

SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF MALAYSIAN GRADUATES IN SOUTH KOREA UNDER LOOK EAST POLICY HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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Abstract: *The relevance of the Look East Policy (LEP) after four decades indicates the success in producing the desired human capital with positive values emulated by both South Korea and Japan. This study examines the experience of LEP participants as sojourners during their stay in South Korea for their first degree. Through a qualitative study, LEP participants shared their experiences and insights into their socio-cultural adjustment. The results indicate that LEP participants were successfully emulated and practiced Korean culture. They managed to overcome challenges in adaptation, such as language, environment, and cultural differences. They demonstrate internalization of Korean culture and practice in their professional and personal life. The findings indicate the positive outcome of LEP program for human capital development as participants have been practicing these values and culture that they learnt from Korea.*

Keywords: *Look East Policy, Socio-cultural adaptation, Human Capital Development, South-Korea, Korean culture, LEP Participants*

Introduction

Malaysia government has sent students abroad for higher quality education and training in order to ensure the development of human capital as the international education helps the students to have new perspectives, cultures, and ways of thinking, along with enhanced knowledge, skills, and employability. Under the Look East Policy, Malaysian students were sent to East Asia countries, i.e., South Korea and Japan, to emulate their positive values and work ethics (*Dasar Pandang ke Timur*, 2009). The policy was implemented in 1982 with the intention to emulate good values, ethics, and working culture from the East, making the policy unique from other

policies for human capital development. The policy was an inspiration to transform Malaysia from an agrarian to an industrial society. The aim of LEP was to learn the working ethics and values, improve technology skills, and learn management systems from countries like Japan and South Korea to improve productivity (Saad & Aboo Talib, 2017).

Following World War II, Japan and Korea showed rapid improvements in their development that inspired other Asian countries. Due to that inspiration, the government has been sending around 9,000 students to both countries with the intention to elevate Malaysia's achievements in management and development as well as establish groups of Malaysians with positive values and work ethics to advance the country (Dasar Pandang ke Timur, 1983). The policy enables Malaysia to broaden its horizons of collaboration and balance its position (Daud & Besar, 2016). This is because importing advanced knowledge that was created by developed countries broadens a new horizon for human capital accumulation in developing countries (Kim, 1998). LEP is different from other human capital development policies because the main focus is on the cultural emulation, positive values, and working ethics from both countries.

In measuring the impact of LEP, it is important to uncover how cultural emulation influences human capital development. LEP participants graduated in Japan demonstrate better attitude and culture than those sent to Europe to pursue higher education. This is because Malaysian students who have been sponsored trips to Japan have been able to adapt to Japanese culture better in their daily lives as well as in their work as opposed to those who pursue their studies in Europe, as mentioned by Ismail & Khalid (2021). Previous studies have discussed how LEP helps graduates access knowledge and technology as well as an opportunity to learn Japanese culture. The LEP program helps alumni gain employment and a better understanding of Japanese culture (Lazim, 2011). In terms of individual impact, Muhammad Nor, Hassan & Paidi (2017) demonstrated in their study that students who studied in Japan developed more significant personal adaptation, understanding of foreign culture, intercultural communication abilities, openness to diversity, and global awareness. The respondents gained valuable experience through engaging in first-hand experiences, which improved their ability to adapt to global competitiveness within a diverse workforce.

Since the cultural emulation is successful among LEP participants who graduated from Japan as indicated in the previous studies, this study is going to uncover the cultural emulation among LEP participants graduated from South Korea. In scrutinizing the cultural emulation, it is imperative to understand their socio-cultural adaptation process. This is because, from the perspective of international studies, the international students often encounter difficulties adjusting when entering a new social, cultural, and educational environment due to language and communication barriers, acculturation stress, discrimination, and racism (Ploner, 2018). The process of cultural adjustment can be facilitated by dissociation from one's own ethnic community and association with members of the host culture, and there is considerable evidence that values affect this process (Kagan & Cohen, 1990). The adjustment of international students can be looked at from the perspective of cross-cultural adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation has been previously discussed in studies of sojourners and immigration to understand the process of learning about the host culture and its language in order to achieve a level of functional "fit." The term "cross-cultural adaptation" is synonymous with "adjustment and coping" to understand the process of adaptation among sojourners or immigrants in the host culture (El Boubekri & Saidi, 2022). The categories of cross-cultural adaptation include both psychological and socio-cultural. Psychological adaptation refers to the feelings of acceptance and satisfaction that accompany cross-cultural transitions, which contributes to the mental

