

Queer Malaysian Chinese Students' Education Mobility to Taiwan

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Going overseas for higher education has long been an upward mobility strategy of students from the 60 independent Chinese high schools in Malaysia, partly due to their qualifications not being recognised for entry into public universities under Malay-centric policies. Different from most other educational migration patterns previously observed (e.g. from Asia to the West), many of these students have been attending universities in Taiwan rather than established destinations for foreign students such as Australia or the United Kingdom. This is largely due to Taiwan's welcoming education policy (i.e. low tuition fees), as a Cold War legacy, for Chinese overseas students since the 1950s (Wong 2016) and long-established transnational networks of Chinese Malaysian students and graduates. In recent years, more and more of these students have turned to Mainland China, especially metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, for university due to its rapid economic development and intensifying global presence. Some major Chinese universities have moreover been active in recruiting Chinese Malaysians; their strategies include organising week-long visits to university campuses and providing scholarships for high-achieving students.

My latest article, "Queer migration across the Sinophone world: queer Chinese Malaysian students' educational mobility to Taiwan", published in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* draws on recent findings of an ongoing ethnographic study of Chinese Malaysian students' educational mobility to Taiwan and Mainland China. Most existing studies have approached Chinese language education in Malaysia from historical and policy perspectives (e.g. Lee 2011; Santhiram and Tan 2017; Tan 1997); out of which many focus on examining the functions of independent Chinese schools in safeguarding the continuity of Chinese culture (Chin 2001; Collins 2006; Tan and Teoh 2016). Interestingly, despite most stakeholders (e.g. teachers, school administrators) in the Chinese language education community being former students in Taiwan or Mainland China, little is known about the role of student mobility in the (trans)formation of independent Chinese schools as sites where transnational Chinese identities are reproduced, reimagined and reconfigured. My research aims to address this question and, in doing so, develop new understandings of Sinophone Malaysia (i.e. the Chinese-speaking aspect of Malaysian society) amid changing Chinese geopolitics (e.g. the rise of China) in the 21st century.

At the time of writing the article, I had conducted some field research in Malaysia and Taiwan and interviewed current or former students in Taiwan. While the scope of my project was not gender- or sexuality-specific, I could not help but notice the prominent presence of LGBT-identified research participants in the sample. Some, including a few queer activists, were referred to me by queer friends in Taiwan or Malaysia; others whose sexual orientation I only found out when they came out to me in the research process. As I talked to more and more LGBT-identified research participants, I was convinced that the sexually diverse sample was not a coincidence. Rather, it was partly a result of their shared desire to study in and learn from Taiwan where its progressive development as a liberal democracy demonstrated the compatibility between one's queer and Chinese identities. This is why I decided to write about the queer dimension of this student migration pattern.

One of the central arguments I made in the article highlights that Taiwan has been instrumental to the queer development in Malaysia. For example, many research participants were involved in various activities organised by Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association (Hotline hereafter), a prominent LGBT organisation founded in 1998. Some, who were now schoolteachers or queer activists, talked at length about how Hotline had shaped their approaches to LGBT issues in teaching or activism since returning to Malaysia. Their shared, sometimes coinciding experience led me to visit Hotline's office in Taipei, where I met the staff member who coordinated the internship programme which provided training to quite a number of Malaysians over the years. She told me it was their priority to receive interns from countries that lacked LGBT-related resources, especially Chinese-speaking students from China or Malaysia, in order to equip them with the skills to do advocacy work when they returned to their home countries. To me, this finding is significant: Despite Taiwan being widely regarded as Asia's gay capital for lifestyle consumption, it has rarely been considered as an exporter of movement tactics that is capable of influencing queer activism globally. This queer, South-South connection between Taiwan and Malaysia charts an atypical trajectory of "globalisation from below", one that is enabled by a distinctive history of student migration.

I hope this article will not only make a case to argue for the queer potentials of student migration across the Chinese-speaking world, but also more generally initiate discussion towards "queering" research on educational mobility.

References

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