"DRAGON, KUNG FU AND JACKIE CHAN…": STEREOTYPES ABOUT CHINA HELD BY MALAYSIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract. This study explored stereotypes about China held by young Malaysians. It focused on the learners of the Mandarin language in a big public university. The study not only examined the content but also assessed the favourability and salience of the language learners' stereotypes, which had not been done in the previous studies. The stereotypes about China provided by the participants were diverse; they referred to culture, politics, language, history, climate, landscape, economics, religion and the Chinese people. Overall, the stereotypes were favourable. Especially the stereotypes referring to Chinese traditional and popular culture and cultural symbols were among the most frequent and most salient images of China. An interesting finding was that transnational popular culture played an important role in the formation of the stereotypical images about China. The study concludes by highlighting some pedagogical implications based on these findings.

Keywords: country stereotypes, salience index, university students, Mandarin language, China, Malaysia

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1. Introduction

China's ascendance in global politics and economy has heightened the interest of the mass media and the general public toward the country. Perceptions about China have fluctuated over the years and between the countries. In 2005, a BBC World Service survey of public opinion about China revealed that the respondents in most of the 22 polled countries viewed China's global presence and its economic power positively (Program on International Policy Attitude 2005). At the same time, China's growing military might was perceived negatively by 59% of the respondents. It is interesting to note that the younger respondents or those between 18 and 29 years old had more positive perceptions about the country compared to the older people.

A more recent poll conducted in 2011 registered a shift in public opinion (BBC 2011). The negative perceptions about China became stronger. However, the attitudes varied across the continents. The respondents in African and Latin American countries held the most positive perceptions about China. While there is no poll data available about the Malaysians' sentiments, the respondents in the polled Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, had strongly positive views about China.

The Chinese government realizes the need for an improved international image of the country in order to match it with China's increasing economic and political influence in the world. In recent years China has organized and hosted several high profile international events, such as the Olympic Games in 2008 and the World Expo in 2010. Simultaneously, the government has intensified its efforts to promote Chinese culture and language abroad through setting up and financing the Confucius Institutes. Currently, there are more than 300 Confucius Institutes all over the world, including one in Malaysia (Xinhua News Agency 2010). Several researchers have described these efforts as China's aspiration to enhance and exercise its 'soft power' (Ding and Saunders 2006, Hartig 2012, Huang and Ding 2006, Li and Worm 2011, Zhao and Huang 2010). 'Soft power' is a concept developed by Joseph Nye (1990) and it refers to the ability of a country to use its attraction rather than coercion to influence other countries' policies in order to achieve the desired results. Cultural attractiveness is regarded as one of the important elements in the concept of 'soft power'.

The efforts by authorities to enhance a country's soft power can be supported or thwarted by several factors that may influence people's perceptions about that country. Among them scholars recognize the socio-political climate, the economic situation, the mass media and popular culture (Bal-Tar 1997, Ding and Saunders 2006, Realo et al. 2009). For example, Bersick (2010) has noted that the German mass media perpetuates the negative and outdated stereotypes about China. He attributes this to the feelings of uncertainty over the future implications of the rise of China, especially in the wealthier countries. A study of the American mass media's coverage of China by Stepchenkova, Kirilenko and Morrison (2006) revealed that economic issues occupied the most prominent place. The researchers noted that a significant attention was given to the topics related to China's economic growth, the issues of technology transfer as well as to the cultural and educational exchanges between the two countries. The coverage of these topics in the American mass media was predominantly positive. On the other hand, the negative tone dominated in the articles devoted to the issues of human rights and politics in China. At the same time, the journalists and the political analysts held a neutral position while discussing China's Asian politics, the Chinese government and the country's labour market (Stepchenkova, Kirilenko and Morrison 2006).

As Huang and Ding (2006:24) have noted, assessing the effectiveness of soft power can be a 'tricky enterprise' due to the intangible qualities of culture and other aspects that constitute soft power. Nye (2004) has suggested that it is possible to gauge the effectiveness of certain aspects of soft power through hold-

ing polls or through researching focus groups. However, opinion polls cannot give a reliable picture of the soft power's effectiveness. For example, positive opinions about China voiced by the respondents in African countries (BBC 2011) could be attributed to the economic benefits that Chinese investments brought to these countries just as much as to reflect China's cultural attractiveness. Perhaps a clearer picture of a country's attractiveness and the potency of its soft power could transpire through exploring stereotypical images that people have about this particular country and by assessing the favourability and salience of these stereotypes.

A search of various databases for studies on cultural stereotypes about China and Chinese people written in the English language revealed that academic literature on the topic is not as abundant as we expected. The findings of the available studies indicate that the mass media in Western countries promote negative stereotypes about China (Bersick 2010, Hartig 2012). Some researchers have argued that stereotyping China-made goods as a threat to the economy and employment is widely spread in the American mass media. As a result, the 'China-as-a-menace-to-the-world' stereotype has become one of the most lingering images of the country (Ng, Ye and Lee 2011). A search of popular mass media and the Internet revealed that people in Western countries hold rather narrow and stereotypical views about China. For example, some still believe that streets in Chinese cities are filled with red lanterns, that people in these streets wear traditional clothes and that everyone pursues Confucian values (Li and Worm 2011, Roell 2012). During the search for relevant studies on stereotypical presentations of China and Chinese people it came to our attention that the majority of the articles have been produced in the Western context. As a result, they reflect the views and opinions of people in Western countries (Bersick 2010, Lee-Loy 2003, Stepchenkova, Chen and Morrison 2005, Lee and Fiske 2006). The present study explores perceptions about China held by its Asian neighbours, such as young people in Malaysia. This approach is especially relevant because, as Turner (2009) has observed, the ideas that people have at a young age shape a foundation for their later worldview.

