State-led talent return migration programme and the doubly neglected ‘Malaysian diaspora’: Whose diaspora, what citizenship, whose development?

Sin Yee Koh
Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei-Muara, Brunei

Correspondence: Sin Yee Koh (email: s.y.koh@alumni.lse.ac.uk)

This paper questions the assumptions of ‘diaspora’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘development’ underlying diaspora strategies targeting a specific pool of overseas Malaysian ‘talent’ migrants. I examine the Malaysian state’s discursive attempts to construct a carefully contained economic ‘diaspora’—the ‘Malaysian diaspora’—through its talent return migration programme. In this process, there is a portion of the ‘Malaysian diaspora’, especially non-bumiputeras (sons of soil), who are doubly neglected and excluded: first, from access to full and equal citizenship (which arguably contributed to their emigration in the first place); and second, from eligibility and recognition to participate in Malaysia’s talent return migration programme. However, recent political activism calling for electoral reform and overseas voting rights challenges state-constructed visions of the ‘diaspora’ and their expected roles in advancing ‘development’. This paper concludes by highlighting questions raised by the Malaysian case, linking these explicitly to how diaspora strategies—as they have been conceived, practised and contested—challenge the broader Migration and Development paradigm.

Keywords: bumiputera-differentiated citizenship, diaspora strategies, diaspora-led activism for overseas voting rights, emigration of Malaysians, included and excluded diaspora, talent return migration programme

Introduction

To remain globally competitive, some emigration states (migrant-sending states) employ diaspora strategies—also referred to as ‘diaspora engagement policies’ (Gamlen, 2006) and ‘extraterritorial citizenship strategies’ (Ho, 2011)—to engage their overseas citizenry to stimulate national economic development. Existing literature has adopted either the explanatory approach such as neoliberalism and governmentality (Larner, 2007; Ragazzi, 2009; Gamlen, 2013) or the policy-oriented approach, i.e., how diasporas can be better engaged and mobilized (Brinkerhoff, 2006; de Haas, 2006; Ionescu, 2006). However, there remains much to be done in critically and systematically examining the implicit assumptions underlying these diaspora strategies. In particular, there are ‘neglected emigrants’ (Ho, 2011) who have been excluded from constructions of the diaspora targeted by diaspora strategies. Furthermore, although diasporas are ‘grounded in internal hegemonies and systems of inequalities’ (Ong & Nonini, 1997: 324), this internal diversity is often obscured in discussions of diaspora strategies. Finally, little has been done in examining the agency and experiences of emigrants and members of diasporas (Leitner & Ehrkamp, 2006) as active human agents rather than passive targets of diaspora strategies.

In this paper, I employ discourse analysis on Malaysia’s neglected emigrants to challenge the assumptions of ‘diaspora’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘development’ in relation to diaspora strategies. While my contribution builds upon existing works addressing state-
led discourses pertaining to Malaysia’s brain gain (Bunnell, 2002), the Malay diaspora (Kessler, 1999; Kahn, 2006; Fischer, 2015) and multiethnic politics in contemporary Malaysia (Kahn & Loh, 1992; Lim et al., 2009), my larger objective is to interrogate assumptions underlying diaspora strategies. In other words, I use the Malaysian case as a platform to raise fundamental questions with reference to the diaspora strategies literature, rather than examining the nuances between the Malay diaspora and the Malaysian diaspora.1

Malaysia’s citizenship is differentiated between those who hold bumiputera (sons of soil) status—the majority being bumiputera Malays—and those who do not. Much has been written about the effects of pro-bumiputera affirmative action policies, which were introduced in the 1970s, on Malaysian social life (see especially Mason & Omar, 2003). Some analyses draw the link to emigration (Nonini, 1997; Cartier, 2003), especially of non-bumiputera (excluded citizens) who face limitations in access to higher education and employment in certain sectors. In this article, I examine the tensions between (1) state-led discourses captured in Malaysia’s recently revised Returning Expert Programme (REP) administered by Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad (TalentCorp)2 and (2) challenges brought about by the Malaysian diaspora. Following this, I outline the assumptions underlying diaspora strategies, before explaining Malaysia’s bumiputera-differentiated citizenship, linking this to emigration or brain drain and selective overseas voting rights.

**Diaspora strategies: problematic assumptions**

Discussions and formulations of diaspora strategies in academic and policy domains are often based on certain assumptions. Diaspora strategies typically premise upon the migration-development nexus argument, i.e., ‘certain types of population mobility induce development’ (Glick Schiller & Faist, 2010: 8). Consequently, certain types of migrants (especially diasporas) bear the responsibility as development agents for their origin contexts (Raghuram, 2009). In addition, policy makers of diaspora strategies assume that there is a diaspora to be ‘claimed’ by the emigration state and that the targeted diaspora is homogeneous (e.g., affiliation to emigration state, desire to be engaged as extraterritorial citizens) (e.g., Padilla, 2011). Finally, successful ‘claiming’ of the diaspora leads to emigrants contributing towards the development of their (national) emigration contexts (for the problematization of diaspora strategies, see Gamlen, 2008; Mullings, 2012).

