

Foreign Nationals as Offenders and Victims in Malaysian Crime News

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Abstract. Foreign nationals in Malaysia come from all corners of the world. They are here as migrant labour, highly skilled and professional migrants (expatriates), illegal migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers (Burmese asylum seekers with UNHCR card), forced migrants (human trafficking victims), students, and tourists. The influx of foreign nationals residing in Malaysia coincides with greater number of crime news featuring foreign nationals. This study explores the social construction of foreign nationals as the 'other' in the local crime news published by Malaysian newspapers. 94 news headlines and lead sentences of local crime news involving foreign nationals were identified and analysed for this study. Findings suggest that Malaysian newspapers magnify foreign nationals' migration status in each crime news.

1 Introduction

Malaysia has a long history on the immigrant for labour purposes where it started during the pre-independent era. The British colonization brought the Chinese from mainland China to work in the mining industry while the Indian from India to work in the plantation industry or estate. In the 1970s, Malaysia started to bring in foreign migrant from Indonesia to work in the construction industry [1]. In a meanwhile, due to Indo-China crisis, immigrants from Vietnam started to come to Malaysia as refugees and asylum seekers in the mid-1970s [2].

Currently, foreign nationals in Malaysia were from the various continent of the world. They were here as labour migrants, highly skilled and professional migrants (expatriates), illegal migrants, refugees, Asylum-seekers (Burmese asylum seekers with UNHCR card), forced migrants (human trafficking victims), students, and tourists. The Dewan Rakyat had announced that as at 2015, they were about 2.06 million foreign nationals working legally in Malaysia. The number constitutes of 6.9% the overall population in Malaysia [3].

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Crime issue is among the salient matter and highly concerned by Malaysian. An official report from the Royal Police Department stated that the crime rate in Malaysia declined by 17.7% in 2015[4]. Despite the decline, the crime news still grabs the attention of the readers and later become public anxiety.

Among the total of the crime index, about 11.2% of the total of crime cases were cases involving foreigners [5]. Statistically, the number is not much, but past studies show that the media is able to subtly construct foreign nationals as criminals although foreign nationals might be both offenders and victims in the news [6].

1.1 Media, crime, and foreign nationals

Due to the global diaspora, the studies on the representation of immigrants in the newspapers increase. As a country with high total number of foreign nationals, local researchers started to study on press coverage on illegal immigrants, the voices of people in power in the media about the immigrants and asylum seekers in Malaysia and the media reports on the influx of foreign workers in Malaysia [7,8,9]. Most of the researchers agreed that the media tend to report foreign nationals as criminals in the crime news. This could be described as minority signification [10]. Other than that, the public easily ponder a dramatic crime news such as murder, rape, and robbery cases [11]. For example, public understands easily a news on a Bangladeshi murdered his colleague than the financial significance of a corruption of public funds. Therefore, the media usually play the issue in this area and add foreign status to increase the news value.

1.2 Problem Statement

Foreign nationals that living in Malaysia are often considered as the 'other' as local citizen assumed themselves as 'us'. Therefore, the foreign nationals' status was magnified in the daily news especially the crime news. Mentioning nationality or foreign status in crime news increase the readability, drama and value of crime news. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the social construction of foreign nationals as the 'other' in the local crime news published by Malaysian newspapers. The analysis presented were based on the research question: What are the references or framed words that portray the foreign nationals as the other in the crime news of Malaysian newspaper?

2 Method

This study employs critical discourse analysis to analyse the data. This approach is used to trace in detail the construction of foreign nationals as the other/outsider/out-group in stereotype image of foreign criminals as in the Malaysian crime news [12].

Four main English language newspapers will be used for this study. They are *The Star*, *The New Straits Times*, *The Sun*, and *The Malay Mail*. *The Star* and *The New Straits Times* are mainstream newspapers and *The Sun* and *The Malay Mail* are known as alternative newspapers in Malaysia. These newspapers usually targeted people living in urbanized areas such as Klang Valley.

The analysis took place by examination of the headlines and the lead sentences [13]. The headline is important to see the tone of the article, the summary of the story and sometimes the only thing that the readers might read. In a meanwhile, the lead sentences serve the similar function to the headline and the news source to considerate from whose perspective the story being presented.

About 112 news articles were located randomly within the period of January to April 2016. However, only 94 articles were chosen for analysis. Other 18 news articles were eliminated because of redundancy of the topic reported. The time frame was chosen because, in the early of 2016, the Malaysian government announced to suspend the hiring of foreign workers in Malaysia. There was debate among various parties about the issue. Some people happily agreed with the decision because they think the influx of foreign nationals in Malaysia create uncomfortable environment but some are disagreeing stating that ‘the country’s economy is powered by foreign workforce [14,15].

3 Analysis

All the articles were coded from 1 to 94. *The Star* (n = 37), *New Straits Times* (n= 24), *The Sun* (n=22), and *The Malay Mail* (n=11). The analysis showed that (n=42) of the articles mentioned the specific nationality of the person involved in the headlines. (n=24) of the articles mentioned foreign national status in the headlines. However, all of the articles mentioned the foreign national status either at the headlines or the lead sentences of the articles.

The analysis presented were based on Wodak’s discourse-historical approach [16,17]. The analysis below is to answer the research question on what are the discourses identified from the data. Two main discourses identified which are foreign nationals as offenders and foreign nationals as victims.

3.1 Discourse

Two main discourse identified from the analysis of the headlines and lead sentences of the data are foreign nationals as offenders and victims in the local crime news.

3.1.1 Foreign nationals as offenders

Five genres were identified under the discourse. First, the dominant genre under this discourse is foreign nationals were highly involving in illegal migration and human trafficking.

