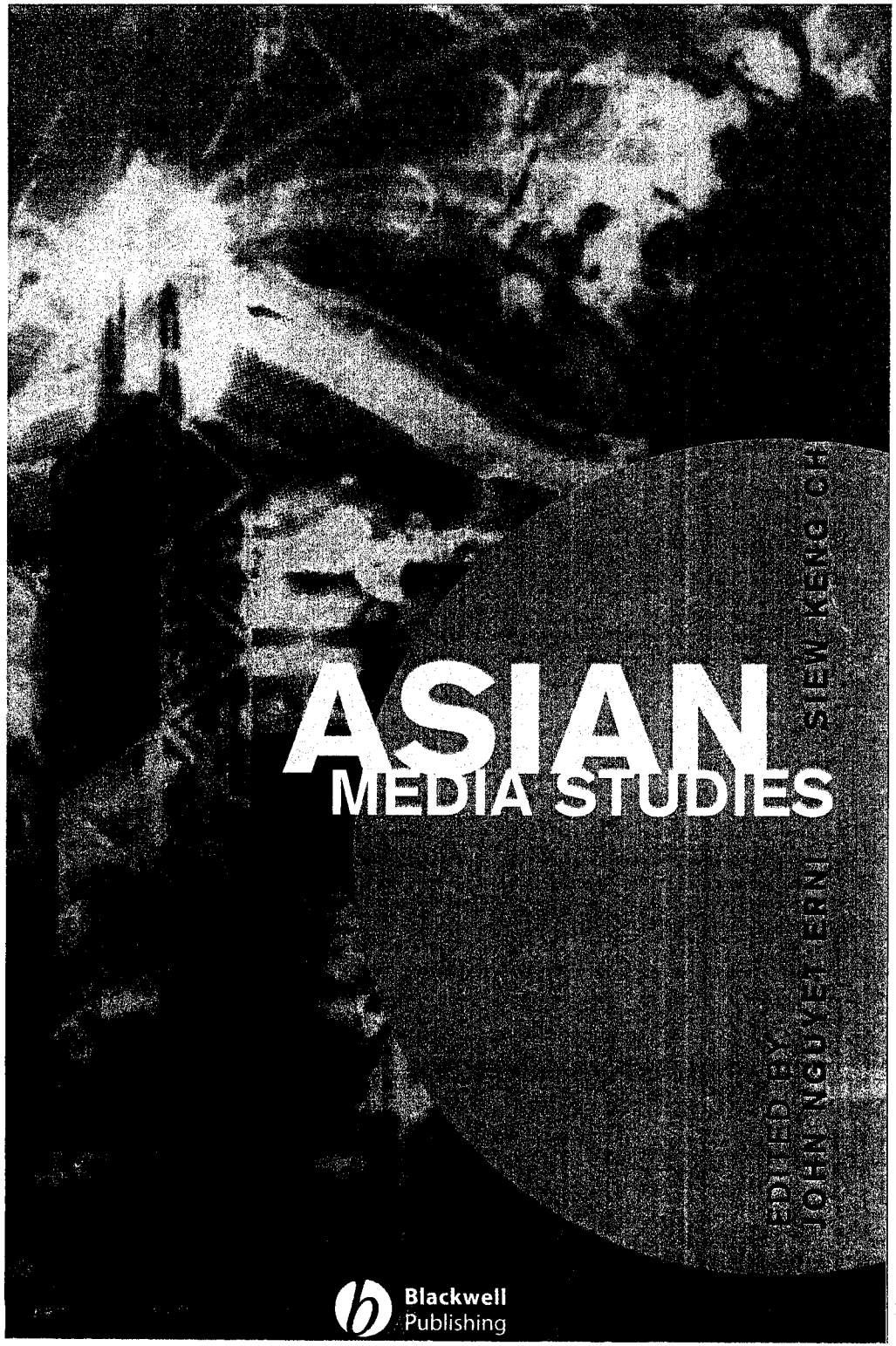

Gaik Cheng Khoo
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Recuperating Malay Custom...

John Nguyet Erni is dedicating this book in memory of his parents, while Siew Keng Chua would like to dedicate it to her mother and in memory of her father.

Asian Media Studies
Politics of Subjectivities

Edited by

John Nguyet Erni
and *Siew Keng Chua*

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1

Introduction: Our Asian Media Studies?

John Nguyet Erni and Siew Keng Chua

In this volume, our endeavor is to forge afresh the connection between media practices and the politics about the formation of subject positions found in the transnational Asian context today. We are particularly concerned about the specific local *realpolitik* through which media work takes place; that is, the *real* spaces and processes in political channels across various dominant *imaginations* about "Asias" today – nationalist, regionalist, globalist "Asias" – that attempt to manipulate and control the media, with varying kinds of intended and unwished-for consequences. To appropriate Foucault, we want to look at the "governmentalist" articulation of nationalism, of a specific vision of trans-Asian capital formation, forms of globalization, historical memories, and gender politics in the region's media world, and examine how these formations impinge upon subjectivity, from the conceptions of "audiences" to that of national sentiments in Asia. Thus, our main concern in this volume is to ask: what are the processes, phenomena, events, and discourses that suture "media" and "politics" together in such Asian contexts as Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, India, China? To what extent do various media practices reflect broader political situations and political contestations found in specific Asian locales? It is imperative, therefore, that we have asked our contributors to present their own research projects, and simultaneously to reflect on the political context of their work, to write about the extent to which their projects call into question specific political problems confronted by the local society and culture, and on their projects' value as political interventions.

