



Review Article

First-generation immigrant entrepreneurship in Malaysia: What do we know so far?



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ABSTRACT

Research on entrepreneurship in Malaysia has grown timidly in recent years. In fact, immigrant entrepreneurship, as a globally growing avenue of research, has not captured much interest among scholars in developing countries. What is abnormal is that the lack of interest over immigrant entrepreneurship research comes despite the strong presence of immigrants in the country and their large involvement in and contribution to the economy of the country. This paper reviewed the few studies found in the literature that take in their essence first generation businesses in Malaysia and discussed their scope of interest, findings, strengths, and weaknesses in light of the findings available in the literature. Ultimately, the paper aimed to further our understanding on how the link between migration (especially the migration of workers) and entrepreneurship in Malaysia is shaped, to invigorate our understanding on what characterizes the behavior of immigrant businesses, and to provide guidelines for future research in this discipline in the country. We found that the research is limited, but rich in topics where it focuses on immigrants from South and Central Asia.

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Introduction

Following migration movement across the world and the achievement of immigrant businesses in terms of self-employment rates together with their good performance and contribution to the host country economy, a new field of research called “immigrant entrepreneurship” has emerged for around four decades now. On the one hand, a good deal of evidence is available with regard to this phenomenon in the Western context; particularly in the US, Canada, England, and the Netherlands (Aliaga-Isla, Rialp, & Martins, 2013). For instance, the literature

shows that in terms of self-employment, immigrants are over-represented compared to natives (Fairlie, 2012). Immigrant businesses are often thought to be petty traders, dealers, merchants, shopkeepers, and even hucksters and peddlers and typically conduct business in catering and restaurants, laundries, nail salons, liquor stores, swap meets, newsstands, taxicabs, import/export and retail of ethnic and cultural goods, garment industry, services, grocery stores, confectioners, tobacconists, newsagents, and other low-rewarding niches of the economy (Ram, Smallebone, Deakins, & Jones, 2003; Zhou & Cho, 2010). Previous research reached mixed results regarding the performance of immigrant entrepreneurs with some scholars arguing that immigrants are poorer performers compared to their peer natives (Sullivan, 2007) while others contend the opposite.

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With regards to ethnicity, often research on immigrant entrepreneurship does not distinguish between first and second generation businesses in the host country. This unified view pertains to the fact that ethnic, immigrant, and minority businesses show similar behavioral types and operate under similar conditions in the host country. Whereas Chaganti and Greene (2002) provided a conceptual demarcation between the three types of entrepreneurship, many other studies (for example Baycan-Levent, Nijkamp, & Sahin, 2009; Beckers & Blumberg, 2013; Efendic, Andersson, & Wennberg, 2015) also assumed this inter-generational distinction between first generation immigrants (born outside the host country) and second generation immigrants who are labeled under “ethnicity” (born in the host country). The main assumption of this distinction is that second generation immigrants operate in different ways compared to their first generation peers because of their limited integration in the host country. In Malaysia, various factors have shaped the inflow and outflow of people into and out of the geographical borders of current Malaysia throughout its history. These long lasting movements have then resulted in the existence of multiple ethnic groups who are now integral parts of the local population. Thus, this paper falls in the latter category and looks into what previous researchers have found regarding first generation immigrant businesses.

Though the inflow of foreign immigrants is increasing and the enlargement of their business activities is witnessed (Everett, O’Kane, & Hamid, 2015), not much research that concerns immigrant entrepreneurship is produced in the Malaysian context. This parsimoniousness can be attributed to the newness of the phenomenon of concern in the country (Abdullah et al., 2012) and to the absence of institutional and academic interest. In fact, paucity of research does not only apply to entrepreneurship among immigrants but it concerns all aspects of migration as a transnational socio-economic phenomenon. Given this situation, our understanding on what is the effect of immigrant businesses, how do immigrant entrepreneurs in Malaysia behave, and what conditions shape their performance is limited. This situation is exacerbated when we consider how mixed immigrant businesses are embedded within economic, social, and political conditions (Kloosterman & Rath, 2001).

