# Socio-cultural and Academic Ties

*Session Three was co-chaired by Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, then Chairman and CEO of ISIS Malaysia, and Ambassador Yim Sung-joon, President of the Korea Foundation. The lead speakers were Dr Hong Suk Joon, Professor, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Mokpo National University, Korea, and Dr Tang Siew Mun, Consultant, ISIS Malaysia. ISIS researcher* ***HW Woo*** *reports.*

*(From left) Tang Siew Mun, Yim Sung-joon, Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, Hong Suk Joon*

Six major issues arose in the presentations and discussions during this session. Among them were:

1. Education in Malaysia;
2. Popular culture;
3. Migration;
4. Tourism in Malaysia;
5. Academic exchanges and programmes; and
6. Cultural exchanges.

**Education in Malaysia**

The first issue raised was education in Malaysia, and the popularity of the country among Korean students as a destination for language learning. Statistics show Malaysia is the third most popular destination after the Philippines and Singapore for English language learning by Korean students. About 2,000 of them reside in the country while studying for English proficiency tests (e.g. IELTS and TOEFL) in special language centres or colleges.

Malaysia's comparative advantage in educational cost, quality and environment can be attributed to several factors. Amongst these are the cost of living in Malaysia, which is among the lowest in the region, reasonable and affordable tuition fees, and the high standard of education offered. Most English language learning centres in Malaysia have trained professional instructors with extensive experience in preparing international proficiency tests. Malaysia also offers a suitable platform for learning and practicing English and other languages, due to its demographic make-up, which is that of a multiracial and multilingual society. A Muslim majority population gives the added advantage of night life being less of a distraction.

**Popular culture**

The issue of Korea's popular culture is seen in the impact of the Korean Wave, which refers to the popularity of Korean films, dramas and music in Malaysia and other countries. The enabling factor for this phenomenon in Malaysia is the high percentage of total airtime set aside for Korean programmes and dramas, with seven hours on private channels and one hour on the public channel (RTM). These programmes are translated into Cantonese and Mandarin. The local Chinese community's fascination with Korean culture, food and fashion has had spill-over effects in the larger economy with increases in the purchase of Korean consumer products, tourism to Korea, and the increasing number of students taking up Korean Studies programmes.

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**Migration**

The existence of the Korean diaspora in Malaysia and its impact on the domestic economy was highlighted under the issue of migration. From 2005-2007, the number of Koreans in Malaysia tripled to 15,000 people making it the 16th largest community of overseas Koreans, the 5th largest in Southeast Asia. The majority consisted of expatriates working in South Korean companies and of international students concentrated in Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, in Kuala Lumpur, and in Ampang, Selangor. As a market for Korean overseas real estate investment, Malaysia is the second most popular destination after the US, with over 700 applications by Koreans each month. This helps promote the Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) programme.

**Tourism in Malaysia**

Tourism is one of the biggest sources of foreign exchange in Malaysia. In 2008, the country had 22.05 million registered tourists, an increase of 5.1 per cent compared to 2007. Statistically, the number of Korean visitors to Malaysia increased by 19 per cent to 267,461 people from 2007. As this comprised only 1.21 per cent of total inbound tourists, an increase to 280,000 was targeted for 2009. Several likely contributing reasons for the increase were pointed out.

Malaysia possesses a variety of attractive tourist destinations. In Sabah there is Mount Kinabalu, the tallest peak in Southeast Asia and Sipadan Island, a world class diving spot. Kuala Lumpur, the capital city has the Twin Towers, one of the tallest buildings in the world. There are direct flights to both destinations from Seoul. The country is also a living showcase of multicultural heritage and the traditions of Asia, befitting its

tagline of `Truly Asia.' It was granted Unesco World Heritage status for the historic, colonial towns of Penang and Malacca, along the Straits of Malacca.

**Academic exchanges and programmes**

On the issue of academic exchanges and programmes, the discussion centred on past policies, current challenges and the possibility of future collaborations. Malaysia has sent over 2,700 students to South Korea for industrial and technical training since the inception of the Look East Policy. Meanwhile, the Korean Foundation provided Malaysians support for graduate studies and research, and provided post-doctoral fellowships for Korean Studies. Malaysia also established a Chair in Malay Studies at Korea's Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in April 2008.

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Despite such initiatives, there are three main challenges still facing Malaysians intending to study in Korea. These are:

- High tuition fees;
- Language barrier (most courses are taught in Korean, although the use of English in teaching is gradually increasing); and
- A lack of short-term study programmes for academics.

Several suggestions were proposed as remedies, based on existing and new initiatives. Among them was leveraging on the uptrend of educational level and quality in East Asia to develop an academic network encompassing a broader region. This could be accomplished through the selection of joint research topics on Malaysia-Korea, using indigenously sourced documents from both sides, based on examples of existing Malaysia-China and Malaysia-Japan collaborative research such as:

- Chinese-sourced documents on research topics such as the migration of Chinese from China to Malaysia; and
- The use of Japanese-sourced documents on research topics such as the era of the Japanese occupation in Malaysia.

Such joint research between Malaysian and Korean academics should also encompass different knowledge areas. They should emulate the Japanese Rompaku exchange programme which encourages short-term study by academics. The establishment of a Korean Chair in Malaysian universities, and the setting-up of departments or divisions on Korean Studies were other suggestions, along with the expansion of Korean language programmes such as the Test of Proficiency in the Korean language (TOPIK) at the National University of Malaysia (UKM).

**Cultural exchange**

The final issue raised was that of cultural exchanges, and suggestions on the future trajectory of bilateral socio-cultural and academic ties. These include the following:

- The growing popularity of Korean dramas and singers extend beyond the local Malaysian Chinese community to the local

Malays, but translation is only provided in Mandarin;

- Regular cultural events and festivals should be organised by Koreans staying in Malaysia, such as those organised by the Japanese in Malaysia, so as to promote Korean culture among Malaysians;
- Twin-cities programmes should be conducted between the capitals and provincial cities of both countries;
- Establishing an Asean-ROK Cooperation Fund for cultural exchange;
- Exploring the possibility of setting up more offices of the Korean Foundation in Southeast Asian states, including in Malaysia, as currently there is only one such office in Vietnam;
- Conducting outreach programmes and educational exchanges at various levels, especially among the youths, students of secondary schools, and tertiary students;
- Better use of Malaysian students who have studied in Korea to deepen contacts between the people through public diplomacy; and
- Bridging the gap between Malay and Korean culture in terms of intercultural communications and the conducting of public debates.

One of the most insightful comments was on the need for Malaysians to emulate the Koreans' sporting prowess. It was noted that it was the fighting spirit, endurance and resilience of Korean men and women that led to their rise and domination in sports such as golf, soccer etc. Many Korean players are now playing in the English soccer premier leagues. On the contrary, Malaysian sports have been facing a decline in their standard. For example, in the 1960s, Malaysia used to beat South Korea in soccer, but now has been overtaken by them. It was also suggested that to advance by building on its current achievements, the Koreans should do more in promoting sports as an industry, with the aid of an agency such as Jetro in Japan.