Other volumes on Asian media studies have provided an uneven attention to such questions. Many important works on the subject have largely been driven by methodological debates, which often means an evaluation of the appropriateness of western methods and knowledge-forms in media research for local contexts. A general situation has existed in the field for over four decades, whereby western methodologies and epistemologies have been largely accepted as a guiding light and "the local" was accepted as the recipient or the context of their glow. For a long time this was the *paradigmatic* predicament of Asian social-scientific research, since it was developed within a much broader historical and geopolitical framework of Third World international development and modernization. Even today, many Asian media studies research communities, associations, and their journals have persisted in conducting their research according to methods and problematics often originally articulated in Euro-American contexts. Interestingly, such persistence has developed alongside a sustaining cry of media imperialism voiced by the same research communities. Thus, the fervent period of growth in Asian media studies from the early 1970s to the early 1990s saw a practice of *skeptical* relay, absorption, and appropriation by many local, but western-trained, scholars *vis-à-vis* Euro-American media theories and methods. What has been generally touted today as the historical development of a postcolonial political consciousness in Asia has not necessarily led to genuinely original theory- or method-building that specifically speaks to media development and critique arising from indigenous political forms, intellectual legacies, or social relations across the region. Lodged in the western framework, local media researchers nonetheless seek ways to "decolonize" their work through adopting the critical impulses of more mainstream Third World political movements in denouncing western cultural imperialism. The reframing of postcolonial politics within media studies in Asia has produced a number of important guiding questions for the region, which can be broadly summarized as follows:

- In what ways has the role of Asian nation-states been reconstituted in the face of transborder flow of media products and practices under the ubiquitous shadow of "globalization"? (See e.g. Gunaratne, 2000; Kang, 2003.)
- In what ways has the whole idea of "domestic" media been challenged, when local media producers themselves have actively sought to emulate, and sometimes create, "cultural pirated versions" of western production codes and programming? (See e.g. Moeran, 2001.)

- Under the political impulse of "cultural resistance," what strategies – through economic production and symbolic reproduction – have been deployed by national media across Asia to defend and bolster national pride, and how have media studies been used to facilitate this putatively defiant stance? (See e.g. Sinha, 2000.)
- What are the consequences of seeing Asian media varieties in the mode of representation only as "case studies," to which western media theories and methods are applied? What is the difference between seeing them as "case studies" as opposed to a more historically informed notion of "contexts"? (See e.g. Curran & Park, 2000.)

It would be misleading to say that only poststructuralist-minded media scholars of recent times were capable of asking these critical questions about our media and media studies practices. In fact, earlier media studies work in the post-Second World War era in Asia, especially in India and China, was implicitly challenging unquestioned adoption of western models of inquiry, despite its need to deploy "accurate methods" steeped in western social sciences in order to gain scholarly legitimacy. Nonetheless, the questions above were asked with a renewed sense of urgency and political acuteness throughout the late 1980s and 1990s by Asian researchers, since they could rely on sufficient legitimate ground in the international media research community, especially through the establishment of such professional institutions and bodies as the Asian Media Information and Communication Center based in Singapore, the Bangalore-based Center for the Study of Society and Culture, the Chinese Communication Association, the Korean Society for Journalism and Communication Studies, and so on. The deeply political project to "decolonize" Asian media and cultural studies was launched through the establishment of the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, which saw the most explicit triangulation of Marxist media and cultural critique, the historical critique of "Asia" as a problematic nodal point for various intellectual disciplines, and local decolonization social movements across subnational Asia. In sum, the field of Asian media studies, if we can claim any sense of totality about it, has been constituted by three important (overlapping) moments of development, namely the politics of appropriation for legitimacy (1960s to 1970s), the politics of self-legitimacy through rejecting western cultural imperialism (late 1970s to early 1990s), and the politics of critical legitimacy through deconstructive postcolonial tactics (early 1990s to the present). Moving through this roughly mapped out trajectory, Asia-born media scholars have traveled, shuttled, moved back and forth, and returned

across geographical points between Asia and the US, Europe, and Australia. Our own travel and educational histories thus press on our theorization of "Asian media" and of the relevant analytical practices; a not insignificant part of Asian media studies must have to do with the creation and negotiation of *subject positions* as media consumers, producers, and researchers living in, and moving across, the region.