The current article focuses on cultural stereotypes about China held by the learners of the Mandarin language in a big public university in Malaysia. Language educators recognize a fact that students come to the classroom with a multitude of their own ideas and opinions about the country, culture and native speakers of the language they learn. These perceptions are often stereotypical as they are not based on solid knowledge of the target language country. Several studies have examined cultural stereotypes held by language learners (Abrams 2002; Kim 2010, Peng 2010, Schultz and Haerle 1995, Vande Berg 1990, Webber 1990). However, the available research is limited to exploring the stereotype content only; assessments of the favourability and salience of these stereotypical images are lacking. It also came to our attention that despite the growing popularity of Mandarin language programs all over the world there is a lack of studies that examine country stereotypes held by the students who learn Mandarin.

The present study aims to address these gaps in research literature by raising the following questions:

1. What stereotypical images about China do Malaysian learners of the Mandarin language hold?
2. Are these stereotypes positive or negative?
3. How salient are the stereotypes about China?

In order to answer these questions the present study adopts and blends methodological approaches used in various academic disciplines. Thus, methods developed in social psychology (Esses, Haddock and Zanna 1993, Spencer-Rodgers 2001) will be used to examine the content and the favourability of the students' stereotypes (Questions 1 and 2). To determine the salience of the stereo-typical images (Question 3) the study will employ methods used in ethno-linguistics (Smith 1993, Smith et al. 1995, Sutrop 2001).

2. Literature review

2.1. The nature of stereotypes

The word 'stereotype' usually refers to people's preconceived ideas about the surrounding world. Stereotypes may include the perceptions about other people, countries, cultures, ethnic groups, and so on. Stereotypes have been described as 'pictures in our heads' (Lippmann 1922/1965:3) and are often viewed as the antithesis to the critical thinking (Webber 1990). Whether negative or positive, true or false stereotypes serve as 'short-cuts' in the thinking process (Schultz and Haerle 1995) and they are an integral part of human cognition. People begin to acquire stereotypes in early childhood. As Lippmann (1922/1965:55) has put it, "In the great blooming buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped by our culture." The mass media, movies, gossip and anecdotal evidence all play an important role in stereotype formation and perpetuation (Realo et al. 2009). As the pace of globalization accelerates, not only the local but also the global mass media and foreign cultural products (such as news channels, movies, drama serials and TV shows) are becoming increasingly influential in the process of formation of cultural stereotypes and in shaping people's perceptions about other countries.

In studies on cultural stereotypes in the academic field of social psychology a stereotype is considered to exist only when a certain number of respondents have referred to a particular characteristic, descriptor or its synonyms (Spencer-Rodgers 2001). However, there is no established threshold for indicating when a stereotype comes into existence. In some studies a minimum percentage of the respondents' agreement to indicate a stereotype varies between 6% and 20% (Echtner and Ritchie 1993, Marin1984, Niemann et al. 1994, Spencer-Rodgers 2001). While considerable research on cultural stereotypes has been done in the academic field of social psychology a deeper exploration of country-related images has been

carried out in studies on tourism and marketing. Brijs, Bloemer, and Kasper (2011:1260) have argued that the formation of country stereotypes is based on a combination of several aspects, among them "(1) cultural identity, (2) political climate, (3) language, (4) history, (5) climate, (6) landscape, (7) economic and technological development, (8) religion, and (9) people" (Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper 2011:1260). Furthermore, Echtner and Ritchie (1991) proposed that stereotypical perceptions about a country cluster along several continuums, namely, 'attribute-holistic', 'functional-psychological', and 'common-unique'. Especially useful for the purpose of the present study is the 'common-unique' continuum because it allows estimating the width and depth of the language learners' knowledge about the target language country. In this continuum, the 'common' characteristics of a country include general references to its climate, scenery, geographical location, etc. On the other hand, the 'unique' country images make references to the places, events, cities, atmosphere that exist only in that particular country (e.g. Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, the city of Kyoto in Japan, the carnival in Rio de Janeiro). It can be argued that a greater presence of the 'unique' images in people's descriptions of a country might reflect a better knowledge about it.

3. Background to the study

3.1. Socio-cultural context

Malaysia is a multiethnic and multicultural country in Southeast Asia. Ethnic Chinese make up 24.6% of the total Malaysian population of 28.3 million and they form one of the three main ethnic groups (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2010). Large numbers of Chinese migrants came to the British Malaya during the 19th century. While making necessary adjustments to the cultural practices of the host country and local communities the Chinese Malaysians have been able to maintain their own cultural identity.

In a broader definition of Chinese cultural sphere researchers distinguish such important aspects as the knowledge of Mandarin or any other Chinese dialect, the observance of Chinese cultural mores and Confucian values (e.g. filial piety, veneration of ancestors, respect for elders and authority), the shared folk epistemologies and lay beliefs which include religious and burial rituals, numerology, *feng shui* and so on (Ding and Saunders 2006, Spencer-Rodgers, Williams and Peng 2012). In order to preserve their culture the pioneer Chinese migrant communities in the British Malaya established Chinese-medium schools, published local Chinese language newspapers and formed numerous religious, clan and dialects associations (Carstens 2003, Chiu 2000, Lee 1997).

