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## The Jungle is Neutral

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The title might ring a bell, if one were my age and vaguely remember high school History. It's trickier if one were younger. With successive iterations of the Malaysian History syllabus, one wonders if *Spencer Chapman's The Jungle is Neutral* makes the cut. Colonel Chapman served in the British Army in Malaya. During World War II (1941-1945), Chapman and his compatriots joined forces with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) to form the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). The jungle was their base, the launch pad of guerilla attacks, where the deep impenetrable rainforest with its dense and disorienting foliage provided refuge from detection and capture. As Japanese brutality worsened in occupied Malaya, the number of MPAJA guerillas grew. To the Japanese occupation force, the jungle became a constant scourge — it could not be subdued, much less conquered. Hence, the title of the book. Or so the textbook said.

The textbook wasn't wrong. But there was so much more to Chapman's work that it couldn't capture. When the syllabus was dominated by facts, with strong emphasis on chronology and major figures, nuances were bound to be lost. The only silver lining from the rote repetitions of Chapman's name and his work was that, seven years later, I recalled its significance when I came across the book in a secondhand bookstore. Interestingly, there is a more profound reason that the jungle is neutral. According to Chapman, the length of life of a British soldier accidentally left behind in the Malayan jungle was bound to be short. A soldier was finished if he thought that the jungle was a "green hell" full of "man-eating

tigers, deadly fevers, venomous snakes and scorpions, natives with poison darts, and a host of half-imagined nameless terrors". Whereas those who think that "the jungle teems with wild animals, fowls, and fish which are simply there for the taking, and that luscious tropical fruits ... drop from the trees" were bound to be ill-prepared. "The truth is that the jungle is neutral. It provides any amount of fresh water, and unlimited cover for friends as well

as foes — an armed neutrality, if you like, but neutrality nevertheless. It is the attitude of mind that determines whether you go under or survive. There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. The jungle itself is neutral." Unfortunately, the textbook merely imparted facts, as opposed to values.

The MPAJA was disbanded after the Japanese surrendered. The MCP was the enemy once more and its guerilla warfare against the colonial government led the British to declare a state of emergency in Malaya. Consistent with the compartmental approach of the textbook, my teacher devoted more time to the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) compared with the Japanese occupation. This would mean that the communists' contribution during World War II was significantly downplayed. That was unsurprising in the Cold War period. And then the Berlin Wall crumbled in 1989, and along with it, the ideological thrust of communism. Soon after, the MCP concluded a peace deal with the Malaysian government. Today, the communist narrative can be glimpsed from *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History*, the autobiography of the former leader of MCP. Might the History syllabus be revised in the light of alternative interpretation of events? Only time will tell.



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Curriculum refresh is not unusual. In fact, it is careless not to revise the curriculum with changing times. This is where an educator plays an important role. Like a conductor who determines the interpretation, tempo and dynamics of an orchestral piece, an educator sets the boundary, temperament and expected outcomes of the syllabus. Misguided education standards sound like a poorly conducted ensemble. Imagine sitting through an orchestral performance that is awkward, strident, devoid of grace and soul. Now, imagine that the country is the shortchanged audience. Worse, that the audience is tone-deaf and cannot tell the difference!

Ultimately, the curriculum is an ideological tool. It can be an instrument of nation-building or a vehicle to sow dissension and bigotry. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's Malaysia Madani advocates a country anchored on the qualities of sustainability, care and compassion, respect, innovation, prosperity and trust. There is much to do to deliver these goals, starting with the mending of divisiveness and intolerance in our society. While it is not the sole responsibility of the education system to tackle this colossal mission, it can play a decisive role. Educators always knew that, unlike Chapman's Malayan jungle of the 1940s, the curriculum is not neutral. At this crossroads of our nationhood, the question is: What shall we sow?

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## The resilience partnership: A collective approach to students' mental health

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A student of mine recently approached me, overwhelmed by the weight of juggling her responsibilities. She spoke about the pressure to meet her parents' expectations, excel in her studies, maintain friendships and prepare for the demands of an unforgiving workforce. Her story is not unique. Across classrooms and boardrooms, young people face mounting pressures, and mental health challenges have become alarmingly common. This is where the collective responsibility of educators, employers and parents comes into play. Supporting students' mental health and resilience requires a holistic approach, with all parties working together to help young people navigate these challenges and build the mental strength to thrive.

The rise in mental health concerns among students is well documented. According to the World Health Organization, one in seven adolescents experiences mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (WHO, 2024). As educators, we witness firsthand how these struggles affect students' academic performance and their ability to cope with life's demands. These challenges often go beyond the classroom, affecting personal relationships and students' readiness for the professional world.