Politics of Subjectivities

In view of the specific essays collected in this volume, we see ourselves as positioned to make explicit the often implied question about subjectivity formations underlying the history of media studies in Asia. The various politics of legitimacy of our own critical sensibility toward our media point to the problematic of subject-positioning as one of important, and recurring, sites of research and cultural politics in the region. Is it any wonder that a visible majority of media research in Asia – as it is in other developing countries – has been audience research?

While audience research does not and cannot answer all questions about the realities and politics of subjectivity, its ethnographic epistemological impulse comes closest to the heart of the matter. In the nonwestern context, the ethnographic episteme indeed has arisen as a pointed opposition to a certain epistemological debate found in western media studies circles, who posited the so-called "impossibility of audience studies" in the face of the (ironically totalizing) postmodern condition. Fractured, fragmented, multiply implicated in a deeply entangled matrix of historical, textual, and sociopolitical factors, and finally unhinged from the rational self, the "audience" is hence positioned (overtheorized?) by western postmodernism. The very political project to dismantle the post-enlightenment legacy has, ironically, threatened to wipe out the non-metropolitan voices that postmodern politics has sought to support. Where media imperialism has long been a critique *shared* by both Third World scholars and progressive researchers in the west, the imperialism of Theory has not been so communal a critique. A reassertion of audience studies – in fact, of the centrality of "subjectivity studies" – in relation to the media thus underwrites many critical projects in Asia, including this present volume.

Two juxtaposing scenarios that conjoin "Asia" and "media" help to illustrate the dynamics of subjecthood that traverse the locus of Asian media studies signposted and examined in this volume.

Love

"For a time, we were on the map."

Karim Bangcola, senior Vice President of the AMA Computer College in urban Manila, uttered those words in reflection of what his infamous student has done on a fateful day. Being "on the map," he implies, puts his country's name in an ambiguous perspective, for the international internet-using community has not forgotten his student's deed so easily. This is a story about media use, more specifically about internet hacking. The fact that it is also about Asia is not incidental. Rather, "Asia" figures in this international incident as a player who loves to be noticed, if only through a cybercrime.

On May 4, 2000, millions of computers around the world were infected with a virus lodged in their email systems. When clicked on, the opened email destroyed files and spread itself to other email accounts. What prompted so many to commit this fatal tap of the finger on their keyboards was the subject heading of the email dreamed up by a soft-spoken young Filipino: "I Love You." Who would refuse this mail, especially when it came anonymously? Who could withstand these knowingly clichéd little words? And who'd think what became known as the Love Bug virus could cause an estimated US$10 billion in damage as it shut down computer systems throughout the world, from corporations to the Pentagon to the British Parliament?

Onel de Guzman's love message to the world could easily be rewritten as "Asia Loves You." "I'm not a hacker who destroys. I don't want to hurt computers. In fact, I want more people to use them," de Guzman said in an interview (Pimentel, 2001). Described as soft spoken and acne-faced, de Guzman is an ordinary Filipino youth hailing from one of the Philippines' poorest provinces on Samar Island. A certain dissatisfaction with using his computer only for playing video games or ICQ apparently led him to begin trying out programming commands, altering codes, and breaking through cybernetic firewalls. Like thousands of other Asian youth, de Guzman wished for a bigger and better life, and like so many in poor locales in the developing world, realized that honing his skills in the computer field was just about the only ticket to international success. Antivirus and computer security experts say that computer attacks such as the "I Love You" virus and its variants are part of the "growing pain" of the internet society found all over the developing world.

The thematic of "I Love You" functions as more than a benign joke; it can, on the one hand, be said to be a kind of subjectivity indicative of the

geopsychological fate of "Asia" caught in the disjuncture between economic and political disfranchisement in the still-operative development model in global internet diffusion, and, on the other, the real experience of a technovernacular life eminently accessible by and affordable to the Asian multitude. Indeed, the narrative of "Asian rising" must be taken seriously as a locus for understanding the discursive positioning of a media-saturated "Asia" as a point of conflict between Asian (national) assertion, especially of technological prowess, and aspects of Asia-based transgressions, especially in media matters (e.g. media piracy being the most acute and well-publicized problem). The surprising element, however, is that this virus was associated with the Philippines, which has not been conventionally linked to the symbolic production of Asianism as a site of international political dialectic. At any rate, the sentimentalizing trope in the form of a traveling computer virus speaks to an important relationality between Asia and the world over the body of the media, namely that "love" is only a relational term *vis-à-vis* other sentimentalizing tropes, including that of resentment. "Love, The Costliest Bug" was the headline used by the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* to make explicit the hidden message dreamed up and spread by a modest Asian man to the rest of the world. As a global symbolic production, the virus was inviting enough yet destructive enough to put Asia "on the map." Sporadic but sustained attention to computer viruses abound after this incident, which has only further ambiguated the position of Asia in the international media-use communities. In locales such as the Philippines, India, and Malaysia, the sentiment has been that Asian information technology know-how has become the region's point of pride (if not "revenge"). But as for the developed world, who habitually claim superiority in technologies, the incident has fueled the image of half-literate Third World criminal hackers "tucked away in small bedrooms across the globe" (Elks, 2002) as an addition to the repertoire of terroristic images of the criminal underworld associated with subaltern regions of the world.

