

MALAYSIAKU

A Collection of Alwyn Lau's Malay Mail Articles (2015-2022)



Edited by:

Alwyn Lau Wing Wang

Jill Lee Sze Seau

Kususanto Ditto Prihadi

Mohamad Ikhrum Bin Mohamad Ridzuan

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UCSI Heights, 1, Jalan Puncak Menara Gading,
Taman Connaught, 56000 Cheras,
Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur

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PREFACE

It was in early 2022, right before the Chinese New Year break, that this idea of publishing a collection of Alwyn's newspaper columns gradually emerged. Ditto, Ikhrum and Jill were surprised to find out from Alwyn that such a project hasn't happened before. Alwyn recalls saying that it barely crossed his mind and that he wasn't sure anyone would be interested.

Nevertheless, after one or two chats, this book project practically gave birth to itself. Ditto, Ikhrum and Jill quickly recommended the categories by which to group the essays (Education, Politics, Culture, etc.) and Alwyn readily agreed to pluck out about half a dozen good pieces which he believed fit those clusters.

In the (quite likely) event you need to be introduced to Alwyn, he's been writing newspaper pieces since 2009. He started out submitting letters to the *Malaysian Insider* that year. About five years and forty-ish published pieces later, he got a paid gig with the newspaper. In 2015, Alwyn was courted by *Malay Mail* to join their group of columnists. Since that time he's penned weekly 1000-word-ish articles on (almost) every topic—government, food, schooling—Malaysians love to read and, uh, argue about. This collection represents some of the most controversial and popular essays out of the four hundred (and counting) published.

The title, “Malaysiak~~u~~”, signals the sense of personal belonging many Malaysians possess yet also the wounds (some light, some heavy) one feels amidst the injustices and less-than-ideal experiences our beloved nation may burden us with. Why the strike-through? Well, as Ditto likes to say, why not? To wax philosophical, the dash may represent the presence of an absence (not unlike a deleted WhatsApp message), prompting us to ask to what extent I (or ‘ku’) exists (or don't) as a Malaysian. At the very least, it prompts us not to take for granted those iffy issues of Malaysian life and identity, something we hope Alwyn's pieces spur us to reflect on.

The photo of the durian on the cover—apart from representing one of the articles in this collection—speaks to the powerful, dangerous and sharp-tasting passions and enthusiasms our country's disputes can arouse in people. The lines between what is precious, good and nourishing, and what stinks and cuts, can be blurred easily. And it's not always easy to tell.

As you can see from the table of contents, we've also used our king of fruits to demarcate the chapter-sections. This is obviously not a rigorous scientific procedure, but we've chosen *XO* to represent the opening (“Appetizer”) article which is a tongue-in-cheek comparison of Malaysia, Singapore and Australia in the context of frequent calls for Malaysians to migrate. Next, we decided the *Black Thorn* type best represents the section on education, not least because academia seems to be a constant thorn in the flesh of both students and teachers alike. The *Musang King* is undoubtedly the best avatar for the main section on politics, society, culture and everything both wrong and right with our country. Finally, we thought the *Red Prawn* is a good fit for the section on the pandemic given that this fruit is said to have a strong aftertaste (surely not a bad analogy for our post-pandemic times).

We believe this assortment serves not only as a nostalgic trip to some key events in our country, but also a conversation starter on some critical topics it may be wise not to forget.

Alwyn, Ditto, Ikhrum and Jill

XO: Bolehland, Kiasuland and Koalaland

The other day someone asked me if I wanted to migrate. After getting rebuked for addressing me like I was a bird, he said I should consider switching countries. “Malaysia is going to the dogs!”, “In Singapore you can make loads more!” “Australia is the nearest first-world ‘Western’ country!”

Right. So here I, like thousands (upon thousands) of Malaysians, am being asked to leave the hell of Bolehland for the bliss of either Kiasuland or Koalaland. But before packing our bags and shipping out, let’s at least be aware of what’s different and same about these three nations:

In Kiasuland, people generally feel superior to those in Bolehland but are too polite to mention it. In Bolehland, people generally inferior to those in Kiasuland but are too proud to say so (except if they’re earning Kiasuland currency, then you’re *sure* to know). Once I was in a cab from Orchard Road to some non-Orchard place, the cabbie was dissing KL all the way. He then mockingly asked me if Johor Bahru was safe ‘nowadays’. I said yes, JB is safe but not for Singaporeans – he kinda stopped talking after that.

Both Kiasuland and Bolehland can learn from Koalaland whose people, the last I went, didn’t appear as hung up on status as such. Australians, always wearing clothes which resemble formal beachwear, don’t evince that obsession with “how much I possess compared to my neighbor”. Maybe it’s because they’re always swimming or cycling or horse-riding every spare second they get. When you’re surrounded by relaxing nature and fresh air (as opposed to KL concrete and weather), maybe your thoughts don’t drift so easily to getting a bigger car than that idiot next door who just bought a Lexus?

Both Bolehland and Koalaland have treated their indigenous people with neglect and disrespect; landgrabs have defined their history but inevitably the aborigines’ “traditional lifestyles and craft” continue to adorn the tourist brochures. One big difference, though. In Koalaland, virtually all public events require an acknowledgement of the debt owed to the original people of the land. In Bolehland? You just hear the *kompang* playing to acknowledge the big shots’ arrival.

In Kiasuland, the trains are as long as the station. In Bolehland, the queues are as long as the trains - and the jams longer than the road. In Kiasuland, the only things NOT modern are the artifacts in the museum. In Bolehland, the only thing modern is the names of the buildings. In Kiasuland, every building is cleaner than the year they first opened. In Bolehland, people fall off buildings and the situation declared a mystery.¹

Koalaland is ambivalent. Melbourne looks like a less gloomy version of London; Sydney like Penang minus a million cars; Brisbane’s extra-bright sun makes it look like Bali with more elevators and Adelaide is essentially one huge central park at the continent’s rectum. It’s like Australians are fine with modernity (who wouldn’t be?) but it better not interfere with their canoeing.

In Kiasuland, the police are efficient though usually hidden. In Bolehland, the police are efficient only when escorting big shots on the road (thus inconveniencing everyone else) or during the Merdeka Day parade. And no they’re not hidden but they like to hide in strange places, especially during pre-festive seasons.

Malaysian police are remarkable. They’re always inviting drivers over for tea and biscuits on the road, near tricky junctions or U-turns. I love these guys. Too bad some cars have actually refused and drivenaway (fast, very fast) despite being called to attend. Maybe these drivers have already had their *kuih*. Or maybe, just maybe, they know the cops are so busy they probably won’t bother with doing a high-speed car chase along an already congested LDP? Sure, our police could just take his license plates butas we’re probably the only country where the cops give DISCOUNTS for paying summons, maybe some drivers have decided to stop caring.

¹ Informed Malaysians would realize that I’m referring to the case of Teoh Beng Hock, whose body was discovered adjacent to the MACC building in Shah Alam on the morning of 16th July 2009, the day after he was called in for an interview.. This was arguably Malaysia’s first political death.

Koalaland, well, is the birthplace of Wolverine, Thor, all those hotshots played by Russell Crowe, not to mention that amazingly imaginatively heroine in ‘Sucker Punch’, so maybe police aren’t that important.

In Kiasuland, efficiency is prized above much else. In Bolehland, people usually live like there’s more to life than being efficient – or at least the smart ones do. Koalaland is the best: People walk so casually and the shops all close so early, it’s like everybody simply wants to relax, sleep, play, read or just not work.

In Kiasuland, there’s a time, place and government department for everything except a meaningful existence. In Bolehland, all times, places and government departments shut down during the holidays which seems to make life worthwhile and - believe it or not - nobody cares what any other country says about that. In Koalaland, every hour not spent in office is a holiday.

Bolehland’s religious and racial bigotry, true, are hitting new records. Wonder-outfit Isma is a real prodigy of its guru, Umno. But Kiasuland’s income inequality isn’t exactly taking a break: if in-trouble blogger Roy Ngerng is right, then about a quarter of Singaporeans still live in poverty (at least back in 2013)² and overall they earn the lowest wages among the high-income countries despite Kiasuland being the most expensive. And God only knows how many Pauline Hansons still spread their compassion and openness in Koalaland cities. Malaysians need to take our noses out of those glossy “Come Live In Singapore/Australia” leaflets. If we’re going to emigrate, at least adopt the same critical attitude towards these governments as we have towards Putrajaya?

In Kiasuland, everyone walks fast and urgently like they’re forever on the move. In Bolehland, often nothing moves (except the mosquitoes) and nobody is sure what we’re doing (not even Pakatan Rakyat) so people tend to learn how to enjoy their families and each other’s company more. This may be, in fact, the lesson the Malays can best teach the Indians and, especially, the Chinese: that family and community are their own rewards and even if corporate rewards are not forthcoming, that hardly makes life less worthwhile. I don’t think the Aussies would disagree.

In Kiasuland, the government is so smart they’ve created a global nexus for finance, trade and services. In Koalaland, there are some truly world-class cities and personalities. In Bolehland, for many people it feels not like a hub where money, creativity and glamour flow, but like *home* where (something like) love does.

Finally, Malaysian food is the best in the world. And there’s no better reason to stay - just ask those who left?

² See Ngerng’s article at <https://thehearttruths.com/2013/10/28/poverty-in-singapore-grew-from-16-in-2002-to-28-in-2013/comment-page-1/>

BLACK THORN: MALAYSIAN EDUCATION

Malaysian Education: 12 Paradoxes

About half a dozen years ago I published an article on 10 paradoxes in our education system. In light of the upcoming PT3 and SPM examinations, I thought I may revise, update and add to them. Here we go:

1. In school, **90% of the 'top' students join the Science stream**, but afterwards 90% of school-leavers go into Business and 120% of them want to do nothing but make money. Also, early on school kids dream of being, say, a pilot or doctor or lawyer or Iron Man and so on. But when they grow up? They only want to be rich. Don't care how.

2. In school, **90% of the material is delivered in Malay**, but 90% of professional life is communicated in Engreesh. So not only will you have thousands of grads talking like they need to include subtitles beneath their conversations, this system will also directly contribute to our unemployment rate for fresh grads rivalling our inflation rate. Basically, our schools simply aren't helping our England out of the char siew pau level.

3. In school, **Maths and Science are deemed critical**; these are more or less the subjects which send tuition class owners grinning to Maybank. But, alas after school the only Biology we care about is what Angelina Jolie eats for lunch, the only Physics attempted is calculating when the lights will turn amber then red; the only Chemistry performed is when we need to shake the ketchup bottle; and the only Maths done is when a huge group of people go Dutch at Brew House.

4. In school, **P.E.³, Moral Education and Arts are not considered important**; at best side-orders, at worst 'pariah' subjects for kids who can't excel at other things. But when we grow up, everybody spends gazillions on fitness and health-tech (and everyone is an expert in dieting), people scream racism and sexism at Twitter every other day, and even Malaysians are starting to spend time in art galleries, especially since "Cultured" is the new Sexy.

5. In school, **using the Internet** for teaching and learning is (shockingly) still considered 'innovative' but upon completing school (or just about any time *other than* at school), the Web is as optional as water. In school (and even universities), online assessment remains taboo or non-serious and many parents freak out at the mention of any kind of exams not written on real paper and within three hours inside a large-ass hall. In real life, everything is, well, the other way round. You live, eat and breathe social media all day, examinations happen on the fly and all our handwriting has gone to hell for lack of, uh, writing anymore.

6. In school—not unlike walking into Mordor—**one does not simply challenge the teacher**. In fact, one is liable to get one's hiney smacked if one tries. Maybe that's why in Malaysian organizations we get many folks who believe that doing nothing but their job is good enough? Maybe that's why the 100% guaranteed way to 'stand out' in any Malaysian organization is to, duh, criticize dumb decisions? 'Cos this would mean the critic has attended some other kind of school than 99% of people?

7. In school, everybody is encouraged to **read and listen**; at work, nobody reads anything other than emails and as for listening? Well, most people certainly pretend to. This paradox is doubly interesting because in school and university Listening Skills is seen as a joke class which only losers pay attention to. But in the corporate world, you can immediately tell who's a good listener and who just wants to butt in and say his piece.

8. In school, children are restricted from discussing **politics and religion in class**. In the bleedin' country, people talk about nothing else. In school, there is not a hint of Political Science 101; after schooling age, every Malaysian is a bona fide political expert.

9. In school, few parents care about their children's success in **drama and acting classes**...before paying loads of money to watch people perform on the big screen or on stage. Go figure. These same parents would've probably known immediately after getting their first job (or, most likely, even before

³ Physical Education, but everyone in school refers to the subject by its acronyms.

that) that in the office *people are not always who they seem* i.e. everybody acts, and one of the key skills to ‘make it’ up the corporate ladder is the ability to brilliantly play the right part at the right time.

10. In school, **homework**—lots and lots of it— is a measure of the seriousness or rigor of a child’s education. Asian parents tend to worry if their kids appear “too free”. Out of school, everybody googles the latest life-hacks, discusses Marie Kondo (wait, you didn’t really think that minimalism *shouldn’t* apply to after-class work too, did you?), worries about too much stress in life and, most noteworthy of all, preaches about *studying smart*.

11. In school, **rote-learning** remains the best way to grab all those As’, especially given the nature of the exam questions. This not only ensures that many post-secondary school kids end up hating school, but also ill-prepares them for a career where learning is anything but rote. In fact, in the office the ability to get along with others and play well as a team far exceeds the ability to churn out detailed essays on esoteric topics. Of course, everybody knows this but for some strange reason (which the Finnish would probably shake their heads at), *learning how to cooperate* is NOT a key module in school. Go figure.