To date, we could identify only eight studies that have researched first generation immigrant businesses in Malaysia. These studies will be reviewed in the next sections. Our reviewing approach started with a detailed reading to properly understand these studies. In the next step these studies were categorized in terms of their scope of interest (topic), methodologies, and findings. The current paper aimed: 1) to further our understanding on migration background and links between migration (especially migration of workers) and entrepreneurship of migrants; 2) to provide a general idea on immigrant entrepreneurship research in a developing country (Malaysia) which is so attractive for immigrants; 3) to see how (and when it is relevant), immigrant self-employment is processed, shaped, and effected in a non-Western context; and 4) to

provide guidelines for future research avenues in this discipline in Malaysia.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First we provide an historical overview of migration movements to Malaysia and their impact on the current multi-ethnic composition of the Malaysian society, then we specifically bring to light the inflow of foreign workers in the post –independence era. In the next section, we discuss first generation immigrant businesses in the country based on the existing literature; specifically the eight relevant studies. These studies are then reviewed in terms of their focus, methodologies, and findings in the discussion section. The conclusion and recommendations make up the last section.

Migration and the Changing Composition of the Malaysian Society in a Nutshell

Since long ago, Malaysia has been, and continues to be, an important destination for migrants from the Asia Pacific, Southeast Asia, Western and Central Asia, and the Middle East. Its strategic location and resource endowment has increased the interest of traders and foreign colonial powers alike. In a nutshell, Hindus and Buddhists descended from India were the earliest settlers to mark their presence in the country. In the 13th century, Arabs and Indian Muslims arrived in Malaysia bringing with them Islam which is now the majority religion. In the 16th century, the Portuguese were the first European colonial power to establish themselves in Malaysia after they captured the strategically located Malacca city in 1511. The Portuguese were then followed by the Dutch who arrived early in the 17th century and lately the British who dominated a big part of Malaya in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The British implemented a capitalist economy which was accompanied by the establishment of multiple firms that operated in industries like plantations (for example, coffee, rubber, and coconut), tin mines, and the construction of railways, roads, and buildings. Given the scale of the projects, the small size of the local population and the low wages, British authorities adopted open policies that encouraged the entry of foreign labor, especially from China and India and, to a lesser degree, from neighboring Indonesia (UNESCO, 2003). These migratory movements have played a continuous role in reshaping the ethnic composition of the country. Currently, though the original people are the majority, migratory movements, especially those facilitated by the British presence, engendered a new multi-ethnic form of Malaysian society.

According to the Department of Statistics website, the ethnic distribution of the total population is: Malay (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indian (7.3%), and others (0.7%). From a policy perspective, the population forms two categories. The first is known as *Bumiputra*; a local term that literally means “the sons of the soil”. *Bumiputra* refers to the Malays and the aborigines in Peninsula Malaysia and to over 20 indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. The term *non-Bumiputra* refers to those ethnic groups who are the off-springs of immigrants; mainly Chinese and Indians (Sultana, 2008; UNESCO, 2003).

Inflow of Foreign Workers in the Post–independence Era

After independence, Malaysia witnessed different types of migration inflow. Being located amid many highly populated and poor countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand has made of Malaysia a good place for migrant workers who seek better incomes. This tendency was invigorated by the reliance of the Malaysian government on foreign workers in the 1970s and through the 1980s to support Malaysia's growth strategy (Abdullah et al., 2012). The government adopted frameworks pertaining to the organization and control of employment of foreign workers early in the 1990s (Del Carpio et al., 2013). As a result, the labor market continues welcoming immigrant workers, especially in sectors like construction, plantations, domestic employment, and manufacturing (Abdullah et al., 2012; Del Carpio et al., 2013; Sultana, 2008).

As a matter of fact, a combination of economic, socio-cultural, and external political factors are the main determinants of the continuing inflow of foreigner workers to Malaysia. The rapid industrialization process, sound economic growth, urbanization, and the relatively small size of the population has created a situation of relatively high employment and tight labor markets. Some of these effects have come from the movement of people to urban areas and the shift to human capital base jobs (Del Carpio et al., 2013). On the one hand, relocation to urban areas, which has accompanied the urbanization-industrialization process, has led to severe labor shortages in plantation sectors and in rural areas in general. On the other hand, the rapid increase in education among Malaysians has allowed for a better upward economic mobility among a good proportion of the population. Consequently, jobs in agriculture and construction were rejected in favor of formal and better-remunerated employment in the public and private sectors.

