

The Third Gender in the Tourism Industry: A Preliminary Observation

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Abstract

In South-east Asia, the involvement of the third gender in promoting tourism is remarkably prominent. Many transvestites are involved in cultural performances or paper dolls shows. The Moulin rouge girl sort of shows received overwhelming response from holiday goers. Many transvestites especially in Thailand and the Philippines opted to work as performers as their living professions let alone those who have traveled the world performing as impersonators and make-up artists.

This group of people has tremendously contributed to the Tourism industry yet they are a laughing stock to the society. Their important role to tourism industry in some countries are denied and seen as a nuisance to the society.

This paper will look at the contribution of the third gender people in the tourism industry especially in the South-east Asia. Discussions on types of performances offered to tourists are highlighted in this paper.

1.0 Introduction

Many have been said about the third gender in the society. Undeniably, many have also constructed bad images of the third gender. The existence of third gender people is extensively getting the society's attention from day to day.

The ways they behave are being imitated in films and dramas. They even make movies out of the third gender dilemma. "To Wong Foo", "The Iron Lady", "The Beautiful Boxer", "Bugis Street" and "Buka Api" are some of the films made to familiarize the society with the third gender. Be it in the west or in Asia, the story of the Third Gender are the same. Many are involved in the limelight of the film industry, modeling agency, artistic creation and not forgetting the tourism industry.

In the tourism industry, Thailand and Philippines in South-east Asia are well known for having the third gender playing important roles as tourist guides, service staff, and the ever popular to the lady boy entertainers and masseurs. Many were also trapped in the prostitution industry as it brings instant income to them.

The Discovery Channel shown on Astro Malaysia (May 2006) investigated on the Third gender in Asia thoroughly. The topic was “The Third Gender” and the writer had decided to adopt the label used by the documentary in writing this paper. The figure of Lily Khru, the Thai language teacher of Thailand, Shabnam Mausi, the mayor of one of the states in India, the world popular beautiful Thai boxer and a street Hijra of India were portrayed in the program. The world was served with the story of the Third gender so that they understand the dilemma of being a transvestite and also the contribution that they have lent to the world.

The annual Miss Tiffany Contest held in Phuket has drawn millions of tourists to witness the ever largest and lovely ladyboys contest in the world. Malaysia’s Paper Doll has performed across Asia to portray the talents of the third gender in the entertainment world. The Phillipine “Baklak” are also well known for their pretty faces and talents in the entertainment line. Many appeared in Television as guest artists and were given a wide coverage in the electronic media.

The third gender as addressed by the public as *maknyah* is a unique subculture group in Malaysia that has special dialect which is not easily understood by the masses. In both states the maknyah has formed a small community with special way of talking. Apart from their femininity in the body language their communication language differs from the rest of the common society. In their effort to be secretive about their lives, they have created a form of language which is not easily grabbed and understood by the society.

In Malaysia, it is proven that the body language and the expression of maknyah have become popular and were adopted by many filmmakers, artists and celebrities in the limelight of the entertainment industries in Malaysia as a way of forming an identity and glamorous personalities. Quoting an example of Fauziah Ahmad Daud who likes to use “akak” to refer to herself and “dek non” to refer to second or third parties she is communicating to is a classic example of the usage of maknyah’s expression in addressing to himself and others. The extent of maknyah’s influence in films and

comical acts does not just lie in the usage of words but also the body movements and language which has proven to be successful in building an identity amongst comedian such as Imuda (in the 2 + 1 comedy series). Imuda hits stardom by simply imitating the character of a maknyah's fashion designer with his catchy lines "this is my card". Sheila Rusly sometimes uses the word "mak" to refer to herself depicting the maknyah's way of addressing himself.

Many words and expressions are created by the maknyahs and have become popular in the society as they were frequently used by the actors and actresses on talk shows, comedies and dramas. Expressions in Malay such as "tak kuasa, mak tak kisah nyah, akak, mak, keretu and this is my card" are maknyah's words that are so popular and well accepted by the society at large as part of their daily conversational expressions.

In general, the life of the third gender people has been part and partial of almost all societies in the South East Asia region. The acceptance of the third gender people in this region has been very positive and transparent, to the extent that their way of life and behaviour were depicted and adopted into films, drama as well as being transformed into a profitable item in the tourism package.