12. In school, **exams** are where we get locked in a room for 3 hours and made to write about 300 pages of stuff we hate (and won’t need) to remember the very moment the exam is over. At business conferences, we love to repeat—over and over again—just how terribly outdated and ‘exam-oriented’ our education system is, whilst going home to force our kids to study and do well...*for their exams*.

E-Learning vs Traditional Classrooms: 3 Areas We Can Exploit

E-learning remains an enigma.

On one hand, during this 2020-2021 Movement Control Order (MCO), we don't have any choice but to go online and most likely learning from home is "da future". Having said that, after conversations with some people (including students), you do wonder if we could use this crisis-opportunity to push the envelope a little more education-wise.

I've been chatting casually with parents and students (both primary and secondary), all of whom have—since mid-March—been engaging in full-time e-learning. Without trying to sound 'privileged' (especially given how many families are unable to learn from home), there clearly remain some areas in e-education we could rethink and improve on.

Like many educators, I reckon one of the biggest mistakes of e-learning is to view it primarily as *a digitalization of what happens in the classroom*; instead, it can and ought to enable a transformation of traditional schooling.

Below are just three baby thoughts on how:

1 - For physical classrooms, being present and face-to-face with the teacher is the given; with e-learning, *not* being "present" is the baseline.

This sorta makes attendance-taking rather superfluous. Yes, of course, there's always the issue of 'reporting' to parents that "your child was present during the class". And maybe with younger children, this is necessary.

But let's all agree it's less than ideal. Besides, is there some super urgent reason why parents simply **MUST** have 'present in the classroom' as an indicator of learning, not least during a crisis period like a lockdown?

A cute irony here is how, during the MCO, almost no employee is required to 'clock in' to work anymore (despite working from home) but teachers still need to take attendance. The plot thickens (or worsens) because in some cases children have problems "signing in" to the particular edu-website *yet* are able to submit their assignments on time (via, say, email) *yet* get reprimanded because they "did not attend" the scheduled online class.

Now, in a physical classroom, one could argue (tenuously) that being physically present was necessary because the teacher said or showed some things which can't be recorded. But for an online classroom, is 'real-time' presence all that important anymore?

We gotta quit obsessing about attendance and focus more on 'deliverables' as a marker of compliance (or, better yet, quality).

All of which flows into the second impasse...

2 - In traditional schools, post-classroom assignments (more commonly known as 'homework') is seen as an 'add-on'; with e-learning, out-of-class study takes precedence and teachers teaching in 'real-time' is the exception.

One popular phrase in education today is 'flipped learning'. This belongs to a family of phrases—like 'active learning', 'personalized learning', etc.—in which, long and short, the student begins to take charge of his or her own education.

Institutions which heavily implement this philosophy will, inevitably, end up looking 'different' from traditional schools. It will look as if the students are the ones 'leading' the learning, doing most of the

talking, working collaboratively with each other (instead of ‘taking orders’ from the teacher) and so on. The teacher, in such cases, usually performs simple facilitation and even behaves like a co-learner.

How does e-learning change this? It should, in a sense, take this trajectory even further.

If flipped learning in traditional classrooms made students look like mini-teachers and teachers look like quasi-students, *then e-learning should make both the teachers and students look less like teachers and students and more like a project team.*

In a real-world project, 80% of the really important work is done independently and only 10-20% of the time is used for ‘checking in’, calibrating, and so on. Anything beyond 20% for the latter and the temptation towards micro-management looms large.

Granted this won’t be so easy or practical with lower primary students (and the last thing anybody wants is chaos), but the principle can be cultivated early.

Overall, we should push for less ‘centralized’ meeting time, more independent group and individual working time. Ironically, this may lead to less time staring at the screen, which brings me to the final issue...

3 - In the traditional classroom, learning is delimited by time and space; with e-learning, these limitations are removed and optionality becomes key.

You know what’s the only thing worse than having to sit inside a classroom for five hours? It’s having to stare into a Zoom screen-grid for the same duration of time. Yet isn’t this precisely what many of our school kids are being made to do?

At least in school, kids can nudge their friends, stand up, sharpen their pencils, stare out the window at the other kids playing sports, pass naughty notes, run to the science lab, go to the toilet (four times during the class) and, best of all, look forward to recess or the final school bell.

During online classes? It’s like going from one passive zombified state to another, isn’t it? Especially when kids are ‘forced’ to listen to teachers talk via a screen for hours.

[Isn’t this why the entire “educational CD-ROM” industry didn’t take off? Because, look, it’s already bad enough listening to an educator drone on and on when he’s right in front of you, imagine watching him doing it through a screen? I reckon the inmates at Abu Ghraib had more fun?]

E-learning is a chance to make education seem less like involuntary confinement and more like a bounded choice.

Instead of one or two textbooks, what if kids were given a ‘recommended’ reading (or, better yet, *viewing*) list? What if kids were asked to submit their own findings of the most helpful vids or articles on, say, climate change, and what points they disagreed with?

Instead of everybody listening to one teacher, what if students were given the chance to discuss answers with whoever they want (and at their own time)?

Instead of one set of exam questions, what about considering the flexibility in choosing the kinds and levels of assessments which is best tailored to their strengths, and so on? I mean, e-learning already renders the concept of ‘closed-book exams’ null, doesn’t it? May as well rethink assessment strategy as a whole!

Again, I don't deny that for some children (especially lower primary) their maturity *may* be as yet insufficiently developed to deal with such independence and options. But I'd insist these are the minority; the majority of school children, I suspect, would love to at least try.

The 4 Iron Laws of Post-Graduate Studies

Maybe it's the pandemic or just the over-supply over post-graduate programs in the country, but have you noticed more and more folks talk about continuing their studies? Maybe do a PhD or DBA or MBA or whatever? I have.

Yet often 'doing a PhD' can sound as enthusiastic—and as short-lived!—as 'joining a gym'. A lot of folks start, but not many finish.

So if you're one of those presently thinking of doing such programs, I wish to offer what I call my "iron laws" to check if you have a good chance of completing them. Having seen friends finish their PhDs', DBAs' and MBAs' (and many more fail or drop out) and having supervised numerous students over the years, I can more or less predict who will finish, who will finish faster than usual, who will (probably) drop out, who will need to keep extending and extending their semesters, etc.

So, behold, the four iron laws of post-graduate studies:

1. Never do a post-grad degree if you're being forced or pressured to

Every time someone tells me they're applying to do a post-grad course because, oh, "my boss wants me to" or "my family says I should" I'm like, hello? Are you still 17 years old or what? If other people so hard-up over a PhD you ask *them* to do it la!

Now, don't get me wrong. If someone is offering to sponsor you to complete a worthwhile program by all means consider hard. Think about it. And not just the usual concerns like 'years of bond you need to serve'. I mean ask yourself if *you* really want the degree; never embark on a post-grad program simply to please or appease someone, let alone out of guilt or obligation.

2. Never do a doctoral program part-time

I submit to you doing a part-time DBA or PhD is a recipe for failure (an MBA is still possible but see note 1). 90% of folks who sign up for a PhD whilst working full-time will either

- a) drop out or
- b) get someone else to do it for them or
- c) take 10,000 years to finish

But, honestly, if you DO decide to study a PhD part-time this is what you have to do: Quit your job, get a divorce (or dump your partner), give up your kids for adoption, tell your pastor or imam or monk you've stopped believing in God, drop all your hobbies, delete your Facebook account, trash your phone all so that you can, well, convert your degree to a full-time one.

Because a PhD needs time.

There is no bleedin' 'short-cut' to a PhD. You either spend hours (and hours and hours) reading or researching or experimenting or whatever, or you don't deserve the degree. There is really nothing more to say.

I know someone who used to print out tons of material to be read (and underlined and notated!) in airplanes and hotel rooms, all over the region where he travelled. I also know people who kept asking colleagues and subordinates to download material for them and even "help to draft" chapters for them. The first example is someone who will because he has put in the time; the second example is someone whom I will never respect as a PhD holder but whom I will very likely not *have* to because such folks will never finish their program.

Because if I'm your supervisor and I discover that you're reading only about, say, an hour a week or writing a paragraph once in a while (or "only during weekends"), I will tell you to either quit your job or quit the program. It just isn't happening.

There is simply no integrity in your research if you're doing "bits and pieces" here and there.

3. Love your subject or don't start.

When it comes to studying for your doctoral, "marketability" should take a hike. Motivation and drive are the key factors and the one thing that'll pump them up is love love love.

You gotta be so infatuated with your topic, your spouse wonders if you love him or her anymore. This is really the only way you'll keep suffering for 2 or 3 or 4 years.

Dreams of a cooler sounding title won't give you 200% motivation to spend an hour downloading twenty articles (because, sigh, Islamic banking products in Malaysia isn't the easiest to find online and dammit where's my librarian when I need him?). An intense curiosity for your subject will.

Thoughts of a bigger office won't keep you skimming through dozens of e-databases articles (because, oh my, this IR 4.0 stuff is complex as heck). Passion for your topic will.

A higher salary won't make you get up at 4am just to add that extra few thoughts on to chapter 3 because what Helen Scales wrote on ecology is brilliant and must be added to your section on marine tourism. But, of course, love will.

Sure, the luckiest post-grads are those whose subject will also substantially elevate their career prospects. But this must be strictly a secondary concern, especially when it comes to drive and motivation.

This is a marathon. Whatever else you're thinking about, you must *enjoy* running.

4. If possible, do a proposal early.

Beware doctoral programs with a 'coursework' component. I don't mean to disparage the quality of such offerings or suggest there's anything untoward academically. But one major problem I've noticed about such programs is how candidates don't normally require a proposal to get a foot through the door.

So one frequent consequence is that many candidates sorta 'breeze' through the first year or so, until they come to the all-important dissertation stage. Then all bets go out the window and the Koyak monster starts to rear its ugly head. Because—especially in Malaysia where often there are hundreds of foreign students with very poor English proficiency—you can fool some of the lecturers some of the semesters but you can't fool all of them throughout an entire doctoral academic calendar (and you sure as heck can't fool the viva committee).

A proposal done early (or even as an entry requirement) at the very least forces students to demonstrate an acceptable modicum of research skills.

So there we have the four iron laws of ensuring maximal chances of completing a PhD with integrity and without a breakdown. All da best.

Note 1: An MBA can be, and is mainly done, part-time because such programs are specifically catered for busy businesspeople i.e. the 'flexibility' of an MBA program is priced-in to the demands of the syllabus. Having said that, the drop-rate for the average MBA is still around 30%. I suspect this is heavily due to the very thing which attracts people about MBAs' in the first place: Its part-time character.

2 Wrong Reasons to be a Lecturer

Recently, a friend of mine (with about 20 years' experience in banks) told me he wanted to quit and join one of the local private colleges as a lecturer. When I asked him why, he said that after spending so long in the "corporate world" he feels he wants to help the younger generation and give back to society.

You'd be surprised how many experienced professionals (and even fresh grads) decide to join the education sector with those two reasons in mind. Without at all doubting my friend's sincerity, you can take it from me (who has about 20 years' experience in education) that those two reasons won't sustain a would-be lecturer much.

So here's my attempted 'debunking' of those two (wrong) reasons to be a lecturer:

#1 - "I want to transform the younger generation via education"

Honestly? Leave that to folks like Maszlee Malik, TED Talk speakers, movies like *Dead Poets' Society* and the average non-fiction "insight porn" best-seller. The only thing students want from their lectures are the specific chapters they need to ~~memorize~~ study for the exams. They would also prefer that you don't bore them to an early death by going on and on about how 'amazing' a certain topic is: Always remember that what excites you about, say, Macro-Economics may simply not be something which pushes the buttons of young people one and a half generations below yours.

What this entails is that you gotta spend time—lots and lots of time—*exploring the worlds of the students you teach* (even more so if you're pushing forty and your class's average age is half that, just saying).

Use their world as a bridge into yours. This might require you to listen to music you find weird but that guy in front seems to lose himself in. Or you may have to download TikTok and embarrass yourself with a video during class. Or maybe even take up FortNite so you convince the gamer gang at the back that you can learn, too.

Transform the younger generation? Tak payah la. Just make one or two of them beam with enthusiasm during each class.

#2 - "I want to give back to society"

As per above, the only thing students want you to give is the exam portion (and, hopefully, the answers, too).

Like most other fields, a realistic perspective of education requires us to lose its "altruistic" cum inspirational cum transcendent component and just see it for the sheer mechanical functionality and purposiveness it gives to society. Look, education is essentially one grand cog in the machine of capitalism; it trains future workers to function productively in order that society can survive and thrive. That's the naked truth of it. It's also the reason why business courses lead the market and why philosophy courses don't even exist.

If you can accept the naked stupidity of this truth, only then can you laugh at it and, maybe, transform it. There is nothing more awkward than a lecturer going into a classroom acting like he's the next Randy Pausch. Not if he has to teach for 14 weeks in a semester.

Because after you're made to do all the work a lecturer has to do, I can assure you that 'giving back to society' will have different connotations for you. Oh, you're not sure what duties a lecturer has? Let me break it down for you. A full-time lecturer generally has to:

- Prepare the lesson plans for *all* classes according to the approved learning objectives of the course (you're welcome to use the boring-ass slides of the previous lecturer but if you fail to grab your students' attention it's on you)
- Mark attendance and report students who are absent (good luck)
- Counsel or tutor students who need post-class assistance (goodbye 'personal time')
- Prepare two sets of exam questions and answers for each official assessment (where you realize that creativity really doesn't pay)
- Vet the exam questions set by *other* lecturers (be gentle)
- Prepare exam reports (and God help you if more than half your class fails)
- Fill up whatever hundred forms required to be filled up by the Malaysians Qualifications Agency (MQA), which is like Bank Negara for the education sector
- Everything and anything else your department requires of you (which may include, but is not limited to: attending education fairs, being the teacher-counsellor for student clubs, attending meetings which have nothing to do with you, organizing conferences, etc.)