Nowadays, the cultural heritage of the Malaysian Chinese community adds to an exciting blend of cultures in this multiethnic country. For example, several words and expressions from various Chinese dialects have become a part of everyday vocabulary of all Malaysians regardless of their ethnic roots. Among these words are *kongsi* (association or partnership)*, towkay* (a wealthy Chinese

businessman, boss), *tapau* (take away food) and *kiasu* (fear of losing out to other people) (Hashim and Leitner 2011). Traditional Chinese culture in the forms of cultural practices (e.g. herbal medicine, acupuncture, cuisine, martial arts) as well as celebrations and festivals (e.g. the lunar Chinese New Year) has become an inalienable part of Malaysia's cultural heritage. Furthermore, Malaysian government-sponsored and commercial TV channels broadcast news and various Chinese language programs, such as drama serials, movies, variety shows both locally produced and imported. Satellite TV channel *Astro* offers to subscribers several packages in various Chinese dialects. All of this means that Malaysians from various ethnic backgrounds, including the participants in the present study, are well acquainted with Chinese traditional and popular culture even if only on a superficial level.

Recognizing the increasingly important status of China as a trade partner and of Mandarin as a language for international business, the Malaysian government lifted all restrictions on Chinese language education in the late 1990s. In 2009, Malaysia and China signed an agreement to establish the first Confucius Institute in the country (Xinhua News Agency 2009). Nowadays, Mandarin classes are offered in national schools at primary and secondary levels. At tertiary level, Mandarin as a foreign language is taught in all big public universities in Malaysia.

3.2. Educational context

This study was conducted in a big public university in East Malaysia. According to the university regulations, the students who have good proficiency in English are required to learn a foreign language (e.g. Arabic, French, Japanese, Mandarin or Spanish) or a local language (e.g. Tamil, Kadazan-Dusun) for three semesters.[1] Generally, they can choose any language program offered by the university depending on the availability of placements. There are, however, some restrictions for the heritage language learners. For example, the students who attended Chinese-medium schools and wish to continue learning Mandarin at the university cannot take the beginner level course; they must register for the advanced level Mandarin classes.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The study was conducted among beginner learners of the Mandarin language in their second semester of the language program. A total of 116 students (N = 116) participated in this study.

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[1] The students who obtain Bands 4, 5 or 6 of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) are considered to have good proficiency in English. Those who obtain Bands 1, 2 or 3 of the MUET are required to continue studying English at the university and are not allowed to register for a foreign language program.

They were all Malaysian citizens of various ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the participants were Malay (n = 41) followed by Kadazan-Dusun (n = 30), Bajau (n = 8), Indian (n = 6), Iban (n = 6), Sino-Kadazan (n = 5), Bidayuh (n = 5) and representatives of other ethnic groups (e.g., Murut, Iranun, Suluk, Brunei, Kayan, Melanau, Lundayeh).

The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 25; their average age was 20.7 (Standard Deviation = 0.734). There were significantly more female (n = 89) than male (n = 26) participants; one participant did not indicate the gender. Overall, the gender composition of the sample reflects the gender ratio of undergraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities.

The participants majored in various academic disciplines, such as the arts and social sciences (n = 33), the sciences (n = 21), economics and business (n = 20), engineering (n = 13), psychology (n = 12), education (n = 6), food science and nutrition (n = 4), forestry (n = 4) and medicine (n = 3).

4.2. Research instrument

Each respondent was given a photocopied form that contained one open-ended question with an instruction as follows "What images or ideas come to your mind when you hear the word 'China'? List as many single words or short phrases as you believe is necessary to describe China". Then, the participants were instructed to put a favourability rating next to each image about China they had supplied. The ratings ranged from –3 (to indicate a 'highly negative' attitude) to +3 (to mark a 'highly positive' attitude).

The students were also asked to provide some demographic information, such as their age, gender, ethnic group and academic major. The participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to know opinions about China held by the students who learn the Mandarin language.

4.3. Data organization and analysis

The first step in organizing and analyzing the data was to classify and label the images about China supplied by the students. The answers to the open-ended question were typed *ad verbatim* together with their favourability ratings and the sequence number of each image in the individual list.

Open coding was adopted to classify the images (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The classification procedure was very detailed and thorough. All images mentioned more than once were grouped together (e.g. Great Wall of China, panda, fireworks, discipline). Each group of the images was given a label based on the words or descriptors it contained (e.g. food, Chinese people); these groups formed categories of the students' images about China. Though some images could be grouped together (e.g. food and dumplings) and form one category, we kept them in separate categories in order to identify as much distinctive images of China as possible.

The following step was to establish which of the categories represented stereo-types. We used frequency analysis for this purpose. This approach is practiced in studies on social psychology that recognize the existence of a stereotype only when a certain number of respondents have given this particular image, descriptor or its synonyms. There is, however, no established minimum percentage of the total responses to indicate a stereotype and it has varied between 6% and 20% (Echtner and Ritchie 1993, Marin 1984, Niemann et al. 1994, Spencer-Rodgers 2001). In the present study, the images provided by more than 5% (n = 6) of the participants were considered as stereotypes.