If this story about the love bug shows the disjuncture in subjectivity that distinguishes "Asian media use" as a site of geopolitical and psychological violence in the global information society, then another story also about Asian sentimentality will illustrate a convergence of subjectivity hurling "Asian media use" onto a different plane of articulation, a different way of being "on the map." We are referring to the highly visible phenomenon of Asian television idol melodramas. Over the past few years, the flow of these dramas across the region has produced an institutional and broad cultural impetus for transnational media production, distribution, and consumption. The Japanese and more recently Korean TV idol dramas represent

another type of love bug that has bitten many devoted fans across Taiwan, Hong Kong, the PRC, and Singapore. They are distinguished from earlier forms of transnational Asian pop such as Hong Kong action films and Cantopop music, and also from parallel contemporary productions such as J-pop and K-pop music videos and CDs. We are interested in the same trope of sentimental love that may be producing new kinds of desiring subjects capable of identifications across historical and cultural boundaries.

Japanese TV idol dramas run through the by-now predictable plot about young lovers in urban Tokyo engaging in complex and subtle romantic hopes and failures, while Korean TV idol dramas place the heart-wrenching, often tragic, stories of young lovers in the Confucian familial framework (see Iwabuchi, 2001; Lin, 2002). The former popular drama highlights the testiness of urban relationships, whereas the latter heightens the conflict arising from family (and familial) duties – but all the while both kinds of TV dramas have a great deal in common. Through interviewing fans of these Japanese idol dramas in other Asian locales, Koichi Iwabuchi (2001) has theorized the complex articulation of "cultural proximity" in terms of models of romantic pursuit among Asian heterosexual youth and young adults, and identification of social and familial forces impinging upon their love affairs. We would add that this cultural proximity has also been articulated through identification of racial proximity in the norms of beauty (male and female), mannerism, styles in clothing, a sense of Asianness in contrast to perceived western outlooks, and so on. The "structure of feeling" is that of a translocal reckoning of moral ideals and practical decision-making not only in terms of matters of youthful sentimentality and sexuality, but also of a syncretic "Asian modernity" capable of enlisting middle-class-based, cross-generational, and western-value sensitized, dialogue and sentiment as a part of the social imaginary for an increasingly regionalized cultural Asia. Here, the triangulation of cultural nationalism, postcolonial sentiments, and the globalist mood in Asian media has found its useful *affective* form for imagining alliances through the televisual field.

The immense popularity of these TV dramas within and across East Asia – interestingly, as carried by the same theme of love – serves as a useful contrast to the incident mentioned earlier about de Guzman and his global love virus. The divergence of "technological Asia" and "cultural Asia" aside, the two "love stories" mark the in-between space for Asian media today with respect to the global media world. The globalist tendency of the computer virus incident contrasts sharply to the more inward-circulating *regionalist imaginary* that underpins the flow of popular TV drama series. We may say that the *centrifugal* politics of self-insertion into the global map

of media and information technology and the *centripetal* politics of mutual validation of cultural and emotional proximity through the televisual media, have produced a special environment for Asian media consumption, and more significantly, Asian subjectivity formation (cf. Chan, 2002).

"Context" is the Name of Something We Lack

Returning to the four major questions framed by the postcolonial consciousness in Asian media studies, we can begin to ascertain the complexity of reformation among Asian nation-states who control their media systems to effect new lines of convergence and divergence in order to satisfy both their regionalist and globalist desires as parallel imperatives, if only through discursive representations in the media broadcast near and far. We can also begin to appreciate the kinds of negotiation media producers make in creating programming for a slippery "domestic market" whose tastes and values are sometimes inward-looking and sometimes internationalist in nature (see Moeran, 2001). As for the whole problem of "cultural resistance," the dialectic noted above through the two "love stories" lays bare the complex ambiguities that can be found either at the level of media consumers/audiences or at the level of nation-states. For instance, the love of TV idol dramas in East Asia can be said to mediate against the popularity of American TV dramas of youthful romance and adventures also found in cable channels in Asia (e.g. *Beverly Hills 90210*; *Felicity*). If we interpret the fans' love of these dramas as cultural "resistance" against media imperialism, then we underestimate the deep influence of American production values and aesthetic packaging on these Asian productions that also form the basis for the Asian fans' enthusiastic reception. It is like ignoring how the Love virus calls attention to the deep-seated need for visibility of Asian information-technology know-how in the global high-tech world.