If you're still standing up and beaming with joy in your classes and giving 120% to your students after all the above, you can be assured your students will be the first to notice. And not just notice but perhaps—like what Thanos said to Tony Stark before he was about to kill him—*I hope they remember you.*

For many lecturers, that's kinda what matters. In the end.⁴

⁴ This article produced two published responses by, namely, Michelle Low (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/what-you-think/2019/09/10/response-to-alwyn-laus-two-wrong-reasons-to-be-a-lecturer-michelle-low/1789259>) and Esther Soh (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/what-you-think/2019/09/10/response-to-two-wrong-reasons-to-be-a-lecturer-esther-soh-huey-jo/1789240>).

Child Sacrifices: Are We Letting Exams Kill
Our Kids?

Fragile

The recent (2016) news of an 11-year-old schoolboy from Singapore who committed suicide because he failed a subject should leave us all stunned.⁵ It should - but probably won't. Why? Because the cruel paradox is most parents remain stuck in the cycle of Die-Die Also Must Succeed (pun sadly intended).

In the Ancient Near East certain tribes sacrificed their children to fire gods and fertility gods. Nowadays things haven't changed much. We're still offering up our children's blood and happiness at the altar of Career and Capitalism.

Very few parents (not least in Singapore) are going to stop viewing their kids like billionaire football players for whom every minute goalless is a universal disgrace. Very few parents are going to give thanks to heaven that despite treating their children like prized bulls, their kids endure and haven't yet hurled themselves off 20 stories.

And the cycle will continue because when bad things happen only *occasionally*, we miss the terribly fragile nature of things.

If we received news every day of friends getting a stroke we would surely cut down on that oily food and shit. But because our friends only kick the bucket once every few months or years, we find it suffices to a) shake our heads, b) write a meaningless quip on WhatsApp about healthy eating and c) maybe take one less prawn at the next meal.

If every day (instead of every few months) someone we care about gets bankrupt, then – and only then – may we be concerned about the way we spend our money.

Likewise, it will require one student suicide per day before we realize two indisputable facts:

1. Shoving our kids towards delusional paths of success (which begets non-delusional pain and trauma) isn't love - it's insanity

Newsflash: Not every child is a junior Stephen Hawking, not every child is Steve Jobs in the making, not every child will solve string theory. For an entire society to be obsessed with academic achievement is like a country training everybody under 12 to be the next Lee Chong Wei or Joseph Schooling, *failing which* the child is made to feel like he should crawl back into the garbage dump from where he was picked up.

Students like Master H jumped because he was stuck, cornered, given zero options. His whole life boiled down to being forced to succeed at something he – like 99% of students – hated with all mind, body and soul. Such students have their minds shut off from other possibilities e.g. home-schooling, excellence in sports, the love of art, the power of friendship, full-hearted support from parents regardless of material achievement. The tragedy is that he wasn't given the chance to excel in *anything other than* what his parents forced him to do.

Again, this is like expecting everyone in the office to be able to deliver great speeches on pain of having one's monthly pay deducted.

2. When *nothing* short of 'WORLD-CLASS Achievement' is acceptable, we will always feel like losers

The system is making our children feel like failures and losers, and parents are helping. Because the way things are wired (especially in kiasu-land) only sky-high goals are celebrated. Assume Ahmad got 94% in his Science – how long before his mum demands 95% and above for the next exam? So now

⁵ The news article available at <https://www.straittimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/death-of-boy-11-who-fell-17-floors-after-failing-his-exams-for-the-first-time>

not only does he no longer feel like he's actually achieved something, he will always feel like a loser until he scores 95%, followed later by 96%.

Should he obtain 91%, he's a goner. May as well slit his wrists right there, no? The fragility is astounding i.e. the only acceptable way is Onwards and Upwards with the *slightest* decline proof of abject failure. In other words, there was no grace in such a life. The prospect of 'salvation' demanded work, sweat, infinite accomplishments.

Dammit, even writing this makes me want to jump out the bloody window.

Only Upsides, Few Downsides

Imagine if every student didn't fear failure or low marks because the only thing which would produce a 'commotion' was doing well. Imagine if they bombed, say, their Geography or Maths, neither Daddy or Mummy will make a fuss; no one will rap them on their knuckles or make snide comments about winners and losers; no one will compare them against their higher-performing cousins, no one will force them into many more hours of prison (I mean *tuition*) time.

No downside, only upside. We must engineer this asymmetry into our children's lives. They must know they are already loved and accepted, there's nothing to 'prove' anymore. Everything is smooth sailing from here, regardless of whether they get 92% or 29%.

Imagine if every student faced absolutely no stress from exam time because only successes will be highlighted and, whilst improvements can be discussed, failure or 'non-performance' are not detrimental to their very personhood. In other words, like in JK Rowling's case, nobody cares if 10 thousand people refuse to read *Harry Potter & the Cursed Child* – all that matters are those millions who do.

Downside? Nobody would even dare.

To all the parents out there with kids in school, if the right column below is even close to how you're treating your kids, please reconsider. And do so fast. Our kids deserve better than that. And, heck, maybe we should try on the left column for size?⁶

| | <i>Asymmetrical Upside, Options, Grace</i> | <i>Fragile, Lock-In, Impossible Demands</i> |
|---|---|--|
| Overall Philosophy | Study everything, master the art of learning (in multiple ways and for various outcomes - not just to take exams) - but you are free to excel in 2-3 subjects of your choosing. | You <i>must</i> excel in everything (except for Art and Physical Education which are only for those losers who can't study) |
| Subjects You 'Hate' or Find Stressful? | If you 'hate' certain subjects, try to understand it deeper first, maybe even read up some non-textbook material on it; if you find you still hate it, then focus on those subjects you love. | I don't care if you find some subjects difficult; study and excel in them. In <i>all</i> of them. |
| What To Spend Less Time On | Don't spend so much time on subjects which bore you or which stress you out; simply ensure you <i>pass</i> these subjects, move on with your life. | Don't spend so much time on recreation, play or 'non-academic' skills. Focus entirely on your school work - <i>merely</i> passing is, again, for |

⁶ This is also the theme of a TEDx talk given by Alwyn in 2019 at University Malaya. The talk can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOch5XrF4xw>

| | | |
|-------------|--|--|
| | | losers (and don't even ask about failure, that's beyond comprehension). |
| Love | <p>For those subjects you love, be the very best you can be! And quit worrying about other things; you don't have to 'prove' anything to us.</p> <p>(And, most important, Daddy and Mummy will always be there for you).</p> | <p>Loving a subject is secondary; the question is can this subject earn you ship-loads of money? Do you want to be a success or not?</p> <p>(And, so you won't forget how serious this is, Daddy and Mummy are going to punish you for your failures).</p> |

**MUSANG KING:
POLITICS, CULTURE &
SOCIETY**

Why Pokémon GO Must Be Banned in Malaysia

I welcome the decision by the Islamic Legal Consultative Committee in the Federal Territories to issue a ban on Pokémon GO.⁷ Too bad it only applies to Muslims because – hand on heart – I believe all Malaysians should stay away from the app.

Such ‘games’ pose a genuine threat to the religious and moral sensibilities of the *rakyat*. There is nothing more destructive for the well-being of society than hordes of individuals pursuing perverted dragon-like characters who look like they’ve got serious anger management issues.

I downloaded the app and within minutes I felt my belief in God, being Chinese and eating chicken rice seep develop as much significance as last month’s Facebook advertisements. I no longer gave a shit about anything. All I wanted to do was run after a serenity-challenged rodent call Pikachu whose name at first made me think this was some ancient Peruvian pyramid climbing game.

I’ve since taken a month of pre-MC and my therapist tells me to seriously consider blindness as an anti-Pokémon tactic.

Saving our Corporations and Children

You know what the committee was concerned about most of all when they issued the fatwa on Pokémon? Our GDP. Our economy. Our businesses.

If we’re not careful, Pokémon will make corporate executives run out of boardrooms chasing tiny blue-winged monsters instead of working hard so that our country’s business reputation, our currency and our corporate high-teas can remain enviably top-class.

Malaysia is a paragon of transparency and meritocracy, and some of our top stalwarts and great fundraisers, too. I think every Internal Audit and Compliance department is simply wasting their time checking. I mean, we’ve had a spotless record of zero wrongdoing by our leaders – the LAST thing we want is for our dynamic yuppies to go bat-shit crazy chasing augmented-reality rodents next to the water-fountain.

If Pokémon takes residence in our corporate culture, soon we’ll have shady business deals and – gasp! – money politics (omg, the very *thought* of that!) happening because one Pokémon player (who happens to own half the city) needs game-tips from another player (who happens to own twenty companies).

Seriously. Malaysians are going to be playing Pokémon, then having illicit sex. They’ll be collecting Poke balls, then ramming their cars into senior citizens. They’ll be hoarding Pokémon candies and stardust, then insulting other races. They’ll be fighting in Pokémon gyms, then burning the national flag.

And what about our children?

Pokémon is the next worst thing to Harry Potter which, as we all know, transformed our Barbie- and Ken-loving girls and boys to Satan-worshipping witches and sorcerers overnight. I have never stopped praying for JK Rowling’s soul since the release of her first book - how *dare* this British woman flood our children’s minds with bullshit-stories of wands, wizardry and weird train stations?! Can’t people like her tell that our kids have more than enough excitement watching RTM 1 and 2, listening to Friday and Sunday sermons, and basically doing nothing but sit in superbly ventilated walled-up rooms all day listening to highly engaging talks about algebra and Malacca forts? What’s wrong with her trying to mess with our young people’s imagination like that?

And things will be worse with Pokémon. We’ll have our children getting run down by cars because they were chasing demons. Our kids will have bogey-man nightmares about Jurassic gardens with

⁷ News article at <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/08/05/ft-islamic-committee-bans-pokemon-go/1177057>

gyrating micro-dinosaurs taunting them with suggestive looks and the temptation of scoring higher than their schoolmates.

Pokémon is Legion – “We Are Many”

The people who proposed the *fatwa* have it right: Pokémon represents religious degradation at its lowest level. If the movie *Conjuring* was about spiritual violence, Pokémon GO is outright spiritual massacre. It's genocide, I tell you.

If you need further proof of the diabolical character of the app, I'll have you know that the word Pokémon comes from the French-Mandarin-Scandinavian word for 'Legion'. And, as every 2-month Christian infant knows, 'Legion' means a truckload of demons. And just *how* many Pokémon demons are there to date? Answer: North of 700!

I rest my case. Pokémon is a bona-fide Luciferian conspiracy to debase the world.

First things first. I'm going to lodge a complaint to Nintendo for locating one of the PokeStops at the Bible Society of Malaysia.

The audacity!

What will happen to our precious Bible-reading and church-going members, now that a popular Scripture distributor has become the habitat of dastardly horned brat-demons! Cleanse that place with holy virtual water right now, dammit! This makes the raid by the Selangor State's Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) in 2014 look like an inter-faith party!

It is no surprise, therefore, that phenomenon like Pokémon is at the root of all the evils in Malaysian society. The 1MDB scandal, child marriages, nepotism, cronyism, public shootings, racism and even why taxi-drivers attack Uber cars – that's *all* because of Pokémon GO.

Absolutely. 1MDB got into 9-figure debts because of the spiritual dark forces emanating from those perverted minions. The app was still being developed, true, but the moment the first mini-psycho was created shaking his demonic butt on the screen, the 1MDB executives were immediately affected, causing them to lose their judgment and make bad decisions. *This* was what the United States Department of Justice was trying to tacitly communicate to the world: *That Malaysian Official 1 is Pokémon!*

Same thing with the recent spate of random killings. No, it's nothing to do with an increasingly criminalized society, nothing to do with the hopelessness and desperation produced by greed and hatred – it's everything to do with fiendish virtual creatures interrupting the sacred normality of Malaysian life.

That's right. The normal, the non-invasive and the non-irrational are deep characteristics of Malaysian society. It's always been this way and 2016 is proof that we remain a model-nation for ASEAN. May we never risk our unique form of eminence simply because debauched and deformed freaks are flashing their middle-fingers on our smartphones. May the darkest curse of God be on Pokémon.⁸

⁸ This article is, of course, satire.

Is Corruption in Malaysian Politics “Not Yet a Pandemic”?

Recently, Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) chief commissioner Azam Baki declared that corruption in Malaysia was worrying, but “not yet a pandemic”.⁹ When I read this I’m reminded of a joke by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek about an exchange of telegrams between German and Austrian army headquarters in the middle of the First World War. The Germans sent the message “Here, on our part of the front, the situation is serious, but not catastrophic.”

The Austrians replied “Here, the situation is catastrophic, but not serious.”

In my view, Azam Baki may well have said that. Because whilst Covid-19 may have devastated our country this past year, corruption in Malaysian politics have absolutely ripped our nation apart for decades and, even now, continues to rear its ugly head (not least in a recent ‘leaked phone call’).

“Not yet a pandemic”? Are you kidding me?

We have a former PM (who also was the Finance Minister) who very likely ripped off *billions* from the country’s wealth. I suspect it hasn’t fully sunk in, especially among continuing UMNO and Barisan supporters, how utterly shameful and despicable Najib’s actions were.

These people surely also brush aside the fact that, for decades, the Malaysian government has been characterized by corruption and vice and bribery and all sorts of nonsensical darkness, with the main culprit being UMNO.

But a great light appeared in 2018.

That year we finally had a new government after more than sixty years. I’m also reliably informed that numerous Malaysians based overseas even sent money home to support Pakatan Harapan in the heart-felt hope that, finally, some change would occur. I know that these proud Malaysians, some of whom only step foot into the country a few days or weeks a year, were rejoicing with me when news of Barisan’s downfall happened.

Why? Because we were all SICK of the ‘non-pandemic’ corruption at the heart of the country.