2.0 Definition of the third gender people

The third gender people are literally defined as transvestites or the so called ladyboys in Thailand. In detail, the third gender people in this paper are defined as males who possess feminine characters and feelings. They normally have the higher tendency to behave, act, talk and dress almost like women. They are also more prone towards having love affairs or relationships with their similar sex that is men than that of women as they do not have interest in the opposite gender. On the other hand, gay people are defined differently from the transvestites. Gay people are defined as those male individuals who are not feminine but having the desire of having relationships with individuals of the same sex. In Malaysia the transvestites are called as "Maknyah" or "Pondan" or "Bapok". In Thailand, the term "Katoey" refers to the Transvestites. In Tagalog, "Baklak" is the word indicating transvestites whereas in Indonesia they used a short form "Wadam"

signifying both male and female gender that are Adam and Hawa (Adam and Eve). Sometimes, the Indonesian also referred to transvestites as “Bencong” and “Waria” (combination of Wanita/woman and Pria/man). In England, the short form for transvestites is “TV” although some do call them “fad”. In India, the term used to describe transvestites is “Hijra”. “Hijra” is a group of transvestites that moves from one place to another by performing (normally dance and singing). The traditional Indian community believes that they will be given better luck by inviting the Hijra to perform at their house for some special occasion such as to celebrate the birth of new offspring. They also believe that the act of dancing and singing by the Hijra will bless those that hire them.

However, both gays and transvestites in this context can be categorized as homosexuals. But for the purpose of discussion in this paper, the third gender is only referred to the transvestites.

Wikipedia.Org mentions that the term transvestism has undergone several changes of meaning and it was firstly coined in 1910 by Magnus Hirschfeld. His group of transvestites consisted of both males and females, with heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and asexual. He does not just associate clothing with transvestites but it goes more beyond simply physical interpretation. After the second world war, in both Europe and North America, transvestite behaviour until the 1960s (both by male and female bodied persons) was seen as an expression of homosexuality or suppressed homosexual impulses. Also, the three-gendered framework of Hirschfeld disappeared, and the two-gender framework became the frame of reference again.

Nasirin (2005) distinguishes transvestite and gay according to the way they dress and their inclinations towards having sexual relationships with men. David Lim (2005) on the other hand mentions that a man is considered as transvestites when he dresses in women attire and behaves like ones. Both Nasirin (2005) and David Lim (2005) agree that transvestites dress in woman’s clothing and behaves like women.

Nasirin (2005) however expands his discussion by mapping queerness and the literary scenes in Malaysia in the 21st century whereby he found that it has become a trend for English literature in Malaysia to include dialogues of transvestite as part of their contents. He further expands his work on queerness by pointing out that Malaysian short story writers like Raslan Kassim and Dina Zaman indirectly use transvestite characters in their publications.

Nasirin's view is supported by David Lim's (2005) paper, presented at the conference on sexualities, gender and rights in Bangkok. He describes that Maknyah characters are part of film making in Malaysia. He pointed out that even in an aggressive film like KL Menjerit, maknyahs' roles were being embraced in making the film more interesting and likable.

Hence, in the context of Malaysian society, transvestites have been implicitly regarded legal and well accepted. It is proven true when the characters of transvestites portrayed in the comedy soap show of 2 +1 played by Imuda received overwhelming positive responses from audience of TV3. The same goes to the recent drama shown on Astro and TV3 channels entitled "Wali" that portrayed the actor Ahmad Tamimi Siregar playing two roles of a father and a transvestite dancer simultaneously which later receives overwhelming critics and good responses from the media as well as the audience. Another TV sitcom that extensively used transvestite character is the Senario, produced by TV3. It hits stardom and was highly rated as interesting by the viewers when it was initially introduced. One distinguished point worth highlighting is that generally in Malaysia the transvestite characters add flavour to a TV show and was well accepted by the public.

3.0 Objectives of the Research

The general objective of the research is to investigate the role of transvestites in the tourism industry in the South-east Asian countries. Specifically the objectives are as follows:

- a. To discover the profile of transvestites in the South-east Asia.
- b. To briefly examine the various forms of roles played by the transvestites in promoting tourism in a country.
- c. To distinguish the points of similarities and differences in the performances made by the transvestites in Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand.