It is because of all these terms of negotiations that are pushing Asian media – and Asian media studies – to consistently be obsessed with the "nation question," the "political economy of media question," and the "resistance question," that we suggest that "Asia" can no longer be taken as a site for mere "case studies," to which western media theories and methods are applied. Rather, we must see it via the more historically informed notion of "contexts." By showcasing some of the ways in which media studies is conducted by our contributors in this volume, we hope to fill in the details of the context of "Asias." We hope that these fresh works show how the scholars – many of them young scholars, and most Asian by ethnicity – practice

their own rigorous cultural analyses and critiques, and in turn, how their politically minded use of western media theories and methods performs its transnational translations. At what we have earlier called the moment of "critical legitimacy" currently confronting Asian media studies, this translation is not only necessary; it is urgent. Given the complex dialectical curves of "centrifugalism" and "centripetalism" criss-crossing the discursive field of Asian media, a longing for context need not be nationalist in impulse or citizenly in force. In fact it is more likely that this desire for context is organized by transnational constituents of subjectivity and experience, and by mobile figures of strategic resistance or excess. Hence, we have organized the essays in this volume by using the trope of movements: "moving in/out" to refer to transnational flow as a dynamic feature of the Asian media world today; "moving backward/forward" to refer to the histories and politics of media, and of media and cultural studies in the region; and "moving between" to refer to varieties of formations of subjectivities (whether they are pressed into formations of audiences is also a point of investigation and theorization by some of the contributors).

Synchronic Mapping of Audiences

The first section of the book articulates the transnational cultural flows in and out of the Asian region. In chapter 2, Iwabuchi explores the intraregional flows of media products and consumption among Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. He notes that the Japanese consumption of Hong Kong popular culture is a "nostalgia for a 'lost' Asian vigor" or a sense of "longing for vanished popular cultural styles and social vigor." At the same time, Taiwanese youths read Japanese drama series to locate "our Asian reality." Iwabuchi sees an ever-increasing volume of regional cultural flows, which are, however, "uneven transnational connections." He sees popular culture connecting audiences within East Asia as a newly articulated form of power relations in the region.

On the other hand, Chua and Junaid (chapter 3) remark on the transnational flow of cultural consumption which moves from the "West" to Asia, specifically to Singapore. This chapter reflects upon a study of very young children's (4- to 6-year-olds') consumption of advertising and fast food. The article shows that media hegemony reflects the wider political economy, which, in the case of very small kids, may not be easy to resist or oppose. The authors note the gap in cultural studies focusing on children's culture and point to the need for this to be addressed in the future.

In yet another turn in transnational cultural flows, Hu (chapter 4) opposes "Asia" to Japan and the west. In her chapter on video compact disk (VCD) technology use and its market, she notes that "VCD signifies Asian technology in a global context." For her, VCD technology use "signifies resistance to Japanese and western technocolonization" and marks "Asia" as different from Japan or the west, or at least a "different type of techno-capitalism." Thus, the Asian VCD phenomenon is seen as "a good example to mobilize the popular idea that the origin of globalization is either located in the west or entirely manipulated by transnational corporations."

The first section, then, generally critiques the uneven transnational cultural flows of media technologies, products, and processes in and out of the region and among locales within the region. The second section of the book lays out, as it were, the historical and political trajectories of media texts and institutions in relation to the constraints on their democratic potential. In chapter 5, Kang sets out the history of the struggle for freedom of the press and its later attainment of hegemonic power. He shows how the "conservative alliance consisting of political power, the bureaucracy, and the conservative press, has played a crucial role in suppressing democratization in civil society in the 1990s." Instead of being a political watchdog, the press "has itself become an organ of power." He examines the relationships between the state, civil society, and the press of South Korea and traces the rise of journalistic power in collusion with a corrupt and conservative political leadership.

In a different example of journalistic collusion with the governing regime, Abel (chapter 6) looks at news presentation to uncover the use of "the discourse of nationalism and looking to the future" to support the political and economic status quo in Singapore. She notes that statist discursive power underlies news presentation strategies to maintain an ideology of control, and constructs the audience as citizens of the nation in "a climate of domestic uncertainty about the fragility of the state and the economy." Abel constructs herself as both an "insider" and "outsider" in Singapore to claim an edge in critical perspective while doing a deconstruction of television news.

In chapter 7, Lee points to the methodological and theoretical crisis in communicational cultural studies in Korea. He looks at a specific community of media analysts, Munhwa Yonku Bunkwa (MYB), and critiques the lack of "empirically rigorous and historicized studies of dominant social discourses and the historically specific forms of domination and opposition." He notes the strong influence of the Birmingham School of cultural studies but laments that this has prevented the MYB scholars from "rigor-

ously engaging with vexed social and political questions in contemporary Korea." For him, communicational cultural studies needs to go "beyond the narrow confines of mass media and cultural texts."

On the other hand, Ma (chapter 8) attempts to map "the nostalgic practices in Hong Kong at a key moment of political transition," through the production and consumption practices relating to a 60-second TV commercial of a major bank in the Special Administrative Region. He refutes the claims that media consumers can find their way out of the hegemonic control "from above." This chapter investigates how "self-claimed 'authentic' coding and encoding of popular meanings can be, in Anthony Giddens's term, structurated within the ideological formation of the political economy at large."