(12,21,23,24,25,26,33,41,42,44,50,52,55,58,59,62,65,70,73,74,75,81,83,85,86,87,90). An example of the articles is ‘240 illegal immigrants jailed’ (81). For human trafficking, such like ‘Filipino charged for trafficking girl’ (65). Second, the analysis identified foreign nationals as actively involved in violent crime events namely murder, assault and rape (3,7,9,19,30,47,56,72,88,91,93). An example of foreign nationals was framed in murder cases is ‘Rohingyas charged with hiding body’ (9). Other than that, ‘Bangladeshi man arrested on suspicion of raping, molesting teen girls’ (93) which portrayed foreign nationals as hunting local teenagers for bad purposes. Third, the data analysis addressed the construction of foreign nationals as involved in drug smuggling cases (2, 5,82,84,94). Among the articles depicting the genre are ‘Thai national among three held in drug bust’ (2) and ‘Bukit Aman police plug Chinese drug pipeline, arrest 10 foreigners, 4 locals’ (94). Fourth, another genre found is foreign national also involved in robbery cases (53) with the headline ‘Gang Negro busted, and two held’. Fifth, the Malaysian newspaper also reported foreign national as involved in conning activities (6,8,10,17,44,46,66,69,76,79,80). Several categories of conning activities identified namely card–scam, ‘Executive duped in card scam’ (10). There was also car-cloning syndicate by Singaporeans, ‘car-cloning syndicate busted’ (17), and cases on foreign traders run businesses using fake business licenses, ‘Foreign traders in control of local permits, premises’ (80). The last genre is on the foreign

nationals as a threat as there highly involved in terrorism activities such as kidnap for ransom (14,63), Sabah invasion (48,89), and Islamic States (IS) (13,51,68). The examples of headlines are 'Accused denies communicating with Lahad Datu intrusion leader' (89) and 'An Indonesian oil-and-gas consultant gets 9 months' jail for terrorism' (68). It can be seen that only Filipino were associated with abduction for ransom and Sabah intrusion while only Indonesians were portrayed as have a connection with IS.

3.1.2 Foreign nationals as victims

Apart from being depicted as criminals, foreign nationals also were reported as victims in the articles analysed for this study. 20 articles were portraying the foreign national status of the victims of the crime events. There were three genres identified which are foreign women as victims, exploited foreign nationals, and foreign-local relationship.

First, foreign women were portrayed as weak and usually be the victims of various crime incidents namely prostitution (21,65) robbery (29,60), murder (20,71), rape (45), and abuse (49). The headlines that can be highlighted are 'Three elderly men charged with trafficking women for prostitution' (21), 'Brazen Bangsar snatch theft - A Japanese housewife was dragged for several metres for her handbag' (60), and 'Man nabbed for molesting maid' (45).

Second, the status of foreign national might be the cause of them to be targeted for exploitation and manipulation. For example, 'Japanese man fleeced by a woman in Kota Kinabalu' (11), and 'Bangladeshi hurt in Mak Mandin flat robbery' (16). There were also be beaten up by the local because of minor misunderstanding event (27,28). Weaker foreign nationals also are the victim of murder (15,54,57,67).

Third, crime news involving foreign nationals also could be an indices of the changes of Malaysian social structure. The researcher found a genre of local-foreigner intimate relationship in the crime news. There are family conflicts that lead to crime cases. The husband or wife are foreign nationals (18,49,71,77). An example of the headlines are 'Wife admits doing a "Bobbit"' (18), 'Man held for abusing Uzbek wife' (49), and 'Family brawl turns fatal for Chinese national husband' (77).

4 Discussion

Thematically, the Malaysian newspapers socially constructed foreign nationals as both offenders and victims in the local crime news. The offenders were portrayed as cruel, horrific, and rogue especially in violent crime events. In contrast, victims were framed as weak, terrified, and pitiful in the crime news.

Despite all, through the examination, it is suggested that the newspapers revealed the nationality/ foreign status of the person involved in the crime events either in the headlines of the news or the lead sentence of the news. It is believed that the act is to add drama, readability, and value of the crime news [11]. Foreign national status such as Nepalese, Indian national, Indonesian woman, Bangladeshi, Myanmar nationals and others were among status mentioned in the data analysed [12].

News on illegal immigrants was reported the most to show that the illegal immigrants issue becoming one of the social ills in Malaysia. Moreover, the news represented the government's voice depicting that the responsible parties will combat illegal immigrant and human trafficking issues. Past studies on illegal immigrants in Malaysia also showed voices of authority are crucial to show they are actively curbing illegal immigration activities. Based on the data analysed, we can see that it is indeed lack of voices of foreign nationals themselves both as offenders and victims. The news analysed

reported the voices of government, authority (Police and Immigration department officers), and also voices of the public (including reporters/editors of the newspapers). It is actually important to report the voices of the foreign nationals to see their views and judgments on this issue. Foreign nationals' views on both issue of 'othering' and 'criminalising' them are essential to avoid from over-generalisation, negative attribution, and prejudice. As a result, the study on this issue also will be more balance.

The study also portrayed the reality of Malaysian landscape presently. The increasing number of foreign nationals in Malaysia build a web of relationships between Malaysian and foreign nationals from various countries. Some are intimate relationships such as husband and wife or lovers. There is a relationship like supervisor and co-worker, and also the news depicted conflicts occurred among foreign nationals themselves. In some landscape, foreign nationals are accepted as part of the group, in contrast, Malaysian in general still not accepting the foreign nationals as part of them.

All of the newspapers' tone of reporting are quite similar regardless of their different ownership and status as mainstream and alternative newspapers. Therefore, it can be said that Malaysian media is in the same view on magnifying the foreign nationals' status as the other through crime news.

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