This lack of critical questioning is problematic for a number of reasons. First, who constitutes the ‘diaspora’? On the one hand, state-led conceptions of the diaspora usually include only emigrants with recognized skills, talents and financial resources. On the other hand, some emigrants may not identify themselves as members of the diaspora. Second, what does ‘citizenship’ (as rights and obligations) entail for diasporas? Seen as extraterritorial citizen-subjects, diasporas could be governed and mobilized as any other citizen-subjects within the emigration state territory. However, extraterritorial populations may not enjoy similar citizenship rights as in-territory populations. Furthermore, emigration states often use discourses of national loyalty and duty towards the ‘home’ country while concealing the underlying economic rationalism (Cohen, 2009).

Third, what constitutes ‘development’? Often, diaspora strategies prioritize national economic development over other kinds of social, cultural and political developments. Furthermore, the ‘national’ frame obscures potential contributions towards development on other scales such as the subnational, societal, familial and individual. Addi-
tionally, the focus on economic development, even when projected onto longer time frames, fails to recognize potential economic contributions that could have trickled down from social, cultural and political developments.

In the following three subsections, I highlight the problematic assumptions contained within the interrelated concepts of ‘development’, ‘diaspora’ and ‘citizenship’.

**Migration-led development and diaspora as development agents**

In migration studies literature, migration has been interlinked with ideas of development (see Castles, 2008). According to Faist and Fauser (2011), the relationship between migration and development has evolved through three phases since the 1950s. In the first phase (1950s–1960s), migrant remittances were celebrated as resources for the development of sending countries. In the second phase (1970s–1980s), migration was seen as a negative phenomenon for development as it led to brain drain and underdevelopment in sending countries. In the third phase (1990s onwards), migrants and their transnational circulatory mobility are seen as crucial in facilitating development of sending countries. In short, the act of migration, together with the actors (migrants and diasporas) and measurable outputs (remittances, human capital), has been crucial in the migration-as-development imaginary.

This imaginary has been circulating in policy and academic realms. International development organizations such as the World Bank and the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) have collectively contributed towards setting the migration-development agenda in international and national arenas. As sites of knowledge production, these organizations create and perpetuate a normalized interpretation of migration-led development. In this perspective, migrants and diasporas are constructed as ‘transnational development agents’ (Faist, 2008) with the capacity and responsibility to facilitate and participate in development agendas of their emigration states.

Such perspectives are also evident in academic debates. Hugo’s article on Malaysia’s emigration, for example, ends with an optimistic suggestion on the role of the Malaysian diaspora as ‘a significant, potential resource which could contribute directly and indirectly to raising the productivity of the Malaysian workforce’ (2011: 238). Although the suggestion is not inherently wrong, it could easily lead to emigration states taking for granted that the diaspora can—and should—be mobilized to contribute towards the state’s economic development agenda.

**Invoking diaspora: included diasporas and neglected emigrants**

‘Diaspora’ is a contentious term. There have been various attempts to define a diaspora through certain characteristics (e.g., Clifford, 1994; Vertovec, 1997; Cohen, 2008). Here, King and Christou’s (2011) three-point summary is useful: there is dispersal from a territory of origin, usually through force (ranging from traumatic events to systems of labour recruitment); there is a sense of belonging and collective memory reinforcing an essentialized and distinct group identity vis-à-vis the receiving community; and there is a strong desire to return to the original homeland.

In studies of diaspora strategies and the relationship between emigration states and their target diaspora populations, the term ‘diaspora’ has often been loosely applied as a descriptive tool. Used in this way, the term ‘diaspora’ conveniently refers to an emigrant population that is recognized primarily as subjects of their emigration states, while their other statuses (e.g., residents of their immigration states) are glossed over.
Without careful and informed usage of the term ‘diaspora’, these discussions assume the a priori inclusion of some emigrants as diasporas.

As a result, the term ‘diaspora’ loses its analytical utility. First, emigrants included in the diaspora strategies discourse are assumed to exhibit diasporic characteristics such as a strong sense of affiliation with the homeland. Furthermore, the idea of a diaspora suggests a homogenous group of emigrants ‘who have the potential of belonging to the same ethnic group, . . . have similar imaginaries, and seek to affect state politics in the same way’ (Ong, 2003: 87). Thus, they are expected to respond to diaspora strategies by virtue of their taken-for-granted affiliations to their emigration states. The debate on intersectionality in the literature on migration and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2007) has not been embraced by discussions of diaspora strategies thus far. Even when a particular type of migrant is specified in the diaspora discourse (e.g., the highly skilled and business elite), there has been little engagement with the intersectionalities of age, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, political affiliation, etc.