Thus the second section of the book critiques the populist notion that audiences could determine their own subjectivities to a large extent and that the hegemonic power of the media could be challenged from below. If this section delineates a more negative politics of the realities of subject formations in Asian countries, the third section lets in a ray of hope. Each of the following four chapters presents a more upbeat picture of audience formations. In chapter 9, Juluri sees the growing importance of audience studies and asks, "What would make for an 'Indian' media audience studies?" He locates MTV as a pervasive TV genre in India which necessitates "new questions for national/global connection." He envisages a new kind of audience research that is able to deconstruct media power while enabling the "epistemic authority in speaking as viewing subjects – of being an Indian." Juluri's new contemporary cosmopolitans lay claim to a "relational sensibility" which is "the bedrock of global condition" while also being capable of creating "a possibility for an alternative globality."

In the next chapter, Yang comments on the dearth of cultural studies work in communication and media studies in Asian countries. She reiterates the significance of feminist media studies and their interventionist analyses and epistemological styles. At the same time, she sees a possible collision between cultural studies and feminist studies and points to the necessity of inflecting cultural studies with a political-economy approach. Such an approach would locate audience studies within both institutional and production contexts while acknowledging the emergence of audience power. She delineates a changing audience landscape in tandem with the changing nature of media genres. Thus her account of the moral panic accompanying shows featuring female teenage bodies seeks to draw attention to the urgency of change within the Asian media landscape and a rereading of variety shows. At the same time, Yang underscores the epis-

temic power of feminist analyses in both interventionist and analytical practices.

Moving to Malaysia, we see Khoo's (chapter 11) feminist-inflected cultural studies work on the recuperation of *adat* (custom/performativity) in the the portrayal of female sexuality embedded in the image of the Malay woman (*perempuan*) in films of male Malay directors. For Khoo, this representation of native, female sexuality recuperates an essential "Malayness" or an essentialized ethnicity that is cathected onto the body of the gendered Other. Muslim women cover themselves by wearing headscarves (*tudung*) and the *baju kurung*, a long sleeved, loose-fitting blouse over a long skirt. Khoo critiques this process of reclaiming ethnic roots while resisting a homogeneous global modernity and fundamentalist Islam. For her, privileging ethnicity in this case may mean sacrificing gender politics. Like Yang, Khoo sees feminist analyses as enabling cultural critiques of the media and the positioning of audience subjectivities.

Finally, Erni and Spires, in their chapter on another marginalized group, gays and lesbians in Taiwan in the 1990s, look at "broader questions about what has been called 'weak group' [*roushi tuanti*] identity politics, family life and modernity in Taiwan." They examine the formation of gay and lesbian identities in Taiwan as expressed in their cultural consumption of the popular *G&L Magazine*. Through a deconstruction of "filial piety central to the Taiwanese sociocultural formation and individual subjectivity," they point to the contradictory dynamics of new liberal ideologies and family politics in Taiwan's queer popular culture. In this chapter the authors show the enabling power of marginalized groups to inform their own subjectivities in negotiating between hegemonic societal constructs and the use of the media.

What these analyses show, then, is that there are many Asias not just in terms of geopolitical spaces but also in relation to gender and other cultural spaces. This volume could have been titled "Media in Asia" in many ways, and yet we wish to call into focus what binds Asia as a region in relation to its media while also acknowledging the diversity of the region within each different geopolitical, nationally bounded space.

Postmodernism has valorized polyvocality and diversity in subject positions; however, as our authors show, we still need to enunciate political and critical issues while acknowledging that we can't return to the old metanarratives. Gender, class, ethnicity, age, and national politics are still important concerns. Who enunciates what is as important as how some issues are enunciated. In a region where media control remains largely in the hands of government regimes, many of which are authoritarian in practice, it is

important to acknowledge the contestation of meanings in media spaces. Nevertheless, it is still important to critique such contestation and the claim that media audiences can negotiate their own meanings. We wish to ask, to what ends? Can cultural readings as strategies for negotiation activate any form of alternative media and public spaces? How can the valorization of audiences carve out a space from authoritarian control? Does the internet actually free up spaces for activism towards social transformation? When most of Asia's media are under the control of government regimes in conjunction with multinational companies in search of the last big deal, what power do audiences have in getting what they want? Do they know what they want? Is it to be entertained to death?

Synchronic mapping of audiences as a way into understanding how the media works in the Asian region can be salutary. In the past, media scholarship in Asia has tended to look at production and institutional practices. How do we genuinely do media studies from the bottom up? How do audiences – critics, scholars, and lay people – make political meanings out of their textual readings? As Souchou Yao says, "cultural politics in Southeast Asia and elsewhere is about the all-important prerogative to imagine differently, and to 'envision' an alternative political future, a perogative for which lives and limbs have been lost, and personal and civil liberties curtailed" (Yao, 2001: 9).

Shaping Strategies of Scholarship

What sort of political meanings apply across the region? How do we as scholars make sense of what is happening on the ground in relation to media politics? Where are the scholars in this area? Who controls scholarship? Who controls the dissemination of scholarship? How relevant are these "western" strategies such as those that call for resisting the hegemony of "official discourses" (Lyotard, 1984: 140–7), or "unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts" (Jameson, 1981: 20–1), or "reading within the interstices of the discursive regimes" (Foucault, 1980)? These have been influential in shaping strategies for scholars within the region.