4.4. Valence rating and mean valence calculation

The favourability ratings of the images provided by the students were used to calculate their favourability or mean valence. We employed the following formula suggested by Spencer-Rodgers (2001):

$$MV_j = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{F_j} V_{ji}}{F_j} \tag{1}$$

where MV_j is mean valence of the stereotypical image j; V_{ji} is the valence rating given by the student i to each image j within the category; F_j is the number of times the image j was mentioned. For example, the students mentioned the 'Great Wall of China' image 67 times ($F_j = 67$). Each student assigned his or her own favourability rating to this image on the scale ranging from –3 to +3. Employing formula (1), the mean valence (MV) index for 'Great Wall of China' was calculated at 2.73. To ensure a high accuracy the calculations were done using computer software.

Next, in order to examine the overall favourability of the stereotypical images we calculated the composite mean valence (CMV) of the stereotypes about China. The CMV is the overall mean of the MV_j for each stereotypical image. The CMV can be obtained from the following calculation (Spencer-Rodgers 2001):

$$CMV = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{M} V_{ji}}{M} \tag{2}$$

where M is the total number of images mentioned by all the students or the sum of each image's frequencies.

4.5. Salience indices calculation

In order to analyze the stereotypes' prominence we used three types of salience indices developed by Smith (1993), Smith et al. (1995) and Sutrop (2001). Smith's (1993) free-list salience (*FLS*) index is able to capture the relative importance of

an image by considering its position in the list of images or 'free-list'.[2] Smith et al. (1995) then modified the salience index calculation (see Sutrop 2001 for an overview). A significant contribution to the salience indexing literature has been made by Sutrop (2001) who introduced the cognitive salience (*CS*) index.

4.5.1. Free-list salience index

The free-list salience (*FLS*) index was developed and verbally explained by Smith (1993). It was then converted by Sutrop (2001) into the following mathematical formula:

$$FLS_j = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N} \dfrac{L_i - R_{ji}}{L_i}}{N} \tag{3}$$

where FLS_j is the free-list salience index of the stereotypical image j; L_i is the number of images mentioned by the student i, and R_{ji} is the rank of the image j in that list of images. The rank of the first image mentioned in the list L_i is codified as *0*, the second image is codified as *1* and so on. If a student i did not mention the image j in the list L_i, the rank of the image R_{ji} would be set as L_i.

To give an example of this calculation method, let's assume that there are only three students ($N = 3$) in a study. The image 'fireworks' was mentioned by two of them. The first student gave the answer 'fireworks' as the first among 2 images ($L_1 = 2, R_{j1} = 0$); the second student gave the answer 'fireworks' as the fourth among 4 images ($L_2 = 4, R_{j2} = 3$) while the third student did not mention this image at all among the three images provided ($L_3 = 3, R_{j3} = 3$). Employing formula (3), the free-list salience (*FLS*) index for the 'fireworks' image is calculated at:

$$\left. \sum \frac{L_i - R_{ji}}{L_i} \middle/ N \right. = \left(\frac{2-0}{2} + \frac{4-3}{4} + \frac{3-3}{3} \right) \middle/ 3 = \frac{1.25}{3} = 0.41$$

4.5.2. Modified free-list salience index

Smith and his colleagues (1995) introduced the modified free-list salience (*MFLS*) index. The mathematical formula suggested by Sutrop (2001) to calculate the *MFLS* index is as follows:

$$MFLS_j = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{F_j} \dfrac{(L_i - R_{ji})}{(L_i - 1)}}{N} \tag{4}$$

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[2] Lists of images about China provided by the participants in this study can be considered as 'free-lists'.

In the *MFLS* index, the rank of the first image R_{ji} in the list of images L_i is codified as *1*, the second image is codified as *2* and so on. Similar to the *FLS* index, if a student *i* did not mention the image *j* in the list L_i, the rank of the image R_{ji} would be set as L_i. Employing formula (4) the salience of the 'firework' image in the previous example would be:

$$\sum \frac{L_i - R_{ji}}{L_i - 1} \bigg/ N \quad = \left(\frac{2-1}{2-1} + \frac{4-4}{4-1} + \frac{3-3}{3-1} \right) \bigg/ 3 \quad = \frac{1.00}{3} = 0.33$$

4.5.3. Cognitive salience index

Sutrop (2001) has proposed the following user-friendly formula to calculate the cognitive salience index (*CS*):

$$CS_j = \frac{F_j}{N(mP_j)} \tag{5}$$

where mP_j is the mean position of the image *j*. The mean position can be calculated as:

$$mP_j = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N} R_{ji}}{F_j}$$

In this method, the rank of the first image mentioned in the list of images L_i is codified as *1;* if the image occupied the second position in the list it is codified as *2* and so on, which is similar to the *MFLS* index. The difference is that if a student *i* did not mention the image *j* in his or her list L_i, the rank of the image R_{ji} is set as *0*. Employing formula (5) for the 'fireworks' image example, the cognitive salience (*CS*) index image is calculated as:

$$\frac{F_j}{N(mP)} = \quad 2 \bigg/ 3\left(\frac{1+4+0}{2} \right) = \frac{2}{7.5} = 0.26$$

5. Findings

5.1. Research question 1: stereotypical images about China

The students provided a total of 956 responses to the open-ended question. The shortest list contained 2 and the longest one had 21 images. In the first step of the analysis all the images, descriptors or their synonyms were classified into groups. This step yielded 119 groups or categories of images; each contained at least 2 responses. There were also 7 idiosyncratic responses that could not be categorized.

