

Introduction: Representations in The Creative Arts of Southeast Asia, Negotiating Meanings and Identities

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ABSTRACT

This collection of articles highlights issues related to the representation of social meanings and identities in the production and reception of the creative arts in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Burma. The articles illustrate that the creative arts are sites of dialogue which articulate diverse meanings to different audiences. They are forms of representation which generate new identities and provide spaces for artistes to speak. Artistes become agents of change as they negotiate their identities and respond to larger social issues and forces such as gender, ethnicity, modernity, nation building, migration, global flows of culture, militarism and authoritarianism. The articles exemplify ways of negotiating the dominant modes of power that prevail in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *representation in the arts, negotiating meanings, Southeast Asian creative arts, flows of culture*

This special issue of *Wacana Seni* is a collection of articles on the creative arts which were presented at the international conference entitled *Southeast Asia, A Global Crossroads* on 8–9 December 2005 in Chiang Mai, Thailand¹. This conference was organised by the SEASREP (Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program) Foundation in celebration of its 10th anniversary. Through grants funded mainly by the Toyota Foundation, SEASREP has promoted collaborative and comparative research about the Southeast Asian region by researchers within the region.

The articles reflect issues about the arts that are of concern among the present generation of Southeast Asian researchers and arts practitioners in the region. In particular, they point to the strategies of representation and contestation in the creative arts. How is meaning produced through representation, discourse, image or performance? How do playwrights, musicians, craftsmen and visual artists rework codes of representation such as local stories, characters or languages or traditional songs to create new social identities or to subvert authoritarian rule? How do the artists and consumers negotiate meaning as they respond to the play of power that takes place between the state, cultural producers and multinational conglomerates? How does the researcher recover the voices of the marginalised who have lost cultural objects and codes of representation? The focus of inquiry is on the "voices of the other" including postcolonial subjects, the marginalised, minorities and migrants at border areas.

RESEARCH ON THE ARTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Until the mid-1970s, academic writing on the performing and visual arts of Southeast Asia was mainly written by scholars from Europe and America. Early researchers such as Jaap Kunst and Colin Macphie focused on Javanese and Balinese gamelan respectively, Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spiess described dance and drama in Bali while Claire Holt analysed the

visual arts. Works on music were rich with descriptions of musical instruments, music theory, scale and elements of style; while those on dance and theatre focused on techniques, structure and repertoire. These early researchers also wrote about the functions of the art forms and their cultural contexts (Kartomi 1995).

Many of the early works were court-centred. The Dutch scholar, Jaap Kunst who documented Javanese music with the help of Indonesian aristocrats in the 1930s, considered popular theatre (such as *komedi stambul* and *ketoprak*) and the hybridised Indonesian *kroncong* music) which were popular among the common people, as inferior (Kunst 1973). The trend of studying court forms continued during the post-independence period. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that local scholars (many of whom were sent overseas to obtain higher degrees) and their foreign counterparts began to study folk and popular forms of performing and visual arts of the region seriously. However, the ethnographic documentation of traditional forms in their cultural contexts and formal analyses of structures, remained a focal point as scholars feared the dying of cultures in the wake of modernisation and conflict in specific countries in Southeast Asia.

This collection of articles marks a shift of methodological focus away from the description and analysis of the structures, style and functions of court forms of music, dance, drama or visual arts which are associated with the earlier researchers of Southeast Asian arts. Rather, the authors in this volume study folk, contemporary and commercial forms of popular and visual arts. They focus on issues pertaining to the practices of representation, contestation and agency in the production and consumption of culture, which are current in cultural, postcolonial and performance studies. Nevertheless, their writings continue to be rich in empirical data with lively descriptions of sound, movement and images. As many of them are actively involved in creating and performing art works themselves, they are empowered to voice their opinions against any essentialised descriptions of art or culture.

The writers in this special issue also come from different disciplines (anthropology, cultural studies, art history, ethnomusicology, gender studies, performance studies, theatre and visual arts), and are multidisciplinary in their approaches. The articles point to the increasing mutual influence and shared problematics between the different disciplines. Methodological crossovers provide a departure for further research on the arts which is emerging as a challenging area of research but which had remained in the periphery in academic discourse in the past. Thinking across disciplines has increased the analytical tools for research and provided the potential for comparison between nations.

While cultural ethnographies in the past designated the researcher as the specialist and others as informants to be cited, the "self-reflexive" fieldwork reports by many of the writers in this volume provide a forum for dialogue between researcher and informants over a range of issues. The ethnographer or researcher no longer speaks with "automatic authority" for others who are "unable to speak for themselves" or considered "pre-literate" (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 10, 14).