For educators, creating an environment that supports mental health is crucial. Encouraging open conversations about stress and emotional well-being helps reduce the stigma surrounding mental health. When students feel safe

discussing their struggles, they are more likely to seek help. In addition, integrating resilience-building activities into the curriculum, such as problem-solving exercises and teamwork, helps students develop the mental toughness they need to overcome adversity. Encouraging students to step out of their comfort zones through public speaking, leadership roles or collaborative projects equips them with skills they will need in both their personal and professional lives.

But mental health is not an issue that educators can address alone. Employers, too, play a critical role. The transition from education to the workforce is a major source of stress for many young people, particularly in industries such as hospitality and events where the pace is relentless and the stakes are high. Deloitte's (2024) research highlights that 31% of young employees report high levels of job-related stress, often resulting in burnout. Employers who prioritise mental health and foster resilience within their organisations can help ease this transition for young professionals, ensuring they do not just survive but thrive in their careers.

Employers can support mental well-being by creating a work environment in which mental health is taken seriously. Offering mental health resources such as counselling services, stress management workshops and flexible work arrangements is an essential step in supporting young employees. In addition, mentorship programmes can be incredibly beneficial. New hires often feel uncertain about their role and career trajectory, and having a mentor to guide them through challenges can significantly reduce stress. A strong mentor-mentee relationship fosters resilience, helping young employees build confidence and adapt to the demands of the workplace.

An oft-overlooked contributor to student stress is parents. While parental support is essential, the line between guidance and pressure can blur, leading to added mental strain. Many students feel immense pressure to meet the high expectations of their parents — whether it is achieving top academic performance or securing a prestigious job. This pressure can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, which can be difficult to navigate.

As students transition into adulthood, it is crucial for parents to strike a balance between support and autonomy. Letting go does not mean withdrawing support; rather, it involves trusting that young adults can make their own decisions while parents remain a source of encouragement. Parents must recognise that young

people need room to make mistakes, learn from them and develop their own resilience. Overprotection or unrealistic expectations can hinder this process. By stepping back and allowing their children to take ownership of their decisions, parents can help reduce mental stress and foster the emotional strength their children need to navigate life's challenges.

Collaboration between educators, employers and parents is essential in addressing mental health challenges and building resilience among students. A supportive learning environment, combined with workplace initiatives that prioritise mental well-being, can make a significant difference in how young people manage stress. When parents also play an active role in fostering resilience — by offering emotional support while encouraging independence — students are better equipped to handle both academic and professional demands.

Employability today is not just about technical skills; it is about the whole person. Resilience, mental toughness and the ability to navigate stress are as important as any hard skill. In fact, a report by the Harvard Business Review found that companies that prioritise mental health see increased productivity, employee satisfaction and retention (Forbes, 2024). Employees who feel supported in their mental health are not only more engaged but also more likely to stay committed to their roles in the long term.



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In conclusion, mental health and resilience are vital components of employability, and addressing them requires a shared effort by educators, employers and parents. As we support the next generation, we must create environments that foster well-being, encourage resilience and provide the tools that young people need to succeed both personally and professionally. With the right support, students can develop the mental strength to navigate the challenges they face and thrive in their future careers.

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## Unlocking potential and inclusive excellence: Empowering students in the hospitality industry

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The hospitality industry has long been associated with hands-on work, teamwork and creativity. This dynamic environment attracts students, especially Gen Z, from all walks of life, including those with special conditions like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder and various physical disabilities, including hearing impairment. In recent years, educational institutions, especially those offering hospitality programmes, have taken progressive steps towards creating inclusive learning environments for students with special needs. While challenges exist, students with these conditions can excel in these programmes when provided with appropriate support.

## UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUE NEEDS AND SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Understanding the unique needs of students with special conditions in different hospitality and culinary arts, and event management programmes requires recognising the diverse challenges they may face and creating an inclusive learning environment tailored to their abilities. These students may need individualised support through modified learning materials, accessible facilities or adaptable teaching methods. It is important to foster a supportive atmosphere where they feel empowered to succeed, ensuring that practical and theoretical

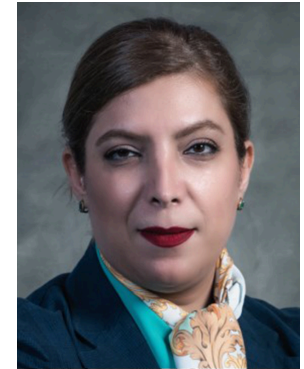
lessons are accessible to all. By focusing on their strengths and offering appropriate accommodations, their lecturers and instructors can help these students fully engage with the curriculum, develop their skills and succeed in these dynamic fields.