We adopted 5% (n = 6) benchmark as the criterion for distinguishing stereo-typical images about China. According to this standard, 51 out of the initial 119 categories formed stereotypes; they contained a total of 660 responses.

5.2. Research question 2: stereotypes' favourability

The favourability of each category of stereotypical images was calculated using the ratings assigned by the students to each image. Based on thus obtained mean valence values, the 51 categories of stereotypes were divided into three classes, namely: (1) positive stereotypes (mean valence ranging from +3 to +1), (2) ambi-valent stereotypes (mean valence between +1 and –1) and (3) negative stereotypes (mean valence between –1 and –3) (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

As the results show, the overwhelming majority of the students' stereotypes about China (n = 41) were positive; there were six (n = 6) ambivalent and four (n = 4) negative stereotypes. The composite mean valence of the stereotypes was 1.61 (SD = 1.70); this indicates that, overall, the students' had positive images about China.

5.3. Research question 3: stereotypes' salience

The findings from the *FLS* (Smith 1993) and *MFLS* (Smith et al. 1995) indices are shown in Table 2. Table 3 reports the finding from the *CS* index (Sutrop 2001) (see the Appendix). Despite minor discrepancies, overall, the salience ranks of the stereotypical images are consistent across the three indices.

More importantly, as Table 2 and Table 3 show, the ranks of the stereotypical images about China based on the salience indices are in line with the ranks based on the frequency. This means that the most ubiquitous stereotypes about China (i.e. the images mentioned with high frequencies) were at same time the most salient. However, there were several exceptions to this tendency. For example, the image 'Olympic games' had considerably higher salience rank (*CS* = 28) com-pared to the frequency rank (42) (see Table 3). This means that although some images were mentioned less frequently, they came to the mind of the respondents who provided them more readily and they occupied higher positions in their lists. Conversely, some images had lower salience indices but higher frequencies. One of such images was 'Cheongsam' (*CS* = 35; Frequency rank = 19) (see Table 3). This indicates that some images came to the minds of the respondents often but they were mentioned as an afterthought and occupied lower positions in their list.

6. Discussion

The images about China provided by the students were multiple and diverse. They included references to culture, politics, language, history, climate, landscape, economics, religion and the Chinese people. This finding aligned with the country-

related aspects identified by Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011) as the most relevant in the formation of country images. Furthermore, to concur with Echtner and Ritchie's (1991) model the participants supplied both common and unique country images. The former included references to China's climate (e.g. cold weather), scenery (e.g. mountains, beautiful scenery), economy (e.g. economy, Made-in-China) and people (e.g. Chinese people, beautiful women). The latter contained references to the distinctive elements of Chinese culture (e.g. Kung Fu), cultural symbols (e.g. dragon), historical sites (e.g. Shaolin Temple, Great Wall of China) and famous landmarks (e.g. Bird Nest Stadium).

Notwithstanding the diversity of the images about China, the data analysis revealed that the majority of them were related to culture, cultural symbols and icons including those from the domain of popular culture. To reflect China's rich cultural heritage the stereotypical images referring to traditional culture and cultural symbols were among the most favourable and prominent. Thus, the images 'Great Wall of China', 'Chinese food', 'culture' and 'Kung Fu' occupied the top ranks according to the frequency, favourability and salience (see Tables 1, 2 and 3 in the Appendix). The respondents also listed such important cultural symbols, as 'dragon', 'red colour', 'panda', 'chopsticks' and 'Cheongsam'. They named Chinese traditional festivals and celebrations ('Chinese New Year', 'Lion Dance') and made references to China's Buddhist heritage ('Buddhism', 'temples', 'Shaolin'). All the images in the domain of Chinese traditional culture had positive mean valences ranging from 2.73 points for the 'Great Wall of China' to 1.17 points for the 'red colour' image. These findings are not surprising owning to a fact that Chinese culture is an integral part of Malaysia's cultural heritage. What came to our attention is that the references to Chinese culture made by the respondents were on a rather surface level. They reflected what is most visible and accessible as well as most widely practiced in the respondents' surroundings.

Besides the traditional culture the images in the domain of popular culture were among the most favourable stereotypes. For example, 'Jackie Chan', who is an internationally famous actor, enjoyed the highest favourability ratings (mean valence = 2.88; SD = 0.34). It was also among the most frequent and salient images (Frequency rank = 6; CS = 5) (see Table 3). Other images related to Chinese pop-culture that had positive mean valences exceeding 2 points included 'Jet Li', 'movies', 'actors/actresses', 'badminton', and 'Olympic games'. These findings attest to the immense influence that popular culture has in the formation of country-related stereotypes. At the same time these results highlight limitations that 'made-in-China' cultural products have in shaping young people's perceptions about the country: none of the respondents had mentioned an actor or a movie director from mainland China. This fact lends some support to Huang and Ding's (2006) proposition that despite China's great cultural resources the influence of its contemporary popular culture is indiscernible.

It is perhaps for this reason that some important cultural figures were not mentioned by the students. Among the 956 images about China the standard-bearer of Chinese culture and its soft power, Confucius, was mentioned only once.

