

Emerging 'Look Malaysia' in Japanese Tourism-Related Mobility

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the emerging notion of 'Look Malaysia' in contemporary Japanese transnational tourism-related mobility, especially the Japanese retirement migration and the education tourism of Japanese youth to Malaysia. Implemented by Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad in 1981, "Look East Policy" aimed to enable Malaysian youth to learn from the experiences of Japan and Korea for the nation-building of Malaysia by sending them to Japan for education and training. The Malaysian government has sent about 14,000 Malaysian students to Japanese universities and technical colleges and trainees to Japanese industries and training institutes in thirty years². This paper argues that the Look East Policy consequently has created a Japan-friendly socio-political environment in Malaysia, whereby Japanese lifestyle migrants/tourists such as retirees and students can live comfortably for leisure-related purposes.

This paper further examines how the development of Japanese retirement migration to Malaysia affects other forms of transnational mobility, such as the education tourism of Japanese youth. Within Japan's current situation of a rapidly aging population and a declining birthrate, a super aged society, retiring abroad has caught growing interest among Japanese pensioners and older adults (Toyota 2006, Miyazaki 2008, Ono 2008, 2009, 2010, Toyota and Ono 2012, Yamashita 2012). Their motivation for moving abroad is to make their post-retirement life more meaningful and financially sustainable within the range of their retirement pension while they are still active and healthy. The everyday life of the Japanese elderly, which has conventionally been understood as static and in-place, is in transition and becoming more dynamic. The Japanese mental-mapping and imagining of Malaysia as a livable place has become the foundation that has cultivated the recently emerging notion of 'Look Malaysia' among tourism-related industries, one that encourages Japanese mobility to Malaysia.

2. Malaysia as the most desirable destination for retirement among Japanese elderly

International retirement migration (King *et al.* 2000), which has been witnessed in Europe for the last several decades, has become a global phenomenon. International retirement migration within Asia, however, is relatively new when compared with the preceding cases of other nations, such as the migration of Northern Europeans like British and German retirees, for example, who started moving to the Mediterranean in the 1970s (*ibid.*). It was not until the late 1990s that Japanese international retirement migration to the Southeast Asian countries where retirement programs for foreign retirees are available, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, and Indonesia, emerged. The government of Malaysia, the country which has been recognized as the most desirable destination among the Japanese, implemented a tourism policy, the "Malaysia My Second Home Programme" (MM2H), in 2002, a program that attracts affluent foreign retirees in order to stimulate the economy, especially in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 (Chee 2007). The MM2H has grown to occupy one of the most important positions of tourism policies in Malaysia.

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2 Website of Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, <http://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/Japanese/JIS/LEP/top.html>, accessed on 8 of May, 2012.

Japanese international retirement migration was originally a government-led project, known as the “Silver Columbia Plan ’92,” launched by the former Ministry of International Trade and Industry in 1986. The plan, however, received criticism that Japan was merely “exporting” its elderly, and, as a result, the private sector took charge of the project by establishing the Long Stay Foundation in 1992 in order to reform the plan and propose a new style of leisure to a generation broader than just the elderly. Since the establishment of the Long Stay Foundation, the term “long-stay” (*rongusutei*), a combination of the two English words, has come to refer to a “residential-type of overseas leisure” (*kaigai taizaigata yoka*). While only Western destinations such as Hawaii, Canada, Australia, the West Coast of U.S., and New Zealand have ranked in the top ten preferred long-stay destinations for Japanese retirees in 1992, the top desirable destination between 2006 to 2012 has consistently been Malaysia, followed by Thailand, Hawaii, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Singapore (Long Stay Foundation 2012). After 30 years since the establishment of the Long Stay Foundation, there has been a shift in the preference of destination away from the West and towards Asian countries. In terms of Japanese retirement migration, there is an apparent “Look East” trend.

