

Must Yong Vui Kong die?
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An internal survey carried out by the MCA in 2003 found that 25 percent of Chinese Malaysian students quit schooling before completing secondary education.

Entitled 'Not One Less', the report also reckoned that more than 65 percent of the dropouts left school before they had a chance to sit for Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR).

Meanwhile, 26.5 percent of the 169,985 Indian Malaysian students aged 13 through 17 did not complete secondary school in 2001, according to the Yayasan Strategik Sosial (YSS), an MIC social arm. Among them, some 3,000 had not been to school at all.

pirated vcd dvd pirate seller peddler vendor 141006 petaling

Where did these youngsters end up? While I don't have concrete figures, a stroll around any major town or city in the country exposes me to Chinese youths selling pirated DVDs or working in unlicensed game shops or internet cafes.

Quite a number of the adventurous ones try their luck by working illegally in Australia, the United States and Britain, but many more found themselves in the wrong company and are now forced to collect debts for Ah Longs (loan-sharks) or, worse, trapped in illicit drug trafficking.

(Now, one can tell Mahathir Mohamad and Ibrahim Ali to their face that not all Chinese and Indians are rich and better-off than the Malays.)

That Malaysia has undergone tremendous economic changes over the last two decades is undisputed, and we do now enjoy a level of material comfort that is beyond our forefathers' wildest dreams.

No jobs in rural areas

But all this has come at a price. The government's emphasis on heavy industries and the urban economy has resulted in the marginalisation of agriculture and fisheries, a situation aggravated by the worsening income disparity.

These days, school dropouts of all ethnic groups do not have a choice but to venture into the city because jobs in the rural areas are hard to come by.

And the city does not offer them much hope. Vocational training programmes or schools - public and private alike - are closed to these underprivileged youths because they do not even have a Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) certificate, so many simply enter the job market as unskilled workers earning meagre pay, or become involved in criminal activities.

Under the glittering surfaces of urban modernity lies a host of social ills. The exam-oriented education system has failed many who are not suited to it, and their futures look bleak.

mat rempitShould one be surprised that the Malays are besieged with the menace of Mat Rempit (street-racers) and dragon-chasers (drug addicts), while gangsterism is a grave concern to the Indians?

And many gambling outlets and brothels would have to shut without the participation of school dropouts from the Chinese community; neither would the Ah Long be doing brisk business.

Even in the vast and resource-rich East Malaysia, the numbers of indigenous girls being lured into the entertainment sector or prostitution in the Peninsula are on the increase.

Rising costs of living mean that both husband and wife are now compelled to work, with no-one at home to tend to the emotional needs of the dropout kid.

One wrong step will leave an indelible pain on the family, and the juvenile delinquency today is a bitter fruit of Malaysia's obsessive pursuit of economic growth and antipathy towards social justice.

Going down the wrong road

Yong Vui Kong from Sandakan, Sabah, is a typical Chinese Malaysian dropout; he did not even make it to secondary school. His life started to go wrong when he came to Kuala Lumpur to work for Ah Longs, collecting debts and selling pirated DVDs.

NONEAfter being told by his "bosses" that drug trafficking would be met with punishment lighter than that for selling pirated products, he was caught with 47g of heroin by Singapore customs officers.

He was barely 18 years old at the time. Last November, Yong (left) was sentenced to death. M. Ravi, a fearless Singapore lawyer, is now racing against time to save his life.

In the eyes of the Singapore authorities that pride themselves on rigorous justice, Yong is no doubt a perpetrator. But isn't he also a victim of a failed education system, a broken family and social poverty? Having embraced Buddhism, he is now a changed person remorseful for his wayward past. Would mercy triumph over harsh justice?

Political and economic pressure

Given that the island state is among the least corrupt in the world and home to a great number of Malaysian workers and professionals, where the People's Action Party (PAP) government seems to have fairer policies that contrast sharply with the malicious nature of Malaysia's race-based politics.

Chinese Malaysians generally think highly of its justice system, as if everyone is truly equal before the law.

NONEHowever, with the publication of the book 'Once a Jolly Hangman: Singapore Justice in the Dock' by Alan Shadrake (left), a former British journalist, this perception is now shattered.

If the PAP government is as colour-blind and judicious as it claims, how would one explain why Shanmugan Murugesu, a Singaporean citizen of Indian origin, was hanged for smuggling marijuana while Julia Bohl, a German national, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment, of which she served only three?

Under Singapore's strict drug laws, capital punishment is mandatory when one possesses more than 500g of marijuana. Bohl had 687g of the stuff with her when she was caught. But she was more than just an innocent consumer, for she actively sold drugs - supplied by a Malaysian syndicate - to her peers in order to sustain her glamorous lifestyle in Singapore. It is widely believed the authorities caved in and reduced the charges against Bohl under Germany's "economic muscle" (in Shadrake's words).

Furthermore, Michael McCrae, a British national, was implicated in two gruesome murders in Singapore. Having escaped to Australia on a fake passport, he confessed to the crimes. Requests for extradition by Singapore were rejected because Canberra is opposed to death penalty.

McCrae was finally brought back to the island state to face trial after the Singapore government promised not to resort to the ultimate punishment. Thanks to Singapore's strong economic interests with Australia, he cheated the gallows and was sentenced to 24 years in jail.

NONEFinally, the Singapore authorities allowed counsels from Down Under to visit Nguyen Tuong Van, an Australian citizen on death row, in 2005. But when Ngeow Chow Ying (right), Yong's legal representative in Malaysia, sought a meeting with her client, her pleas went unheeded. If this is not double standards, what is?

The PAP argues ad nauseam that only the sternest punishment can deter drug couriers.

But it is a well known fact that the very same government has maintained close trade ties over the years with Lo Hsing Han, a notorious Burmese drug lord of Chinese origin.

Since Singapore is renowned for its world-class efficiency in virtually every area, including nipping dissent in the bud, is it not puzzling that, to date, no notable drug kingpin has been convicted there?

Yong was indeed reckless and guilty, but was his offence really more heinous than those committed by McCrae and Bohl, that it can only be expiated by death?

Of uppermost concern to Malaysians is: if we fail to save Yong from the gallows, would the Malaysian government, political parties and general public be able to ensure Yong would be the last victim of our very own social failure?

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