There were no references to other cultural icons, such as Mencius or Lao Tse. Only two allusions were made to Chinese literature. One student mentioned the *I-Ching*, which is one of Chinese classical texts, and one student wrote 'legends'. These omissions indicate that the respondents were more familiar with the most visible aspects of traditional Chinese culture, which agrees with a proposition that stereotypes of the target language country and culture held by language learners tend to be limited to trivial and mundane (Schultz and Haerle 1995). Furthermore, the respondents' lack of awareness of the essence of traditional Chinese culture with its Confucian philosophy and ethics gives empirical support to an observation that traditional Chinese culture and its inherent moral attraction are often overlooked (Huang and Ding 2006).

Other important stereotypes discovered in the course of the data analysis referred to Chinese history, historical heritage and famous historical sites. Among these images were 'emperors', 'Forbidden City', 'history', 'historical places' and 'imperial palaces'. All these stereotypes were favourable with the mean valences ranging from 2.5 points to 1 point. Moreover, 'Forbidden City' (Frequency rank = 19; SC = 11) and 'emperors' (Frequency rank = 11; CS = 12) were among the most often-mentioned and salient images about China (See Table 3).

However, compared to the stereotypes about Chinese culture, which contained a number of references to unique cultural phenomena and products, the images referring to Chinese history were somewhat vague. Thus, among the references to 'historical places' only one unique image was given, namely, the 'Forbidden City'. Furthermore, the respondents did not mention even one 'emperor' by the name; neither did they specify any of China's imperial dynasties. There was one historical figure mentioned by the students, namely, Wong Fei-hung who is a folk hero and incidentally a protagonist in a famous Hong Kong television drama serial. These findings lend support to a proposition by Ding and Saunders (2006) that in the increasingly blurred line between information and entertainment the premium is on promoting spectacular sites and events rather than on a deeper exploration of the multifaceted historical heritage of the world's oldest existing civilization.

Several stereotypical images referred to China status as an economic power-house. For example, the image 'economy' (Frequency rank = 8) was not only among the most frequent but also among the most favourable (mean valence = 2.17; SD = 1.20) and the most salient (CS = 7) images of China (see Tables 1 and 3). The country's status as the 'world's factory' was reflected in the images 'Made in China', 'cheap goods' and 'fake goods'. Interestingly, while the images 'fake goods' (CS = 10) and 'cheap goods' (CS = 16) both had high salience only the latter enjoyed high favourability ratings (mean valence = 2.13; SD = 1.41). The respondent disapproved of 'fake goods' (mean valence = –1.47; SD = 1.74) and had ambivalent attitudes toward the 'Made in China' label (mean valence = 0.25; SD = 2.01). Furthermore, the recognition of China's economic status was supported by the acknowledgement of the country's influence in the global political arena. The image 'world power' was mentioned often (Frequency rank = 19); it

had the second highest favourability (mean valence = 2.8; SD = 1.75) and high salience (CS = 14).

The respondents were aware of China's status as the most populous country in the world. The image 'large population' was the second most frequent and salient of the images (Frequency rank = 2, *CS* = 2) preceded only by 'Great Wall of China'. However, the participants' attitudes toward China's demography were ambivalent as reflected in the negative mean valence (–0.60; SD = 1.81) of this image. It is interesting to note that while the students viewed China's large population in a negative light they expressed even stronger negative feelings toward China's 'one-child policy'. It was one of the most negative stereotypes (mean valence = –1.67; SD = 1.03) though the image had low frequency and low salience (Frequency rank = 42; *CS* = 50). Despite the negative perception of China's demographic status none of the stereotypes referring to the people (i.e. 'Chinese people', 'small eyes' and 'beautiful women') had a negative mean valence. The most positive among these images was 'beautiful women' (mean valence = 2.67; SD = 0.52) though, admittedly, this stereotype was among the less frequent and less salient images (Frequency rank = 42; *CS* = 42).

Only four stereotypes out of fifty-one were negative. In addition to the 'fake goods' and 'one-child policy' images discussed above the negative stereotypes with mean valence below –1 point included 'natural disasters' (mean valence = –2.83; SD = 0.41) and 'communist' (mean valence = –1.56; SD = 1.27). This result is not unexpected: the participants chose to study the Mandarin language by their own volition, which indicates that they had interest toward and liked the country. These results also align with a trend reported by an international poll (PIPA 2005) that young people tended to hold more positive views about China compared to the older respondents.

6. Conclusion

The present study addressed two underexplored areas in research literature. Firstly, it examined stereotypes about China held by learners of the Mandarin language; secondly, it assessed the favourability and salience of these stereotypical images. This study was conducted in a multicultural and multiethnic country, Malaysia, where Chinese cultural heritage is an unalienable part of the national culture.

For the respondents in this study mainland China represented a kaleidoscope of images; some of these images formed stereotypes. Mostly the students' stereotypical representations of China were positive, which supports Nye's (2002) proposition that soft power is more likely to be attractive in the context where there are some cultural similarities rather than great cultural disparities. As the findings revealed, the most favourable and salient images provided by the participants referred to Chinese culture and cultural symbols, both traditional and contemporary.