Foreign workers tend to concentrate in low value-added activities in key sub-sectors of the economy. Statistics indicate that they represent 30 percent and 69 percent of the total workforce in manufacturing and plantations, respectively (Del Carpio et al., 2013). According to estimates, the number of foreign laborers in Malaysia ranges between 2 million and 4 million people; however, they remain highly concentrated in Peninsular Malaysia in terms of their regional distribution. Recent figures advanced by Del Carpio et al. (2013) show that about 1.8 million foreign workers are regular or registered and the rest (1–2 million) are undocumented or irregular workers (unregistered). The study further indicates that foreign workers were flooding mainly from the neighboring Indonesia, Nepal and Bangladesh. However, Myanmar and Cambodia have also been sending larger numbers of workers in recent years. India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Pakistan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and China are among the other countries from which a considerable proportion of the labor force has originated. For example, Ganto and Usman (2015) reported that around a million Indonesian workers are estimated to be working in Malaysia; half of whom are contracted and the other half are illegal.

First Generation Immigrant Businesses in Malaysia

Official statistics and information regarding the number of immigrant/ethnic businesses in Malaysia, their size, geographical dispersion, and industrial distribution are not available. Much of what is known on this matter comes from the individual efforts of researchers who have studied specific groups. For instance Everett et al. (2015) reported the existence of around 4,000 Korean businesses in Kuala Lumpur in 2014. The same researchers reported the lack of comparable statistics on the number of Indonesian and Pakistani businesses. Similarly, through personal communication with officers in the Companies Commission of Malaysia (*Suruhanjaya Syarikat Malaysia*), we were informed that the number of businesses that have shareholders from Arabic origins was 1,883; out of which 1,685 businesses are in Greater Kuala Lumpur.

Self-employment among immigrants in Malaysia takes place under different conditions depending on the country of origin, the immigrant's status, size, and concentration of the ethnic community, and the cultural and geographical distance between home and host countries. Those from neighboring countries start as workers first before they try to engage in their own ventures (see for example Abdullah et al., 2012; Sultana, 2008). The remarkable shift in status is often triggered by the low wages received in the labor market and the availability of remunerative entrepreneurial opportunities as a replication of successful co-ethnic entrepreneurs and as a reaction to economic crises. According to Abdullah et al. (2012), the period between the financial crisis in 1997 and the world economic crisis of 2008 has witnessed many workers engaging in self-employment. The shift to self-employment is, indeed, facilitated by three factors; first, through support from earlier co-ethnic members (Ganto & Usman, 2015), second, via a partnership with natives using weak ties (Abdullah et al., 2012; Sultana, 2008), and lastly, through marriage with a native spouse (Sultana, 2008). The latter approach is common among Muslim immigrants (Indonesians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Muslim Indians and Arabs) due to cultural (Islamic) similarities.

First generation immigrant entrepreneurs are engaging in various types of business across different industries. Their businesses are operated within and outside ethnic communities and also in traditional industries such as groceries, food and beverage, and garments as well as knowledge-based industries such as training and consultancy. Moreover, immigrants in Malaysia are increasingly operating businesses that engage in transnational activities with other countries particularly the home country (see Mustafa & Chen, 2010). Transnational extension might be, in large amount, strengthened by the open policies of the local economy, increased demand for co-ethnic and culturally based products and services, and the lower cost of products and services procured from home countries.