Second, as Ragazzi (2009: 389) explains, such ‘remapping of the boundaries of belonging [by emigration states] constitute[s] a new dichotomy between the “included” and the “excluded” which is independent of territorial considerations’. In this way, ‘useful’ emigrants ticking the right boxes (e.g., with skills and resources valued by the emigration state) are co-opted into the diaspora discourse, while ‘useless’ emigrants are excluded despite demonstrating the three fundamental characteristics of a diaspora. Crucially, the economic is often valued over social, cultural and political capital.

**Citizenship: membership, rights, enactment**

‘Citizenship’ is a crucial concept underlying diaspora strategies. Here, I argue that a focus on citizenship enactments (as individual and collective political acts) is necessary to enrich the diaspora strategies literature. Political participation of emigrants is intimately linked to their citizenship or diaspora status and meanings, with implications for their reciprocal affiliations to their emigration states and participation in, and contestation to, diaspora strategies. A focus on ‘citizenship’ also raises questions of governmentality and agency, which in turn inform our understanding of the politics of neglected emigrants.

‘Citizenship’ in a transnational migration context has been conceptualized as a confluence of legal-political rights and obligations and public recognition of collective membership and belonging (Faist, 2000), as well as reciprocal emotional affiliations (Ho, 2009). For emigrants and diasporas, external citizenship refers to ‘the status, rights and duties of all those who are temporarily or permanently outside the territory of a polity that recognizes them as members’ (Bauböck, 2009: 478).

However, ‘citizenship’ is more than a one-directional state conferment of formal membership, rights and obligations; it also entails one’s ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin, 2008) such as political voting and collectively shaping the future course of one’s nation-state. In the context of our discussion on neglected emigrants, examining citizenship practices clarifies how individual and collective diasporas—whether included or neglected—challenge state-led hegemonies and acts of claiming. Moreover, examining citizenship practices highlights how citizenship is enacted by diasporas, not merely conceptualizing them as passive targets of diaspora strategies by virtue of their extraterritorial citizenship status. As Staeheli (2011: 399) argues, ‘[i]t feels unsatisfying to seem to overlook citizens in favour of citizenship’. Barry (2006: 20) further highlights that ‘[c]itizenship’s content and its role as determinant of behaviour and source of identity cannot be understood by considering only the black letter of the law for attributing membership’.
The Malaysian context

Having set out the theoretical groundings, this section provides an overview of the Malaysian context in three related areas: the history of bumiputera-differentiated citizenship, Malaysia’s brain drain and recent governmental efforts to resolve the issue through an economic transformation programme, and overseas voting rights for the Malaysian diaspora. The overview provides the contexts within which to interrogate ‘citizenship’, ‘development’ and ‘diaspora’ in the Malaysian case.

Bumiputera-differentiated citizenship

The territory known as Malaysia today has been home to a multiethnic population. In addition to indigenous natives (orang asli or original peoples), the area has also been receiving immigrants who predominantly hailed from the Indonesia Archipelago. Under British colonial rule, especially during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, many ethnic Chinese and Indians immigrated from China and India as labour migrants. The British colonial administration’s ‘divide-and-rule’ strategy confined and stereotyped ethnic groups into specific economic and political activities, creating a legacy of racial ideology (Hirschman, 1986).

The formation of the Malaysian nation-state was one of negotiation and compromise between different stakeholders representing the multiethnic population (see Ongkili, 1985; Cheah, 2002). In the lead up to Malaysia’s independence, the Alliance Party was formed between the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), representing the three main ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese and Indian respectively. The Alliance Party became the Barisan Nasional (BN) (United Front) coalition in 1974. The coalition proved to be a winning formula and secured political majority throughout Malaysia’s electoral history since the first federal general election in 1955. Despite the coalition arrangement, UMNO as the dominant party pushed for the retention of Malay traditions such as the special positions of the Malays and Malay land reservation rights. A political bargain was eventually reached: in exchange for UMNO’s agreement for a jus soli (birth right) Malayan citizenship, MCA and MIC agreed to accept the existing four-to-one ratio of Malays to non-Malays in the Malayan civil service, the adoption of Malay as the national language and an educational policy of ‘Malayan curriculum’.

This preoccupation with Malay indigeneity resulted in constitutional articles pertaining to citizenship, rights and privileges of the Malay rulers; Malay as the national language; the Yang di-Pertuan Agong’s (Head of State) responsibility to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the states of Sabah and Sarawak; and the proviso that any amendment to these provisions shall not be passed without the consent of the Conference of Rulers. Subsequently, the Malays and natives of the states of Sabah and Sarawak became referred to as bumiputera. Interestingly, the term bumiputera does not appear in Malaysia’s constitution. Instead, the earlier 1948 constitution defines a ‘Malay’ as a person who ‘habitually speaks the Malay language’, ‘professes the Muslim religion’ and ‘conforms to Malay customs’.

