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Everyday lives of the Malaysian diaspora

Blog entry

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The issue of Malaysia's brain drain is not something new. Now and then, you hear of family, friends and acquaintances who choose to leave. Sometimes you read about government policies and programmes to attract overseas Malaysians to return. You also hear repeated stories of how the 'Malaysian diaspora'[1] struggled in their citizenship and emigration dilemmas; how those who returned choose to leave yet again; and how the rest contemplate leaving.

It's all very well to research broad trends, collate statistics and run regression analyses as 'real' proofs of social phenomena. Yet, what are the nuances and individual stories embedded behind that one statistical unit? How do we focus on twists and turns in the journeys of citizenship and migration decision-making, rather than assuming that leaving/returning is an end point? How do we capture and understand changing motivations and personal circumstances amidst uncertainties? More importantly, by standing in the shoes of the Malaysian diaspora, can we get closer to comprehending their considerations, so as to find real and sustainable solutions?

Using predominantly qualitative methods, my research seeks to uncover and understand these complexities in the Malaysian diasporas' citizenship and migration trajectories. Specifically, I am interviewing tertiary-educated, professional Malaysians, aged 25-50, who are currently located in London, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. I aim to understand the motivations, decision-making processes and rationalisations in their citizenship and migration choices; and to compare and examine the similarities and/or differences for people currently located in London, Singapore, and returnees to Malaysia.

Preliminary findings

I have recently completed fieldwork in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Risking sounding overly simplistic and reiterating the same things like a broken record, these are my preliminary findings:

1. **A culture of migrating for education**: The education system has produced a culture of migration. The first is out of lack of choice, e.g. those who cannot get local university places, and those who are educated within the Chinese independent school system. The second is out of availability of other choice, e.g. those who chose Singapore's education system (often perceived as better compared to that in Malaysia). Once the first move is made, one has access to opportunities and exposure that might lead to permanent stays away or further migration.
2. **The significance of 'family' in one's Malaysian consciousness**: Attachment and sense of belonging to Malaysia is often conflated with the 'family' – e.g. presence of family members in Malaysia; a sense of familiarity, comfort and belonging to an imagined 'family' of fellow Malaysians; equating one's Malaysian citizenship and/or identity with one's family. **However, a strong sense of Malaysian consciousness and belonging may not translate into actual returns to Malaysia**: Firstly, strong feelings of emotional belonging work both ways, ranging from blind faith to utter disappointment. Secondly, living one's life in another place while yearning for a life in Malaysia (perhaps for retirement?) can coexist in parallel. Thirdly, life happens and people change – and so do their emotions.
3. **The significance of 'family' in citizenship and migration decisions**: First, some may leave/return for their parents or partners. Second, some make citizenship and migration decisions as a family unit. Thus, decisions are no longer just about one person's career prospects and economic gains. Those with children entering formal education, for example, may look to migration for the future of their next generation. Third, 'family' contributes towards one's impressions of Malaysia's current development, especially for the Malaysian diaspora who is away (see next point).
4. **The significance of impressions and the lack of information**: Impressions formed from news, social media, and information from social networks are significant in contributing towards people's considerations for emigration and return. It doesn't matter whether the stories are true or untrue – what matters is the perception one holds, for that would have presented a major obstacle preventing return. This, coupled with the lack of information on the job market, career prospects, relevant policies and access to resources prevents the possibility of return. And of course, many of these impressions have been passed on from one generation to the next.

So, what next?

I am attempting to internalise the data (archival materials, oral histories, interviews, news articles, official documents, conversations and personal reflections) into an understanding of citizenship and migration in Malaysia's context. One of my arguments is that to understand migration, we must look at how human agency operates within and beyond structural factors (e.g. differentiated citizenship rights, education system, political system, global economy). In other words, I am trying to dissect Malaysia's culture of migration in order to find possible ways of entry that could hopefully bring some changes.

Beyond Malaysia

While this research is empirically-grounded in Malaysia's case, I am constantly thinking of this in relation to broader, global issues. With increased international mobility and capital flows, countries are engaging in talent wars and competing for people with valued skills. Yet, because this is linked to issues of citizenship and immigration – which are in themselves linked to politics, international relation and social psychology – you see changing migration policies that impact on human lives. One of the normative questions I am grappling with is the notion of citizenship, and whether/how this remains relevant and useful in this age of migration.

But for the time being, what next for Malaysia?

For Malaysia, this is no longer a national issue. Like a business deal, people with choices are going to look at the cards on the table and play the game to their advantage. How much weight does the Malaysia card carry vis-à-vis other cards? (Remember that the current and upcoming generations are not the ones who went through post-colonialism and nation-building directly.) How long can emotional attachment be sustained when this is not reciprocated in real and tangible terms?

Koh Sin Yee is a PhD candidate in human geography at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Follow her project here.

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[1] I am using the term 'Malaysian diaspora' to mean Malaysian-born people who reside outside the international borders of Malaysia. The term 'diaspora' itself is extremely contested, especially when it is used to invoke loyalty, obligation, autochthony and the like. However, I chose to use the term because – for the lack of a better word – it captures a sense of *diasporic consciousness*, i.e. a sense of emotional attachment and belonging to one's place of origin, while living one's everyday life in another place.