REPRESENTATIONS, ARTICULATING MEANINGS AND CULTURAL STRUGGLE

Stuart Hall, who was instrumental in developing cultural studies as a multidisciplinary approach to study culture and ideology, has argued that cultural texts or practices are sites where the articulation of meaning takes place. Meaning is "expressed in a specific context, a specific historical moment, within a specific discourse" (Hall 1981).

Cultural meanings are not "reflected" but constructed and disseminated through systems of representation or what Hall calls "languages" (Hall 1997). These systems of representation include cultural texts such as literature, art works (painting, installation art and comics),

performances (dance, drama and music), film and other types of new media. Various layers of meaning are conveyed through the use of semiotic or representation codes² such as costume, visual imagery, sets, music, choreography, verbal and gestural languages and performance elements. These codes can be interpreted differently by different audiences.

Because diverse meanings can be attributed to the same cultural text or practice, representational systems can become sites of struggle. On the one hand, representational systems recreate the ideologies of those who control the texts. Ideologies produced by the economic or political elite tend to be more powerful and dominant. When these elites represent, they control how others perceive them. Postcolonial studies, a subfield of literary studies which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, provide many examples. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) analysed the representational practices in 19th century European texts, showing that orientalist colonial discourses were influential in governing and suppressing "the Orient."

On the other hand, because ideologies are constructed, they can also be deconstructed. There is potential for agency and representational systems have the capability to subvert ideologies. Textual contestations to colonial representations have taken various forms. The *Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989) traces various courses through which the Orient "answers back" to the dominance of the Empire through literature. Likewise, artists in postcolonial countries have reclaimed pre-contact forms of performance, ritual, visual arts, language, costume, performance space, character, historical context and other conventions to deconstruct colonial texts and to "answer back" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996).

Concerned with the body, lyrics, sound, image, cultural objects and other codes of representation as sites of struggle, the authors focus on the links between form and content

and counter-strategies in representation. As meaning is constructed, the contexts that condition cultural expressions become important. The various tiers of meaning and coded information that a performance or art work communicates, can operate counter-discursively. Hence the alternative staging of a scene, use of specific movement or painting of a particular figure, can be used to express different meanings or to subvert dominant discourses or ideologies.³

It must be emphasised, however, that the boundaries of subjugation and contestation in the arts are difficult to pin down. The articles in this special issue go beyond simple dichotomies such as West/East or State/People or Global/Local. Rather, the arts are seen as discursive fields in which artistes navigate meanings through representations. They investigate a range of cultural texts or representation systems such as music (Ferguson, Tan Shzr Ee, Baes), visual arts, photography and art installations (Datuin, Tolentino, Baes), material culture (Tolentino, Baes), comics (Fernando) and theatre (Rajendran).

The problematic dealt with in this special issue is how specific social, ethnic and gendered identities are being articulated and represented in the creation, staging and reception of the arts. Through signification, the arts play an important role in the construction, negotiation and exploration of these identities. Identities are, however, never fixed in some "essentialised past," but undergo constant change as they are subject to the continuous "play of history, culture and power" (Hall 1990: 224)⁴. They are defined by continuity with the past as well as difference as artistes dialogue with local and global political and economic forces. The following chapters illustrate the repositioning of Southeast Asian identities by artistes in relation to forces such as global flows of culture, colonialism, gender and patriarchy, modernity, nation building, authoritarianism as well as militarism.

GLOBAL FLOWS GENERATE NEW IDENTITIES

The first two articles deal with the production of new identities as a consequence of the global flows of culture. They illustrate that global culture produced by transnational conglomerates and circulated as commodities need not necessarily end in a culturally homogeneous world. As Appadurai (1990) emphasises, global culture disseminated through "ideoscapes, ethnoscapas, finanscapas and technoscapas," is characterised by "disjuncture and difference."

Popular music is a case in point. The dissemination of Anglo-American sounds and technologies has not led to homogenisation that some cultural imperialism analysts feared (Adorno 1991). New musical syncretism have emerged from the exchange between nations and regions. Global pop has been transformed through the incorporation of local aesthetics and embodies new identities and social meanings.

Jane Ferguson's article *Sublime Rock: Burmese Popular Music, Language Code Switching and Sentimentalism among Shan Migrants at the Thai-Burma Border* looks at the consumption of Burmese popular music by the Shans who have migrated across the border into Thailand as a consequence of conflict and poverty. She observes that Burmese pop music communicates in multiple ways to the Shan migrants and is "a site of struggle for Shan identity and culture." Shan recording artists such as Sai Mao and Sai Htee Saing are particularly popular as many of their songs "deal with aspects of being Shan in a country ruled by Burmans." Representational codes which appear in the texts such as Shan clothing, and local foods like the *Hto Nao* bean (the staple food of the migrants) signify Shan ethnicity and identity. The singers express nostalgia for their Shan homeland and life in the lyrics of the songs. The Burmese texts are sung with Shan accent showing difference from other popular songs sung by Burmese singers.