wellbeing of sojourners. Meanwhile, socio-cultural adaptation pertains to an individual's ability to adjust to the host culture by learning social skills and behaviors in daily intercultural interactions (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Based on these categories of cross-cultural adaptation, examining socio-cultural adaptation is an appropriate approach to determine the cultural emulation among LEP participants. This is because the degree of sociocultural adaptation desired occurs when both social skills and behaviors are successfully acquired by establishing positive interpersonal relationships with members of the host culture and effectively carrying out the required tasks (Wang et. al., 2018). In other words, socio-cultural adaptation reflects the development of skills and abilities of the sojourners to be accepted or negotiated in the host country. A greater disparity in culture requires sojourners to acquire more skills, information, and adaptability (Searle & Ward, 1990). As noted by Yu, Bodycott and Mak (2019), it may be difficult for some international students in the process of adaptation. To avoid discrimination in the host country, sojourners need to understand the local dialect and have social support, which could result in the enhancements of skills and abilities of the individuals. Due to that, the objectives of this study are to (1) scrutinize the socio-cultural adaptation among LEP and (2) examine the influence of Korean culture after graduation.

Literature review

One of the implementations of LEP is training in development, which involves sending the students or trainees to Korea and Japan, to train employees in the technical field in an effort to increase efficiency and inculcate positive work values from Japan and Korea with the intention of increasing job production, as well as to provide opportunities for Malaysian students to study science and technical knowledge (Dasar Pandang ke Timur, 2009). For such reasons, the government has been sending students or trainees since the year 1982 till present. This kind of international scholarship program is applied around the world as an effort to build capacity and provide opportunities to students in low- and middle-income countries to gain high-quality education abroad. International scholarships are the financial grants that cover any related cost of higher education study outside of the recipients' home country to develop skills and transfer of newfound knowledge to the home country (Campbell, 2017).

In order to gain skills and knowledge, the international students go through a process of cross-cultural adjustment or adaptation. In adjusting to cultural differences, Cai & Rodriguez (1997) has introduced the Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM), where they defined intercultural adaptation as “the process through which persons in cross-cultural interactions change their communicative behaviour to facilitate understanding”. This process is emphasized on how to reduce the probability of being misunderstood, driven by a goal and typically occur during a cross-cultural encounter. The cross-cultural encounter is “an encounter as one composed of two individuals who enact significantly different communicative behavior based on social norms that derive from groups which possess unique sets of values and beliefs (cultures)”. This when two individuals who possess different unique sets of values and beliefs engage in different communicative behavior. The determinants of IAM are intercultural competence, language skills, intercultural training, past intercultural experience, motivation and cultural distance (Čuhlová, 2019).

The outcomes of cross-culture adaptation can be classified into two outcomes, namely psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990). Psychological adaptation refers to the well-being or satisfaction of the sojourners, meanwhile the sociocultural

adjustment refers to the ability to “fit in” by acquiring appropriate skills and negotiate interactive aspects in the host country (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Psychological adjustment focuses on the personal response or coping to the host culture that broadly affects the personality, life changes, satisfaction, and others. Sociocultural adjustment stresses the ability “to fit in” within the framework of social or learning cognitive models (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006).