In view that the participants in this study were university students and the learners of the Mandarin language some pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings. Scholars agree that among important objectives of any foreign language program are enhancing the learners' cultural awareness, deepening their knowledge of the target language country and promoting a more sophisticated world view (Abrams 2002; Schultz and Haerle 1995, Vande Berg 1990, Webber 1990). Mandarin language educators may or may not support China's aspirations to harness the country's soft power through promoting Chinese culture and language. However, they may want to consider the ways in which stereotypical images held by the language learners could be used as a starting point to deeper explorations of China's cultural and historical heritage as well as its contemporary culture and society.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Stereotypical images about China and their favourability

No	Image	Frequency	Mean valence	First quartile	Median	Third quartile	Standard deviation
	Positive stereotypes						
1.	Great Wall of China	67	2.73	3	3	3	0.62
2.	Chinese food	40	2.25	2	3	3	1.03
3.	Culture	30	2.13	2	2	3	0.86
4.	Kung Fu	27	2.52	2	3	3	0.89
5.	Jackie Chan	25	2.88	3	3	3	0.34
6.	Lin Dan	19	1.18	0	1	3	1.70
7.	Economy	18	2.17	1	3	3	1.20
8.	Cheap goods	15	2.13	1.5	3	3	1.41
9.	Movies	13	2.42	2	3	3	0.79
10.	Beijing	13	2.08	1	2	3	1.04
11.	Dumplings	13	2.00	1	2	3	1.08
12.	Temples	13	1.23	0	1	2	1.36
13.	Dragon	11	2.00	1.5	2	3	1.18
14.	World power	10	2.8	3	3	3	1.75
15.	Cheongsam	10	2.00	2	2	3	0.94
16.	Forbidden City	10	2.00	2	2	3	1.15
17.	Cold weather	10	1.89	2	3	3	1.76
18.	Language	10	1.80	1	2	3	1.14
19.	Martial arts	9	2.22	1	3	3	0.97
20.	Big country	9	1.88	1	2	3	1.13
21.	Buddhism	9	1.11	0	1	2	1.05
22.	Interesting places	8	2.25	2	2	3	0.71
23.	History	8	2.13	1	2.5	3	0.99
24.	Nice buildings	8	1.38	0	2	3	1.85
25.	Actors/actresses	7	2.67	3	3	3	0.82
26.	Chinese New Year	7	2.57	2	3	3	0.53
27.	Mountains	7	2.43	2.5	3	3	1.13
28.	Jet Li	7	2.43	2.5	3	3	1.13
29.	Four seasons	7	2.29	1.5	3	3	0.95
30.	Badminton	7	2.14	2	2	3	1.07
31.	Shaolin Temple	7	2.00	1	3	3	1.41
32.	Lion Dance	7	1.86	1.5	2	2.5	1.07
33.	Chopsticks	7	1.43	0.5	1	2.5	1.27
34.	Panda	6	2.67	3	3	3	0.87
35.	Beautiful women	6	2.67	2	3	3	0.52
36.	Beautiful scenery	6	2.67	3	3	3	0.82
37.	Imperial palaces	6	2.50	2	2.5	3	0.55
38.	Bird Nest stadium	6	2.50	2	3	3	0.84
39.	Olympic Games	6	2.17	1	2.5	3	0.98
40.	Historical places	6	1.83	1	2.5	3	1.6
41.	Red colour	6	1.17	0	1	2	1.17
	Ambivalent stereotypes						
1.	Large population	54	−0.60	−2	−1	1	1.81
2.	Emperors	14	0.85	0	0	2	1.07
3.	'Made in China'	12	0.25	−1	0	1.5	2.01

No	Image	Frequency	Mean valence	First quartile	Median	Third quartile	Standard deviation
4.	Small eyes	9	0.56	0	0	1	1.59
5.	Chinese people	8	0.75	0	0.5	1.5	1.28
6.	Politics	7	−0.29	−0.5	0	0	1.50
	Negative stereotypes						
1.	Fake goods	17	−1.47	-3	−2	0	1.74
2.	Communist	11	−1.27	-2.5	−1	0	1.27
3.	One-child policy	6	−1.67	-2	−2	−1	1.03
4.	Natural disaster	6	−2.83	-3	−3	−3	0.41
	Composite mean valence of stereo-types	**660**	**1.61**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1.70**

Table 2. Findings from Free-list Salience (*FLS*) index (Smith 1993) and Modified Free-list Salience (*MFLS*) index (Smith et al. 1995)