Emigration, brain drain and the New Economic Model

In the 1960s, economic disparity worsened between and within ethnic groups in Malaysia. In the lead up to the 1969 elections, ethnic tensions were high as ethnic-based opposition parties capitalized on communal sentiments in their campaigns. After the May 1969 riots, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in 1971 to serve two
main objectives: reduce socio-economic disparities between the different ethnic groups, particularly between bumiputera Malays and non-bumiputera Chinese, and create conditions for national unity (Jomo, 2004). The NEP cemented the Malays’ special position and rights as bumiputera and also resulted in significant emigration of Chinese- and Indian-Malaysians, especially to Singapore and the member countries of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). By 2000, the five destination countries hosting the largest numbers of overseas Malaysians were Singapore (46 per cent), Australia (12 per cent), Brunei (9 per cent), the United States (8 per cent) and United Kingdom (8 per cent) (World Bank, 2011: 91).

The Malaysian government has been aware of the outflow of its tertiary-educated citizenry since the late 1960s, but it did not recognize the outflow as a brain drain problem, as the majority were students pursuing overseas degrees on Malaysian government scholarships who are expected to return to serve the government for five to seven years (Commonwealth Consultative Committee on South and South-east Asia & Colombo Plan Bureau, 1972). This perspective changed in the 1990s, as seen in the introduction of reverse brain drain policies administered by various ministries. This included the Scheme for Appointment of Overseas Malaysian and Foreign Scientists in 1995, the REP in 2001 and Brain Gain Malaysia in 2006. However, these programmes have not been particularly successful. The 1995 programme attracted 94 researchers, scientists and engineers worldwide (including 24 overseas Malaysians)—all but one of them has since left Malaysia (The Sun Daily, 2010). From January 2001 to February 2010, 840 out of 1455 REP applications were approved, of which 601 (71.5 per cent of approved applicants) actually returned to Malaysia (The Star, 2010).

The World Bank (2011) estimates that there are one million overseas Malaysians in 2010 compared to 750 000 in 2000, with a third of them being tertiary educated. It also found that in 2010, one in 10 tertiary-educated Malaysian migrated to an OECD country—twice the world average. The New Economic Advisory Council acknowledged the problem by stating in its report that ‘we are not developing talent and what we have is leaving’ (New Economic Advisory Council, 2010: 6). Induced in part by the Malaysian government’s realization of the extent of brain drain, the New Economic Model (NEM) was announced in April 2010. Under the NEM, the government aims to achieve targets in 12 National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) amounting to an increase of some 2.5–2.9 million jobs and RM 1042–1148 billion in gross national income contributions by the year 2020 (Table 1). The plan includes the attraction, development and retention of human capital necessary for the country’s anticipated ‘economic transformation’ (NEAC, 2010).

Overseas voting rights for the Malaysian diaspora
To understand the orientations of some members of the diaspora towards the Malaysian government, a brief explanation of overseas voting rights is useful. Malaysia is one of the 115 independent countries and territories that adopted absentee voting, a legacy inherited from the British colonial administration (Ellis, 2007). However, extraterritorial voting rights are not universally available to all overseas Malaysians. Prior to January 2013, only civil servants, military personnel, full-time students and their spouses living abroad are allowed to register and vote as absent voters. Overseas Malaysians who are privately employed, unemployed or retired are required to return to Malaysia to vote in person. It is noteworthy that civil servants, military personnel and students on overseas government scholarships are predominantly bumiputera Malays because of quotas institutionalized under affirmative action policies. Given UMNO’s, and by extension BN’s,
strong orientation towards bumiputera Malay interests, this selective conferment of overseas voting rights appear to lend electoral advantage to the ruling coalition.

Indeed, the selective conferment of overseas voting rights and the lack of transparency in postal voting processes were said to be the ruling coalition’s strategy to secure seats in certain constituencies (ABC News, 2008). Indeed, research has shown incidences of electoral fraud and a lack of transparency in the electoral process, such as the mass deletion of mostly Chinese names from the electoral roll between the 1969 and the 1974 elections (Crouch, 1996), mass registration of nonresident voters (including illegal immigrants) and dead persons in the electoral roll (Ong, 2005) and redrawing of electoral boundaries to boost electoral strength to particular distributions of ethnicity within constituencies favouring the ruling coalition (Balasubramaniam, 2006).

In response, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, better known as BERSIH (clean), was formed in November 2006. Comprising about 60 civil society organizations, BERSIH is supported by three main opposition political parties. The coalition has initiated three public demonstrations to date: BERSIH 1.0 in Kuala Lumpur on 10 November 2007, BERSIH 2.0 on 9 July 2011 in 38 cities worldwide and BERSIH 3.0 on 28 April 2012 in 35 countries and 85 locations. With pressure from BERSIH and other civil society organizations, the Malaysian government formed the Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reform (PSC) on 3 October 2011 to evaluate and make recommendations for a fair and democratic electoral process.