Millions of us punched our fists with delight when some key people—proven top achievers—were brought into the Cabinet and finally given the reins to our country’s running (especially its finance, infrastructure, science, law courts, etc.) For about a year, our country was on the firm path of progress, of real change, of recovery and reform, of something real and good. I know that we were about to show the world that Malaysia can be admired not only for its food and the twin towers.

But this dream collapsed back into a nightmare.

The one person *everybody* trusted to guide the country back to some semblance of justice and goodness decided that his personal interests and political ambitions took precedence over the good of the nation.

I don’t know what the precise details and machinations and ‘games’ were which were being played. But, once again, everybody knows there was some hanky-panky going on. I, like millions of my countrymen, watched in abject shit-faced horror as the dream of finally being a

⁹ News article at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-corruption-worrying-but-not-yet-a-pandemic-macc-chief-220381>

nation the world could be proud of slowly but inevitably fell apart and reverted to the age-old rot of money and race-based politics.

Unfortunately, the whole world knows that the fall of Pakatan Harapan, to be replaced by the highly inefficient Perikatan Nasional (again, amidst a ton of soap-opera like power games between old men), couldn't have come at a worst time.

The Covid-19 pandemic could've been dealt with much more effectively if the government, you know, had a bloody clue about what they were trying to do. Instead, we have a train-wreck of half-baked decisions which don't make sense, last-minute instructions affecting millions of businesses, non-compliant VIPs' breaking SOPs' with impunity and the train-wreck of three—and now possibly four—waves of infection.

Fast forward and—surprise surprise—we have a PHONE CALL in which, yet again, it's shown that ultimately it's about what a few people want. It's not about the party, not about so-called ideology or values and it sure as heck isn't about the country.

Essentially, the politics which matter in Malaysia are about what two or three individuals conspire to get for themselves.

Like most Malaysians, I don't know how these folks can do it. To people like Tun Mahathir Mohamad, Datuk Seri Mohd Azmin Ali, Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim (and others, I'm sure): ***How could you make grand promises, accept our votes, then go about and rip the country to pieces over your petty rivalries?***

It's not as if you don't have enough cash to spend on all your bungalows and cars and vacays and weddings and what-not; why can't you ever put the damn country's needs on at least as high a priority as your own? What is the country to you, other than a game-space to garner more wealth and power?

So, I'm curious, does anyone still genuinely believe that Malaysian corruption “still not yet a pandemic”?

Some Malaysians Never Grow Up
#AntiICERDRally

In Paul Beatty's Booker-prize winning novel, *The Sellout*, the protagonist reinstated segregation in a small town as a way of reinvigorating his black community. Perversely, he realized that negroes required institutional discrimination as a means of casting off the pretense or façade of formal equality, a subtle deception which was a greater burden than overt racism.

I wonder what Beatty would've said if he was in KL last Saturday during the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) rally.

Okay so there's a rally to protest the ICERD. Sure...they must be protesting the fact that it *wasn't* ratified, right? Surely this must be the minority groups pissed at the government for refusing to take the next important step towards ending racial discrimination, no? This rally is a straight-forward rally against racism, right?

But hang on. Wait a minute. Huh? This protest is by members of the majority segment, the group already enjoying the lion's share of political power and constitutionally stipulated privileges, people who for years have the fewest reasons to claim ill or unequal treatment by the government – hang on, *these* are the groups protesting? And they're protesting the ICERD after the government agreed not to ratify it?

Kinda like white communities in U.S. and U.K. complaining about a lack of benefits and advantage in life after a decision which promoted white supremacy, isn't it?

A straight-forward parenting metaphor cum lesson is available here. If you spend many years showing favoritism to one child over the others in your family, in the end the result will be *detrimental* to that favored child. S/he will have entitlement grow on him, and fury will follow any time his Most Favored Kid status is under threat. Unless this child has learnt to share with his/her siblings or, better yet, serve and suffer for them, one dark truth will emerge absolutely clear: ***This child will never grow up.***

Amidst all the shouting and screaming and intimidating, I wonder if people like PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang and Perkasa's President Datuk Ibrahim Ali realize that the ratification of the ICERD is not only about promising equality for all ethnic groups, it's also about *helping selected members of that one particular ethnic majority to finally break free from the shadow of partiality*. True diversity isn't only about levelling the playing field so minorities can enjoy what the majority has taken for granted, it's also about saving the latter from hubris.

The ICERD spurs dominant groups to grow up, to throw off the 'siege mentality', to quit betraying their sense of inferiority (for why else would people threaten to go 'voluntarily berserk' if there wasn't some deep fear within them?). Again, if the constantly privileged older brother keeps portending domestic doom each time Mummy says all children will be given a more or less equal allowance, he needs to be reprimanded—not appeased.

The government's decision to not ratify the ICERD itself spoke volumes about Malaysia Baharu's ability (or, rather, inability) to stand up to an extremist minority; to allow such a rally appears to add insult to injury (or culpability to compromise).

A new Malaysia needs to be one that has grown up. Last Saturday is proof we're still in our diapers.

Israel-Palestine: When Dialogue Becomes Impossible

Another crisis, another conflict, another volley of rockets, another sortie of retaliatory strikes. In the end, only one outcome, as always, prevails: The IDF and Israeli leadership as a whole will grow stronger, as will Hamas, Fatah and other militants. Civilians on both sides will suffer (especially Palestinians, but some Israelis also lose their homes and their lives), and guess what, the world will continue as normal until another flare-up occurs.

Rinse, repeat.

This long bloody history never seems to stop. Worse, nobody on either side really wants to dialogue. On social media the rage continues in proxy with members from both and all camps weighing in, valorizing their heroes, demonizing each other, shouting war cries of victory and greatness for one's side mixed with disgust for the cruelty of the other side.

American comedian David Barry said, "If the earth is blown to smithereens, there will be some organisms still fighting on a debris from the Middle East." I would add such debris would probably use social media.

You're either pro-Palestine or you're (gasp!) a brutal genocide-approving Zionist! Or, wait, you're either Pro-Israel or a vile supporter of Islamic terrorism who doesn't mind if Hamas uses human shields!

What follows is an attempt to initiate a dialogue precisely by articulating what these two sides cannot help but hold in their heads 24/7. By putting the best of the two perspectives together, maybe a kind of epistemic humility can be nurtured.

And I'm guessing that's not too bad a thing.

View #1 – The Zionists Are Systematically Massacring the Palestinians

"They had bombed and burned, killed and maimed, plundered and looted. Now they have come to claim the land." (Susan Albuhawa)

"In any war between oppressor and oppressed, support the oppressed." (Anonymous)

Israel is absolutely and exclusively responsible for the crisis in Gaza. They desecrated the Al-Aqsa mosque during the month of Ramadhan by attacking the worshippers there; the Jews even cheered when the mosque was burning.

They followed this up with unjustifiable airstrikes into Gaza city which resulted in numerous deaths, including those of children.

Israel is a racist apartheid regime which murders innocent women and children so they can continue stealing land in the name of their Zionist religion. Israel established their state in 1948 by ethnically cleansing out the Palestinians (a tragedy known as Al-Nakba, now a forbidden celebration in Gaza) and have expanded their territory through violence and deceit ever since. Their 'self-defense' baloney is nothing but an excuse to kill Palestinians and make their military serve as a makeshift demolition crew in Gaza. Besides, surely the right to self-defense cannot justify the murder of innocent women and children and the wiping out of practically all of Gaza's infrastructure.

It is Israel's illegal and brutal occupation of Palestine since 1967 (during a war which they initiated) which is the root cause of the conflict and bloodshed. That and the on-going blockade of Gaza (since 2007), not to mention the inhumane treatment of the Palestinian people, make even the very thought

that Israel is the 'good guy' here a cruel joke. Much of Palestine now is, in fact, an open-air prison with people living in poverty and fear. That Israeli settlements continue to be (illegally) built only adds mocking insult to much injury.

Groups like Hamas, whilst using questionable tactics in battle, are nevertheless the products of the decades-long Israeli Occupation. What they are doing may not be entirely right, but we must understand that many of them were raised as refugees, and they are fighting for the freedom of their people against a vicious Occupier.

The point is, even granted some extremity in Hamas, Israel is without doubt the more powerful oppressor and thus have NO RIGHT to talk as if they are victims or are under threat. To talk about 'balance' and 'neutrality' is promote Zionist propaganda and side with this oppressor which perpetrates genocide. Furthermore, Israel has violated or ignored countless international laws, including the Fourth Geneva Convention and other United Nations resolutions, so Israel can hardly complain if Hamas' tactics are 'illegal'.

Israel must leave the occupied territories – immediately. Once Israel pulls out of Palestine completely, chances are peace will come to Gaza. The Arab-Israeli conflict is unambiguously the fault of a selfish Zionist state that has no compassion for the people they are occupying.

Best Point: Focuses on the power dynamic, employs the Oppressed-Oppressor model to emphasize how Israel's superior military strength is definitive of the situation and that therefore no comparison exists between Israel and Hamas when it comes to working for peace.

Weakest Point: Downplays (or even justifies) Arab hatred of Israel and is somewhat presumptuous of the consequences for peace after Israel fully withdraws.

View #2 –The Root Cause of the Conflict is Palestinian Refusal to Recognize Israel's Existence

"Peace will come when the Arabs love their children more than they hate us" (Golda Meir)

"I cannot conceive of Israel withdrawing if Arab states do not recognize Israel...within secure borders" (Nelson Mandela)

Hamas - and similar Islamic terrorist groups – is symptomatic of the deep and on-going Arab hatred of the Jews and is the main reason why there is conflict in the Middle East.

It was Hamas and Fatah who incited the riots at the Al-Aqsa mosque, leading to the clashes with soldiers. It was also Hamas rocket strikes—numbering almost a thousand—which necessitated retaliatory strikes by the IDF to take out those rocket launchers. However, because Hamas strikes from within civilian areas, Palestinian deaths are an inevitability.

The Arabs did not accept the UN's (entirely reasonable) 1947 Partition Plan for a Palestine and Jewish state co-existing side by side; they have repeatedly tried to destroy Israel since then and the public declarations to obliterate the Jewish state persist to this day (e.g., Iran). The crucial 1967 Six-Day War which resulted in Israel taking over the occupied territories was started by the Arabs in an attempt to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. The Arabs lost that war but have by no means stopped their terrorist strategies against Israel.

In the light of history (from 1948 and even to this day), therefore, to brand Israel a 'racist' regime is the worst kind of hypocrisy ever: Almost like UMNO accusing DAP of cronyism.

Bear in mind that Israel is only one lost war away from being annihilated as a nation. Granted some (minor) progress towards peace, to conclude that Israel has absolutely nothing more to fear from their Arab neighbors represents either naïve or wishful thinking.

This is (at least partially) why Israel remains reluctant to give up the occupied land. In the light of decades of Arab attacks, they are simply not convinced the Palestinians want peace; and with Hamas firing missiles at Israeli civilians, this conclusion will all but reinforce itself. Furthermore, the Palestinians have been offered statehood three times (1937, 1947 and 2001) but have rejected them all and each time responded with violence. Has the world forgotten the 2002 suicide bombings in Jerusalem?

It is likewise self-delusion to believe that peace in Palestine would reign if only Israel would stop the Occupation – as if the Arabs required an Israeli presence to become violent (e.g. see the wars in Syria, see ISIS, etc.). Hezbollah, for example, has also vowed to continue its attacks on Israel were the Occupation to end.

Note, too, that Hamas – the group the Palestinians *elected* to govern their most populated areas in the West Bank - spent international aid money to build attack-tunnels and encouraged its people to become human shields. And yet the world vilifies Israel?

Peace in (and withdrawal from) the Disputed Territories will only come when the Palestinians make a genuine and sustained effort at removing anti-Semitism and violence from among their own people. Israel may eventually return to pre-67 borders, but whatever happens the Palestinians will not be rewarded for violence.

Best Point: Emphasizes the socio-historical roots of the conflict and the Arab propensity towards hatred/violence against Jews.

Weakest Point: Understates the suffering of innocent Palestinians and neglects Israel's primary responsibility as peace-broker, given their Occupier status.

Pakatan Harapan or Pakistan Harapan?

Four guys caned for having gay sex. A radical preacher from overseas remains protected. Child marriages remain legal. The LGBTQ community remains threatened. A Christian pastor's whereabouts remains unknown. And the religious police continue to stalk, roam and hunt those whose private lives don't fit the approved script.

Sometimes I don't know if our government is trying to forge a New Malaysia or not. Or would they prefer this country to be a second Pakistan? Or maybe another Iran?

A foreign preacher promotes violence towards non-Muslims, we shelter him like he's some modern-day Anne Frank fleeing from India's Nazis'. But one call from Thailand to send back their anti-monarch activist and we obey like an inter-regional Domino's Pizza. *Thank you for your order, you want handcuffs with the dissident?* Likewise, disabled Jewish swimmers want to swim in Kuching we treat *them* like terrorists and go on BBC bragging about "solidarity" with our Palestinian brothers and sisters whilst at the same time kowtowing to China despite their mass incarceration of the Uyghurs. I didn't realize Muslims in the Middle-East mattered so much more than those in Asia, or—gasp!—would this double standard have anything to do with China not being spelled I-s-r-a-e-l?

I can't help but recall that UMS student who performed his Nazi salute during his convocation last week then later thanked Hitler for "taking care" of the Jews in WW2¹⁰. The irony of him being a History grad was not lost on most people. We could also highlight the deeper irony of him posting his messages on a platform created by a Jew (i.e. Facebook) and (I guess) using an app invented by an Israeli company, Waze. Great example of "We hate the Jews and we approve of their mass destruction, but let's not overact?"