Popular Burmese rock songs are also sung by the young Shan people in guitar and drumming jam sessions at the Thai-Burma border. In these sessions, the singers "play with the language and other signifiers bringing in local meanings to the foreign songs." Language switching between Shan, Tai and Burmese, is also part of everyday interaction among the Shan migrants. Ferguson shows that the Shan migrants rework the meaning of the pop song texts in relation to their personal experiences. Through these pop songs, they express longing for their Shan homeland, challenge Burmese cultural discourses and create new identities living in Thailand.

Just as localised pop songs can project the recreated identities of the musicians, new material culture produced for commercial purposes can also signify the changing identities of the makers. In his article, *Authentic/Adulterated Artifacts: Material Culture and Ethnicity in Contemporary Java and Ifugao*, Delfin Tolentino, Jr. writes about the impact of globalisation and commercialism on the material culture of the indigenous Ifugao from the Gran Cordillera Central of the Philippines and the *batik* and *topeng* (mask) designers in Yogyakarta, Central Java. The Ifugao have recarved the *bul-ul* figures, wooden vessels and other objects used for rituals as "curios of tourist art" following "aesthetics introduced by Manila antique dealers and interior designers." Likewise, *batik* designs which were linked to social rank, ceremonial occasions and community rituals in Yogyakarta, have been replaced by those depicting "landscapes, rural scenes and portraits of natives" for the consumption of tourists. The *topeng* used in masked dance, are now reproduced for "decorative purposes" and no longer linked to mythology or characters of the dance.

Although dissociated from their original meanings, Tolentino contends that these material objects still function as markers of local identity that is being transformed. They are "representations of a native culture that has changed" and should be seen as "attempts to revitalise old traditions, by people who know that they are no longer artisans working

in isolation but producers in a global network prompted by commercial demands" and "contemporary notions of decorative arts."

NEGOTIATING AND RECONSTRUCTING GENDERED AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES

In the subsequent article entitled *Reclaiming the Healing Arts of the Ancient Priestess: Babaylanism as Site of Southeast Asian "Feminisms,"* Flaudette May V. Datuin argues that women artists have intervened in the discourses that naturalise gender hierarchies through representational systems such as painting and installation art. These art works provide contexts for the reconstitution of gender roles and identities and the articulation of a "multiplicity of feminisms." Analysing the paintings of women artists in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, Datuin shows that these artists "return the gaze of the patriarchal vision" by reclaiming ancient female goddesses and priestesses in their creations. By so doing, the women artists are empowered to represent themselves, and become involved in defining an "emerging feminine aesthetic in Asia." Datuin argues that "strategic essentialism," a term introduced by Spivak, is an effective strategy employed by women to show difference and to claim a speaking voice.

In "Hanoman's Task," Ni Made Sri Asih of Bali painted Sita, the female lead character and goddess in the Ramayana, as a strong and courageous woman. Sita sits on Hanuman's shoulders and holds a *keris* as though she is ready for battle. This representation contrasts from the Javanese version where Sita is presented as fragile and subjugated. Similarly, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, the only mural painter in Thailand, painted Thoranee, the Earth Goddess, who was witness to Buddha's right to enlightenment, as one who could create and destroy at the same time. In an art exhibition by women artists (curated by Datuin) held at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines 2004, the goddess Mebuyan was featured in a performance ritual signifying women's "life-giving powers" and the "capacity to nurture." Mebuyan moved

to the accompaniment of prayers chanted by the women artists and painted the walls with "fluids pressed out of her many breasts." Through Mebuyan, the women artists then called on Babaylan, the ancient priestess who was the traditional bearer of knowledge, culture and medicine, to be present. For the women artists of Bali, Thailand and the Philippines, the female goddesses and priestesses represented sites of comfort, pain as well as of possible liberation.

The next two articles examine how artistes negotiate distinctive forms of identification which are constructed by the state and cultural elites of Malaysia and Singapore. As I have discussed elsewhere, nation building and the creation of a national identity among the diverse ethnic groups involve a degree of streamlining and homogenisation. The state devotes funds in self-representation and disseminates its discourses through the media and selected cultural texts and events (Tan 1990; Yao 2000). Nonetheless, the state's notion of national identity is often negotiated from below. The performing and creative arts are often ways of showing difference. The following two articles illustrate different representational strategies employed by artists in Malaysia and Singapore which subvert official national identities based on essentialist ethnic categories.