In October 2012, the Election Commission of Malaysia (SPR) announced that overseas Malaysians can register as absentee voters for the 13th General Elections. On 18 January 2013, the SPR announced further conditions: applicants must be Malaysian citizens and existing registered voters; they must have been resident in Malaysia for a total minimum of 30 days within the preceding five years before the dissolution of the current parliament; and they must not be resident in southern Thailand, Singapore, Brunei and Kalimantan in Indonesia (SPR, 2013). Regardless of the conditions for absentee voting, many overseas Malaysians have expressed their intention to return to Malaysia to cast their votes, as they are wary of the transparency of the postal voting
facility. For example, Jom Balik Undi (Let’s go home and vote) is a diaspora-led campaign urging overseas Malaysian to return home to vote (Free Malaysiakini, 2013). The campaign’s Facebook page published photo submissions from overseas Malaysians pledging to make a trip to Malaysia to vote.

State-led talent return migration programme

Defining the (included) ‘Malaysian diaspora’

Clearly, citizenship in Malaysia does not confer equal status with privileges to all who formally hold Malaysian citizenship. It is, in fact, a bumiputera-differentiated Malaysian citizenship. Some non-bumiputera have emigrated to access higher education and employment opportunities perceived to be curtailed if they had remained in Malaysia. As overseas Malaysians, their political voices have also been limited by conditions imposed on overseas voting rights. As a consequence, they are ‘excluded citizens’ who in turn have become ‘excluded diasporas’—i.e., members of a diaspora who have been deliberately excluded and marginalized.

Ironically, the Malaysian state has embarked on a talent return migration programme targeting ‘the Malaysian diaspora’. In April 2012, TalentCorp announced the launch of Talent Roadmap 2020 (TalentCorp, 2012), mapping out strategies for Malaysia to become a top 20 global talent destination in the Global Talent Index by the year 2020. The plan identified three strategic thrusts, including ‘optimize Malaysian talent’, ‘attract and facilitate global talent’ and ‘build networks of top talent’, targeting specifically the ‘Malaysian talent’ (Malaysians residing in Malaysia, including students), ‘Malaysian diaspora’ and ‘foreign talent’ (highly skilled foreigners).

The term ‘Malaysian diaspora’, referring to skilled overseas Malaysians, started to appear in public discourse in 2004 (New Straits Times, 2004). The Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) introduced policies to attract overseas Malaysians to return and initiated joint ventures with local universities and laboratories to employ overseas Malaysian scientists. The focus then was to improve Malaysia’s research and development capability. As a result, the term ‘Malaysian diaspora’ became synonymous with a specific segment of overseas Malaysians—those with relevant qualifications and overseas work experience in industries and professions that are periodically identified and defined by the government. For example, a document outlining the fields of expertise for the previous REP ends with a caveat: ‘The Government of Malaysia reserves the right to revise the fields of expertise without prior notice’ (MOSTI, 2005).

In other words, to be officially recognized as a member of the ‘Malaysian diaspora’, the overseas Malaysian must meet the shifting eligibility criteria defined by the Malaysian government. For example, changes have been made to the REP fields of expertise defined in 2005 and 2011 (Figure 1). While industries such as financial services, education and healthcare have been retained, others such as science and technology, arts and culture, maritime and aerospace have been dropped. Instead, new areas such as Greater Kuala Lumpur or Klang Valley, wholesale and retail, and tourism have been added. Applicants to the REP must be currently employed and residing overseas for a minimum of three years prior to application. In addition, REP application guidelines require candidates to have minimum overseas working experience that varies depending on their qualifications: 10 years for diploma holders, 6 years for bachelor’s degree holders, 4 years for master’s degree holders and 2 years for PhD degree holders.
Mobilizing the ‘global talent’

The Malaysian government has referred to the Malaysian diaspora as ‘an asset’ (Bernama, 2011) and a ‘valuable source of talent’ (TalentCorp, 2012: 107). In his foreword statement for Talent Roadmap 2020, Malaysia’s prime minister claimed that ‘the Malaysian talent represents the key to transforming [the] nation into a high-income economy, [which will be] driven by knowledge-intensive and innovation-led activities’ (2012: 1). Here, the ‘Malaysian diaspora’ has been subsumed under the broader umbrella of ‘Malaysian talent’, which includes ‘Malaysian diaspora and foreign talent’. In this way, the Malaysian state has shifted its focus from ‘diaspora’ to ‘talent’, thereby expanding its reach beyond a citizenship-specific pool of human capital. This shift in focus and state-led constructions of the ‘Malaysia diaspora’ corresponds to Bunnell’s earlier observation that the repositioning of Malaysia is ‘seen to entail opening the nation to (suitably skilled) non-Malays’ (2002: 116).

