteworthy that Huang quoted "a friend in need is a friend indeed". He recalled that in early 2008 when a part of southern China suffered freezing rain and a snow disaster, the Malaysian government donated USD1 million (RM3.2 million)

and established the China Relief Fund. Also, after the severe earthquake that struck Wenchuan in Sichuan, the Malaysian government and its people again extended a warm helping hand; Malaysia was also the biggest donor in terms of monetary contribution. Huang expressed that the Chinese people would forever remember the goodwill of all Malaysians. He added that when the MH370 flight incident occurred, China stood alongside Malaysia and the two countries worked together as a family (*Sin Chew Daily*, 26 May 2014).

*Global Times* published an editorial article, which criticised the mainstream Western media for focusing on the “intense relations” between China and Malaysia after the MH370 incident. In addition, a Chinese female tourist was reportedly kidnapped by suspected Filipino insurgents on April 2, 2014. These incidents offered opportunities for the Western media to incite negative impressions of the Sino-Malaysia bilateral relations. The author admitted that the Chinese public was very dissatisfied with Kuala Lumpur over its handling of the vanished plane, with some venting their anger vehemently. However, the author explained that those were impulsive condemnations and did not represent the general attitude of the Chinese society as a whole. The article also assured that the MH370 incident was not significant enough to alter the friendly nature of China-Malaysia relations. The author pointed out that public opinion, in particular online opinion, was often in disarray and contradicted with the core interests of China. Therefore, the Chinese media were advised to be responsible and rational, especially when reporting on major public events (*Global Times*, 4 April 2014).

### **Criticism**

By undertaking the “Criticism” frame, *Utusan* reported that in Beijing, furious Chinese relatives were ramping up pressure on the Malaysian and Chinese governments to give them answers on the details of the accident. They were threatening lawsuits and demanding to see Chinese President Xi (*Utusan Malaysia*, 13 March 2014a). MAS as well as the Malaysian and Chinese governments responded that they were doing all they could for the relatives, though Beijing demanded Kuala Lumpur to drastically step up its efforts (*Utusan Malaysia*, 13 March 2014b).

*The Star* reported that close to 200 upset family members of the MH370 Chinese passengers had marched towards the Malaysian Embassy in Beijing, while holding placards and chanting slogans like “Give me back my family members”. Police, military police and security personnel, who had cordoned off the street, allowed the protesting family members to pass through. Pressmen, however, were restricted to an area cordoned off by barricade tape. This prompted the family members to try to “free” the pressmen and the situation then turned chaotic amid shouts of “media freedom”. Subsequently, the family members handed a statement to the embassy which was received by the second secretary Al-Fadil Adam (*The Star*, 26 March 2014).

*People’s Daily* reported that many family members had bitterly accused Malaysia of a dubious and incompetent response. There was mounting frustration among the Chinese public over the many still unanswered questions as to why the Beijing-bound plane suddenly took a sharp left turn over the Malaysian peninsula, and whether the tragedy could have been caused by hijackers, the actions of the flight crew, or a result of some other mid-air disaster (*People’s Daily*, 25 March 2014).

### **Trade, Industry and Tourism**

By employing the “trade, industry and tourism” frame, *Utusan* reported that the Malaysian Tourism Ministry would only resume promotional activities in China when there was closure to the MH370 tragedy. The then Tourism and Culture Minister Nazri revealed that there were about 30,000 cancellations from China tourists in 2014, while there was no booking for 2015 although more than 1.6 million Chinese tourists visited Malaysia in 2013, making them the

third-largest group to do so after Singapore and Indonesia. Nonetheless, Nazri contended that the Chinese had to express their anger somewhere and Malaysians were “big enough” to accept it during that difficult period (*Utusan Malaysia*, 25 April 2014).