Because in Malaysia, we have a tendency to overreact when we should instead be chillin' out and minding our business. We are *so* damn concerned about how people conduct their sexual lives, our religious police—despite it almost being 2020—still raid hotel rooms and drag consenting adults to religious jail. Likewise, the farcical "Azmin & Haziq" show can only be popular in places like Malaysia where, somehow, it's a matter of national concern what two guys who love each other do behind closed doors. Me? I'm not gay, don't want to be gay, and don't particularly want to watch *Brokeback Mountain*, but for the life of me I can't see what a dude's sexual preferences have to do with his abilities as a minister, an executive or whatever. And I certainly cannot see the rationale of two adults who love each other being caned as punishment (unless they're, uh, "punishing" each other, of course).

This all seems to be part of the same disease in which one stranger believes he has the right to tell another stranger who he's allowed to be attracted to sexually.

In the same vein, I wish these same religious officers (or other non-religious ones) would raid the homes of those middle-aged men who take teenage girls as their brides, some as young as 11. When almost 6,000 teenage girls are being raped legally in seven states out of thirteen, every damn year, only one conclusion is possible: Muslim children in Malaysia aren't safe. Thank God that's still way below the almost 2 million child brides from Pakistan annually. Still, that's no reason to smile. Our government is under-reacting on this matter just like they are plain *frozen* when it comes to enforced disappearances of people like Pastor Raymond Koh.¹¹

The very thought that our government cares so much more for Zakir Naik than Pastor Raymond totally pisses me off. In what universe is this considered even remotely just? I suspect it's the same kind of universe in which gay folks can be thrown off buildings just for being gay, and Jewish people executed in public just for being Jewish, and little girls married off to old guys who already have wives just because, well, the guy likes them young.

¹⁰ News reports available at <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/11/26/sabah-varsity-graduate-draws-online-flak-for-nazi-salute-at-convocation/1813465>

¹¹ A good introduction to such cases of forced abductions (of which Pastor Koh is just one) available at <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/52553/disappearances-of-pastors-raymond-koh-joshua-hilmy-allegedly-interlinked-suhakam-inquiry-hears>

The Paranoia Over Christian Evangelism in Malaysia

The claim by Ummah chairman and Ikatan Muslim Malaysia (Isma) president Aminuddin Yahya, in his speech during the National Ummah Unity Convention last week, that there is some drive to ‘evangelize’ Putrajaya is, frankly, amazing.¹² It’s incredible not only for the sheer bull-shittery of the content but also for what it shows about the paranoid fundamentalist mindset.

Groups like Isma seek the serenity and accord that they *think* accusing Christians of national schemes will provide. But people who make claims like those Aminuddin did will never be satisfied. They’re like flat-earthers for whom no amount of evidence will suffice to change their minds.

I could tell Aminuddin that I’ve been attending Christian churches and meetings for over forty years and never once have I heard anything about any scheme or plot or design to ‘place as many Christians as possible in national leadership positions’. All I ever hear are Christian leaders praying for Malaysia, for justice and good governance to prevail.

I could tell him that evangelism—the sharing of one’s faith to someone outside the religious community— is one of the *weakest* aspects of almost any church in the country. Christians are way better at sharing out complaints about everything wrong with the church building, the church leaders, Hollywood movies, politics, culture, food, what *other* ‘heretical’ Christians believe, etc. The point is, we suck at evangelism. Especially nowadays, when the average Christian prefers to spend 10 hours scrolling on his phone than 10 seconds telling non-Christians about the good news of salvation in Jesus.

So the idea that there is some grand elaborate evangelical ‘drive’ to control the country sounds even weirder than the thought that maybe Donald Trump wants to buy Malaysia.

I could ask Aminuddin where on earth he got his information from and how he knows something that almost no other Christian knows about. Perhaps, to stop all the speculation and objections, in future he should just record his conversations with his dodgy informers and upload that for the whole country to listen to. I mean, like, don’t we all want to know the truth, too?

Because failing real evidence, it just sounds like paranoia.

Paranoid groups like Isma are always complaining that someone somewhere has stolen (or is about to steal) something precious to them. *My precioussssss*. They need to retrieve this object and thus will constantly harass these certain others to give it up, to fess up, to roll over and die.

What they cannot accept is that this ‘treasure’ was never really lost. Why? Because it never existed in anywhere but their troubled psyches.

The situation resembles Victoria’s Secret. What *is* the secret which, uh, belongs to Victoria? It’s the secret that there *is no* secret, but it’s worth believing there is. It’s the secret that people long to convince themselves there’s something *more*. It’s the secret that something mysterious resides in deep places and the mere appearance of a veil spurs a passion to discover and possess.

Bulls are infatuated with the color red. People are infatuated with infatuation itself. Likewise, religious bigots are fascinated with bigotry for bigotry’s sake. “How can we stop the Christianization of Putrajaya?” is the same kind of question as, “What is Victoria hiding?” The answer is less enigmatic than the challenge of the question itself.

Victoria’s secret, in a word, is the secret of desire. And desire is produced by loss. To keep enjoying desire, one must keep *producing loss*.

This is the problem with fundamentalist Islam in our country: Its members long to enjoy their desires (or suffer their enjoyment, which is about the same thing) but they have to keep telling themselves they have lost something. So others need to pay for that ‘loss’ by being irrationally targeted.

That’s the open secret, isn’t it?

¹² More news on the fallout and reactions found at <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/08/27/churches-want-action-after-malay-muslim-coalition-accuses-christians-of-inf/1784479>

Rethinking Dual Canteens and 'Segregation'

The recent controversy over the issue of ‘segregated’ canteens found in six Malacca schools¹³ does make one wonder if Malaysians need to take a chillax pill over racial rhetoric. Almost anything can trigger off knee-jerk accusations of racism, discrimination and so on.

So the facts are that these schools—five missionary schools and one Chinese vernacular school—have two canteens. One of them serves non-halal food and another serves halal food. *That’s it*. What purposes do the dual canteens serve? What’s the history of this ‘separation’? We don’t know, but many people have, ***on the sole fact that the school has two canteens***, proceeded to employ the label ‘segregation’ with all the evils the word brings about (see note 1).

This mirrors the outcry by some people (albeit fewer) over the proposal to provide a free breakfast scheme for children within the B40 category. Some folks immediately used the phrase ‘segregation’ as a way of shooting it down. In both cases—the canteen and breakfast scheme—the fallacy is the same i.e. apply a very dark label to a situation or proposal and thus declare it bad.

Apparently, it doesn’t matter to some folks that segregation in, say, the pre-civil rights era of the United States involved white and black communities being separated in *multiple* domains (e.g. toilets, restaurants, bus seats, club memberships, drinking fountains, etc.); in Melaka there is nothing of this sort. It doesn’t matter that segregation in some ancient caste systems involves an explicit *belief* in the uncleanliness and essential inferiority of one community vis-à-vis another; in Melaka there is nothing of this sort. Finally, it seems lost upon some folks that the chief victims of World War II who were segregated were made to stay in practically inhabitable conditions prior to the murders; in Melaka, there is nothing of this sort.

In other words, shouldn’t the fact that many other key characteristics of racism and discrimination (associated with segregation) are absent in both the Melaka and B40 case make us pause to ask if we’ve read the situation wrong?

The point, of course, is that **mere separation by itself should have no racist/unjust overtones**. In supermarkets you have non-halal sections. In airports you have Smoking Rooms. On highways you have the motorcycle lane. Casinos are off-limits to kids. In mall washrooms, you have special facilities for the physically challenged and parents who need to change diapers. In some restaurants, you have Children sections. And on the MRT and LRT you have special seats meant for the elderly, pregnant and so on.

Why don’t we cry ‘segregation’ for these examples? Obviously, it’s because we recognize that these are positive and helpful separations for the sake of the minority who require them (or, conversely, to not inconvenience the majority in servicing the minority).

The majority-minority distinction is important because it alerts us to the number of ways we have of meeting diverse needs without disrespecting any particular faith or community. In the case of the B40 breakfast scheme, the whole intention is simply to assist those with a lower income; in essence, it’s almost no different from having a lower income-tax bracket for those with lower salaries. Nothing ‘racist’ or ‘segregationist’ about any of this. To harp on the mere fact that some kids get free breakfast and others don’t completely miss the point.

In the case of the Malacca schools, the halal canteens were set up (many years ago) to cater to the growing number of Muslim students. The Muslim students would obviously constitute the minority group in reference to the majority group of non-Muslim students.

There are at least two ways of handling the fact that the minority group (see note 2) requires halal food, but not the majority.

¹³ See the Malacca Education Department’s explanation for this 2018 issue at <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/453304>

Option #1 Minority Rules, Majority Acquiescence i.e. "some cannot eat pork, so all don't eat pork"; all canteen food halal, so everyone eats the same thing, the majority (non-Malay) follow the minority (Malay). This option is in fact the one which Malaysians are used to. It's also the option selected in most fast-food restaurants. Generally, everyone gives way to the minority and that's that.

The Malacca schools, however—probably because they began as missionary schools and a vernacular school (both of whom naturally begin without many Muslim students)—have chosen the other option.

Option #2 Majority Rules / Minority Provision i.e. "most can eat pork and non-pork, only some cannot eat pork, so an option is provided for the latter" i.e. most of the non-Malay students still eat their non-halal food, but an option is provided for the minority Malays.

The bottom line is that it's not about 'racism' at all, but about opening up a special space for a minority so their needs can be met without taking anything away from the majority. Again, it's like Chinese wedding dinners which offer a vegetarian meal (or sometimes even a special table just for vegetarian guests) in an otherwise meat-heavy spread.

Now, of course, most missionary and vernacular schools have adopted option #1, in that all their canteens serve halal food. That's fine. The point is that these few schools in Malacca are merely taking another route and shouldn't be hastily labelled as 'segregated' or racist.

I hope this table (which includes a third option) helps:

| Scheme | Examples |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Minority Rules, Majority Acquiescence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security checks at airports and borders (terrorists and criminals are minority, but all are affected) • "No pork and beef dishes allowed" for Malaysian multi-cultural events (e.g. end-of-school class parties) • Whole family watches action movie in cinema because dad wants to (or eats at KFC because the youngest wants to, or goes to Cameron Highlands because mum loves strawberries) • Cars giving way to ambulances (or police-escorted vehicles) in heavy traffic • Straw bans at fast-food restaurants (society complies with pro-environmental activists) • Non-ratification of ICERD due to protest by minority • Vocal minority sways public opinion (e.g. 5-10% of participants severely complain about workshop or event, whilst majority are silent, thus producing mass condemnation) • Meeting delayed because of one person |
| Majority Rules, Minority Provision | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smoking rooms in airports • Toilets for physical challenged • Special seats on trains and buses • Vegetarian table in Chinese New Year or Raya corporate lunch gathering • Non-halal section in supermarkets |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More examination time given to students with special needs |
| Majority Rules, Minority Acquiescence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No smoking inside planes or hospitals (or, more controversially recently, outdoor restaurants) • Theatre or concert performances which don't allow children • SG-18 movies and casinos' entry restrictions • Movies (especially non-English movies) without subtitles • Vegetarian restaurants in Buddhist temples • Non-halal restaurants • Right-hand drive cars in Malaysia |

The point is none of the above can be properly (or easily) characterized as racism or discrimination; they represent a variety of ways to satisfy divergent needs (in the context of a majority-minority dynamic). Likewise, the mere *fact* of there being two canteens should not occasion protest. We need to learn how to perceive some situations as different ways to play the cards one has been dealt with.

Note 1: In fact, there's nothing inherently wrong with the word 'segregation' itself, which is simply a macro version of the word 'separation'. But as with many other words, 'segregation' has been over-determined by the historical baggage it carries.

Note 2: When I say minority, I do not necessarily mean those forming the lower *number or quantity*; that's often true, but sometimes it's simply the group with more stringent *restrictions*. E.g. if ten friends want to go out for lunch, and five of them are Malay, the whole group will almost definitely eat at a halal place.

Durians Are No Laughing Matter

You know why Southeast Asia never produced a Gautama Buddha or Isaac Newton? Because all these world-changing hopefuls were sitting under durian trees. The truth must've hit home too hard. These meditators, dreamers and thinkers couldn't withstand the power of the revelations, uh, falling upon them.

And yet it's these same trees which ensure that, every June to August of every year, Malaysians go all-out crazy over a slimy substance which stinks so bad you can see dead cockroaches in your car boot after you drive home with your durians.

You know how every Malaysian is an expert in politics, education, world affairs, early childhood development, economics, Asian cuisine and, lately, the whos', hows' and whys' of a particular sex tape? (If you're not sure, simply spend about an hour in an average kopi-tiam). Well, between June and August, we are also experts in durians.

Every Malaysian knows everything there is to know about XO, Golden Phoenix, D24, etc. where to buy them, what not to buy, how to 'sniff' out the best fruits, the price range of each breed plus which stalls accept credit card. Seriously, you'd think whoever named the fruits could've done better than just picking up lazy super-hero names with passive-aggressive undertones: Black Thorn, Red Prawn, Green Bamboo.

It really sounds like an all-male team with a metrosexual edge. It also demonstrates the versatility of the fruit; in a, uh, nutshell it can burst forth flavors which range from seafood to hard liquor to something pandas eat.

And then of course there's His Majesty the Ruler of Musangistan himself, the Musang King. I think if you check up its background, you'll discover that, well, his dad was the original king of the land then, you know, his uncle wanted the throne, plotted to kill his dad and pin the blame on the son, blahblahblah. This joker costs anywhere from RM38 to RM2000 per kg and no durian lover worth his sweat will dare his majesty taste anything less than awesome sublime perfect and heavenly. I'm surprised the fruit isn't on any of our state flags, since I have it on good authority it's going to be hoisted by our national mascot...or may even *become* our national mascot.

This is also why Singapore will never DARE to say that durians "originated in Singapore", because that would be tantamount to a declaration of war. The closest they'll come is to launch some piece of nonsense like "durian whiskey" which really isn't worth anybody's time responding to.