For this study, the outcome of sociocultural adjustment is chosen as the determinants to understand the inculcation of culture and positive values from Korea as promoted in the LEP. This is because sociocultural adjustment specifically focuses on the ability to “fit in” by acquiring new skills to negotiate with the interactive aspects of the host country. Unlike psychological adaptation that focus on how to cope with depression or more global mood disturbance, sociocultural adaptation is appropriate to be the determinant as its emphasis on social skills and cultural learning paradigm will not be overlooked (Ward & Kennedy, 1999), which is an important part of LEP. Socio-cultural adaptation shows how well they manage day-to-day life within the host culture. Essentially, socio-cultural adaptation encompasses all aspects of everyday life, including living environment, social morality, social service, and social support (Chen, Liu & Mao, 2019).

Sojourners need to acquire social and cultural skills in order to adapt to their new country because an individual needs to know how to navigate a new cultural environment (Wilson et. al., 2017). Sánchez-Hernández (2018) demonstrated, however, that not all sojourners will be fully socially and culturally adapted in the host country. According to her study, sociocultural adaptation is only partially influenced by learners' background cultures, which directly influence routine production. As a result of the cultural differences between their home countries, such as uncertainty avoidance and power distance, they required assistance for sociocultural adaptation (Güzel and Glazer, 2019). A study by Mahmood and Burke (2018) revealed the benefits of sociocultural adaptation, which help to increase five important skills in sociocultural adaptation, i.e., interpersonal communication, academic or work performance, personal interests and community involvement, ecological adaptation, and language proficiency. These skills help decrease the levels of acculturative stress among the students and are significant for their development as human capital.

Host national identification is likely to be more strongly linked to sociocultural adaptation, the negotiation of social interactions, and the accomplishment of everyday activities in a new cultural context. Strong identification with host nationals suggests an inclination to do things the “local way,” a recommended attribute for individuals who are expected to interact frequently and effectively with host nationals. Past research certainly suggested that host culture proximity positively affects sociocultural adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Although a strong co-national identification may impede social competence in a new cultural milieu, this is likely to occur in an interactive fashion, dependent upon the host culture proximity. For example, separation is likely to be associated with the greatest level of sociocultural difficulties. The LEP participants may face challenges because of differences in social structure between Malaysia, a heterogeneous country, and South Korea, a homogeneous country. In both theoretical and practical ways, their experience of adapting to different cultures will add value to the Malaysia-Korea collaboration program.

Research Methodology

To examine the cross-cultural adaptation among LEP participants who were sojourners in South Korea, this study employs a qualitative approach using focus group interviews. This technique is used to gain richer data on the socio-cultural adaptation of LEP participants (Then, Rankin, & Ali, 2014), but at the same, to avoid Hawthorne effect during the interview session. Focus-group interviews were conducted with seven LEP participants who graduated from South Korea with a few sessions involving two to three individuals at a time. Every session took one and half hours on average. The participants were identified from the members of *Alumni Graduan Institusi Korea Kebangsaan* (AGIKO) society. The interviewees were enlightened, interested and have given their consent to share their experiences. The process of cross-cultural adaptation was examined to understand the impact of the program to the interviewees and how the program affected the people who took part in it. The interview responses were analyzed using theme analysis.

Research Findings

Respondent Profile

The respondents consist of five males and two female LEP participants who obtained their first degree in South Korea. In terms of residency, all respondents reside in Malaysia, except for one respondent who resides in South Korea. Most of the respondents work in the private sector, with only two individuals work in the public sector. Most respondents hold positions at the managerial level, and only two individuals are at the highest level, possessing the title of CEO in their own company. In terms of income, most respondents revealed that they earn less than RM 10,000.00 per month. The timeline of respondents resided in Korea was between the years 2001 to 2007. Four of the respondents have stayed for more than five years, and three of them have stayed for more than ten years. Graduates of the University of *Ulsan*, *Hanyang* University, Korea University, and *Yonsei* University are among the respondents. The respondents' majors are Mechanical, Mechanical and Automotive Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Chemical, Biological Engineering, and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. In terms of years of employment in Malaysia, most of them have more than ten years of experience and two to nine years of experience working in South Korea. Only two respondents are members of AGIKO as far as alumni engagement is concerned.