*Sin Chew* reported that Ong Chong Yi, Minister Counsellor (economic affairs) of the Malaysian Embassy in China, shared that the Chinese believe that by the age of 40, one should no longer have any doubts. This underscored the diplomatic ties and economic cooperation between Malaysia and China over the last 40 years that have grown exponentially, with the most notable development being the “Two Country Twin Parks” project. The one-of-its-kind project — one park in Qinzhou, Guangxi province, and another in Kuantan, Pahang — underlines the strong commitment between both countries. On whether the missing flight MH370 would affect bilateral trade and investment ties, Ong was certain that the incident would not cause any long-term negative impact on Malaysia-China trade relations. He observed that the impact was mainly confined to the tourism sector and believed that Chinese companies were aware of Malaysia’s reliable infrastructure, world-class facilities, investment incentives, skilled manpower and pro-business government. He was also confident that quality investments from China would continue to flow in and committed investments would proceed as planned (*Sin Chew Daily*, 23 May 2014).

### Valence

Among the five newspapers, *People’s Daily* appeared to be the most supportive towards a friendly Malaysia-China bilateral relationship, followed by *Sin Chew*, *Global Times*, *The Star* and *Utusan* (see Table 4). It is also interesting to note that the most prevalent valence in *Utusan* was neutral, while both supportive and neutral valence dominated *The Star*’s coverage. Although it was found that both *Global Times* and *People’s Daily* focused more on “Criticism” than “Friendships, ties and understanding”, the supportive valence towards Malaysia-China bilateral relations was found to be most salient in *Sin Chew*, *Global Times* and *People’s Daily*.

**Table 4.** Valence (%)

	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (n = 69)	<i>The Star</i> (n = 93)	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 159)	<i>Global Times</i> (n = 28)	<i>People’s Daily</i> (n = 15)
Supportive	33.33	38.71	51.57	42.86	53.33
Neutral	57.97	38.71	39.00	32.14	20.00
Critical	8.70	22.58	9.43	25.00	26.67

## DISCUSSION

Political and social scientists have pointed out that Malaysia's foreign policy as a whole has not received much scholarly attention (Monte, 2011; Balakrishnan, 2006) and this also holds true for the systematic examination of Malaysia-China relations. The current study contributed in narrowing the knowledge gap in this area by offering a systematic comparison between the Malaysian and Chinese newspapers in their coverage of the MH370 incident and Malaysia-China relations.

The differences in the number of articles published by the five newspapers indicated that they carried an unequal weighting on the MH370 incident as well as Malaysia-China bilateral relations. Kim and Barnett (1996) highlighted that the local news coverage of a foreign country is dependent on its geographical size, population, economic development and the duration of its status as a sovereign nation. In addition, the amount of coverage will be primarily determined by the relevance of an overseas event to the local country's involvement in the affairs of that country. Significantly, Chang, Shoemaker and Brendlinger (1987) found that the coverage would also be more positive than the coverage of an event of comparable importance that did not feature such involvement. This study showed that *Sin Chew* devoted the most attention to the MH370 incident and Malaysia-China bilateral relations. It was followed by *The Star*, *Utusan*, *Global Times* and *People's Daily*. This also reflects that the Malaysian newspapers gave much more attention to the incident and bilateral relations between the two countries in contrast to the Chinese newspapers.

It is noteworthy that only *Sin Chew* carried editorials on the incident. Editorials are "barometers of the thinking of the most powerful voices within the newspaper and corporate hierarchy" (Fahmy, 2005, p. 390); this proves again that *Sin Chew* was the most concerned about the relationship between the two countries. Many Malaysian Chinese have forged strong business interests in China; therefore, this could explain why *Sin Chew* devoted much attention to the MH370 incident as well as Malaysia-China relations. Another possible explanation could be attributed to the Malaysian Chinese often proudly proclaiming their historical links to China (Tan, Thock, Ngah, & Goh, 2012), where their forefathers originated, and hence tend to pay more attention to the ties between Malaysia and China. In addition, the findings also suggest that the framing of the MH370 incident and Malaysia-China bilateral relations reflected the political economic and ideological boundaries within which journalists work.