However, as with all kings today, unfortunately, society's respect is declining. You can tell a celebrity's decline when you see his or her face on almost every brochure or product ad. Ditto Da King *of the King* of Fruits.

Nowadays, every dish must have durian inside. From ice-cream, to cendol, to nasi lemak, to biscuits, to cake, to whiskey(!) and probably fried chicken as well. What's next? A condo with durian flavored walls? Durian slippers, durian-inspired cars? I'm offended.

Simply ask those people living in America, Canada, Europe, Australia. You know what they pay for durians? Almost enough to get a brand-new Tesla Model 3.

Dammit. The durian is fruit royalty, not cheap seasoning. Hey, it's probably the only fruit which has made it on Jimmy Kimmel Live, brought into the studio by none other than Jessica Chastain (who pronounced the word 'durian' like she was talking about an Indian herb).

Finally, I wish to remind the younger generation that one must never eat durians without participating in that time-hallowed ritual: Drinking from the empty husk (you're most welcome to drink from the non-empty husk, but that might be difficult). You see, like how the skull of the xenomorph (in the Aliens series) is the only thing which can withstand the creature's acidic blood, the durian's husk is the only thing which purifies water to the point where it removes the stains and smells of the pods from your hands.

It's a miracle of creation, okay. Don't play play. Don't believe me? *Cuba, jangan tak cuba*. And if doesn't work, add some soap—that totally boosts the miracle.

Which City is More Exciting - Penang or KL?

Just my crappy luck with a delayed flight. So there I was, waiting 30 hours in the lounge because my budget airline wanted to play ‘Let’s See How Many Passengers Prefer to Walk’. Blonde-haired obviously-non-Malaysian passenger was talking about her upcoming cross-peninsular tour. Being the eaves-dropping Jason Bourne wannabe, I overheard her utter a supreme blasphemy, “I think Kuala Lumpur could be a more exciting place than Penang.”

Good heavens! I nearly spit out my mushroom soup at Michael Phelps’ face on the TV screen! The horror.

Anyway, here’s why I think she should’ve read the sign at any Malaysian airport that says, “Penang, On Its Worst Day, Beats Kuala Lumpur Hands-Down In Any Most-Exciting-City Contest”.

Cars and Weather

First, the traffic.

In Penang you need barely 5 minutes to drive around (literally *around*) the city. In KL, by the time you drive from Istana Negara to Jalan Bukit Bintang, you could’ve switched 5 jobs. In Penang, only a state funeral or a pink moon will bring out traffic policemen. In KL, policemen double up as traffic lights and Ghost-Riders escorts for huge black cars with very important people on whose schedule the fate of national security depends i.e. if these vehicles *slow down* for even two seconds the Malaysian sky may fold in on itself, like in the trailer for *Doctor Strange*.

Bizarrely enough, I’ve been in Penang quite a number of times, I’ve never had a policeman tell me to make a left turn (and ruin my entire route) just because a guy in a suit has to be somewhere. (By the way, every time a cop in KL tells me to do that, I always oblige because I’m very sure the passenger in the back seat of the many-flagged car has something extremely important to do like, I dunno, defuse a bomb or deliver a baby or, like I said, stop the sky from falling?)

My point is, in Penang, even if Typhoon Dora hits and your car battery’s dead and all the buses have stopped running, you would still get to your office in Georgetown quicker than if you worked in KL and you lived in the same building as your office.

Second, the weather. In Penang, you’ve got fresh sea air and the beach is pretty damn close by. You’ve also got mountains and if you’re really depressed, you can swim to Sumatra.

In KL, every breath you take includes hot air from air-con compressors and the only beaches available are fake ones in water-parks or ‘beach clubs’ i.e. tourist and yuppie fly-traps where you pay RM50 for a Coke and if you ever other anything even remotely resembling ‘Western food’, you better eat r-e-a-l-l-y SLOW to make up for the arm and leg you had to give up.

The Food

Third, like *Yang Amat Mulia* Michael Jackson said: **This is it**. This is the crux, ladies and gents. Food and more food. Even if by other criteria KL is a Dubai 7-star skyscraping hotel and Penang is the heart of the Jinjang landfill, the island-state would still be better off due to this factor *alone*.

To even *begin* to compare Penang’s tastes with KL’s is to commit cultural suicide. That tourist or whatever should’ve known that Malaysians can have their passport revoked for even *considering* the possibility that KL food holds even an imaginary candle to Penang’s. Give a starving prisoner one bite of Penang fried oysters, then tell him the next dish is a KL specialty, he’ll throw the dish in your face and file an official complaint to the United Nations.

On Thursday I had two bowls of prawn noodles (termed *Hokkien Mee* in Penang) at this stall which named itself ‘888’. That’s two gorgeous mega-helpings bowls in ten minutes. Why? Because the voice of the Kitchen God was forcing me to. Because if I didn’t order that second bowl, I would’ve had to run naked around Komtar as an expression of the injustice of existence itself.

But Hokkien Mee isn’t only thing you’d willingly trade your soul for. There’s also *Char Kuey Teow*

which is French for “Don’t Think - Just Chew, Swallow and You Can Die Happy”. There’s *Nasi Kandar* which is Spanish for “Shut up and eat everything on your plate, and if it’s too spicy just shut up and eat some more.” Fyi, Penang is ground-zero for nasi kandar; this means that every two weeks all the nasi kandar sellers from KL make a trip to the island to *kowtow* thirty times before the master of their universe, failing which the Angel of Death will descend upon KL and transform all the nasi kandar in the Federal Territories into grub that even Singaporeans will reject.

Then there’s the galaxy-famous *cendol* in that alley which, on some occasions, can produce a queue so long even the Thai border authorities start getting concerned. This cendol-seller is living-eating proof that food is art, and one of his cendol bowls better hang in the Louvre really fast lest the Mona Lisa starts to weep tears like green worms and calling for more ice and jagung.

Note to anyone reading this who doesn’t know what *cendol* is: It’s the stuff that every Olympic gold-medal winner drinks before they show the silver-medalists who’s boss.

One of my personal favorites is this dish called *Kueh Kak*. This is carrot cake for the uninformed, but way different from that RM500-a-bite crap you get in Starbucks. Unlike that cosmopolitan what’s-the-wifi-password nonsense, Kueh Kak is fried to obscene perfection and served with goodies like taugh, eggs and world peace.

There’s this uncle selling it near the ferry terminal, and he’s been frying the stuff since the Dutch invaded; when he cooks even God takes notes. Every time I visit him, I buy four huge packets and I refuse to share - because who needs ethical behavior when you’ve reached heaven?



Anyway, I wanted to tell the tourist that when you visit KL, every other food stall will have the word ‘PENANG’ in their poster or menu. ‘Penang Chow Kuey Teow’, ‘Penang Prawn Mee’, ‘Penang Government’, etc. It’s like Malaysia’s capital pays homage to the island-state because should it *not*, people will stop eating hawker food and spend all their money at KFC instead.

However, the reverse doesn’t apply in Penang. You will absolutely NOT see any Penang food-seller advertise their dishes by citing ‘KUALA LUMPUR’ as their origins. You will absolutely NOT see the

sign 'KL Wantan Mee' or 'KL Beef Noodles' – to do this in Penang would be to perform professional *kamikaze*. Even the stray cats will be jumping ship and leaving shitty comments in TripAdvisor.

Bottom line: The food in Penang makes the food in KL look like glorified leftovers for the tenants at the Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

And if any tourist brochure tells you there's anything more exciting in the country than food? You're in the wrong country.

****Mic drop**.**

The 5 Laws of Chinese Wedding Dinners

So, your great granddad was from China, you're getting married and you have to book a *makan* place so your extended family (and *their* extended families) all get to join the celebrations, right? And it has to be a *Chinese* restaurant (replete with round tables and red tablecloths, etc.) because if not you'll be renounced by your immediate family, correct? And now you're panicking because you're a millennial and you forgot the 'rules' your ancestors have lived by for the past five thousand years?

Okay, no problem. Here are five non-negotiable laws of Chinese wedding dinners which, if kept properly, will ensure minimal confusion and terror on the evening itself:

Law 1 - You shall never start on time.

Look, if you start even four hours after the officially stated time on the wedding invitation, you'd be insulting the entire Chinese community and the entire history of China. No, you must absolutely wait at least a full working day after the last guests have arrived before giving the cue to the restaurant folks to unleash Course #1 which usually comes out accompanied by music which Darth Vader could march to, and is usually some climatologically challenged dish called 7 or 8 Seasons.



If you start the dinner on time, you'd be insulting the entire Chinese community – Photo by Pax Tan. Why, then, do new couples keep printing cards stating that 'Dinner will start at 7pm *sharp*' or something to that effect? There are only a few possibilities:

- They are trying to transform Chinese culture – might as well throw ice cubes at the sun to cool it down
- They are assessing the guests' grasp of Chinese culture – because with negative Western influences telling us to be 'on time' and all that nonsense, you never know when a good test may be appropriate
- They are pranking the non-Chinese guests, especially the Mat Sallehs – isn't it funny to see people come 'on time' then wait for another 7 hours before dinner starts?
- Restaurants are getting desperate, having lots of trouble opening till 4am and so they've been colluding with card-printers to slip in these 'reminders', etc.

Law #2 - You shall never mention that guests must pay.

This one is critical. You can never ever say that your beloved guests must do something as unheard of and uncivilized as actually pay for their own food. To even hint otherwise will be a violation of the very rules of the universe which erected the Great Wall. This is a *Chinese* dinner– not a Dutch one.

Yes yes yes EVERYBODY knows that the passport into the dinner hall involves a packet (usually red in color but gold is acceptable, too – don't use a black or white envelope or there's a chance your house could be specifically targeted by a Ming Dynasty asteroid) containing an amount which covers the cost of the meal for the number of guests in one's entourage. But no no no NOBODY from the families of the couple involved must mention this fact.

I repeat: Nobody on the side of the engaged couple must ever use the phrase 'ang pow' in connection with the wedding dinner, or at least not until two hours after the event has ended and all the guests have driven out of the car park.

It's like some Egyptian Mummy curse; if you even so much as *think* that your guests must contribute to the RM900-RM2,000 cost per table (see Note 1), the wedding will be cancelled and the couple be forced into exile and disgrace for the rest of their waking life.

In fact, if you're the dad of the groom and you're kidnapped and a gun's put to your head and your captor asks, "How much must your guests put into each ang-pow for the wedding dinner?! Tell me now or I'll blow your head off!!", **the only acceptable answer** you can give is, "Don't worry! No need to pay! It's free!"

And if you're kidnapped again *after* the dinner and the same fella puts the same gun to your head and demands to know, "If the dinner was free for all guests, a) why on earth did you NOT put a big sign outside stating this and b) why did you accept all the ang-pows' people gave you?! Huh?? Answer me now or I'll splatter your brains on the wall!", the only culturally respecting answer you can provide is, "Aiya...not that I want to take the money, but people give ang-pow it's not polite to decline mah! People give you must take lor!"

Law #3 - If you're a guest, the food is perfect (and nobody takes the last bite)

Not only perfect, but totally the best meal you've tasted in the whole wide world EVER (or, uh, since the last wedding dinner). From the prelude peanuts to the sweet stuff at the end, everything on the table is a gift from the Kitchen God and *that* dude only offers the best the celestial heavens can impart to earth.

It don't matter if the chicken still has feathers on it, if the pretend-sharks' fins' soup is really starch with water, if the prawns taste less like butter-fried prawn and more like butter-fried butter – during the 2.5 hours you spend in the restaurant, the food is perfection personified. God himself cooked it – so there.

[But what if the food is *marginally* below supreme excellence? What if the abalone is an *inch* in width less than what the angels decreed must be the perfect width of stir-fried sea-loving slugs? Well, there's only one acceptable place to *very* reluctantly lodge a *minor* complaint to the food gods: ***In the car*** after you've driven out of the parking lot].

Also, please remember: No matter how gorgeous each and every bite is and no matter how much shame it piles on your mum's best home-cooking, nobody – and I mean *nobody* – is allowed to take the last helping on the table.

That final chicken wing (it's always a wing)? Sacrosanct.

That last prawn? Untouchable.

Most critically, that final bowl of crypto-shark-fin's soup or eco-friendly soup-which-somehow-looks-like-sharks'-fin? Absolutely consecrated unto the holy of holies. Whoever touches that will be instantly

annihilated into ashes and blown to the four corners of the world, their souls forced to walk the dark road of shame and judgment.

Law #3A - There shall be shouting

The proof that Chinese tradition is dying is not in the fact that many Chinese folks today can't read or speak the language, or that Chinese opera can only be seen as *backdrops* for kungfu movies, or that not a single person in Malaysia have the slightest clue about Chinese art, or that some Chinese folks are surprised the fourth law is named 'Law 3A'.



No, the death of Chinese culture lies in the fact that people can still talk after participating in the gala moment of the dinner: The Yam Seng cum toasting ceremony.

Nobody even knows why a thousand people need to raise their glasses and scream their heads off using two syllables which sound like barbarians charging to war – and nobody cares. My best guess is that, like firecrackers and lion-dancing, silence means that evil has won and so there had *better* be noise as loud as a million thunders or, heck, nobody leaves the restaurant.

Ideally all guests are supposed to swallow a gallon of liquor each, the alcoholic percentage of which should be enough to launch Apollo 13 out of orbit should it catch fire, but not before shrieking YAMMMMMMM SENNNGGGGG to the heavens (or the stage in front). If your larynx doesn't explode, you're clearly doing it wrong.

But, sigh, no.