Therefore, hospitality schools that prioritise inclusion adopt various strategies to ensure the success of all students. These strategies may include creating sensory-friendly learning environments, offering extended deadlines, modifying assignments, or providing additional time in the classroom or kitchen. Such accommodations help address the diverse needs of students, allowing them to excel and fully participate in their education.

Additionally, establishing a strong support network within the school is crucial. Peer mentors alongside faculty who understand the challenges faced by students with special conditions can offer valuable guidance. For instance, in culinary arts programmes, where teamwork is a fundamental aspect, promoting an inclusive culture where students support one another can greatly benefit those with special needs, helping them feel more integrated and capable of succeeding alongside their peers.

## THE ROLE OF INDUSTRY PARTNERS

Another important aspect of supporting students with special needs in these schools is the role of industry partnerships. As students with special conditions progress through their studies, even in their internship periods, they may face barriers to gaining practical experience in the workplace. Thus, collaboration between educational institutions and industry partners can ensure that students with special needs are placed in internships or work placements that accommodate their abilities in a supportive workplace environment.



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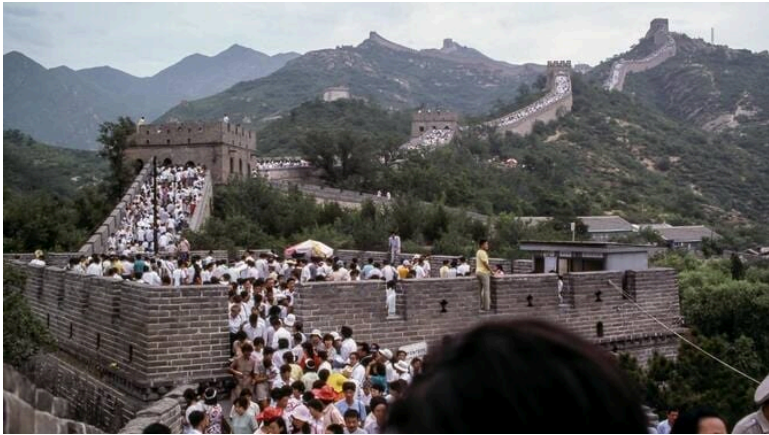
Simply put, employers in the hospitality industry are increasingly recognising the importance and value of inclusion. By partnering and working with schools to offer internship positions and job opportunities to these students, they help break down barriers and promote a more diverse workforce. These collaborations not only benefit the students but also enrich the industry by bringing in individuals with unique perspectives and problem-solving skills that can enhance service quality and innovation in hospitality.

## **SUCCESS STORIES AND CONCLUSION**

There are many examples of students with special conditions who have demonstrated remarkable success in the hospitality industry. Some students excel in pastry arts, where the precision and routine of baking allow them to focus on many details and express their creativity. Others thrive in event management, where the fast-paced environment aligns with their energetic nature and need for continuous engagement. Furthermore, adaptive technology and supportive peers have empowered students to pursue careers in both kitchen and front-of-house roles. Achieving success in these fields relies not only on the students' determination but also on a strong support system within their educational institutions and the industry.

# Unveiling the undercurrents: Navigating over-tourism in post-pandemic Asia

By **Business Today Editorial** - February 16, 2024



*By Assoc Prof Dr Daniel Chong of School of Hospitality and Service Management, Sunway University*

## The Post-Pandemic Tourism Landscape

As the world cautiously emerges from the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global tourism industry finds itself on the path to recovery. Encouragingly, projections from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) suggest that international tourism is poised to rebound to pre-pandemic levels by 2024, with a projected 2% growth above 2019 figures. However, this optimistic outlook comes with caveats, contingent upon factors such as the pace of recovery in key regions like Asia and the ongoing evolution of economic and geopolitical risks.

While the prospect of a swift recovery is cause for optimism, it also raises concerns about the potential consequences of a rapid resurgence in global travel. The phenomenon of over-tourism, characterised by an unsustainable influx of visitors to popular destinations, has been exacerbated by the pandemic-induced pent-up demand for travel. Nowhere is this more evident than in countries across Asia, including Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Cambodia, which have borne the brunt of over-tourism's adverse effects.

Consider Thailand's Phuket, once hailed as a tropical paradise, now grappling with the staggering statistic of hosting 118 tourists for every local resident. This imbalance not only strains local infrastructure and resources but also threatens the cultural and environmental integrity of these destinations. Despite the lessons learned during the pandemic, including the importance of crowd management and hygiene practices, the allure of "revenge travel" has led to a swift abandonment of these measures. Tourism operators, eager to recoup economic losses incurred during the pandemic, have been quick to capitalise on the surge in demand, prioritising short-term gains over long-term sustainability.

