This paper analyzes the bilateral ties of Kuala Lumpur-Beijing over four decades in the political, economic and socio-cultural fields. Firstly, the paper discusses the historical background of Malaysia-China informal relations from the Kingdom of Malacca; the British era; during the early stages of Malaysia's independence; as well as the Cold War era before the establishment of diplomatic ties. Secondly, the paper analyzes the beginning of Kuala Lumpur-Beijing diplomatic relations from 1974 until the demise of the Malayan Communist Party in 1989. Thirdly, this is followed by an examination of bilateral developments between 1990 and 2008. The section analyzes the extent to which the principle of openness in Malaysian foreign policies was followed, cooperation within the framework of regionalism as well as how the rise of China's economic power has had positive impact on bilateral relations. More significantly, the paper then extends the discussion to Malaysia-China relations under Mohd Najib Abdul Razak which began in 2008 and ended with the advent of the new government of Pakatan Harapan in Malaysia in May 2018. Presently, Malaysia's foreign policy towards China is facing a revamp under Dr. Mahathir Mohamad’s leadership. Yet the paper argues that the current government’s actions is seen to enhance comprehensive cooperation, particularly in the political and economic spheres.

Keywords: Malaysia-China relations, regionalism, Communism, Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, Mahathir Mohamad, Pakatan Harapan, Malayan Communist Party

Historical Background of Informal Malaysia-China Relations

The earliest record of Malaysia’s historical relations with China was found in Han Shu written by Ban Gu, stated that there were maritime ties between China and India since the first century. The majority of Chinese scholars have acknowledged that this maritime relationship did indeed mark the early history of Malaysia-China trading relations. Archaeological findings of ceramic materials of the Qin and Han Dynasties in the Johor River Valley further proves the existence of trade between Malacca and China in the first century.¹ When Malacca emerged as an important kingdom in the Malay archipelago, China’s political relations with the state began in the third century after the Wu Dynasty sent Kang Tai and Zhu Ying as peaceful emissaries to Malaya. Meanwhile, during the Song Dynasty, Nambei and Liang, emissaries from the Malay kingdom, were sent to meet Chinese officials who presented gifts

¹ Kong Yuanzhi, Cheng Ho Muslim Tionghoa: Misteri Perjalanan Mulihah di Nusantara, Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2011, p. 128. Professor Kong Yuanzhi was a visiting professor at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Malaya in the late 1990s.