3.0 Significance of the paper

This research is essential for people engaged in the study of sociology and anthropology in understanding the behaviour of transvestites in different parts of the world. It can also contribute to the understanding of behaviours of special group of people that is part of a larger society. Transvestites are also now a common phenomenon in South-east Asia and it is very important to understand their ways of lives which include communicational behaviour. Their contribution to the welfare of the ASEAN countries at large must be clearly understood if better strategies are desired by the governments of those countries. Ministry of Education, The Department of Social Affairs, The Ministry of Youth and Sports and The Ministry of Higher Education (many transvestites are university students) and The Ministry of Tourism in ASEAN Countries would benefit from this paper. Researchers from universities might want to perform further studies on this area.

2.0 Review on the involvements of Third Gender In Tourism

The writer observes that little effort has been made to write on the connection between gender and tourism. After gazing through the internet, magazines and newspapers, the writer managed to discover some writings made on the contribution of transvestites in the tourism industry.

In the Travel Time column, The New Straits Times newspaper (Tuesday 21st April 2009) had allocated two pages full coverage on The Island of Phuket in Thailand. One of the elements promoted was the night life of Phuket. The writer for the travel newspaper, Zalian Mod Som mentions:

“The nightlife in Phuket is pulsating, with flickering lights, blasting music and party goers.....Also in a similar Las Vegas style is the Simon Cabaret which attracts those looking for something different as its billboards advertise having ‘the world’s most beautiful lady-boys...With superb stage sets and fabulous, stunning costumes, its easy to forget that the only things these trans-genders do are lip-synch and look pretty and sexy”. The Simon cabaret offers a 90 minute mimic show at Patong Beach. The show runs twice daily at 7.30 p.m and 9.30 p.m consecutively.

The Star newspaper once again (Sunday, 4th October 2009) highlighted the roles of the society in helping transsexuals to reveal their own identity to the public.

In The Star (4th February 2004), Bukit Bintang MCA division chairman Datuk Dr Lee Chong Meng proposed to boost transvestite shows in Kuala Lumpur. He added that transvestite shows should be promoted as a tourist attraction and also to enable the transvestites to earn a proper living. He said that this should be included in the proposed project to upgrade Lorong Haji Taib in the Chow Kit area. The proposal to develop the area is being studied by City Hall.

In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the beauty pageant was also held but under the nomenclature of Miss World for the transvestites.

Asia web Direct through its page Phuket.Com (retrieved 11 October 2009, 4.26 p.m) promotes Patong Cabaret show by the lady-boys. The web appears as below:

“Captivating ladyboy performers attract throngs of people every night at Phuket Simon Cabaret. Not as well known but well worth seeing is the **Playhouse** on Rat-U-Thit Rd, which runs cabaret shows every evening in its small yet spectacular theatre. Excellent restaurant attached. Many more of the same can be seen at some of the Soi Paradise bars and at the **Moulin Rose** (formerly Andaman Queen) at the end of the famous Soi Katoey. (Katoey literally translated means Ladyboy.”

In the thingstodosingapore.com (retrieved 11 October 2009, 5.30 p. m) the area of Changi was mentioned as the location for transvestites in Singapore. The writer mentioned that it is difficult to distinguish the transvestites in those areas whether they are male or female.

In Thailand, the Miss Tiffany Beauty pageant was given extensive promotion by setting its own home page. As of 11th October 2009, the beauty pageant remains flamboyant and promising whereby the grand event was given full coverage by just clicking on the website. It was obviously mentioned that the Pattaya city is well known for its ever famous Miss Tiffany Beauty Pageant. Extracting the quotation on the website, the writer found that it is a well promoted contest and grandeur event. The event has run for almost 35 years and it has been acclaimed as part of the successful growth of Pattaya city, Thailand most popular resort city. The show was broadcast live throughout Thailand on the National Thai Television Channel and had attracted 15 million viewers. It does not only promote Pattaya City as a tourist spot but also capture the heart of the novice to donate for a good cause such as for AIDS Foundation and other charity programmes. It is mentioned on the web site that the main objectives is to promote tourism in Pattaya by providing attractive events in Pattaya. It is also aimed at promoting a positive image towards transvestites internationally.