The extent of geographical dispersion of first generation immigrant businesses may vary from one ethnic group to other. For instance, many ethnic groups tend to proliferate in areas dominated by the presence of co-ethnic community members. This is clearly noticed among Arab

businesses. With the exception of restaurants, which are found everywhere across the country to serve both Arab and the wide Malaysian clientele, other industries such as in the retail, garment, hair salon, travel agent, and training and consultancy categories are ethnically oriented and found in locations of high Arabic density, particularly within Klang Valley. The main areas are Bukit Bintang (Kuala Lumpur tourist area with extensive presence of Arab tourists), Gombak, Cyberjaya, Serdan, and Kajang. Strangely, Pakistani businesses are often externally oriented. Pakistanis are extensively present in the furniture, Islamic garment industry, and home decoration. In reality, there are many reasons behind this discrepancy among Arabs and Pakistanis in terms of their market orientation including the size, concentration, and purchasing power of the co-ethnic community. The absence of such conditions among Pakistanis has led them to set more aggressive market strategies that target the large mainstream market. The same thing goes for Indonesian businesses which prefer to serve all over the country especially through groceries (Ganto & Usman, 2015).

Whereas Westerners are seen operating pubs and food and beverages businesses in tourist areas, especially in Kuala Lumpur city center and across some islands like Langkawi, Bangladeshi entrepreneurs seem to be successful in establishing and operating businesses within and outside the Bengali community using different strategies. In this sense, Sultana (2008, pp. 92, 259) stated:

“Establishing small scale grocery shops full of Malaysian and Singaporean electronic goods along with other items, setting up phone booths, hiring a place in the market area in order to open cyber cafés accompanied by ‘web cams’ and internet phone calling facilities etc. ... A type of commercial networking is developed there within and outside the community, where well-off migrants set up their quasi formal enterprises by the assistance of local people. Though the actual owners of these enterprises are Bangladeshi well-off immigrants or businessmen because of the local institutional framework on ethnic enterprises, they establish this business as a joint venture”.

Indeed, the involvement of Bangladeshi outside the ethnic enclave (external orientation) is stimulated by the human capital factor as well.

Amidst the lack of insights on immigrant entrepreneurship in Malaysia, the appealing question of what makes immigrants start their businesses is of priority concern. The extant literature acknowledges that engagement in self-employment among immigrants is often triggered by three motives: survival (necessity entrepreneurs), upward mobility (integrative entrepreneurs), and achievement of different objectives via entrepreneurial orientation (opportunity entrepreneurs). Through the cases analyzed in this paper, it seems that the three sets of motives are relevant in the Malaysian context. Survival was highlighted by Abdullah et al. (2012) in the case of workers starting their own ventures after or before they finish their work contract. This act is one of the strategies used by immigrant to avoid returning to their home countries. The same situation is true for the case of female entrepreneurs

from Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Somalia and Afghanistan found in Ayadurai (2010).

Bunmak (2013) indicated that upward mobility is common among Muslim Thai entrepreneurs. Thai entrepreneurs in Malaysia often start as workers before accumulating the necessary experience and funding that allows them to open their own businesses. Minimal salaries gained as workers in Thai restaurants together with the wide acceptance of Thai food in Malaysia are two of the crucial factors that push toward economic independence and integration in the host country through self-employment. In a very similar scenario, Sultana (2008) argued that Bangladeshi business owners in Malaysia regard the business milieu as a significant way for upward mobility and an avenue through which they can emerge in transnational activities with other countries. Lastly, Rahmandoust, Ahmadian, and Mad-Shah (2011) provided evidence of opportunity entrepreneurs represented by Iranians. These researchers found that Iranian entrepreneurs are more inclined toward the most established type of entrepreneurship (opportunity entrepreneurs) because of two reasons; having the entrepreneurial intention as part of their migration project and their focus on the mainstream (external) rather than co-ethnic (internal) market.

Discussion

Table 1 represents a summary of the review made of the eight studies found in the literature of first generation immigrant entrepreneurship in Malaysia. One good thing found in these studies concerns the variation of topics/aspects explored. The literature on immigrant entrepreneurship, which started in the 1970s, has been biased towards studying factors that facilitate or impede business start-up of immigrant ventures (Curci & Mackoy, 2010), self-employment motives, and variations of self-employment rates between immigrants and natives. At the same time, other important aspects of immigrants' businesses were marginalized, including performance (Efendic et al., 2015) as well as marketing strategies, human resource practices, business relations' management, production processes, and supply chain management. The same pattern was observed in the case of immigrant entrepreneurship research in Malaysia. Six out of the eight studies have shown concern with business start-up conditions and motives whereas only half of this number have turned to performance.