Theme Analysis: Objective 1 Socio-cultural Adaptation of LEP Participant

Socio-cultural adaptation focuses on the skills and ability of the individual to negotiate with the host culture in order to have an effective interaction and successful adaptation (GulRaihan, & Sandaran, 2017). Socio-cultural adaptation helps the sojourner to cope with the physical environment, including weather, diet, and services in the host society. This also helped them to prevent any maladjustments, such as psychological withdrawal and poor performance in their study (Chen, Liu, & Mao, 2019). As for this study, respondents seemed to go through challenges during the process of adjustment, especially at the early phase.

This situation could be predicted from the perspective of acculturation as sojourners would encounter challenges during the adjustment process. It is inevitable that challenges will emerge because the psychological change in an individual may affect their interaction and involvement with members of the host culture (Berry, 2001). Among the several aspects of challenges that have been faced by the respondents were (i) language and communication, (ii) living environment, and (iii) social and academic support.

Language and communication

The first aspect of challenges of socio-cultural adaptation among LEP participants is language and communication. The respondents revealed that they had difficulties with the Korean language and communication with the host culture. This has made it hard to mingle with the locals due to language and communication barriers. However, this only occurred during the early phase of adaptation. This can be seen from the following excerpts.

“.....the first three months of experiencing different foods, different cultures. The language is very difficult.....”

Respondent 1

“First phase...learning language...study is quite manageable, but making friends is a bit difficult, due to cultural differences, different upbringing...very hard to penetrate this boundary, because of the different things they talk about...”

Respondent 2

This indicates that respondents were unfamiliar with their host culture. As all respondents were sent to Korea between 2001 and 2007, this unfamiliarity in terms of culture, language, and environment was expected. This is because exposure of Malaysians to Korean culture only occurred after the emergence of the Korean wave in the year 2000. Before the Korean wave, Malaysian citizens were more exposed to Japanese media products and their influence. However, the situation has changed due to exposure with various Korean media products, as reported by Statista Research Department survey in 2019, among 500 Malaysians aged 15 to 59 who had experienced South Korean cultural content, 40% and 45.8% of respondents considered K-dramas to be very popular and quite popular, respectively, in Malaysia (Statista Research Department, 2022). Therefore, the language was one of the real challenges for the respondents as they lacked exposure and knowledge of the Korean language culture.

Living Environment

The second aspect of socio-cultural adaptation is the environment which is a common issue to the sojourners. International students may face cultural adaptation issues due to differences in customs, values, and culture between mother countries and South Korea (Han & Han, 2016). This could be due to frustration and disappointment due to language, cultural, and social challenges, leading to psychological and sociocultural discomfort (GulRaihan, & Sandaran, 2017). The following excerpts show how the environmental challenges faced by the LEP participants.

“.....there are many things that were different; the weather, the foods, everything was different.”

Respondent 4

“.... Korean asked “where is Malaysia?””

Respondent 6

A geographical difference between Malaysia and South Korea was another challenge to the LEP participants during the early adaptation. The LEP participants need to adapt to the weathers and gastronomy of the host country. The unfamiliarity of South Koreans was challenging during

this adaptation as they would feel unwelcome, since they are foreigners. In this case, there is a lack of understanding between the two countries, which causes difficulty in adapting to change. At this point in time, people-to-people exchanges did not flourish, but economic collaboration between Malaysia and South Korea was growing stronger as South Korea became a major economic partner. Activities such as social and cultural exchanges also started to be more active. Additionally, South Korea has been influenced by the USA as their role model, while Malaysia still has little if any effect from Britain as a colonizer, which makes the situation harder. Other than this, they also faced internal struggle during adaptation, as per the following excerpts:

“Did not choose Korea, but chose German. The JPA offered Korea. Have some regrets the during early period of living there....”

Respondent 1

“Happy, but concerned with the Korean language...”