According to statistical data obtained from the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, by November of 2012, Malaysia received total 20,328 participants from over 75 countries³ Followed by China (3,562) and Bangladesh (2,466), Japan reached 2,410 approvals by the Malaysian government since the implementation of the program in 2002 (Malaysian Ministry of Tourism 2012). Japanese retirement communities have been developing in the Cameron Highlands, Penang, Kota Kinabalu, and Kuala Lumpur areas which are known for tourist destinations and are Japanese expatriate communities as well. Among the four popular destinations for Japanese retirees in Malaysia, popularity of Kuala Lumpur has been growing gradually since the mid-2000s. Japanese retirees cherish the freedom and flexibility of being temporary residents, they utilize MM2H and enjoy ‘pendulum mobility’ between different places to their advantage (Toyota and Ono 2012).

Statistical data from the Japanese Embassy in Malaysia shows that 5,673 Japanese nationals currently live in Selangor state (Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya), 1,803 in Penang, and 96 in Pahang state, the location of the Cameron Highlands (The Embassy of Japan in Malaysia 2012). It is important to note, however, that there is no accurate statistical data on all Japanese retirees in Malaysia due to the fact that not everyone with an MM2H visa currently resides within Malaysia and that not all Japanese individuals apply for the special visa because many Japanese retirees stay on a regular three-month tourist visa without settling down.

■ 3. Malaysia’s “Japan-friendliness” as a destination pull factor

In the MM2H and long-stay promotion activities targeting Japanese people by the tourism and related industries, Malaysia has always been promoted as a politically pro-Japan country and therefore has been regarded as a safe destination for Japanese retirees and tourists. Among other competing destinations in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, Malaysia has been recognized for its Japan-friendliness, especially with the political and institutional establishment of the Look East Policy. Therefore, the Japan-friendly socio-political environment of Malaysia based upon the ongoing Look East Policy has been proposed as one of the rationales for why Japanese elders choose Malaysia as their destination for retirement migration.

Promoting MM2H, the Malaysian tourism officials occasionally refer to the amicable relationship between Japan and Malaysia and express that they welcome Japanese participation to the MM2H for publicity so that Japanese people can feel being welcomed by Malaysia. The former Malaysian Min-

³ The statistic on the amount of approved MM2H applications reflects households comprised of a couple, a single individual, or a family including elderly dependents and children under 21 years of age.

ister of Tourism, Datuk Dr. Leo Michael Toyard, mentioned in his greeting remarks on the *Malaysia My Second Home News Letter* to Japanese readers published by the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism that many Japanese retirees told him that Malaysia has come to provide Japanese elders the best living environment for post-retirement life, due to the friendship between Japanese and Malaysian nationals (Malaysian Ministry of Tourism 2005). Moreover, the current Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry of Tourism, Dr. Junaida Lee Abdullah, who has been in charge of MM2H and has paid visits to Japan for MM2H promotion every year, mentioned in her words of recommendation in the MM2H guidebook, published by a Japanese publisher and is sponsored by the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism that she personally loves Japan and is very impressed with and respects Japanese culture and Japanese work discipline (Sakamoto 2010: 12-13). Reflecting these words from the Malaysian tourism officials, MM2H licensed agents and travel agents readily explain that Malaysia is a pro-Japan country and Malaysian people respect the Japanese people featured by the Look East policy at their commercial seminars (cf. Ishihara 2011).