Old Marxist metanarratives may no longer be enabling but how enabling are the new poststructuralist tactics? Can we only speak of alignments and tactical approaches or can we carve out space(s) for the articulation of new ways of critiquing and reading the media? How do we translate discourse into action? Feminists of many different positions have

always acknowledged the importance of the link between discourse and practice. We wish to re-inflect cultural theory or cultural studies with this perspective and to enunciate the importance of this in the study of "Asian" media. At the same time the politics of place must always be borne in mind. September 11, 2001, played on the global screen but brought home sharply the politics of place, the space of the media for the staging of an ethnic and religious "first-strike" by a group of extremely media-savvy terrorists. And, of course, the Bush administration responded with an equally spectacular media display of beating up the "enemy" by pounding on the Afghan national space and in the process wiping out innumerable innocent, ordinary Afghans while ostensibly at war with terrorism. If this creates a feeling of déjà-vu for those of us in Asia who have lived through the era of the Vietnam wars, it also reaffirms the media as the twenty-first-century gladiatorial arena. The trauma is not just globalized, horrendous as it is, it also specifically displaces the media from its cozy cocoon of "entertainment as news" couch position. Suddenly what is brought home is how relevant "politics" as news is again, at least in the US and Europe. In Asia, ethnic and religious politics have always been part of everyday life. Contestation of meaning has always been played out between authoritarian regimes and fundamentalist ethnic/cultural warriors. The former has more and more displaced the hatred of the colonial, or the ex-colonial, while constructing a culture of fear via the latter to keep the citizens under control. Cultural spaces, in particular, broadcast media spaces, always have this edge of lived politics being strongly in place.

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11

*Recuperating Malay Custom/*Adat *in Female Sexuality in Malaysian Films*

Gaik Cheng Khoo

I

The sexual is deeply political in the Malaysian media, as played out in 1998–9 in the vast coverage of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's alleged acts of sodomy and corruption. That a discourse regarded as belonging to the private sphere – sexual activity – is used by the state to malign and politically undermine Anwar in the public eye, reflects how sexuality is a highly contested site in sociocultural, religious, and political terms in Malaysia. In fact, sexuality will continue to be a very important battleground in the current post-Anwar climate, where a conflict is waged between the imperatives of modernity, the greed of capitalism, and the growing Islamist right.

But first, some understanding of Malaysian cultural history and politics is necessary. Before the coming of Islam in the fifteenth century, the region that is now Malaysia derived its culture from Indianization when "a relatively limited number of traders and priest-scholars brought Indian culture in its various forms to Southeast Asia" (Osborne, 1995: 21). Indianization was absorbed and adapted by the locals into their own existing culture and became integral to Malay custom or *adat* (more on *adat* later). Today, modern Malaysia is a multiracial country run by the National Alliance, initially consisting of three major ethnic-based political parties headed by UMNO, the United Malays National Organization, which has been in power since independence in 1957. Under Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir's leadership, Malaysia has seen tremendous economic growth and increase

in living standards in the last 30 years, achieving an annual GDP of about 8 percent from the late eighties until the Asian economic crisis in the mid-1990s. These changes concur with the National Economic Plan (NEP, 1971–90) which was a kind of affirmative action for the majority indigenous Malays (60 percent of the population) whose feelings of disenfranchisement had led, in May 1969, to violent racial clashes with the Chinese, who were long believed to have dominated the then new nation's economy. Under the NEP, the Malays were declared *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) and maintained linguistic, religious, and cultural dominance and rights over non-Malays. The NEP saw the burgeoning of a Malay middle-class who were educated in local universities or sponsored by the government to study abroad. The pace of modernization, outmigration of young female factory workers to the cities from rural areas, the move from a largely agrarian-based economy to high-tech and service industries, etc., combined with the rise of resurgent Islam, have led to cultural shifts and social displacement for the Malays.

In the November 1999 elections, Mahathir's National Alliance managed to win a majority government despite the public disenchantment with the obviously biased treatment of Anwar Ibrahim[1] and despite the opposition put up by Wan Azizah, Anwar's wife, to form a coalition with other opposition groups under the Gerak Keadilan banner (Movement for Justice). However, the most important outcome of this election is that "with or without Anwar, Islam is here to stay" (Maznah, 1999: 6) as reflected by the victory of PAS,[2] the Islamic Party, over the predominantly Malay state of Trengganu. Anwar represents the modernist, moderate Malay Muslim position, having been the charismatic student leader of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM[3]) who led a massive student protest in 1974 in solidarity with Malay farmers. When the secularist UMNO realized the strong influence of *dakwah* (Islamic proselytizing) groups over the lower-class Malays, it co-opted the revivalist Islamic movement by setting up Islamic institutions and also by recruiting Anwar in 1982. The latter's struggle for rural farmers' rights as ABIM leader gave UMNO a tinge of Islamic credibility and broadened its appeal for Malays who believe in social justice. Hence, when Mahathir eradicated his political enemy, Anwar, he achieved the very opposite of his goals – the strengthening of radical Islamic movements which will continue to intensify (Maznah, 1999: 6). Maznah Mohamad's post-mortem of the election results that "UMNO will try to counter radical Islam by becoming even more Islamic as a way of winning back the Malay heartland" (1999: 7) was supported by journalist and lawyer Karim Raslan a year later during his seminar "From Command Politics to