Respondent 2

For LEP participants to mitigate the challenges related to socio-cultural adaptation, resocialization would be helpful. Resocialization is the process where a person learns the norms, beliefs, and values of a newly created setting or a social responsibility. It encompasses a variety of changes for participants, such as learning the language, culture, values, and customs of South Korea. The new environment (Korean culture) will also influence the individual development of LEP participants, as the process of resocialization is based on individual characteristics (Khan, 2021). In terms of ethno-linguistic identity, the acculturation of people of diverse ethnic groups should follow patterns of identification fashioned after linguistic alterations accruing from such contact (Cormos, 2022). In that case, the cross-cultural adaptation of LEP participants would be successful if they were able to speak Korean.

Social and academic support

The third aspect of socio-cultural adaptation is social and academic support. Education could be a factor that contributes to better adaptation (Tonsing, 2013). The finding shows that the socio-cultural adaptation of LEP participants involves two stages of (1) readiness to accept and (2) adapt to the new culture and factors that contribute to their overcoming their challenges throughout the process. At the earlier stage, some of the respondents seemed to have mixed feelings about South Korea, but they received academic and social support that helped them to adapt to Korean culture. This can be seen from the following excerpts:

“Luckily there were seniors who guided us for a few weeks, and after that we went to Seoul National University Language Center, then after that, Dongyang University for Diploma and Hanyang University for Degree.”

Respondent 4

“Final two years. Making friends, but studying there is more challenging, because the Korean students are really competitive, they put their energy into studying. In relationship wise, it is easier with international students. The Korean students prepared with further study and put in more effort.

Respondent 2

“..The biggest challenge, was the Professor from Busan...because I never learned dialects. It is really difficult to understand. Luckily, I have a friend who can translate that to me, and after a few months I was used to it. The language barrier was the most difficult thing.”

Respondent 3

Through the support of their seniors, friends and lecturers, they were able to overcome the challenges of adaptation. They received guidance from their seniors and also made friends with Koreans and other international students. Seniors and friends provide support to help the respondents adjust to the new environment and study approaches. For academic support, lecturers also help their students get the most out of their learning.

While there were challenges during the early adjustment period, the participants were able to socio-culturally adapt to a completely different environment with the supports from their surroundings. Their ability to adapt to the language also contributes to their psychological adaptation. This is because language barrier would lead to the inability to have a proper adjustment as purported in a study done by (Zheng & Berry, 1991), where Chinese sojourners with less English fluency were faced with a higher level of adaptation difficulties and communication problems, which led to less desire for and actual contact, and more incongruity and separation. Social supports from their surroundings help to buffer against the psychological effects of stress (Searle & Ward, 1990). Thus, LEP participants' adjustment received social and academic supports that enable them to survive and achieve their goal in the host country.

Theme Analysis: Objective 2 The influence of Korean culture among LEP participants

In terms of emulating the Korean culture, this study shows that LEP participants progressed through three stages: (1) appreciating Korean culture, (2) adapting Korean culture, and (3) practicing Korean culture in their daily lives. For the first stage, it reveals that LEP participants have identified positive Korean values, such as dedication, work, commitment, and competitiveness. The respondents were impressed by the Korean working ethics and values. This can be seen through the following excerpts:

“One thing is really hardworking, there is no such thing as no, they are committed and all tasks must be finished...they are working late...”

Respondent 1

“Koreans are developed due to their hardworking....”

Respondent 7

“Korea is too competitive.....”

Respondent 1

At the second stage, the LEP participants managed to adapt and mingle with the host culture and the surrounding. This can be seen in the following excerpts;

“...After a year, I cannot eat rice without ‘Kimchi’. It was how I developed with the culture.”

Respondent 1

“...Also live in the Korean.... mixing with Korean.... after joining Ulsan university...exposed to industrial training and saw how they developed not only business, but the country.

Respondent 3

Lastly, at the third stage, they are already practicing Korean culture in their daily lives, especially after coming back to Malaysia. This can be seen in the following excerpts;

“Since I came back from Korea, I cannot throw rubbish in the wrong place..... I systemize every single thing as in Korea”

Respondent 1

“In Korea, I will get scolded if I do not throw rubbish systematically, but after coming back to Malaysia, I feel obligated to practice for a better society...the civic-mindedness that builds up...”