Authors of guidebooks on taking long-stay in Malaysia introduce the country as pro-Japanese and promote the MM2H of Malaysia as a desirable long-stay option. One of the well-known guidebooks on retirement in Malaysia and utilizing MM2H, *“Rewarded life in Malaysia (Gohobi Jinsei Mareshia)”* written by Sakamoto Yasuhiko, who is one of the earliest Japanese participants of MM2H and has been associating with the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism for the promotion of MM2H with other MM2H participants from Japan, includes quotes from government officials of both Malaysia and Japan. The former secretary general of the Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia Datuk Dr. Victor Wee, considered it a type of new wave how the increasing interest in long-stay and retirement migration to Malaysia among Japanese retirees participating in the MM2H had accelerated the friendship between Japan and Malaysia (Sakamoto 2006: 178). The former Minister of the Embassy of Japan, Yu Yokoi, also found it extremely unique that the Japanese retirement migrants may have strengthened the bilateral relationship between Japan and Malaysia (ibid.: 180-181). He explained that he asked the Japan Club of Kuala Lumpur to set up a committee in order to promote the MM2H program to Japanese people in 2004 in order to help Japanese retirement migrants facilitate mutual support (ibid.). It is therefore noteworthy that guidebooks present a picture where both the governments of Japan and of Malaysia consider the new stream of increasing Japanese retirement migrants as a potential agent to deepen the national relationship.

At the individual level, Malaysians who studied or trained in Japan in the last thirty years of Look East policy directly or indirectly were involved in the construction of the everyday lives of Japanese retirement migrants and other expatriates in Malaysia. For example, some Japanese-speaking Malaysian medical doctors, who studied and trained in Japan, consult with Japanese retirees and expatriates at private hospitals. Moreover, Malaysians proficient in Japanese become friend with them and provide daily support. The Malaysian people who studied and trained in Japan are not necessarily Look East Policy alumni. However, the Look East Policy has been considered to be the main vehicle whereby Malaysia as a multiethnic country is open to foreigners, one which especially welcomes Japanese people who are willing to participate in MM2H and reside in Malaysia.

■ 4. An emerging notion of ‘Look Malaysia’ in tourism promotions

The successful development of the MM2H promotion to the Japanese market has broadened and stimulated the commoditization of related forms of transnational mobility, such as education tourism. Learning English in Malaysia is considered one of the main leisure activities and necessities among the Japanese elderly with limited English proficiency who are planning to live in Malaysia for a long period of time. Language schools in Malaysia accept Japanese elderly students who are either MM2H participants or long-stay tourists, and these students participate in the courses for a few lessons each week.

Due to the demand for English language lessons as both leisure activity and lifelong learning, some MM2H agents prepare language lessons for their clients and some language schools have become licensed MM2H facilities to lure the increasing amount of foreign students.

The Long Stay Foundation reports that the reason for taking long-stay as a type of safeguard in order to cope with an aging society has recently been increasing (Long Stay Foundation 2012), whereas “the interest in different cultures” has originally been the primary objective of long-stay. Furthermore, it foresees that long-stay enables people’s normal places of residence to become more and more borderless as inquiries from those in their thirties and forties, in addition to retirees, has been increasing (ibid.). The Malaysian government does not accept only pensioners and older adults through the MM2H, but it also accepts the youth since MM2H does not regulate participants by age. It allows the participants of the MM2H to bring their elderly parents and their children who are under the age of 18 as dependents, a rule which permitted participants to relocate to Malaysia as a family. While increasing amounts of elderly Japanese join MM2H after their retirement and move to Malaysia, younger Japanese lifestyle migrants who have children and are of the working generation are eager to leave Japan and take advantage of the MM2H in order to educate their children in a multilingual and multicultural environment (cf. Nomoto 2012: 37-39). Moving to Malaysia with children and sending them to international schools for primary, secondary, and higher education has become one of the lifestyle options for foreign residents who are parents.

Japan experienced tremendous damage from the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, an event which has consequently accelerated the transnational mobility of Japanese adults and youth to Malaysia. The Malaysian Ministry of Tourism announced that the number of approved Japanese MM2H participants in 2011 has increased 16.9 % from 195 successful applications in 2010 to 423 in 2011. Furthermore, after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board implemented the Look Malaysia Program (*Rukku Marêshia Purogramu*), a study abroad program for Japanese youth, co-sponsored by Air Asia X, and sponsored by ASEAN Japan Centre (see Figure 1.).