To reach out to engage and attract the ‘Malaysian diaspora’, the current government has adopted a three-pronged communication strategy to opportunistically target different audiences. First, TalentCorp takes on a neutral position in targeting ‘global talents’. TalentCorp programmes focus on actively engaging with overseas Malaysian students and professionals, raising awareness about employment and business opportunities in Malaysia, supporting business and training partnerships and facilitating actual returns for those who choose to do so. The terms ‘loyalty’, ‘patriotism’ or ‘obligation’ did not once appear in the main texts of Talent Roadmap 2020. Second, in contrast to TalentCorp’s neutral position, rhetoric on national loyalty and obligations to serve the country continue to be used from time to time to target overseas Malaysians who are assumed to have emotional affiliations to their home country. Malaysia’s International Trade and Industry Minister, for example, claimed that the Malaysian diaspora plays a role in Malaysia’s economic development, because ‘we are all bound by a common love for our country’ (The Star Online, 2012a).

Third, with China’s rising economic power on the global stage, Malaysia’s prime minister is now acknowledging ‘the contribution of the Malaysian Chinese community to the growth and development of the country’ and including the Malaysian Chinese community ‘as productive citizens of [the] country, working hand in hand with the other races11 to transform the nation’ (Malaysian Mirror, 2010). Furthermore, the prime minister’s 1Malaysia campaign promotes ‘national unity among the multiethnic Malaysian population, based on a few important values that should become the practice

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**Table: Comparing fields of expertise and NKEAs.**

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<th>Discarded areas (Fields of expertise, 2005)</th>
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<th>Retained areas (NKEA, 2011)</th>
<th>New areas (NKEA, 2011)</th>
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<td>- Science and technology</td>
<td>- Finance, accounting and economics</td>
<td>- Financial services</td>
<td>- Oil, gas and energy</td>
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<td>- Art and culture</td>
<td>- Industry</td>
<td>- Electronics and electrical</td>
<td>- Palm oil</td>
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<td>- Medical and health</td>
<td>- Communications, content</td>
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*Figure 1. Comparing fields of expertise and NKEAs. Source: MOSTI (2005); PEMANDU (2012).*
of each and every Malaysian’ (Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, 2010, my translation). These values are the culture of excellence, endurance, humility, acceptance, loyalty, meritocracy, education and integrity (Department of Information, 2009). In this way, the Malaysian government is strategically turning the attention to universal human values that is now associated with being a Malaysian citizen, rather than dealing directly with issues of ethnicity and the **bumiputera**-differentiated citizenship.

**Neglected emigrants**

*Returning Expert Programme: inclusions and exclusions*

The REP has prescribed specific eligibility criteria for overseas Malaysians to return to Malaysia through the scheme. However, to what extent do these criteria disqualify and neglect overseas Malaysians who could have been included in Malaysia’s talent return migration programme? According to OECD data based on year 2000 censuses, the top three sectors that employ tertiary-educated overseas Malaysian in OECD countries are health and social work; real estate, renting and business activities; and education (Figure 2). These top sectors vary among OECD countries; in New Zealand, the top sectors are financial intermediation, construction, and public administration and defence. Comparing the OECD top sectors to NKEA target sectors (Table 1), there is obviously a mismatch—most tertiary-educated overseas Malaysians in OECD countries are engaged in sectors that are not one of the NKEAs. How then will they be eligible for or interested in diaspora strategies such as the REP?

Furthermore, there have been cases where REP applications submitted by suitably qualified overseas Malaysians were rejected on the grounds of rigid rules. For example, an application by a Harvard University graduate with 13 years of working experience,
including employment at the World Bank and the United Nations, was rejected because he was unemployed at the time of application (The Star Online, 2012b). I interviewed a US-based journalist with 16 years of working experience who applied for the REP under the ‘communications, content and infrastructure’ category since there was no category for journalism. The application was first rejected without any given reason and only approved after an appeal. According to this respondent (pers. comm., Kuala Lumpur, February 2012), TalentCorp has not engaged REP-returnees after they returned to Malaysia, with the exception of a few who have been contacted to be featured in Talent Roadmap 2020 (TalentCorp, 2012).

The ‘real’ Malaysian diaspora: self-excluded?
While it is clear that Malaysia’s talent return migration programme institutionalized an official framework for the inclusion and exclusion of persons worthy as members of ‘the Malaysian diaspora’, attention should also be focused on the perspectives of the ‘real’ Malaysian diaspora. Who are they, and how do they perceive their relationship as citizens or diasporas with the Malaysian state? What are their responses towards Malaysia’s talent return migration programme? Here, a critical examination is necessary: why do Malaysians present themselves as a citizenry not only victimized and discriminated by the Malaysian state but also patriotic to the home country? Are they self-excluded diasporas by choice, i.e., choosing to be excluded from state constructions of the ‘Malaysian diaspora’ and 1Malaysia, and thus never able to ‘return home’ and contribute to national development? If so, can we then view them as neglected emigrants who do not wish to be part of Malaysia’s state-led talent project?