Furthermore, our review gives indications on efforts made by scholars in exploring topics often disregarded in the literature of immigrant entrepreneurship like the cultural distance between home and host countries and their impact on business functioning (Everett et al., 2015), the transition process from employees to employers (Abdullah et al., 2012), and the use of transnational and weak ties networks in the entrepreneurial pursuit (Sultana, 2008). The interesting findings reported through the examination of these topics would add to the existing knowledge and serve as bases and foundations for future research.

Another major observation made through the current study is the adoption of a qualitative approach using

Table 1
Focus/objectives, findings, and methodologies

| Study | Focus/objective | Finding | Data collection/Sample/Sampling/Origin of the sample |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|
| Ganto & Usman, 2015. | To understand start-up motivations and success factors of Acehese immigrant entrepreneurs in Malaysia | Motivating factors: economic depression, business opportunity, friend encouragement, better income, friends' success Success factors: work experience, personal characteristic of the owner | In-depth interview/purposive sampling/7 informants/Aceh, Indonesia. |
| Everett et al., 2015. | To understand how entrepreneurs from Korea, Indonesia, and Pakistan perceive normative and cognitive challenges in their entrepreneurial pursuits | The host country's business environment significantly shapes immigrant firms though they are from different countries, they experience similar challenges in business | In-depth interviews/Snowball/case studies/40 informants/Korea, Indonesia, Pakistan |
| Bunmak, 2013. | To explore the history of Tom Yam restaurants owned by Malay-Thai Muslims in Malaysia and to examine their extent of operation (start-up motives and success) | Involvement: all across Malaysia in common and dense locations Motives: low education, labor market discrimination, minimal salaries in the labor market, others' success, cultural similarities (language, religion, ethnicity), geographical proximity Success factors: cultural similarities, co-ethnic labor, unique products. | In-depth interview/10 informants (owners) and their workers/Southern Thailand. |
| Abdullah et al., 2012. | To establish a hypothetical model of job displacement (movement to self-employment) of unskilled foreign labor to entrepreneurs | Industries of focus are clothing, hair salons, decoration. Most respondents (migrant workers) have shown a high desire to try their luck in taking advantage of a stable economic situation. High odds of remaining in the same industry where they served as workers. Working experience, opportunities and fellow encouragement are the main migrant drivers for displacement Entrepreneurial reasons were effective in the migration decision of immigrant entrepreneurs beside the socio-economic and political factors. | In-depth interview/Snowball sampling/82 informants/Southeast Asia, China, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Lebanon. |
| Rahmandoust et al., 2011. | To understand immigrant entrepreneurship phenomena between two developing countries | Indirect provision of resources was most common in the case of distant relatives or non-kin Networks are long-lasting without frequent contact. The influence of family members was revealed to be important when growing abroad | Interview/ 5 informants/Iran |
| Mustafa & Chen, 2010. | To examine how immigrant entrepreneurs utilize transnational family networks to develop and internationalize | Start-up challenges: fund raising, products and services' marketing Skills of success: marketing knowledge, production skills, English, communication and personal characteristics (confidence, motivation, hard work) | Semi-structured interview/convenience sampling/5 case studies/India, Oman. |
| Ayadurai, 2010. | To uncover challenges faced in initiating entrepreneurial ventures by immigrants Identify the skills required for entrepreneurial success. | Both strong and weak ties are influential Businesses are often established as joint ventures/ Involvement in businesses, new passport acquisition services, work permit and visa application and renewal | In-depth interview/51 informants/Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Afghanistan. |
| Sultana, 2008. | To understand the role of networking in transnational business involvement as a survival strategy | | Case study of Bangladeshi in "Bangla bazaar" |

