

## *Analyzing China's Soft Power in Malaysia: The Confucius Institute and Xiamen University*

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### *Abstract*

In the midst of a tense geopolitical standoff, China and the U.S. have extended their rivalry into the realm of soft power, a dynamic clearly visible in Malaysia. China's burgeoning influence in Malaysia encompasses various sectors, notably exemplified by the establishment of the Confucius Institute (CI) and Xiamen University's overseas campus in Malaysia (XMUM), which has turned education into a new arena for soft power competition. This article examines China's soft power through these two key initiatives: CI and XMUM. As a language teaching center, CI aims to promote Chinese language learning, whereas XMUM operates as a comprehensive university, notably expanding China's presence in Malaysia's tertiary education landscape. Nevertheless, both face challenges in attracting non-Chinese students; however, they remain key to China's soft power strategy. Specifically, the article presents three arguments indicating that XMUM signifies a more strategically significant transformation of China's soft power and is poised to have a deeper impact on Malaysia and the broader region. First, we highlight XMUM's role as China's entry into the strategically vital sphere of international higher education. Second, we argue that

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XMUM's expansion into Malaysia offers the potential for transformative shifts, allowing it to embrace Malaysia's multicultural ethos and foster closer ties between the two countries. Third, amid the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry, XMUM has the potential to serve as an impartial channel for promoting independent scholarship and facilitating academic exchanges.

## **1. Introduction**

Amidst a tense geopolitical standoff, China and the U.S. have extended their rivalry into the realm of soft power. In Malaysia, China's growing influence is evident across various sectors: from trade investments and manufacturing to e-commerce and the digital economy. More notably, the establishment of the Confucius Institute (CI) and a Xiamen University's overseas campus in Malaysia (XMUM) has turned education into a new arena for soft power competition.

This article examines the impact of China's soft power on Malaysia through its educational initiatives. It analyzes the effects of CI and XMUM, considering the challenges that they face and their potential to enhance China's influence in Malaysia and the broader region.

To provide comprehensive context, this article commences with an examination of the ongoing soft power rivalry between China and the United States. It proceeds to offer a review of the intricate relationship between China and Malaysia, elucidating China's nuanced projection of soft power within the Malaysian context. Subsequently, the article delves into an analysis of the CI and XMUM, examining their respective roles and impacts within the broader framework of China's soft power strategy.

Functioning primarily as a language teaching center, CI has made important strides in promoting the study of the Chinese language in Malaysia. It has set up five branches throughout Malaysia and offered numerous cultural activities to the local non-Chinese speaking population. Conversely, XMUM operates as a comprehensive university, notably expanding its presence within Malaysia's tertiary education sector. While CI has achieved a significant milestone in establishing branches and connections with local universities, XMUM, however, encounters immediate challenges in terms of reaching out to non-Chinese demographics and diversifying the ethnic makeup of its campuses. Despite these obstacles, they persist as integral components of China's soft power strategy. This article contends that XMUM is poised to exert a more comprehensive