Cartier (2003: 73) has described the emigration of the Chinese-Malaysians as a ‘second wave diaspora’. Indeed, in popular mass media, overseas Malaysians have presented themselves as exiles or victims of systemized discrimination who seek greener pastures elsewhere. From May to June 2011, The Malaysian Insider, an independent online news portal, published ‘Migration stories’ and ‘Why I stayed’, two complementary columns written by (overseas and re-emigrated Malaysians and nonemigrating and returning Malaysians. The first group emphasized their inability to accept incidents of systematized discrimination, while the second group accepted the limitations as part of Malaysian life and emphasized their hope for positive changes by staying in the country. Common among all participants are the acknowledgement of racism and corruption in Malaysia and love for the country as home. Indeed, it is widely known that corruption scandals and restrictions of political rights and civil liberties occur in Malaysia (Freedom House, 2012), in addition to money politics (Teh, 2002), political patronage, privatization and rent-seeking practices (Gomez & Jomo, 1997).

Furthermore, despite the proclaimed sense of patriotism and emotional attachment to Malaysia, many overseas Malaysians remain ambivalent about returning to Malaysia. On the other hand, those who have returned to Malaysia face frustrations as they are caught between wanting to contribute towards ‘development’ and feeling unappreciated and discouraged by institutional structures and resistance to change. For example, a government scholar who returned expressed her frustration with the sense of complacency and a lack of desire for change in the Malaysian academia (The Malaysian Insider, 2011).

Diaspora-led political activism: refusing exclusion
However, the 12th and 13th General Elections have raised levels of political awareness among the Malaysian citizenry and diaspora. The 12th General Election in 2008 saw BN
losing the states of Selangor and Penang to the opposition party. In the recent 13th General Election, BN lost its longstanding two-thirds majority in the parliament. This latest election also saw an approximate 84 per cent turnout among the electorate, the highest in Malaysian electoral history.

The attention on the 13th General Election and the active electoral participation among the Malaysian citizenry and diaspora must also be understood against the background of civil society efforts by BERSIH and selected groups of actors within the larger Malaysian diaspora. In 2011, MyOverseasVote UK, a nonincorporated association established in London, submitted a petition to the PSC. In October 2011, six Malaysians working in the UK filed a lawsuit against the SPR at the Kuala Lumpur High Court, requesting the High Court to compel the SPR to register them as absent voters. The lawsuit was subsequently dismissed although an appeal was lodged. On another front, thousands of overseas Malaysians have participated in BERSIH demonstrations in their respective cities.

Diaspora-led political activism demonstrates the Malaysian diasporas’ acts of citizenship in two ways. First, the Malaysian diaspora is refusing to be excluded from electoral voting, arguing instead that it is their constitutional right to enjoy this citizenship right. Such activism challenges state-led interpretation of ‘citizenship’ in terms of (un)equal rights accorded to in-territorial and extraterritorial citizens. Furthermore, in light of constitutional provisions preventing the questioning and changing of bumiputera-differentiated citizenship, these acts of citizenship can perhaps be seen as early steps towards social change in Malaysia.

Second, diaspora-led political activism challenges state-led constructions of the Malaysian diaspora. While some members of the Malaysian diaspora who fit the eligibility criteria are included in state-led talent return migration programmes, the ‘real’ Malaysian diasporas are exercising their rights as Malaysian citizens in charting the future political development of the country. In this sense, the definitions of ‘citizenship’, ‘diaspora’ and ‘development’ are simultaneously questioned, challenged and reworked.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Malaysia’s bumiputera-differentiated citizenship means that emigrants who are excluded from state-led talent return migration programme are doubly neglected and excluded. Non-bumiputera are excluded from certain citizenship privileges and rights, while bumiputera are included and prioritized, although both hold the same Malaysian citizenship. Affirmative action policies such as the NEP have contributed to the outflow of tertiary-educated and skilled emigrants. Ironically, the REP attempts to persuade these previously excluded citizens to participate in the national development agenda by rhetorically including them as the ‘Malaysian diaspora’ through a series of manoeuvres. First, the ‘Malaysian diaspora’ is reconstructed as ‘global talent’ and invited to capitalize on economic development opportunities in the country. Second, the ‘Malaysian diaspora’ is defined based on specific and quantifiable criteria, including academic qualifications and years of working experience in selected industries. Third, the complementary 1Malaysia campaign attempts to shift attention from the unresolved bumiputera-differentiated Malaysian citizenship and instead paints the vision of a Malaysian nation united by universal human values.

