Brain Drain or Banal Everyday Lives: 
Malaysians (and ex-Malaysians) Negotiating Emotional Geographies of Diasporic Citizenship and Mobilities

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The World Bank (2011) estimates that the Malaysian diaspora has reached 1 million in 2010 compared to 750,000 in 2000, while the Malaysian brain drain is currently estimated to be a third of its overall diaspora. With the New Economic Model (NEM), the Malaysian government aims to achieve targets in National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) which amounts to an increase of some 4.1 million jobs and RM798 billion in GNI contributions by the year 2020. Talent Corporation Malaysia has introduced programmes to attract overseas Malaysians and foreigners to relocate to Malaysia in order to meet these talent needs. Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister has also recently called the Malaysian diaspora an “asset” with which the country seeks to “cooperate with and hopefully entice to return in the near future”. Yet, there is obviously a gap in the permanent departure of the Malaysian diaspora vis-à-vis targets in talent development, attraction and retention. The 1995 Returning Scientist Programme attracted 93 researchers, scientists and engineers, including 23 Malaysians – all but one of them has since left Malaysia. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Malaysian migrants with tertiary education in OECD countries has increased by 40%. Despite this, programmes such as the 2006 Brain Gain Malaysia (BGM) continue to focus on “Researchers, Scientist, Engineers and Technopreneurs (RSETs)”. While it is not surprising that these programmes are highly-selective, this effectively excludes tertiary-educated Malaysian diasporas who may not be RSETs. On the other hand, how much do we know of the Malaysian diaspora? Are they “assets” of the country, or are they flexible citizens (cf. Ong, 1999) pursuing their respective migration projects? Here, a set of inter-related questions needs to be asked. Firstly, who are the Malaysian diaspora? Secondly, do they identify themselves as the Malaysian diaspora? Thirdly, why would they want to return? Fourthly, how do they rationalise their citizenship and migration decisions? Fourthly, how are these negotiated and translated into actual mobilities? Fifthly, of those who return, what are the hidden stories of their trajectories? More importantly, how do these insights inform Malaysia’s current and future talent retention and reverse brain drain efforts?. This paper draws from in-depth interviews with tertiary-educated Malaysians and ex-Malaysians in Singapore, London, and returnees to Kuala Lumpur. I employ an emotional geography (Smith, Davidson, Cameron and Bondi, 2009) lens to understand the rationalisations and epistemologies of the respondents, particularly in their citizenship and migration decisions. Taking Laguerre’s (1998) and Siu’s (2005) diasporic citizenship as a starting point, I argue that the respondents’ diasporic Malaysian citizenship is intertwined and conflated with their conceptualisations of “Malaysia” as “family”, “identity”, “growing-up years”, and “possible place for retirement”. These anchoring concepts provide a sense of grounding and permanency – or “moorings” (Moon, 1995) – as the respondents negotiate their transnational
mobilities, shifting life course requirements, and changing perspectives. However, the passage of time complicates the shifting meanings and significance of citizenship vis-à-vis actual mobilities. While many of the Malaysian diaspora may nurture a sense of sentimental loyalty to “Malaysia”, this may not translate into actual returns. Instead, individually-motivated returns are often facilitated by personal preferences, family circumstances, availability of financial resources and access to social networks. By focusing on the negotiations of banal everyday lives, I argue for a perspective that sees the Malaysian diaspora as human, social actors rather than valuable talents per se. In providing a nuanced understanding of the Malaysian diaspora’s citizenship and mobility decision-making, this paper seeks to offer ethnographically-informed suggestions for Malaysia’s talent project.