Charlene Rajendran's article *Negotiating Difference in Krishen Jit's Theatre: Staging Identities and Contesting Boundaries in Multicultural Malaysia* looks at how the late Krishen Jit, one of the pioneers of contemporary theatre in Malaysia, uses "casting against race" and the "mixing of languages" to negotiate this articulation of essential identities. While official national identity is based on racial division into four essentialist categories of Malay, Chinese, Indian and others, the experience below the nation is of linguistic and cultural mixing. By casting a Malay boy as the Indian, Ratnam, in the production of *The Cord* (1994) by K. S. Maniam, Jit challenged the "construct of identity based singularly on race" and projected the "alternative imaginings of self." In *A Chance Encounter* (1999), Anita, the young cosmopolitan Chinese

salesgirl mixed English, Malay and Cantonese words, accents and syntaxes. Fatima, an elderly Penang Indian Muslim, used local Penang Malay and some English. Language switching and the blending of words reflect everyday reality in Malaysia. Jit's characters depicted ways of being Malaysian without being bound by language or ethnicity. His plays also provided an arena where this "cultural phenomenon could be staged and publicly performed for reflection and interrogation."

In the subsequent article entitled *A Chinese Take(Away) of Brahms: How the Singapore Chinese Orchestra Courted Europe*, Tan Shzr Ee explores the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's (SCO) multilayered representations of Singaporean Chinese identity to foreign audiences in London and Budapest. These representations ranged from various viewpoints rather than the discourse of a homogeneous national imagery. The programming strategy was influenced by "state endorsed identity" (as the SCO was set up by the Prime Minister and the tour to London and Budapest was sponsored by the Singapore Tourism Board and the National Arts Council), requests of the international hosts and the conductor's preferences.

The conductor tried to attract the audiences in the two cities with different programming and constructed situational identity to audiences. For the London audiences, the conductor presented a modern and cosmopolitan Chineseness. The program included Chinese avant-garde pieces of composers from Hong Kong and China. These works were accompanied by multimedia presentations of the "painting of a celestial creature" and "live demonstrations of an artist painting a scroll." Also included in the program was Tan Dun's *Crouching Tiger* which was familiar to British audiences and requested by the British hosts. By contrast, in the program for Budapest, the conductor presented exoticised Chinese music which had Malay folk melodies incorporated. As the audience there was not accustomed to Chinese music, the orchestra performed arrangements of the works of Hungarian composers such as Kodaly and Bartok and Brahm's Hungarian dance which were known to the audience. By representing

a different cosmopolitan or exoticised Chineseness, the SCO conductor's programming subverted Singapore's official policy of maintaining essential group identities (such as Chinese, Malay, Indian and others).

CONTESTING AUTHORITARIANISM AND MILITARISM

The last two articles focus on representational strategies used by artists to envision change in states which are under authoritarian and military rule. The authors illustrate how communities utilise codes of representation to symbolically contest inequality and subjugation under regimes where the distribution of power is imbalanced. Signifiers can also be employed to recoup identities and traditions that have been lost due to conflict.

Dakila Fernando's study entitled *Militarism and Authoritarian Rule: Visualizing Desire for Social and Political Change in the Philippines and Indonesia through the Comics of Nonoy Marcelo and Sapto Raharjo (Athonk)*, maintains that comics is a means to express sentiments for change in societies under authoritarian and military rule. For Dakila, comic is a medium that reaches all groups including the poor and uneducated. Diverse meanings can be interpreted from the humorous images and texts. Athonk, a student activist from Semarang, expressed strong sentiments towards President Suharto's authoritarian rule in *Bad Times Stories 1 and 2* (1994). He used ball pens to draw and photocopied his comics for distribution. The main characters in the series were represented by three black demons who were constantly trying to escape from the suppression of the angels. Athonk reversed the roles of the devils and angels, symbolising devils as good and angels as bad forces. Militarism was signified by sketches of angels with protruding eyes wearing white uniforms, immovable stone heads and images of "armed attack, ammunition and bombs."

In the Philippines, Nonoy Marcelo created the comic series *Ikabod Bubwit* to protest against President Marcos' authoritarian and military rule and to "visualise change" in the 1970s. The comics were published in newspaper bulletins in the late 1970s and later as comic books using pen and ink. The comics revolved around the adventures of a mouse called Ikabod (mouse in the Philippines) who lived in Dagalandia. Dagalandia was ruled by the Big Boss, a lazy fat cat called Myawoka, who was perpetually trying to kill the mice. Myawoka represented the dictator while Ikabod and his friends represented the Filipino people. The latter developed ways to cope with the hardships living in a world of constant fear. Both artists used humorous images and texts as a symbolic attack on their respective states, to comment on the social ills and mismanagement of the respective rulers and to call for change.