Nowadays, we have people drinking sissy-ass Chinese tea or 'house wine' or Coke or Sprite or (for some reason) Mirinda *Orange* (it's never Strawberry) and—blasphemy of blasphemies!—**lip-syncing** their way through the *yam seng* i.e. no actual sound coming out, just the mouths making 'yam' and 'seng' shapes. Such an offense is akin to visiting your Chinese in-laws for dinner, grabbing the soya sauce and pouring it on your mum-in-law's cooking.

That's the reason the Chinese invented water torture.

Law #5 – Book the dinner reservations way in advance.

As in, you're getting hitched in 2022? Get a time machine, go back to 2012 and book the restaurant. Enjoy the dinner.

And congratulations.

Note 1: Nobody's even surprised by the numbers, right? With these kinds of dinner packages, even the mafia's going, hey, we should skip running casinos and just open Chinese restaurants instead?

The Case for Caning Children

“I wanna kiss you all the time, but I will test that butt if you cut outta line” ~
Will Smith (Just The 2 Of Us)

First, yes, I’m desperately trying to win the Malaysia’s-Most-Beloved-Parent Contest. My popularity index fell lately and I can’t wait to pull it back up. Secondly, no, I don’t always hang my children by meat-hooks and use horsewhips on them each time they fail to bring back a report card dripping with Distinctions. Once in a while but not always.

Third, this is not an article *encouraging* parents to go Mike Tyson on their kids whenever they feel like it. It’s just that I haven’t read too many articles in favor of using the cane. Either a) every writer is against caning or b) those in favor are scared of saying they are. Knowing us Malaysians, most likely (b).

Fourth, as I see it, banning corporal punishment to raise better children is like outlawing *Dumb & Dumber* to produce smarter adults. The road from child to teen to young adult is a complex, multi-faceted affair hardly reducible to caning. For the latter to receive so much attention is like blaming the drop in *nasi lemak* quality solely on the *ikan bilis*. Indeed, judging from the way some writers write? It’s almost as if the mere act of eliminating the cane produces a generation of super disciplined and productive youngsters. That’s so messed up even Ridhuan Tee would label it extremist.

So let’s cut straight to the arguments against caning and see if they hold water. Most of the below are taken from articles written by Ko Teik Yen (Principal of Academy of Asian Parenting)¹⁴ but it’s quite representative of the anti-caning school of thought. Here we go:

1. “Caning children is wrong because we do not cane adults if they missed deadlines, so how can it be acceptable to hit children for misconduct?”

This sounds intuitively persuasive, but there is a wrong analogy embedded here. The sheer difference between adults and children is simply, uh, smacked away?

We don’t ask adults to hold hands when they visit the Science Center – does that mean we shouldn’t ask children to do so as well? We seek to control children’s ice-cream intake (e.g. not more than two scoops at any meal), does this mean we should do the same for adults?

This is almost like saying that since we have toilets for Male and Female, why not have malls exclusively for Chinese, Indian or Malay?

The truth is even adults get punished or disciplined when they go off-track at work. But just as children cannot be ‘cold-storaged’ or fired, adults don’t usually get a ruler tap on their palms. Not quite rocket science, right? The key issue is whether or not caning children helps them with internalizing right and wrong. My straight-forward answer is: Sure it does.

But not all agree, as per below...

2. “Caning children is not an effective disciplinary tool - if it works why keep doing it?”

This objection is even more bizarre. Are the anti-caners suggesting that if a method doesn’t work the first few times, we should dump it? In that case, why not do away entirely with reading, with forgiveness, with sales calls, with marriage, with cooking, etc.?

Some people also claim that spanking may secure immediate compliance, but it does not convince the child not to repeat his/her misbehavior. My instinctive response was, where in the name of Rotan can we find a method which produces immediate 110% compliance on the spot for *all* cases?

Every parent on earth and out of earth will tell you that speaking gently to a child doesn’t always produce the results hoped for – what then? Stop speaking gently?

¹⁴ Click on <https://www.malaymail.com/what-you-think/article/caning-our-kids-a-letter-to-parents-and-teachers-ko-teik-yen> for Ko’s article.

There is also the concern that caning makes the child feel like a bad and lousy person. Well, gee, for some children simply being TOLD not to do something or being REFUSED a brand-new toy makes them feel like a 'bad and lousy person'. Should we simply give in to what the kids want every time? I mean, since it's such a tragedy if our kids don't feel like 'great and fabulous' people all the time?

Discipline itself is unpleasant. The problem isn't the disciplining - it's the one being disciplined. Duh.

3. "Caning children is wrong because violence begets violence; children will grow up to become abusive adults"

True but irrelevant, especially if :

- a) the caning is 'light' (most of the time)
- b) it's accompanied by firm instruction and explanation of why Daddy is smacking your butt and
- c) if children are likewise reprimanded for using violence on other children, etc.

This kind of argument effectively ignores how *millions* of adults who have been caned when they were young do NOT go around thumping their colleagues on the head. I'm reminded of the backlash against 'violent' video games i.e. if I spend five hours blowing up virtual buildings with my virtual fire-bombs then, gasp, maybe I'm more prone to become the next Unabomber. C'mon, seriously?

(Okay okay, I confess I *sometimes* feel like slapping a co-workers' stupid grin off his equally dumb face but, hey, I insist this is nothing to do with me being caned in the past; it's more of me over-watching Jackie Chan films. But I digress...)

A related concern with 'light' caning is that it always leads to 'heavy' caning. On this perspective, parents should reject even the mild use of punishment because this can easily get out of hand.

Notice a classic slippery-slope fallacy here. By extension we should ban cars since drivers can easily go berserk and speed at 300Km/h in the city. And why not ban sweets since this can lead to diabetes? A similar mistake occurs in the next argument...

4. "Caning children can scar them emotionally for life"

Sure. And so can school exams, unfaithful boyfriends, watching Tottenham concede last-minute goals, and being laughed at because we forgot to put gel on our hair. Nevertheless, we don't stop going to school, we don't refuse falling in love, we don't quit enjoying football and we don't adopt Einstein's hairstyle simply because there is a risk of being very disappointed. Neither do we question the virtue of family and friendships simply because those who love us are also the ones who can hurt us the most.

Indeed, a popular technique of the anti-caning school is to employ rhetoric and worst-case scenarios to paint corporal punishment is the worst possible light. One of Ko's paragraphs illustrates this best:

"When adults use hitting or violence to teach their children, we see an unsecured oversized child who are frightened of its own shadow, resorting to the most primitive way of dealing with 'perceived' threat to their own position and authority rather than helping, guiding and inspiring our future generation to grow up to be who they truly are."

I don't know if Ko realizes it or not, but he's talking about abused children, not caned children. Conflating the two only makes his argument sound nonsensical. This is especially so given the many *thousands* of people whose backsides have been *hentam*-ed kow-kow by their folks without any long-term scarring.

The fundamental question is: Is there any value in caning? I think an honest tradition-respecting answer will be: Yes, there is. Notwithstanding abuse and cruelty, caning can lead to higher levels of discipline and character formation than not. And this is a practice that has been applied *with love and care* by millions of families across time and space. Furthermore, at least two world religions sanction it.

Life is not at all about living from one pleasant feeling to another, neither should it be about running away from risky psychological events. I fully understand if parents wish to protect their kids from emotional scars, sure, but *over*-protection is also a danger.

Indeed, there is a growing consensus that the occasional *stressor* is necessary to build character, strength and so on. Light or mild caning can provide this hiatus from the comfy life of nothing but You're-So-Awesome, 'Atta-Boy!' 24/7 encouragement and painless living.

Like how fasting can make the body healthier, *some* psychological/physical discomfort may be worth it. Children can be (gradually, carefully) exposed to the fact that sore discipline is an appropriate consequence of in-discipline.

In general, tradition and experience support the practice of caning children with the intention that they will become better persons. As 'simple' as that.

Conclusion: If we wish to outlaw caning, we should have a lot more evidence and much better arguments than presently supplied.

RED PRAWN: PANDEMIC

Are You Still Using Flu Analogies For Covid-19?

So many Malaysians continue to “not worry” about Covid-19¹⁵ by saying things like, “Oh, c’mon la, flu also kill thousands of people – why don’t you panic? Dengue also dangerous mah, don’t go out la! Car accidents also banyak, so stop driving la!”

There are some severe errors with comparing the flu with Covid-19. To list just a few: We have vaccines for flu, but not Covid-19. Some people have temporary immunity from flu, but at present there is no immunity from Covid-19. Most importantly, if your elderly loved one gets the flu, chances are pretty good he or she won’t even need to masuk ICU; but if they contract Covid-19, you better start praying. Hard.

Essentially, Covid-19 is an Unknown and in the face of an Unknown, the responsible response is to heighten our alertness and **err on the side of caution** if necessary.

Example, if you’re a parent taking your kids to the mall, one of the (obviously) best commandments you can give your child is to Never Follow Strangers. This directive, as we all know, is 120% non-negotiable. We never say to our children, oh, if the stranger looks friendly or polite or kind, then it’s okay to follow her. We just say *Never follow strangers*. Period.

Because in such a high-stakes context, ‘paranoiac’ caution is critical.

However, the most important reason why you cannot ‘brush off’ Covid-19 by talking about the flu is because our country’s medical system has already ‘factored in’ flu incidents—but Covid-19 is something which our health infrastructure is not prepared for. Imagine if, overnight, a few hundred (or even thousands) of people suddenly being admitted for Covid-19. Even if a majority of them survive (and, thank God, they probably will) think about the ***fresh crushing weight of all these new patients on the existing load of medical requirements***.

Notice I haven’t even discussed the death rate yet. At 4% mortality, if even a *fifth* of Malaysia’s 31 million population kena the virus, that’s 6.2 million people affected and thus **potentially almost 250,000 dead**. Let that sink in.

Systematic vs Idiosyncratic Risk

So that’s the flu. What about comparing Covid-19 to car crashes and dengue? The chances of dying in a road accident or being killed by an aedes mosquito is ‘almost as high if not higher’ than Covid-19, so why don’t we panic?

Two quick responses. The first, again, is that in cases like dengue it’s already a Known. So granted we still must be careful to empty our pails in the garden, at the very least our hospitals are not going to be overwhelmed.

But the most important reason we can’t compare Covid-19 and things like car crashes is because this new virus constitutes a **systematic risk**, whereas a car crash is what’s known as an **idiosyncratic risk**. A systematic risk is something which, as per its name, threatens to pervade the *entire* system. Like the global market system. A crash at the London Stock Exchange threatens every other stock market. A political crisis in Penang cannot be ignored by the people in KL. These are systematic risks.

On the other hand, an idiosyncratic risk is when one incident has minimal or zero effect on another. Two cars slamming into each other in Klang isn’t going to cause another car to crash into one in Melaka. Likewise, if someone gets dengue in SS2 that doesn’t much contribute to the likelihood that someone in Wangsa Maju will get dengue. In other words, idiosyncratic risk is *isolated* risk.

Covid-19, on the other hand, is 100% systematic risk. The spear and scale of transmission is frightening. If someone in a mall near you has confirmed being infected, that *de facto* means that the chances of you

¹⁵ This was published in March 2020, when many Malaysians continued to believe that Covid-19 was no more dangerous than the common flu.

being infected has risen.

And this is why schools and other public places must be shut down immediately. Because it's not so much that "children aren't that vulnerable to the virus", it is that *when even one healthy person gets it, it will raise the probability of an unhealthy or elderly person getting it*. Ergo, systematic risk.

Let's not continue to be in denial. Covid-19 is hitting our society hard, but it is only *as a society* that we can contain and defeat it.

3 Ways Malaysians Can Respond Faster in High-Impact Scenarios

I hope by now most Malaysians would agree that this “movement restriction” slash quasi-lockdown slash closure-of-almost-everything should’ve happened earlier—much earlier, at least a week or two in advance if not in late Feb itself. Compared to countries like Vietnam, Kuwait, Denmark, etc. Malaysia really does exemplify the title of that Def Leppard song, “Two Steps Behind”.

What follows are thus three principles I hope all of us can remember in order that future national crisis scenarios (or even potential emergencies within your organization) can be addressed earlier:

1 – Think Consequences, Not “Probabilities”

Undoubtedly the #1 reason why most Malaysians remained complacent even in early March (and despite all the news coming from China, Italy and so on) is because we *did not believe* we could get infected. We saw the “low probability” of contracting the virus and, coupled with some pretty bad conceptualization of systematic risk, simply decided that we still had lots of time, there was “no need to panic” and so on.

But this is a mistake for one simple reason: **In a high-impact scenario, you must throw probability out the window.**

You buy house insurance not because of the ‘low probability’ of a fire happening, but because of the severe consequences of your place burning down. You wear seatbelts not because of the ‘low probability’ of another car hitting you, but because *if you don’t and a car does* you may break your neck. You never allow your small child to follow strangers at the mall not because it is ‘unlikely’ that a stranger at any one time will kidnap your child, but because you fully understand the irreversibility of your child being taken away.

Same thing with C19.

What very few people saw (and what many ignored) was the magnitude of suffering should any of our elderly friends or colleagues get infected. This—when coupled with the additional burdens to our healthcare infrastructure (so ‘obvious’ now but almost entirely dismissed even in early March)—drove a small group of people to repeatedly call for business and school closures and an early lockdown. They stopped caring about ‘probabilities’ and called for the right thing to be done.

Therefore, always think impact impact *impact*. And stop debating about odds (even privately, let alone in public).

2 – Use the “Less Is More” Principle for News and Information

Another thing which fueled our complacency and false optimism, ironically, was all the data and information we were receiving.

I have lost count how many times people said, “Oh, well, the outbreak is confined mainly to those who were at the Sri Petaling mosque” or “Don’t worry, the numbers in our state are still low” or “Relax la, the virus isn’t as strong in hot-weather countries like Malaysia,” or “Hey it looks like the virus is less severe on youths”, etc.