Entman (1993) argued that, to some extent, the source is the story. This study showed that both *Utusan* and *The Star* allowed Malaysian officials to act as opinion leaders in defining the MH370 incident as well as the Malaysia-China relations. In contrast, *Sin Chew*, *Global Times* and *People's Daily* gave Chinese officials the privilege to construct and impose their version of reality on their respective readers.

Liow (2009) emphasised that a study of Malaysia's China policy will serve as an important contribution to the security studies canon. The author added that such studies would provide important insights as to how small states conduct their relations with great powers. From the findings of the current study, it is evident that both the governments of Malaysia and China aspire to maintain close and friendly bilateral relations. In addition, many scholars (Alagappa, 2013; Bower & Nguyen, 2015; Kuik, 2016) recognised that the economic pragmatism approach undertaken by the Malaysian leaders was to maximise trade and investment benefits from China's vast and growing economy.

According to Lim (2009), the employment of economic pragmatism to further maximise commercial benefits from China was not purely an economic or foreign policy matter, but also to regain political ground and survival for the then ruling alliance BN. Lim explained that Najib adopted measures aimed at enhancing his government's performance in

ensuring and delivering economic growth, alongside other pathways of legitimation. Undoubtedly, BN's weakened position after the 2008 and 2013 elections further increased the salience of performance legitimacy for Najib.

Kuik (2014) also concurred that Najib cannot afford to allow Malaysia's economy to continue to deteriorate. It was, therefore, crucial for Najib to search for sources of growth in order to haul the country's economy out of recession, and China proved to be a promising source. In fact, Najib stated on his 2009 Beijing trip that China would be at the "forefront" to pull the world out of recession as it is one of the few countries that would be able to "survive" the economic crisis better than others. He also noted that the revival of the world economy would witness a greater integration of major economies in East Asia with those of Southeast Asia. This shift would create many opportunities and Malaysia should take advantage of them by advancing and upgrading its relations with China (Kuik, 2014, p.10).

In analysing the trends in Southeast Asia, Lee (2014) recognised that many groups and individuals in UMNO were reluctant to appear too close to the United States. Additionally, the pro-business ethnic Chinese community has forged strong business interests in China and would be critical of any potential loss of commercial opportunity resulting from any political deterioration of the Sino-Malaysia relationship. Therefore, Lee (2014) argued that these domestic factors provide strong motivation and incentive for Kuala Lumpur to stick with its current approach to China, i.e. forging ahead with a "comprehensive strategic relationship" with China, whilst in reality, making itself a "small target" when it comes to political disagreements with Beijing, and quietly reaffirming and strengthening military relations with the United States at the same time.

In addition, it is noteworthy that many observers believed that China's softening stance towards Malaysia with regard to the MH370 incident was driven in part by geopolitical considerations; Malaysia is an important member of ASEAN, which Beijing does not want to alienate because "it needs Malaysia as a counterweight to countries like the Philippines and Singapore in its diplomatic strategy in the region" (Kuik, 2014, p. 12). The *Economist* held a similar view: "In the regional battle of wills with America, China needs good relations with Malaysia" (Kuik, 2014, p. 12). According to another analysis, China would not take any action "that could provide the United States with a major strategic advantage at Beijing's expense. During President Obama's visit to Kuala Lumpur in April 2014, he stood up for Malaysia by praising its leadership of the MH370 search operation" (Kuik, 2014, p.13).

It is a common notion that the news media plays a vital role in constructing and shaping the image of a nation (Soroka, 2003; Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004). National image, also called "national stereotype" (Huang & Leung, 2005) or "nation branding" (Zhang & Meadows, 2012), is often associated with public diplomacy, international perception and international relations. In addition to its informing function, the media also takes upon itself an interpretive function, especially when the subject of the news story is relatively far removed from the experience of the readers (Van Belle, 2003). Thus, news coverage permits the media to not only selectively transmit information, but to transmit a particular narrative framework. Some scholars contended that ideology plays a key role in framing international events and argued that the coverage of international events is motivated by the political preferences and strategic perceptions of a nation (Entman, 2007; Nye, 2004). Based on the above discussion, it is not surprising that the newspapers in this study portrayed a rather supportive valence for Malaysia-China relations.

