



THE (NON) CITIZENS OF KOMTAR

Reflections on Migrant Worker Spaces and Expressions of Community and Agency

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A Komtar food spot, popular among foreign workers from Burma, showcases posters of famous icons including Pantera, the Beatles and Aung San Suu Kyi

It can be said that the spaces that migrants roam in somehow reflect the state of foreign workers in a given area, the conditions they face, and how they contend with these despite their limitations. Places such as Kota Raya in Malaysia, Lucky Plaza in Singapore and Victoria Park in Hong Kong provide an evolving spatial metaphor that captures everyday negotiated practices carried out by migrant workers as they make room for themselves in their host locales, straddle transnational realities and navigate through global disparities. In Penang, Malaysia, Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak (KOMTAR) accommodates a neatly compartmentalized tapestry of different worlds, converging in a shared, borrowed space. This space is shaped by local impetus, a national policy of containment and regulation, and localized transnational activity that speaks of family ties, nurturing communities, and relations across borders. It also consists of small, segmented pockets of 'deterritorialized nations' annexes of home, transplanted and tucked away in designated corners that migrants claim and maintain for their own uses.

Once envisioned as the premier shopping district in Penang, Komtar remains a landmark even after losing its luster as the local hub for leisure, entertainment and shopping. Over the years, as Malaysians opted for other more upscale shopping centers such as Gurney or Queensbay, the area evolved as a popular hangout for migrant workers from the Philippines, Burma, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, among other nationalities working in the state. Still a central location, which also contains government offices, a bus terminal, and the tallest building in Penang, Komtar today is also emerging as a globalized, ghettoized arena that provides space for non-Malaysian segments of the population living and working in the area.

A destination frequented by foreigners, but certainly not your typical tourist spot, this part of Komtar reveals a grimier side of the global, highlights the distinction between Malaysians and foreign workers, and demonstrates a general attitude towards migrant labor. There's a pronounced difference between local residents and migrant workers, even in the way they view Komtar. While foreign workers would say, "See you in Komtar, where else?" some Malaysians would ask me, "why do you keep going to Komtar? It's dangerous and dirty."

For sure, Komtar today hardly represents the gleaming, sprawling image flaunted by soaring structures that we would

associate with things global. The rundown main building has seen better days, where the corridors of shops that used to thrive with local business now sit empty and idle. Along some of these same aisles of previously abandoned commercial spaces, migrants have now set up shops, food stalls and other enterprises patronized by their growing communities. A deserted complex, revived and appropriated by migrants, Komtar now functions more than just a space for local commerce; it has gradually and inadvertently transformed into a transnational, multiethnic shared space with economic, social, cultural and political dimensions.

A Transnational Space for Globalization's Rank and File
Contrary to its reputation, a depiction blown up by reports of petty crime and theft, police busts and crackdowns, inside Komtar there is an implicit, well-organized order, where the zoning and containment stance toward migrant workers can somehow be gleaned from the placement of various sections that have been carved out by different migrant groupings. Hidden away in some awkward corners on the first level, the Nepalese canteen *Dewi Global Ganga* provides Nepalese utility workers and shop hands a place to meet, where they eat curry and momos, and enjoy drinks while listening to music from Kathmandu. Here, they



Nepalese utility workers and migrants frequent this small restaurant, which serves familiar dishes from "home."

spend their breaks, lunches, or days off, talking to compatriots in their mother tongue, reading the paper or even exchanging news from home. Up in the main building on the second level, the Burma section of Komtar houses an internet café, several small canteens and dry goods stores, a travel agency and a volunteer office. Many signs along the corridors are written out in their script, while the shops hang posters of popular stars and important icons from Burma, including Aung San Suu Kyi and her father. On the third floor, you find an Indonesian nook of satays and batiks, and then, on the next level the Filipino area, where along the rows of empty commercial spaces you find LBC, a remittance center, karaoke and dining places, a Filipino products store, and a Filipino-run internet café.

While groups largely keep to themselves, they do have a sense where the others are, with the layout perhaps implying an acknowledged unspoken order. It's sort of a systematized smorgasbord of various things Asian—where one can find *batik*, *bagoong* and Burmese publications offering the latest news on Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, among other things, a hidden dimension of what makes "Malaysia truly Asia" as the country continues to draw in successive streams of migration. Although still not a widely recognized focal point such as the Chinatowns or Little Indias elsewhere, once you enter and walk around, it becomes more and more obvious you are stepping into a space that is not only regional but also clearly transnational, where interactions that traverse borders are carried out and sustained; where globalization's rank and file retreats and congregates.