Look Malaysia Program aimed to initiate global human resource development as a means for disaster recovery support program, provide the opportunity for international exchange, and cultivate interest in Asia among Japanese youth. The Tourism Promotion Board received 140 applications for the program in 2011 and selected ten Japanese students between the age of 18 to 25 who attended universities and colleges in the Greater Tokyo Area (comprised of Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, and Shizuoka). The ten participants spent three weeks in Malaysia and experienced home-stays, visited local industries, and attended classes and exchanged ideas with local students. They put together a “proposal for the future of Japan and Malaysia” as well as reported their experiences participating in the Look Malaysia



Figure 1. Look Malaysia Program
Source: Website of the Malaysia Tourism Board⁴

4 Website of the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, <http://www.tourismmalaysia.or.jp/>, accessed on 17 of June, 2012.



Figure 2. “Study in Malaysia” (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board 2012)

Program at the JATA Travel Showcase 2011, one of the largest tourism events in Asia organized by the Japan Association of Travel Agents⁵.

After the Look Malaysia Program in 2011, the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board sought to further promote Japanese youth mobility for those seeking higher education in Malaysia. Firstly, on February 23, 2012, it organized a seminar on educational and training opportunities in Malaysia in commemoration of launching the guidebook “Study in Malaysia” (*Marêshia Ryugaku Gaido*) (see Figure 2). This guidebook includes six pages about the Look Malaysia Program in 2011 and essays contributed by the participants about their experiences in Malaysia. The Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board continued the program in 2012 under the theme of “Discussion in Malaysia, a multi-ethnic country in Asia and recommendations for Japan’s globalization” and sent sixteen students from the

Greater Tokyo Area and Kansai region to Malaysia for three weeks⁶. In the promotion to Japanese youth for education tourism as well as study abroad opportunities, Malaysia is represented as a “global society” and a “gate to Asia, therefore to the world” (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board 2012: 14-15). Moreover, Malaysia’s advantage is explained by its position as “a multiethnic country with tolerance and diversity whereby each ethnic group accepts different values and ways of life while keeping their own culture, religion, and language” (ibid.: 14-15). These characteristics of Malaysia are emphasized to show things which Japanese youth can learn from Malaysia in order to develop themselves as global human resources (ibid.: 13). Through tourism promotion, Malaysia deliberately expresses a desire for Japan to learn from Malaysia. In the information material about education tourism in Malaysia prepared by the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, the Director of the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, Noor Azlan Abu Baker, remarked, “From Look East to Look Malaysia, there are many things we can learn from each other” (The Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board 2011: 2). This can show that the emerging notion of Look Malaysia in tourism-related mobility is a preface for the notion of “look towards each other,” an idea which facilitates more active international human mobility between Japan and Malaysia.

■ 5. Conclusion

This paper examined that the 30 years of implementation of the Look East Policy has created a Japan-friendly socio-political environment in Malaysia, whereby Japanese lifestyle migrants, such as tourists, retirees, and youth, can reside comfortably for educational and leisure-related purposes. The development of the Japanese retirement migration to Malaysia affects other forms of transnational mobility, such as the education tourism of Japanese youth, and has cultivated emerging notion of Look Malaysia in tourism-related industry.

The implementation of the Look Malaysia Program by the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board represents that the bilateral relationship between Japan and Malaysia has transformed from one-way traffic to a flow traveling in both directions. After 30 years of the Look East Policy, Malaysia has matured to

5 Website of the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, <http://www.tourismmalaysia.or.jp/>, accessed on 17 of June, 2012.

6 Website of the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, <http://www.tourismmalaysia.or.jp/look/about.html>, accessed on 22 of February, 2013.

become the second most advanced economy of the ASEAN countries. As a result, the notion of Look Malaysia has emerged, and Japan and Malaysia have come to the point where they will “look to each other”. Active international human mobility between Japan and Malaysia will comprise the infrastructure for sustainable development of their mutual relationship and actually accelerate coexistence among the citizens of the two countries and beyond.

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