The final article, *When There is No More Music...or...Dumagat Internal Refugees in the Philippines and the Issues of "Cultural Objecthood"* by Jonas Baes, shows how photographs of material culture are modes of representation which can help the younger generation recover traditions and identities that they have lost as a consequence of conflict and militarism. Baes focuses on the Dumagat indigenous people living at the Kanlungan refugee center in Mindanao. These "internal refugees" had to leave their ancestral lands because of armed conflict between the "government's military and rebel groups including the communist New People's Army." Militarism increased as the indigenous people opposed mining operations and the building of dams by big corporations. These internal refugees have not only lost their land but their cultural objects and music as well.

Baes recounts the experiences of a cultural activist, Sergio, who set out to produce a play about the plight of the Dumagat so that the marginalisation and militarisation of the internal refugees could be publicised. Sergio wanted to let the children tell the stories of Nanay Adeling whose husband was murdered by the military as he opposed the building of a dam in their ancestral land. He wanted the children to use their cultural traditions but the latter

had no memories of their indigenous cultural objects as these items had been estranged from their context and place of origin. Sergio helped the Dumagat recover their history and traditions by showing photographs of traditional material culture to Nanay. As she looked at the photographs, Nanay recalled the past and created the play together with Sergio. Cultural representations are ways for those who have lost their cultural traditions to reclaim their past and identities. Baes concludes that musical recordings are other forms of representation which could be used to bring back memories about the musical cultures of these internal refugees.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The articles in this collection highlight issues related to the representation of social meanings and identities in the production and reception of the creative arts in selected parts of Southeast Asia. Covering a range of cultural texts and nations of Southeast Asia, the articles illustrate that the creative arts are sites of dialogue and struggle. They articulate diverse meanings to diverse communities and audiences. They are forms of representation which generate new identities and provide spaces for artistes to speak. Artistes become agents of change as they negotiate their identities and respond to larger social issues and forces such as gender, ethnicity, modernity, nation building, migration, global flows of culture and authoritarianism.

By providing detailed analyses of the creative works, this special issue of *Wacana Seni* raises significant issues of methodology that can contribute to further studies and comparative analyses of the creative arts. While ethnographic fieldwork remains significant for an adequate understanding of the creative works and their representations, one needs to go beyond pure description and formal analysis. As cultures are not prescribed some "essential" essence but are constantly being constructed and transformed, a study of the social and historical contexts of their creation are imperative. We have set out to deconstruct binary oppositions so that

the multitextuality of the genres is held in balance. Collectively, the articles provide ways of negotiating the dominant modes of power that continue to prevail in Southeast Asia.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) Foundation for inviting me to organise two panels on the arts for the conference and subsequently to edit and publish the papers. Most of the articles in this special issue of *Wacana Seni* were presented at the creative arts panels, namely, *Tradition and Border Crossings: The Creation of Contemporary Performance in Southeast Asia* and *Art as a Medium of Political Expression*. Charlene Rajendran's paper was co-opted after the conference. To all the paper writers, a note of thanks for their patience and cooperation during the long process of editing. I also thank Prof. Maris Diokno of the SEASREP Foundation in Manila and Yumiko Himemoto (Toyota Foundation) who provided support and encouragement.
2. Semiotics is the investigation of signs. In cultural studies, semiotics is used to understand culture as if it were language. Barthes (1977), a prominent semiologist, explains that cultural signs have both direct (denotative) meanings or indirect (connotative) meanings. The latter can "act like myths" creating "hidden meanings behind the more apparent."
3. In performance and music studies, a few authors have looked at the arts and music as sites of multiple meanings. An informative book is *Power Plays, Wayang Golek Puppet Theatre of West Java* by Andrew Weintraub. Weintraub shows that *wayang golek's* meanings are diverse to different Sundanese people: they can be "sacred ritual, secular entertainment, art, commerce, propaganda, and subversion" (Weintraub 2004: 8).
4. Some of the important works about the arts define identity as constructed and changing within social contexts. Stokes (2000: 229) looks at how the Turkish Arabesk represents different identities

to the peasantry, intelligentsia, Turkish state and musicians. Heryanto (2008: 4) discusses the representation of fluid identities of Indonesians in their popular culture and media. He argues that "four major ideological forces (Javanism, Islam, liberalism, and Marxism)" have framed the "parameters of Indonesian nation-state building" and the "debates in the production and consumption of pop culture."

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