Malaysia's Migration Regime

Many of today's Komtar 'regulars' are minorities and transients—including the migrant laborer, as well as the occasional 'tourist' and 'overstayer', the runaway, the UNHCR card holder, the undocumented, 'paperless' (*walang papel*) and 'illegals', among oth-

er subjects in the Malaysian migration milieu. All these people inhabit the in-between spaces that lie within those two poles, comprising of the citizen on one end, and the *non-citizen*, on the other.

In Malaysia, it is estimated that 1 out of 4 workers is *pekerja asing*, a migrant worker. According to the Immigration Office, 1.649 Million foreign workers were issued with working permits in 2010 (as of November). They work in manufacturing (39%), plantations (14.9%), in construction sites (13.9%), in services (9.5%), agriculture (9%) and households (13.8%). Documented foreign workers mainly come from various parts of Asia—Indonesia (43%), Bangladesh (18.2%), Nepal (13.7%) Myanmar (8.8%), India (5.2%), Vietnam (2.8%), Pakistan (1.6%), Philippines (1.8%), Cambodia (2.7%), and others (1.8%). On top of this huge number of registered workers, there are also an estimated 2 million irregular workers, in effect, doubling the size of the foreign worker population.

In Penang, data coming from the Immigration Department shows 126,135 registered foreign workers in 2010, flowing in from Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Philippines, Thailand, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, all primarily employed as laborers in factories, shop hands in the service sector and domestic workers in households.

Undervalued, Neglected, Invisible

Despite their large, ever growing numbers, and Malaysia's apparent reliance on them, foreign laborers generally remain undervalued, neglected, and invisible. Marked as non-citizens of Malaysia, accorded limited rights and entitlements, and relegated to a transitory and peripheral location in a larger sociopolitical space, many of Malaysia's migrant workers are constructed as mere visiting, laboring bodies. They are tied to their employers and bound to their jobs by virtue of work permits that specifical-



A lorry for transporting arrested migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur presents a familiar and stark image associated with the Malaysian migration regime, known for its raids, check points and crack downs on undocumented foreigners.

ly indicate the name of their employer, their sector and industry, along with practically absolute discretion of employers to grant or cancel these documents. The unevenness of this scheme is pointed out by one worker who told me, "they can dictate and change the terms of employment, pick and sack workers as they please, but we cannot choose employers or simply leave even when we are clearly disadvantaged."

Depicted as rigid and overly regulated, Malaysia's migrant worker regime has been described as resembling conditions of indentured work, where foreign workers are essentially thrust into a form of bonded labor conveniently enshrined in law. For this multitude of 'low-skilled' foreign workers, their non-citizenship (that which limits their recognition and equal access to rights, protection, services and entitlements), prohibits them from having a say on the terms of their stay and work conditions, decrees their subjection to heavier regulation and also constitutes them as 'valuable' workers, justifying lower wages, longer work hours, restricted mobility, harsh working conditions and poor living situations.

While workers concede that they came to Malaysia "to work," some will also express that their situation is "*parang walang laya*" (it's like we don't have freedom), working "as if we were slaves from old times". Traveling far in search of employment, many foreign workers contend with restricted movement and freedoms upon arrival, confined to their workplaces and employer-managed living spaces, thrust into a position where they are practically isolated from others and heavily dependent on employers, many of whom would not hesitate to take their workers' passports or threaten them with deportation to keep them passive and compliant. Disciplined to docility by a combination of intimidation, desperation and isolation, many workers consequently find themselves in a situation that also renders them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation within the workplace and beyond.

An Agora for Workers in Diaspora

Contending with the restrictions and regulations of non-citizenship outside, in Komtar, migrants appear to reclaim a sense of citizenship and agency. Here, they are not mere workers stripped of their identities, treated as cogs in manufacturing assembly lines or servants in shops and households. In this space, they are also Filipinos or Burmese or Nepalese, and not simply the Other, an imposed categorization whereby Filipino means 'maid' and Burmese means 'illegal'. Here, they are customers consuming their choice products; they are caring family members sending home their hard earned pay; they are compatriots and friends taking part in celebrating successes; extending sympathy and support; and exchanging opinions about their day-to-day travails or chronic "national issues".