No.	Image	Frequency	Rank	*FLS* index	Rank	*MFLS* index	Rank
1.	Great Wall of China	67	1	0.432	1	0.411	1
2.	Large population	54	2	0.317	2	0.293	2
3.	Chinese food	40	3	0.180	3	0.154	3
4.	Culture	30	4	0.144	4	0.123	6
5.	Kung Fu	27	5	0.141	5	0.130	4
6.	Jackie Chan	25	6	0.138	6	0.128	5
7.	Lin Dan	19	7	0.100	7	0.094	7
8.	Economy	18	8	0.096	8	0.087	8
9.	Fake goods	17	9	0.071	11	0.060	13
10.	Cheap goods	15	10	0.049	19	0.039	23
11.	Emperors	14	11	0.067	12	0.060	12
12.	Movies	13	12	0.043	24	0.032	31
13.	Beijing	13	12	0.079	9	0.075	9
14.	Dumplings	13	12	0.071	10	0.068	10
15.	Temples	13	12	0.056	17	0.049	17
16.	'Made in China'	12	16	0.041	27	0.033	29
17.	Dragon	11	17	0.058	16	0.054	16
18.	Communist	11	17	0.062	14	0.059	14
19.	World power	10	19	0.053	18	0.047	18
20.	Cheongsam	10	19	0.035	29	0.030	32
21.	Forbidden City	10	19	0.064	13	0.061	11
22.	Cold weather	10	19	0.046	20	0.041	21
23.	Language	10	19	0.043	25	0.038	25
24.	Martial arts	9	24	0.045	22	0.042	19
25.	Big country	9	24	0.046	21	0.041	22
26.	Buddhism	9	24	0.030	37	0.023	40
27.	Small eyes	9	24	0.059	15	0.057	15
28.	Interesting places	8	24	0.030	38	0.019	43
29.	History	8	24	0.021	47	0.014	50
30.	Nice buildings	8	24	0.043	26	0.038	24
31.	Chinese people	8	24	0.033	33	0.029	33
32.	Actors/actresses	7	32	0.030	36	0.026	36
33.	Chinese New Year	7	32	0.019	50	0.014	49
34.	Mountains	7	32	0.035	30	0.033	30
35.	Jet Li	7	32	0.043	23	0.042	20
36.	Four seasons	7	32	0.027	40	0.024	38
37.	Badminton	7	32	0.031	35	0.027	34
38.	Shaolin Temple	7	32	0.038	28	0.036	26
39.	Lion Dance	7	32	0.026	42	0.022	41
40.	Chopsticks	7	32	0.024	43	0.021	42
41.	Politics	7	32	0.032	34	0.027	35
42.	Panda	6	42	0.027	39	0.025	37
43.	Beautiful women	6	42	0.019	51	0.013	51
44.	Beautiful scenery	6	42	0.023	45	0.018	45
45.	Imperial palaces	6	42	0.021	46	0.017	46
46.	Bird Nest stadium	6	42	0.026	41	0.023	39
47.	Olympic Games	6	42	0.035	31	0.033	27
48.	Historical places	6	42	0.024	44	0.019	44
49.	Red colour	6	42	0.035	32	0.033	28
50.	One-child policy	6	42	0.020	48	0.016	48
51.	Natural disaster	6	42	0.020	49	0.017	47

Table 3. Findings from Cognitive Salience (*CS*) index (Sutrop 2001)

No.	Image	Frequency	Rank	Mean position (mP)	Rank	*CS* index	Rank
1.	Great Wall of China	67	1	3.268	1	0.1767	1
2.	Large population	54	2	3.722	3	0.1250	2
3.	Chinese food	40	3	5.300	21	0.0650	3
4.	Culture	30	4	4.466	10	0.0579	4
5.	Kung Fu	27	5	5.444	23	0.0427	6
6.	Jackie Chan	25	6	4.920	17	0.0438	5
7.	Lin Dan	19	7	5.842	29	0.0280	9
8.	Economy	18	8	4.333	7	0.0358	7
9.	Fake goods	17	9	5.647	25	0.0259	10
10.	Cheap goods	15	10	6.800	42	0.0190	16
11.	Emperors	14	11	5.714	26	0.0211	12
12.	Movies	13	12	6.153	34	0.0182	18
13.	Beijing	13	12	3.923	4	0.0285	8
14.	Dumplings	13	12	5.538	24	0.0202	13
15.	Temples	13	12	6.153	35	0.0182	17
16.	'Made in China'	12	16	6.750	41	0.0153	23
17.	Dragon	11	17	5.272	20	0.0179	19
18.	Communist	11	17	4.909	16	0.0193	15
19.	World power	10	19	4.400	8	0.0195	14
20.	Cheongsam	10	19	8.000	49	0.0107	35
21.	Forbidden City	10	19	3.400	2	0.0253	11
22.	Cold weather	10	19	5.800	27	0.0148	25
23.	Language	10	19	6.700	40	0.0128	29
24.	Martial arts	9	24	6.000	31	0.0129	27
25.	Big country	9	24	4.666	14	0.0166	22
26.	Buddhism	9	24	6.333	36	0.0122	31
27.	Small eyes	9	24	4.444	9	0.0174	20
28.	Interesting places	8	24	4.625	13	0.0149	24
29.	History	8	24	7.250	45	0.0095	40
30.	Nice buildings	8	24	4.125	6	0.0167	21
31.	Chinese people	8	24	6.000	32	0.0114	32
32.	Actors/actresses	7	32	5.428	22	0.0111	34
33.	Chinese New Year	7	32	7.857	48	0.0076	47
34.	Mountains	7	32	5.857	30	0.0103	37
35.	Jet Li	7	32	4.571	12	0.0132	26
36.	Four seasons	7	32	7.142	44	0.0084	43
37.	Badminton	7	32	6.428	38	0.0093	41
38.	Shaolin Temple	7	32	6.142	33	0.0098	39
39.	Lion Dance	7	32	7.285	46	0.0082	44
40.	Chopsticks	7	32	8.285	50	0.0072	49
41.	Politics	7	32	4.857	15	0.0124	30
42.	Panda	6	42	6.666	39	0.0077	46
43.	Beautiful women	6	42	5.833	28	0.0088	42
44.	Beautiful scenery	6	42	6.333	37	0.0081	45
45.	Imperial palaces	6	42	7.000	43	0.0073	48
46.	Bird Nest stadium	6	42	5.166	19	0.0100	38
47.	Olympic Games	6	42	4.000	5	0.0129	28
48.	Historical places	6	42	4.500	11	0.0114	33
49.	Red colour	6	42	5.000	18	0.0103	36
50.	One-child policy	6	42	7.500	47	0.0068	50
51.	Natural disaster	6	42	8.500	51	0.0060	51