In Malaysia, transvestites are sometimes hired to play roles in films and dramas which indirectly influence the perceptions of tourist that come to Malaysia towards the third gender. Similar trends are observed in the Philippines where the characters of transvestites become part and partial of film making. Besides given roles, they are also involved as make-up artists.

In the Philippines, transvestite beauty queen is also promoted through the website tourism- philippines.com. The city of Pampanga is one of the locations noted for harnessing the skills of transvestites in beauty pageantry. In the Philippines, Beauty Queen Pageant is also an agenda to promote tourist to the Philippines. As stated in the Philippine Ladyboy Beauty Contest (retrieved 12 October 2009, 8.30 a. m):

“The Amazing Philippines Beauties Pageant is a Beauty Pageant with a twist and all the contestants are transsexual, transvestites and cross-dressers. The Amazing Philippines Beauties pageant has been running for the past 4 years and is now really gaining a lot of attention. The grand winner earns their slot in the Amazing Philippine Theatre Shows inspired by the world-famous performances in Thailand, and will also be shipped off to Thailand to compete for the title of Miss International Queen the following year. With the promise of a job where tips can be higher than 100 dollars a night, the pageant has become the most prestigious, one of its kind in the country. The Thai inspired Amazing Philippine Theatre was established in 2001 to produce the “Amazing Philippine Show,” a theatrical variety show that features Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and Korean folk dances, song numbers, comedy acts, among others, performed by the most beautiful transvestites in the Philippines. Thailand pioneered the variety shows featuring transvestites with Alcazar and Tiffany in Pattaya and Calypso and Mambo in Bangkok. These shows have and will continue to attract large numbers of tourists from all over the world. Lee Jong Hyun, the theatre’s chairman hopes that the Amazing Philippines Beauties Pageant will grow into the international scene rivaling Thailand, and in turn help bring more tourism to the country. “One of the objectives of the pageant is to uplift the way people look at gay beauty pageants. We want society to accept transvestites and transgender people as productive individuals.

The company now employs 147 workers in various departments within the Manila Film Center and in the past year they have seen more than 280,000 customers through the doors. Koreans are biggest fans at 80 percent with Chinese, Japanese and local tourists also watching the shows.”

www.indonesia-tourism.com (retrieved 12th October 2009, 10.00 a. m), mentions about the involvements of transvestites in Indonesian tourism. One of the commentators on the website mentioned that a film about transvestites in Jakarta, Indonesia was produced. He also mentioned that it is a beautiful double portrayal of Nancy and Nuke and the acceptance of transvestites in the largest Muslim community. A video of 58 seconds was posted on the web showing an Indonesian transvestite singing and dancing at a theme park.

From the above literature, the writer can conclude that Transvestite Beauty Pageant is also part of the tourism package offered by almost all South-east Asian countries, be it a muslim country or otherwise. Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia prove to be active players in promoting transvestite as an element in tourism of their respective countries.

3.0 Research Methodology

This paper is prepared by collecting secondary and primary data. Due to the nature of the topic, the writer collected information from newspapers, magazines and the internet.

In order to obtain an insight into matters pertaining to transvestites, the writer interviewed 15 transvestites who are members of the Paper Dolls Show. Basically, a Paper Dolls Show group consists of 10 to 20 transvestites acting as impersonators of famous local or international artistes performing at night clubs and discos around Kuala Lumpur. They were interviewed with the aim to have some basic personal backgrounds of transvestite performers.

Since the writer is based in Malaysia, obviously it is an impossible mission to get responses from transvestites in Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines. However, the writer had the chance to visit some of the shows a few years ago while visiting Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta. The experience patronizing the shows has become a source of data for the writer to rewrite the experience collected previously while witnessing the performances. Observation while watching the show had become very valuable to the writer in arriving at the findings for this paper.