Within the vicinity of Komtar, workers come to send money back home through remittance centers. They purchase goods from shops that sell an assortment of medicine, food items, toiletries, reading materials and other products imported from their countries of origin. They come to eat in the small canteens that offer 'home-style' meals reminiscent of shared dishes from their own villages and towns. They surf the net and chat, link up with their families and friends left behind, through Facebook and Yahoo. They get their hair, brows and nails done, pamper themselves with foot and back massages, rejuvenating for another week of non-stop work. They take part in broad-daylight, 2 pm 'disco,' squeezing in some fun before their 7 pm curfew. They throw parties to celebrate a birthday, or on days off, drink and listen to music or sing karaoke. They practice presentations for church, plan activities, prepare decorations and post announcements, updates and invitations, all of which bear the imprint of an emerging sense of community.

While migrant workers can be seen as appropriating unwanted spaces, which locals normally snub for being "dangerous and

dirty," migrants are nonetheless constantly reminded of their place, even in this area. Komtar landscape is also associated with almost regular raids and a fixed police and surveillance presence; whereby migrant workers status and 'place' is essentially drilled in by crackdowns, round ups and other threats and disruptions posed. The message to migrants that they are only passing through, only here to work and not permitted to settle, still echoes in the halls of Komtar. As such, this side of town tends to resonate with some kind of underground tag, also coinciding with an almost-blanket construction of migrants as *undesirables and illegals*. This in turn is used to justify (and perpetuate) the treatment they receive and the limited rights and freedoms they are given.

Nonetheless, the shop owners, mostly long-time residents and foreign spouses, would allude to a greater rationale for their enterprises, imputing added meaning to the space while emphasizing the importance of remaining in business, because otherwise "where would they (migrant workers) go then?"

At a coffee place downstairs, two young men compare newly issued cards from the UNHCR, while waiting for another companion to take them to Alor Star where relatives and friends are detained. Upstairs, a makeshift table is set for a game of *tongits*, while in the next room, a Filipina domestic helper belts out a lively rendition of "*Top of the World*" by the Carpenters.

In Komtar, people linger on for hours and come even without the intention of buying anything." I come here to see others and relate with people," one Filipina domestic worker tells me. "When you come to Malaysia, you are alone, you have no one, in Komtar somehow you do not feel that way" says another.

In this regard, Komtar somehow similarly functions as an agora for a polity in diaspora, where dispersed, atomized, individual workers, cut off from their homes, families and communities, are able to come together, meet and mingle. There is no encompassing migrant collective consciousness per se nor an explicitly ar-

ticulated notion of common projects and aspirations, but within the different communities, a level of solidarity seems to be shared, nurtured and exercised in ways that at least fill the gaps left by their condition of non-citizenship. Those who are active in this pursuit stress the importance of having a physical space that workers know they can use and run to. This is what prompted some young migrant workers to set up a small office on the second floor to offer "volunteer funeral services" and hospitalization support to foreigners in need, deciding to formalize their organization after countless ad hoc cases of collecting funds, processing documents, and arranging rites for migrants who do not have access to these basic services. Other self-organized support groups provide relief and assistance to workers in distress, at the same time mobilizing compatriots around social and cultural activities that allow them to come together in maintaining and honoring shared values, traditions and practices while overseas.

Komtar is constantly abuzz with a certain degree of dynamism and activity, teeming with possibility, even without yet posing any direct challenge to this existing status quo and other deeply embedded injustices migrant workers face. While enjoying and carving out their own tenuous nooks and crannies, migrant worker expressions underscore that they do not intend to threaten their employment and stay. They express a level of human agency, reclaim a sense of citizenship, and assert a sense of belonging, *a right to be here*. Even through some token symbolic presence and local imprint, these are nonetheless subtle articulations made in an uneven terrain that migrants carefully tread. For now, these everyday acts—seemingly mundane practices almost collectivized by common experience and amplified by sheer number—glare against conditions that would isolate or make migrant workers invisible and inconsequential. As these communities take root however, it will be exciting to observe how the spaces they engender will evolve and where deepening solidarities may lead.



A corridor of empty and vacated shops depicts a typical weekday at Komtar, which transforms into a bustling commercial center especially on Sundays, when most foreign workers take their day-off.