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China-Malaysia Relations: Zheng He and the Islamic Link

LEE Kam Hing and NGEOW Chow Bing

In 2013, the Pew Research Centre in the United States carried out a survey on how different countries in the world viewed the United States and China. The survey showed that a majority of countries regarded the United States more favourably than China. However, there were a significant number of countries where China ranked higher than the United States. What is striking is that many of those that viewed China more favourably than the United States were Muslim or Muslim-majority countries. These included Malaysia. The others were Indonesia, Pakistan, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, the Palestine state and Nigeria. In Malaysia, China had an 81 per cent favourable rating compared to the US's rating of 66 per cent.

Why the US had a less favourable perception in Muslim countries could be due to various reasons including American support of Israel. But this chapter looks at the case in Malaysia and to consider whether Islam had in the past or present played some role in the relations between Malaysia and China.

One could argue that China's favourable visibility is not surprising given China's long history of relations with the Middle East and the Muslim world. Traders from the Middle East have been trading in China from early times and these included the Persians, the Nestorians, and later the Arabs. Arab traders were reported to have visited the southern ports of China in the 10th century. Chinese goods were brought through the sea lanes and over land across the Silk Road to the Mediterranean by merchants. Chinese merchants too made the long journey from southern Chinese ports through the Straits of Malacca and on to West Asia and Southeast Asia. These were state-backed merchants as well as private traders. An important port visited by the Chinese traders was Calicut on the west coast of India. There they