

Multicultural Existence Is a Work in Progress

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In Southeast Asia, migration and multicultural existence has been a lived reality for centuries. The maritime worlds of Nusantara and Nanyang met, traded and intermingled in this strategic location between the great civilizations of India and China, and later, in the great port-cities of the colonial world. Migrants and refugees from various corners of Asia, speaking different tongues and practicing different religions, made this into a culturally pluralistic and socially open world with one basic shared belief, that no one owed them a living; as migrants, they owed it to themselves. When Wang Gungwu, later to become a distinguished historian, returned to Southeast Asia after having spent the war years in Nanjing, China, he marveled at the “open” society he found there, as against the closed society of China’s mainland.

There is, however, another portrait of the multicultural reality of immigrant societies in Southeast Asia—Furnivall’s famous depiction of the dysfunctional “plural society” created by uncontrolled immigration under the aegis of a colonial state. In this model of the plural society, different social groups led separate lives, meeting only at the market place, under the watchful eye of the colonial state. This depiction of 19th-century colonial society, however, overlooks the “middle ground” of markets, folk religious festivals, schools, mixed neighborhoods and other spaces where casual encounters did occur and everyday exchanges and adaptations did take place. While this middle ground remained limited by spatial and social barriers outside of which multicultural existence was pursued largely along separate pathways of collective life and habits, its significance as a space of porous borders and social experimentation and change should not be overlooked or underestimated.

Migration in itself tends inherently to assume a collective form, and in search of a new livelihood in a new environment, migrants of necessity seek help from each other and congregate together. Furthermore, it has almost always been state policy to keep migrants apart from the general populace, allotting them special quarters where they were to keep to themselves. This was the case for the Asian empires (Tang China, the Malacca sultanate), as well as the western colonial powers, whose unstated policy regarding their multicultural subject population was to “divide and rule.”

In discussing the Southeast Asian experience of migration and multicultural existence, therefore, there is a danger both in romanticizing the cosmopolitanism of the past, as well as in underscoring the inevitability of social closure and conflict. Malaysia’s recent history as a nation-state shows that multicultural existence is a constant work in progress. As migration led to settlement and colonial status to independence and self-government, the terms of multicultural existence within a sovereign nation-state had to be negotiated. This was no easy undertaking, given the politics and economics of race and religion, and a final consensus remains elusive up to today.

As the global migrations of the past decades have been transforming previously “homogenous” nation-states into political entities more in the mold of the multiethnic “plural” societies of colonial

and postcolonial vintage, with its attendant problems, the question of multicultural existence, or more specifically, the terms on which multicultural existence is to be, or can be, based, has acquired universal urgency. I would suggest the following lessons which need to be learnt from each other.

1. Societal Acceptance of Everyday Difference

The historical experience of the “middle ground” in borderland and colonial societies has given rise to a familiarity with, and acceptance of, the social fact and visibility of difference. While this does not preclude prejudice and stereotyping, it facilitates social interaction and exchange in the public square, both of the market and the street. This is a form of sociality not to be belittled or dismissed. Out of such informal interactions arise recognition; the absence of such interactions breeds invisibility, ignorance and contempt. In the absence of such a middle ground, the state’s attempt to regulate the presence of new arrivals through formal legislative instruments highlights public visibility and the fear and rejection this can engender. The excessive legalization of migrant and refugee governance in the OECD countries not merely raises the financial and economic cost of managing migration; by allowing such costs to escalate, it also raises the social cost of migrant reception.

2. State Adoption of Legal Norms and Good Governance

Malaysia practices a liberal policy of low-wage migrant labor recruitment to keep its economy going, to the detriment of domestic wage levels and capital investment. In 2017, foreign labor accounted officially for 12% of the country’s labor force. Given the ubiquity of undocumented workers, a recent paper noted that up to six million foreign workers could be laboring in Malaysia, 2.27 million legally, and another 2.5 to 3.37 million illegally. Neither category of workers enjoys sufficient legal rights and protection. A major part of the problem lies in the fact that foreign worker recruitment, processing and placement is a business worth more than RM 2 billion annually, the proceeds of which go to manpower agencies closely linked to high-ranking government officials. Corruption is rife and exploitation is widespread. There is a crying need for the adoption of transparent legislation and good governance in migration management. The cost paid by the migrants, and the externalized cost to local society, is simply too high.

Human mobility—the ability, willingness and, indeed, often the necessity to move—is integral to the human condition. Migration has always been an opportunity to individuals and societies to reinvent themselves; it has also been a threat to those individuals and societies unable or unwilling to cope with the arrival of new peoples and different ways of life. Today, the challenge of migration and multicultural existence is a global one. It is a profound challenge, one that will not be resolved by goodwill and a well-meaning “culture of reception” alone. Europe’s recent experience with mass immigration has shown the need for measured debate and effective policies before irresponsible demagogues take over and occupy the political stage. All involved—states, civil society and immigrants—have to be willing to learn from past experience, and move to the middle ground.

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