## CONCLUSION

It has long been recognised that international news coverage by local media influences, either positively or negatively, the public perception of other nations, which, in turn, may impact policymaking. As a global and regional power engaged in active diplomacy, China especially has become directly relevant to Malaysia's economic and political aspirations. In light of the events surrounding the missing flight MH370, the critical importance of studying media representations in Malaysia and China has become all the more essential to understand the role of media in bilateral relations. The findings of this study indicate that the newspapers reported the MH370 incident and Malaysia-China bilateral relations with differing intensity and prominence, while relying on different news sources. The two salient frames found in this study were "search and rescue operation" as well as "friendship, ties and understanding". The coverage of the newspapers was also dominated by positive valence towards Malaysia-China bilateral relations. As for future studies, it would be interesting to examine the factors affecting newspapers in Malaysia and China in their framing of Malaysia-China relations. In addition, it is also necessary to compare the findings of this study with public opinion data to measure public perceptions towards Malaysia-China relations, and the extent to which news coverage impact policymaking and Malaysia-China relations as well as the mechanisms involved.

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## Appendix

### News articles cited in the findings

SOURCE	TITLE OF ARTICLE	DATE PUBLISHED
<i>Global Times</i>	China again urges Malaysia to coordinate search	14 March 2014
<i>Global Times</i>	Chinese premier asks Malaysia to provide more detailed, accurate info on MH370	17 March 2014
<i>Global Times</i>	China demands Malaysia to provide satellite data about flight MH370	25 March 2014
<i>Global Times</i>	MH370 will not shake Sino-Malaysian ties	4 April 2014
<i>People's Daily</i>	Chinese government joint working group leaves for Malaysia	10 March 2014
<i>People's Daily</i>	Family members demands Malaysia disclose info	25 March 2014
<i>Sin Chew Daily</i>	Thriving on sensational news	2 April 2014
<i>Sin Chew Daily</i>	'Beijing not angry with KL'	3 April 2014
<i>Sin Chew Daily</i>	MH370: Financial aid for affected kin	21 April 2014
<i>Sin Chew Daily</i>	Chinese invest in Malaysia	23 May 2014
<i>Sin Chew Daily</i>	'We won't forget Malaysia's support'	26 May 2014
<i>The Star</i>	Missing MH370: Australia launches 'needle in haystack' plane search	18 March 2014
<i>The Star</i>	Chinese families hand strongly-worded statement to embassy	26 March 2014
<i>The Star</i>	MH370 and Sino-Malaysian relations	31 March 2014
<i>The Star</i>	With no body, how will relatives mourn?	5 April 2014
<i>The Star</i>	Search to enter new phase	6 May 2014
<i>The Star</i>	FAQs about bilateral relations	26 May 2014
<i>The Star</i>	Taking ties to greater heights	1 June 2014
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	MH370: Hubungan dua hala Malaysia-China tidak terjejas [MH370: Malaysia-China bilateral relations not jeopardised]	2 March 2014
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	Media di Beijing tumpu insiden pesawat MAS hilang [Beijing media focuses on lost MAS aircraft incidence]	9 March 2014
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	Keluarga penumpang di Beijing mahu adakan telesidang dengan pemimpin Malaysia [Passengers' families in Beijing wants teleconference with Malaysian leaders]	13 March 2014a
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	MH370: Usaha cari pesawat hilang diteruskan – PM China [MH370: Search effort for missing aircraft continues – Chinese Premier]	13 March 2014b
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	Ahli keluarga digalakkan melakukan aktiviti rehatkan minda [Family members encouraged to carry out mind-relaxing activities]	17 March 2014
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	Malaysia-China terus bekerjasama [Malaysia-China continues to cooperate]	27 March 2014
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	30,000 pembatalan tempahan daripada pelancong China [30,000 Chinese tourists cancelled booking]	25 April 2014
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	Fasa baharu Malaysia-China [New phase of Malaysia-China]	31 May 2014

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