Such an attitude ignores the fact that for low-impact scenarios (where nothing really important is at stake) you can be right or wrong, it’s almost irrelevant. But for high-impact scenarios, you can be right many times it will not matter—***but if you’re wrong even ONCE***, the game is up.

Hence, the responsible thing to do is IGNORE news or information which tempts us to feel ‘good’ and ‘safe’, whilst blind-siding us to an iceberg which could be just around the corner.

Do you remember the turkeys a few weeks before Thanksgiving Day? Farmers kept feeding them well, they were getting fatter and fatter, and life was good i.e. all the data was positive...until it wasn’t.

Ditto those drivers along the North-South highway who believe they’re Malaysian Vin Diesels’ going at north of 160 KM per hour, zipping in and out of lanes like they’re chasing down terrorists. I know one

or two. Whenever they are told to please drive more carefully, their response is usually along the lines of, “Hey, look, I’ve been driving this way for years, not a single accident.”

These speed demons kept looking at the wrong ‘data’ and, thus, will one day not be able to look at any more data.

So one tip for the future: For potentially catastrophic situations, assign 1-2 people in your organization (those who have a knack for sniffing out complacency which threatens survival) to screen out news and information most pertinent to decision-making, given the risks. Let *them* decide which information the leaders must take into account.

3 – Focus more on the UNKNOWN than the Known

This principle basically encapsulates the first two. A person strongly cognizant of risks and uncertainty (especially in the light of high-impact scenarios) will always be more mindful of what he doesn’t know than what he knows.

(It is ironic, therefore, that someone who felt I was over-reacting in early March 2020 actually asked me what it was that I ‘knew’ which everybody didn’t; it’s precisely the other way round).

A fundamental problem today is people who know too much, have numerous MBAs’, have watched a million TED talks, read so many books, all of which results in a view of reality limited by whatever they think they know *whilst remaining oblivious to the danger emanating from what they can’t imagine they don’t know*.

It’s like a kid with a new bike who thinks he’s watched enough YouTube videos such that he believes he knows how to handle speeding down a hill. He would most probably ignore his mum, who hasn’t seen a single vid about cycling, but who nevertheless is smart enough to say Please Don’t Accelerate Down A Steep Slope.

The kid relied on his oh-so-amazing Knowns; his mum on the Unknown. Who do you think is more ‘rational’?

This folly demonstrated itself so clearly in Britain’s early handling of the C19 pandemic, where they hoped to create ‘herd immunity’ by allowing thousands (or was it millions?) of their population to be infected. The British government and the ‘experts’ in the National Health Services used this algorithm, that formula, this recovery rate, that death rate, this infection rate and concluded that—voilà!—this plan is good and the risks are ‘manageable’.

I tell you now, **the aged aunty in my apartment who began cancelling her line-dancing classes in early March had more rational good sense than the entire UK Cabinet did**—despite “knowing” much less.

Conclusion: Always prioritize safety and caution above what you think you know. When life and death is at stake, forget the smart-alec MBA who’s still debating “pros and cons”. Listen to the cleaning lady who says Act Now.

Stay safe, everyone.

From 'R0' to 'k': Applying the 80/20
Principle in Addressing Covid-19

Pop quiz: Which is more dangerous for the country? Option A, ten malls recording a few positive Covid-19 cases each or option B, a cluster with 30-40 pax infected?

Most Malaysians don't see a difference. Most of us (at least the public, not sure about the government) react similarly to news of KLCC Suria being infected with one person as with news about three dozen being infected from some gathering in Kedah. In fact, some will even claim that multiple malls being infected is a worse-off situation than a cluster.

But I want to suggest today that Option B is way more important than Option A (and since our 'emo' reserves are limited, we should channel most of our concern towards clusters rather than the one-off case in a popular hotspot). This is relevant not just because our evaluations of the relative seriousness of any particular scenario affect the national 'mood' (and thus solutions) towards the pandemic, but because understanding why also helps shed light on many other areas in life.

So why is Option B more serious than Option A? Why should all of us, according to this view I'm presenting, be less concerned about 1-2 cases breaking out in 1 Utama than, say, the discovery of a new cluster in Tropicana Golf Resort?

Our present way of tracking the infectivity level of Covid-19 is to use the by now popular R_0 (pronounced R-naught). This measures the *average number of new cases* that one case will create. However, some researchers are now suggesting that the critical number we should be looking at is 'k' i.e. the measure of the virus' dispersion.

In a particular country or location, is Covid-19 spreading in small steady increments or in large sudden bursts? Almost every piece of research suggests that it's the latter i.e. **this virus does NOT follow some steady 'straight-line' path of progress. Instead it grows in unpredictable jumps and spurts.**

Thing is, if you're looking at ' R_0 ' your focus will be on the average...*and the average is always tied to linearity*. Yes, you'll get a 'picture' but that picture won't fit reality very well. On the other hand, if you look at 'k', your attention will be on the variability and the extremes, which is precisely what the experts are saying the spread of Covid-19 looks like.

Just like the famous Pareto Principle, a *majority* of infections are caused by a *minority* of spreaders. This is most obvious in the case of 'Patient 31' from South Korea who was the starting point of more than 5,000 cases in a megachurch cluster back in March. Closer to home, the Sivagangga case in Kedah shows us that a few individuals may carry with them high 'viral loads', even as Datuk Mohd Khairuddin Aman Razali's case (however unjustly and unfairly) shows that not everyone who breaks quarantine will create a cluster (see Note 1).

Likewise, as everybody knows, the Sabah clusters have ramped up our daily national average; and why our government didn't close off the airports much earlier is anybody's guess. Instead, because we didn't take the Sabah cluster as seriously as we should have (was it because the 'average' was still relatively low?), it has now led to movement control orders in KL and Selangor.

Malls Or Clusters?

My personal view, in light of the damaging effects the lockdown had on the economy, is to tighten and enforce the rules instead of mandating lockdowns. This is especially pertinent given the damaging effects lockdowns have on people's livelihoods. At the risk of sounding simplistic, just because a mall had one or two positive cases, that should NOT require closing it. Firm SOPs, sanitization, absolute social distancing and mask-wearing should suffice.

I know it's almost impossible to remove the feeling of fear if you discover Mall A had one positive case but, logically, *why would you feel safer in Mall B with no reported positive cases?* Are you sure the chances of being infected in Mall A are 'lower'? In fact, if Mall A is being sanitized and everyone's taking extra precaution and suddenly crowds are much smaller, shouldn't Mall A be a safer place than Mall B (to which more people may go to instead of Mall A!)?

A cluster, on the other hand, is already by definition a runaway train.

More and more people have already become infected, leading to a very strong likelihood of an outbreak. It would seem clear to me that the government should channel the bulk of their resources towards battling a cluster. Lockdowns and barricades should be used on super-spreader events; for ‘non-supe’ incidents, stricter SOPS’ and enforced rules, with some fortune, should result in lower or even zero numbers within a few days (e.g., a majority of those mall incidents did not lead to new clusters).

Again, we must treat the ‘majority’ 80% (clusters) different from the way we handle the minority 20% (one-off positive cases).

I’m not an expert but I believe I’m echoing what many experts around the world are saying (check out the articles in the ‘Further Reading’ list below). I’ve also done a brief comparison of ‘R0’ vs ‘k’ solutions. Whilst Malaysia’s methods certainly overlap, there are nevertheless some differences if we address the pandemic with ‘R0’ in mind as compared to thinking about ‘k’.

| | Tackling ‘R0’ (Average no. of people contracting disease from one person) | Tackling ‘k’ (Variability of the virus’ dispersion) |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Overall Strategy | Maintain a lower national average of daily cases via identification of <i>individuals</i> | Seek out and destroy clusters early via identification of transmission <i>events</i> |
| Contact Tracing | <i>Forward</i> tracing emphasized | <i>Backward</i> tracing emphasized, to locate source of infection. Forward tracing still used to check likelihood of a cluster appearing. |
| Lockdowns | National or state-wide lockdowns | Extremely localized or mini-lockdowns, targeting clusters or super-spreader locations. Rules enforcement more important than lockdowns. E.g., no more than 20-30 persons within a closed environment. |
| Public Behaviour | Staying Home is paramount. | Avoiding clusters is paramount. Use the 3Cs’ criteria to know what to stay away from: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Crowds2. Close Spaces3. Close Contact Naturally, staying home remains the safest option but the 3C criteria reduces the risk of going out, thereby mitigating damage to the economy. |

I wouldn’t pretend to be able to say anything new to the Ministry of Health regarding how to handle our country’s pandemic situation. I’m just somewhat concerned that googling turns up not a single instance of ‘k’ being discussed by Health Director-General Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah nor the Ministry of Health (see Note 2). Thus, I hope this piece generates more conversation about the relative importance of the unequal spread of the virus vis-à-vis the daily ‘positive cases’ everyone receives in WhatsApp around 6pm.

Like much of life itself, Covid-19 comes at us with a high degree of randomness. It’s almost like guerilla warfare. Needless to say, when we fight unpredictable insurgents—who don’t fight according to a fixed

schedule—we need to reduce one-size-fits-all approaches and start being, well, creative?

Note 1: To be very clear here, like almost every Malaysian, I am incensed that political leaders can break SOPs' with impunity. What Khairuddin did cannot be justified. The point of this article, though, is that thankfully not all irresponsible behavior produces disastrous consequences.

Note 2: My googling turned up just one result in which the 'k' indicator was discussed within the Malaysian context. It's an article by two pediatricians, Dr Musa Mohd Nordin and Dr Husna Musa from early October and it makes essentially the same argument I'm making here (albeit with more technical finesse).

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The (Cautious) Case Against Mask Mandates

Last week¹⁶, the Health Ministry dropped our mask mandates for outdoors, whilst retaining it indoors. Even though this decision appears like the worst of both worlds—the pro-mask camp claiming it puts us more at risk, the anti-mask one complaining about its half-heartedness—I think at the very least it can help in moving the discussion forward.

There's nothing like taking actual steps to get people thinking. As I suspect most people are familiar with the case for a mask mandate, I wish to be a little contrarian here by putting forth the opposite view.

It is interesting to note that the removal of masks mandates (in many places around the world) is occasioned by none other than the Omicron surge, in which hospitalizations and deaths have been decoupled from admittedly high positive test cases. Since masks are meant to prevent spread, if spread has no major impact on the healthcare system, it would make sense that 'preventing spread' is no longer a priority. This is the primary reason why many European countries and the United States are relaxing their restrictions and reopening of their borders.

Nevertheless, there remains many voices who believe that mask mandates are important.

I'm no scientist or epidemiologist but I'd like to summarize what many experts are saying about the case against mask mandates. Since Malaysia's vaccination rates are very high and we've already been hit with Omicron, I figure this is a good time to examine this issue closer.

The case *for* mask mandates, at first sight, appears intuitive.

With such a highly transmissible variant like Omicron, it only makes sense for everyone to be masked in order to better contain the virus. Masks appear even more critical for schools, as each school is potentially a super-spreader given how children like to play and gather in groups with minimal regard for social distancing. This could be even more urgent if one has an elderly or immuno-compromised member of the family whom the child goes back to.

This reasoning may sound airtight until we hear the case against forcing everyone to wear masks.

So, why are some health and medical experts claiming that mask mandates should be dropped?

First, at least in Malaysia, our mask mandates are 'violated' a million times a day in restaurants, cafes', salons, etc. Even if I take a very pro-mask position (and I confess I used to), I can't see how millions of people removing their masks to have their chicken rice doesn't render the mandates pretty much superfluous. This is almost like having a national lockdown which applies only on Mondays', Wednesdays' and Fridays'.

Secondly, the risk of vaccinated adults suffering serious illnesses from Covid-19 (let alone the Omicron strain) is very low. Once a person is fully vaxxed (see note 1), masks become even less necessary especially if the priority objective is to eradicate serious illnesses and sustain the healthcare system instead of 'flattening the curve'.

With children, the risk is even lower. Feel free to google this or check the World Health Organization website or ask any health expert of any persuasion. It's simply a statistical fact that people under twenty, let alone under twelve, are at an infinitesimal risk from Covid-19 even *before* being vaccinated (what more with two or three jabs)!

To reiterate an earlier point, the reason why mask mandates (and Covid restrictions in general) have been dropped (at least in Europe and the USA) is because **curve-flattening is no longer associated with saving the healthcare system**. Since Covid or Omicron has been 'priced into' the healthcare system, it would've become just like any other disease prior to 2020 i.e. no need for mandates or restrictions which affect the whole country.

But what about people who remain unvaxxed?

¹⁶ This article was written in early 2022, after a vast majority of Malaysian adults have been given three shots of the vaccine.

Well, clearly they will be at higher risks than vaxxed folks but, and I know this sounds tough, perhaps after all this time we should learn to respect their decision and accept the fact that they're willing to take that risk. This is even more possible now because when a majority of people have been vaccinated, the healthcare system is already 'safe'.

But what about the immuno-compromised or the elderly or those with co-morbidities who have been vaccinated but are still at risk?

This is, unfortunately, the kind of decision societies make all the time. Do we have to make policies which affect a majority of the population because of a minority? Sometimes the answer is Yes, sometimes it's No, hence the need for a lot of thinking. For this issue, given vaccines and the availability of more treatments for Covid-19 (dexamethasone, methylprednisolone, ibuprofen, etc.), do we still need to make millions of people wear masks indefinitely for the sake of the thousands? Would that truly be the most rational thing to do especially when not everybody uses N95 masks which is like the *only* one which stops Omicron?

To reiterate, these are not simple questions and dropping or upholding mask mandates is not an easy decision. Hence, and again, the importance of sound reasoning and debate. Because surely the last thing we wish to mandate is thinking itself.

Note 1: There's a lot of news about how the vaccines' effectiveness 'wane' over time. However, if you read up about "memory T and B cells" you'll discover that vaccines continue to offer protection against serious illness over time.