Fuelling the rapid acceleration of over-tourism is the pervasive influence of social media, which amplifies the pressure to travel and share experiences online. The phenomenon of "FOMO" (fear of missing out) coupled with envy-inducing posts of others' travel adventures has created a domino effect, driving even greater numbers of tourists to already strained destinations.

In light of these challenges, it becomes imperative to examine the degree of repercussions caused by over-tourism in the post-pandemic era. Moreover, to acknowledge the unique drivers that contribute to the acceleration of this phenomenon.

## Unveiling the Underlying Factors of Over-tourism in Asia:

While the impact of over-tourism continues to reverberate across Asia, several underlying factors, often overlooked, are poised to perpetuate, and exacerbate this phenomenon in the coming years. These factors wield significant influence behind the scenes, shaping the landscape of tourism and challenging the sustainability of popular destinations.



1. **AI in Social Media Market Analysis:** As the global market for AI in social media burgeons, projected to reach USD 7.25 billion by 2029, the role of artificial intelligence in driving tourism patterns cannot be underestimated. Beyond the surface-level influence of social media platforms, AI tools embedded within these networks possess the capability to comprehend individuals' intricate travel desires, decision-making processes, and behavioural patterns. This deeper understanding enables AI to not only shape travel intentions but also foster brand loyalties, thus heralding the era of AI-induced tourism via social media. In the next five years, we anticipate a paradigm shift where AI plays an increasingly dominant role in steering tourism flows, presenting both opportunities and challenges for destination management.
2. **Visa Liberalisation in Asia:** The ripple effects of visa liberalisation initiatives, particularly between China and Southeast Asia, are poised to redefine geopolitical strategies in the region, with significant implications for tourism. As countries embrace more open visa policies, especially towards mass markets such as Chinese and Indian tourists, the potential for tourism gains is undeniable. However, this surge in inbound tourism raises concerns about the carrying capacities of vulnerable destinations, including smaller islands, heritage sites, and minority communities. The liberalisation plans announced by governments, such as Malaysia's in 2024, signal a strategic pivot towards leveraging tourism as a geopolitical tool, necessitating careful management to mitigate the adverse effects of over-tourism.
3. **Continued Growth of Low-Cost Carriers in Asia:** The exponential growth of low-cost carriers (LCCs) in Asia, driven by rapid economic expansion, urbanisation, and a burgeoning middle class, presents a double-edged sword in the battle against over-tourism. With estimates suggesting a demand for almost 13,000 more airplanes worth \$1.9 trillion over the next two decades in the Asia-Pacific region, the proliferation of LCCs is poised to democratise air travel, making it accessible to a broader demographic. However, the proliferation of new routes targeting smaller cities poses a significant challenge in terms of managing tourism flows and preserving destination integrity. While touted as a means to divert traffic from mainstream tourist hubs, the efficacy of this strategy hinges upon the capacity of these emerging destinations to absorb and sustainably manage increased visitor numbers.

## Recommendations Moving Forward

It is important to acknowledge the complexities and challenges inherent in promoting responsible and sustainable tourism, especially in the context of short-

term economic pressures and cultural dynamics in Asian communities. Here are some approaches to be considered in addressing over-tourism:

1. **Recognise the Reality of Coexisting Pressures:** Acknowledge that the desire for exploration, experience, and economic stability may often outweigh considerations of responsible travel behaviour and sustainable tourism practices in the short term. Strive for a balanced approach that addresses both the immediate needs of tourists and the long-term sustainability of destinations.
2. **Set Realistic, Micro-Level Goals:** Instead of relying solely on country-level policies and enforcement, prioritise the development of realistic goals at the micro level, tailored to the unique social, cultural, and economic contexts of individual tourist sites, streets, towns, and cities. This localized approach allows for targeted interventions that are more responsive to the specific needs and challenges of each destination.
3. **Cultivate Organic Mindset Shifts:** Recognize that fostering collaboration between governments, tourism operators, and local communities may face obstacles due to power dynamics and cultural norms in Asia. Instead of relying solely on obligation-induced or enforcement-driven measures, focus on cultivating organic mindset shifts towards responsible tourism through education, awareness-building, and experiential learning. Encourage individuals to consider the personal implications of their actions on their own well-being, fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between individual behaviour and broader societal impacts.

## Conclusion

While promoting responsible travel behaviour and sustainable tourism practices remains a laudable goal, it is essential to recognise the complexities inherent in achieving meaningful change, particularly in the short term. Moving forward, the emphasis should be on setting realistic, micro-level goals that are responsive to the unique characteristics of individual destinations. Rather than relying solely on top-down policies and enforcement mechanisms, efforts should be directed towards cultivating organic mindset shifts. While the journey towards responsible tourism may be fraught with challenges, it is through ongoing education, awareness-building, and experiential learning that we can affect meaningful and lasting change.