interviews to study the phenomena. As a matter of fact, this is suitable because there is a lack of related research in the same context. However, when we look into the issues from a global perspective, we can still see a considerable research stream being achieved in the Western context. Thus far, some theories proper to immigrant/ethnic entrepreneurship have been developed in an effort to explain different aspects of the phenomenon. This includes middleman minority theory, cultural theory, ethnic resources theory, economic enclave theory, discrimination and blocked mobility thesis, the Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward (1990) interactive model and the most recent mixed embeddedness theory. The aforementioned theories can still serve as platforms for future quantitative (deductive based) research in Malaysia to help reach solid, empirical conclusions and build on comparative findings among different ethnic groups provided that large data and rigorous analysis approaches are employed. Lergos, Kuraranga, Lebouc, and Mohiuddin (2013) have, for instance, been calling for more comparative research.

Related to this, interviews appeared to be the most common form of data collection. Suitable for qualitative research, interviews allows researchers to reach new and rich information. However, the number of informants (sample size) in the reviewed papers seems limited. Half of the cases relied on less than 10 informants. Although saturation effect might have been achieved, one would call for a larger sample size, especially when the essence of the study is built on comparison among immigrant businesses from different ethnic groups.

Although immigrant businesses in Malaysia are increasing in number and size, and although immigrant entrepreneurs are originating from all corners of the world, the eight models have only focused on Asian ethnic groups from Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East (Lebanon). South and Central Asian entrepreneurs do indeed have higher representation in the overall immigrant business market. For example, Western, Arab, and Turkish immigrants are running a good number of successful businesses across Malaysia, particularly in Klang Valley but they have been left unstudied. This is, in fact, attributed to the ethnic affiliation of the researchers themselves. A similar pattern is seen across the literature because of the ease in terms of data collection that results from trust and networking.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Our review of the eight studies found in the literature brings to light many insights. Generally speaking, we noted three facts from the current study. First, research on immigrant entrepreneurship in Malaysia remains scant but limited. Given the history and extent of immigrants' involvement in Malaysia, this state of affairs remains questionable. One reason for this outcome is related to the lack of interest in this topic; maybe because it is something that does not concern natives (indigenous entrepreneurship). Unlike Western countries, especially North America, internal conditions have resulted in the policy makers in developing countries uninterested and often unaware of the conditions, importance, involvement, and implications of immigrant/

minority businesses in the wider socio-economic life of the host country. Due to this fact, research is taking place in the academic circle (UNESCO, 2003).

Second, although limited, research could have explored avenues of immigrant entrepreneurship which previously did not or have only slightly captured attention of researchers. This includes cultural similarities between the home country of immigrant entrepreneurs and the host country, the use of weak ties and networks in business development, and the shifting process from employees to employers.

Third, despite the fact that immigrant entrepreneurs in Malaysia belong to different ethnic groups, a good deal of this paper has focused on ethnic groups such as Pakistanis, Indonesians, and Bangladeshis. Thus, it would be of utmost importance if future research explores and/or investigates different aspects of immigrant entrepreneurship for other groups as well. In the same vein, much less attention has been paid to host-country-specific conditions, immigrant entrepreneurial behavior, and managerial styles. Therefore, a look into aspects of immigrant entrepreneurship in Malaysia needs to consider both the characteristics of the target immigrant group(s) and the structure as well as the broader external environment of the host country (Malaysia). The Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward (1990) model of mixed embeddedness can be articulated because they provide plenty of insights in this matter.

A similar recommendation can be made for the research approach that needs to be adopted by future researchers. Since qualitative approaches are useful for theory building, further quantitative research is needed in order to contribute to theory refinement. Researchers can use theories developed in Western countries; from which relevant factors will be deducted and tested in the Malaysian context. In addition to this, given the multi-ethnicity of Malaysian society, the nature of the reactions of immigrant firms to market pressures and their adoption of external marketing strategies are arguably dissimilar to what is found in the Western-based literature. For instance, as seen earlier, Pakistani and Indonesian entrepreneurs have marked their paths in serving the mainstream market; however, it remains to uncover whether this only applies to Malay people with whom many cultural similarities are shared, or is it relevant to native Chinese and Indians as well. Indeed researching this avenue will add a substantial contribution to the body of knowledge because the existing research is not far reaching in this regard.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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