Respondent 2

“..... That’s why we bring back how to negotiate with people.....the Koreans are really honest, and I implement that in working life.”

Respondent 3

The whole stages of LEP participants' socio-cultural adaptation can be explained through the theory of social learning (SLT) (Bandura, 1977). The theory emphasizes how people learn through observation and subsequent imitation of model behavior. Individuals can learn to imitate observed behavior and thus reap the benefits, or they can learn not to imitate a specific action and thus avoid the unpleasant consequences (Lyons & Berge, 2012). SLT consists of four components: attentional process, retention process, motor reproduction process, and motivational process. Modelling stimuli and observer characteristics is the first component; the second is retention, where response patterns must be stored in memory as symbolic codes, which affect cognitive organization and directly influence symbolic and motor rehearsal; the third is motor reproduction, in which symbolic representations are transformed into appropriate actions; and the final component is motivation, in which behavior is adopted if it results in outcomes or if it has unrewarding or punishing effects. They also need the opportunity to reproduce behavior by converting the information obtained from attention and retention processes into action.

As apparent in this study, LEP participants learned the Korean culture by identifying the positive elements of Korean culture, which is the first component of SLT. Through mingling with Koreans in their studies and adapting to Korean diet styles in their daily lives, they acquired the skill of adapting to the host culture. This can be seen in the two components, retention and reproduction. Finally, they use Korean culture in their lifestyle, which is the fourth component of the motivational process to continue using the culture in everyday life. SLT can therefore recognize that the participants are able to adapt to a new environment and can aid them in changing their behavioral patterns and capabilities. Through this adaptation, participants become well adapted to the Korean culture and broaden their views on Korean culture. Most importantly, the participants will bring the positive working culture back to their home countries after graduation.

Overall, the socio-cultural adjustment resulted in learning and embracing positive Korean culture. Culture and values adopted from Korea are being practiced, like respecting the elderly, protecting the environment, etc. Early adaptation requires participants to receive support, which they typically receive from their lecturers, friends, and seniors. Similarly, Bethel, Ward, and Fetvadjev (2020) found that national connectedness helped psychological adaptation and personal resources. Participants continue to practice positive cultures, such as civic mindedness, systematic management, and customer service (negotiation skills). Participants in this study were more open to learning about positive cultures than to maintaining a separatist identity, in contrast to Falavarjani and Yeh (2017) and Lee, Park, and Ban (2016).

Most importantly, the findings of the study show similar acculturation of LEP participants who graduated from Japan, as indicated by Muhammad Nor, Hassan and Paidi (2017) in which they have developed more significant personal adaptation, understanding of foreign culture, and intercultural communication abilities. As evidenced by Ismail and Khalid (2021), LEP participants who graduated from Japan emulated Japanese positive values and culture back to their homeland. This positive emulation and practices after their returning to Malaysia is almost identical to the respondents in this research. This study enlightens us that LEP has achieved its objective as it has been inculcating positive values among participants that can contribute to improvement of management and performance.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Overall, it demonstrates that LEP participants overcame challenges in socio-cultural adjustment while learning positive Korean culture. They have developed adjustment skills due to challenges, such as language and communication, environment, and social and academic support. The learning process of LEP participants could be seen from the perspective of SLT in which the student observes, reproduces, and continues to practice Korean values. After their graduation, they have been practicing the Korean culture that benefited them for their personal and professional life. This indicates that the main objective of LEP has been achieved as cultural emulation has positively affect the LEP participants in terms of such aspects. This study could be further explored with different batches of LEP participants who went to South Korea after the impact of Korean wave on Malaysian society as Malaysians have been widely exposed to Korean culture. This circumstance could bring about different levels of socio-cultural adaptation as many LEP participants are familiar with Korean language and culture before they travel to Korea. To optimize the potential of LEP participants who are equipped with Korean positive values and working culture, they should be hired as trainers or consultants for various sectors. Their knowledge and experiences are indispensable for Malaysia's human capital development to ensure Malaysia becomes a developed country, especially in Industrial Revolution 4.0.

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