The interview methods were used to obtain first hand information from the transvestites in Kuala Lumpur. The purposive snowballing approaches were used in gaining the samples of respondents for this research. The data obtained were quoted individually and analysed qualitatively. Opinions put forward by the respondents in the conversation during the carried out interviews were recorded and quoted as naturally as possible. The opinions were then analysed to see the differences and similarities in the points given by the respondents. The outcomes were then illustrated manually in a tabular form. The researchers also use observation as a way in understanding their gesture, behaviour and obtain information. In ensuring the comfort of the respondents, the researchers have to wait and follow their tight schedule, since many of the respondents are dancers and designers. Samples of 15 transvestites involved in beauty queen and paper dolls

performances were chosen as respondents. These respondents are considered as the prominent figures of the Malaysian transvestite social groups in their respective locations.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Basic personal data of the transvestites in Kuala Lumpur that are involved in Paper Dolls Show

4.1.1 Age

Table 1.0: Age

Age bracket	%
15-20	33.3 (5)
21-25	46.7 (7)
26-30	13.3 (2)
Above 30	6.7 (1)
Total	100 (15)

Majority (80%) of the transvestite interviewed were in the age bracket of 15 to 25 years old. Most of the performers are still young and they are very inspired to become glamorous entertainers. The writer found that only one respondent aged above 30 years old (42 years) which explains that entertainers must be young, pretty and energetic. One of the respondents met was only 16 years old although he is still considered as an underage to start working in such establishment.

4.1.2 Educational background

Table 2.0: Educational Background

Educational background	%
Primary school	0
Lower secondary	6.66 (1)
Upper and higher secondary	80 (12)
Diploma	6.66 (1)
Degree/ Masters	6.66 (1)
Total	100 (15)

Most (86.7%) of the transvestites involved in the Paper Dolls show are educated up to the upper and higher secondary that is either they have passed their Malaysian Certificate of Examination which is equivalent to “O” Level or Higher School Certificate that is equivalent to “A” level. One respondent holds a Diploma in

Culinary Arts and another possesses a Bachelor Degree in Banking. All of the respondents are able to speak English although not very well polished.

4.1.3 Profession

Table 3.0: Profession

Profession	%
Dancer	40 (6)
Make-up artist	20 (3)
clerk	26.7 (4)
Professionals such teachers, bankers etc	13.3 (2)
Total	100 (15)

Majority (60%) of the transvestites are involved in the creative industry working as dancers and make-up artists. The rest of the respondents are working as clerks. Only 2 of them are professionals, mainly due to their tertiary education that they have secured a Diploma and Bachelor's Degree.

4.1.4 Family members

Table 4.0: Family members

Number of family members	%
1-3	26.7 (4)
4-6	60 (9)
7-10	13.3 (2)
More than 10	0
Total	100 (15)

60% of the respondents have family members ranging from 4 to 6 persons in a household exclusive of the parents. This is a common figure of Malaysian family which is in the range of 4 to 6 person in a family.

4.2 Any other family members as transvestites too

When posed with the question of whether any of their family members are transvestites, almost 93% mentioned that they are the only transvestites born in their family. However one respondent (7%) agreed that he has a younger sibling which is also a transvestite and they are best friends at home.

4.3 Types of performances in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand

In terms of performances, most of the performances offered to the audience are a cabaret show. In Malaysia they labeled themselves as Paper Dolls Show. Similar show was observed in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. The Cabaret resemblance kind of show is common and had overwhelming reception from the audience. The audience was entertained by their professional mimic show. Although in the Philippines, some of the shows are not just lip-sync or mimic, their show had received positive responses from the audience. Most of the shows in Malaysia are lip sync. Tourist will be given an opportunity to witness the show if they asked on the where about of the shows. In Malaysia and Indonesia, one has to ask around to see such show because normally it is not readily available on the website. Another reason could be due to the religion of the people in that country which is mainly Islam. However in the Philippines and Thailand, information about the lady-boy shows is easily accessible on the internet. Information such as the where about of the show and the components of the show are readily available. In Singapore, it is not that easy to know about the lady boy shows because they are very discrete about those activities. However, if one asks around, it is not that difficult to witness a drag queen show in Singapore. The Drag Queen show in Singapore is very much similar to the British way of performing where they will have witty speech and talk in between the show. The writer once watched a short segment of Drag Queen show in Singapore on Travel and Living Channel.