On the one hand, the Malaysian government is strategically expanding boundaries of the ‘Malaysian diaspora’ and artificially removing ethnic cleavages within the Malay-
sian citizenry without resolving structural constraints posed by Malaysia’s bumiputera-differentiated citizenship. Under the state-led talent return migration programme, citizenship is invoked as national belonging, loyalty and duty towards the country’s economic development that can be made possible by the individual member of the Malaysian diaspora with his or her valuable ‘talent’. On the other hand, territorial and extraterritorial Malaysian citizens are contesting state-determined citizenship rights by campaigning for reforms of the electoral process. In this instance, citizenship is not only invoked as national belonging but also enacted as a political right and collective duty for the political development of the country. Clearly, the tensions between (ethnicized) political and economic dimensions of extraterritoriality in the Malaysian case have remained largely unresolved.

The Malaysian state appears to have created two distinct categories—the included diaspora and the neglected emigrant—in its talent return migration programme, but these are contested by emigrant and nonemigrant Malaysians in two ways. Neglected emigrants with the means to sustain transnational lives and flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999) have the choice to remain as self-excluded diasporas (Koh, 2014) and abstain from being claimed by Malaysia’s diaspora strategies. In addition, through bottom-up enactments of citizenship, collective Malaysian citizens and diasporas are exercising ‘the right not to be excluded’ (Shachar & Hirsch, 2007: 264) by demanding for equal and nondiscriminatory citizenship rights for all Malaysians. Thus, they are ‘shaping new shades of belonging and their legal expression’ (Barabantseva & Sutherland, 2011: 2).

On a broader level, the Malaysian case raises four important questions for the diaspora strategies literature. First, the persistence of ethnicization in the Malaysian context (Holst, 2012)—a colonial legacy that has been systemized into the multiethnic Malaysian society through the bumiputera-differentiated citizenship—highlights the need to consider the historicity of state-citizen relationship (Koh, 2015a; 2015b), to provide a nuanced understanding as to why contemporary diaspora strategies are crafted as such, and why and how diasporas respond to these strategies. In Malaysia, where ‘racialized communities have been targets of government since its inception as a nation-state’ (Bunnell & Coe, 2005: 846), a critical understanding of racial politics is essential.

Second, and closely related to the first point, we need to examine the boundaries between the state (or government) and country from the citizen and diaspora perspectives. The Malaysian case has suggested clear conceptual separation between both: emotional affiliation is to the country, while the state and government are eyed with distrust. This is further exacerbated when an individual politician’s actions are seen as synonymous to, and representative of, the state, and hence, the government. As the ruling coalition has been in power since Malaysia’s independence, the government has also been perceived by default as BN or UMNO.

Third, there are distinct demographic differences (especially ethnicity, class and political affiliation) between and within Malaysia’s emigrant and nonemigrant populations. A critical examination of intersectionalities between and within the two groups will shed light on their respective motivations and affiliations, thereby informing our analysis of their responses to diaspora strategies and ‘development’. Finally, acts of citizenship by the Malaysian citizens or diaspora challenge notions of ‘development’ prioritized by diaspora strategies and reshape the geographies and spatialities of citizenship. Thus, we need to highlight alternative and empowering interpretations of ‘development’, particularly in the way they challenge state-led acts of inclusion and exclusion.
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Endnotes

1 For example, Kessler suggests a symptom of ‘diaspora-envy’ in the Malays’ desire to invent a ‘Malay diaspora’. Analysis of the difference(s) between the Malay diaspora and the Malaysian diaspora is beyond the scope of this article.
2 TalentCorp was established in 2011 under the Prime Minister’s Department to drive the revised REP in line with the New Economic Model (NEM), an economic transformation programme with the aim for Malaysia to become a high-income country by the 2020.
3 I use ‘migration-as-development’ and ‘migration-led development’ interchangeably.
4 Malaysia took these various forms: the British Crown Colony of Malayan Union in 1946, Federation of Malaya in 1948 (gaining independence from the British in 1957), Federation of Malaysia (including Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak) in 1963, and Federation of Malaysia (excluding Singapore) in 1965.
5 Although Malaysia gained independence in 1957, the first federal election in 1955 can be considered part of the national election history, as the Federation of Malaya was formed in 1948. See note above.
6 The Yang di-Pertuan Agong is elected among nine Sultans to serve a five-year term on a rotational succession basis determined by the Conference of Rulers.
7 This definition prescribes that ‘Malay’ is by legal default also a Muslim. In the 1957 Constitution of Malaysia, ‘Muslim religion’ was changed to ‘religion of Islam’ by Act A354, section 45, in force from 27 August 1976.
8 Also known as the Returning Scientist Programme (RSP), this was discontinued in 1998.
9 The Greater Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley comprise an area under the administration of ten local authorities, with a population of 5.7 million in 2010.
10 Additional criteria were introduced in March 2014. These include work experience in Malaysia (prior to employment abroad), current salary, and expertise relevant to priority sectors.
11 ‘Race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are used interchangeably in the Malaysian context.
12 Although more recent data in certain destination countries (e.g., Australia) are available, the 2000 OECD data is used here, as it is the latest available comparative data.

References