Besides the Paper Dolls or Drag Queen Shows, the transvestites are also prone to organize Beauty Queen Pageants which come in many brands, labels and names such as the world famous Miss Tiffany of Thailand. In Malaysia, the beauty pageant is named as The Miss World, whereas in the Philippines, it is called Miss International Queen. Likewise, the Singaporeans name it the Drag Queen Pageant while in Indonesia it was given a local flavour of “Ratu Waria”. Waria is a combination of two Indonesian words that are Wanita (female) and Pria (male).

The types of transvestite performances offered to tourists can be summarized in Table 5.0 below:

Table 5.0: Types of performances offered to tourists

Country/ Types of Performances	Malaysia	Thailand	Singapore	Indonesia	The Philippines
Beauty Pageant	Miss World	Miss Tiffany	Drag Queen	Ratu	Miss International
Shows	Mimic/ lip sync Cabaret show/ sometimes traditional cultural show	Mimic/ lip sync as well as live performances Cabaret show/ sometimes traditional cultural show	Mimic/ lip sync Cabaret show/ sometimes traditional cultural show	Mimic/ lip sync Cabaret show/ sometimes traditional cultural show	Mimic/ lip sync as well as live performances Cabaret show/ sometimes traditional cultural show
Any Obscenity?	no	Yes	no	no	no
Performers	Young, slim and pretty, mostly of Malay and Chinese race	Young, slim and pretty, strictly Thai	Young, slim and pretty, combination of Malay, Indian and Chinese race	Young, slim and pretty, strictly Indonesian	Young, slim, fat, big sized and cute, strictly Filipino
Song and dance	Western, local, and international, most contemporary and sometimes traditional	Western, local, and international, most contemporary and sometimes traditional	Western, local, and international, most contemporary	Western, local, and international, most contemporary	Western, local, and international, most contemporary

4.4 Promotion of the show- worldwide or locally

Most of the transvestite shows are promoted through the internet. Sometimes, they even have their special websites such as the Miss Tiffany Beauty Contest. Although they are interested in promoting their shows, they also take some initiatives in promoting the locations of their shows such they promote Pattaya, Phuket, Bukit Bintang Kuala Lumpur and many other places. In Malaysia, information on transvestite shows are not readily available on the internet, perhaps it is due to the small scale operation of the paper Dolls Group which is not fully commercialized. Similar trend is observed in Singapore. However, in countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, it is well promoted through the internet and a tourist can easily spot the premises of ladyboy show. The promotion of those shows in Thailand and Philippines are normally tied together

with tourism promotion. This phenomenon can be clearly observed in Miss Tiffany website and the Pampanga website in the Philippines.

4.5 Contribution to the tourism sector in the country

Although the contribution of the transvestite shows are not that remarkable, nevertheless it has somehow contributed to the rebranding of tourism packages of all countries in South-east Asia. The transvestite show, be it in the form of Cabaret show or Beauty Pageant has contributed to the adventure of tourism in most countries. This contribution might look minimal but its impact has been very fruitful to some countries for instance the Miss Tiffany Beauty Pageant which has attracted many visitors to visit Pattaya Beach every year just to witness the prestigious show. Similar trends were observed in other countries around South-east Asia especially the Philippines and Malaysia. Witnessing the success story of Thailand, they tried to emulate the shows and lure tourists to their countries by organizing interesting events such the Beauty Pageant. It is obvious that in Malaysia, some politicians are trying hard to change the negative perceptions towards transvestites by changing their roles into a more meaningful contribution to the country's tourism industry.

5.0 Conclusion and suggestions

The third gender exists in most countries in the world and has been open to criticism by all walks of life in the society. Their roles in developing the tourism industry has been viewed as less remarkable although it is proven as successful in some part of South-east Asian countries such as Thailand. The success story of the Lady Boy show in Thailand has urged transvestites around the world to emulate what has been achieved in Thailand. Thailand has set a model of turning transvestite adventure into a profitable endeavour.

Most of the shows offered to tourists in the South-east Asian countries are similar ranging from Cabaret-like shows to the Beauty Pageant. The contribution of the third gender people to the tourism industry throughout the world cannot be disputed since many simply visited a country just to witness shows offered by the transvestites.

No matter how small is the contribution of the third gender people, citizens of tourism have to embrace with open arms that this sub-group people in the society is not to be forgotten in terms of their contribution to the making of a better place to live in this world.

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