Civil Society?" given at the University of British Columbia (Nov. 14, 2000). He pointed to the government's sponsoring of the Restoration of Faith bill which calls for a year's jail sentence and gives the Islamic syariah court the power to determine what "apostasy" means. Raslan also sees inherent class differences among the Malays widening: for him, Anwar's political devastation has destroyed the link of trust between the lower-class (more religious) Malays and the secular elites who were more dependent on the patronage system[4] in place since feudal times and which was fostered by British colonialism.

This rather long foray into Malaysian politics is to contextualize the framework in which the contemporary discourse of gender and sexuality is defined and produced. For example, Nik Aziz Nik Mat, leader of the opposition party PAS, was recently quoted as saying that female contestants should be banned from Quran recital contests because they had to use "high melodic voices which 'may be an attraction to men'" (*The Asian Post*, Oct. 26–Nov. 8, 2000). Moreover, he had been criticized a month earlier for stating that women who wore skimpy attire encouraged men to commit rape. Such statements display the patriarchal dominance of an imported Arabicized Islam overshadowing the more liberal modes of Sunni Islam as traditionally practiced in Malaysia, especially the kind that acknowledges the critical role of women's labor in the growth of the Malaysian tiger economy.

In the face of such struggles for cultural and political hegemony and their intersections with multiple and varying discourses of modernity, I suggest that a small group of liberal, progressive (read "secularist") Malay filmmakers, writers, and journalists is responding to the mainstreaming of resurgent Islam and to potentially homogenizing westernization by consciously or unconsciously recuperating *adat* in the 1990s. Many progressive Malays view the impact of Islamic revivalism as repressive of Malay sexuality. Some of the filmmakers in this category include U-Wei Haji Saari, Adman Salleh, Mahadi J. Murat, Hishamuddin Rais, and woman filmmakers Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima. A few sample names of writers and journalists who recuperate *adat* are Salleh Ben Joned, Karim Raslan, and Dina Zaman. The process of recuperating *adat* occurs simultaneously too in theater and the performing arts as attempts to discover, uncover, and recover the fragmented subject in a globalized postmodern Malaysia. But for this short essay, I will only focus on cinema.

There are various forms of reclaiming *adat* in Malay film, such as a showing scenes of traditional healing, and uniquely indigenous folk dances like the *kuda kepang* dance (in *Ringgit Kasorrga*), the Malay martial arts

silat (*Amok*), holding traditional festivities like *puja pantai* (*Selubung*), all of which are deemed un-Islamic as they contain forms of Hinduism, magic, and spirit worship. Another aspect of *adat* is bilaterality in gender relations (which encourages women's power and autonomy) as well as more openness to sexuality: "In their homes, married women customarily held the purse strings, despite the Islamic emphasis on men's keeping and handling money. Most important, women's special knowledge and skills were used in cooking, childbirth, health care and the intensification of sexual pleasure" (Ong, 1995: 166). In her footnote, anthropologist Aihwa Ong goes on to say that the Malay *kampung* (village) women she interviewed saw Islamic beliefs about sexuality in a positive light[5]: "For instance, *kampung* women claimed that female circumcision (partial removal of the clitoral hood) increased a woman's sexual pleasure during intercourse. *Kampung* women use different techniques and tonics (*jamu*) to condition their bodies for enhancing erotic pleasure. Sex was considered essential to good health and a normal life and only viewed negatively when indulged in excessively or with an unsuitable partner" (1995: 188, n. 5).

The focus on sexuality by the *bumigeois*[6] is linked to the proliferation of ethical discourse on sexual conduct by the ideological state apparatus – the media – not to mention by political and religious leaders (of course, the most overt being the Anwar Ibrahim case). But even prior to the economic slowdown in 1997, space for sexual as opposed to political discourse was permitted as the state carefully cultivated a liberal, cosmopolitan image in order to encourage foreign investment. Global trends like the discourses around AIDS prevention have also opened up issues of sexuality as workers at Pink Triangle and the Malaysian AIDS Council in Kuala Lumpur set up awareness programs in the 1990s. I believe that the increasingly advanced level and pace of modernity and westernization in Malaysian cities paradoxically allows an opening up of discussion on the relation of sexuality to Malay *adat*. It enables Malay writers to recover the sensuality, earthiness, and sexuality in *adat* that are being repressed by the new Islamic hegemony, and one detects this preoccupation with sex even in writings that supposedly contain an Islamic-fundamentalist morality.[7] To reiterate, aspects of Malay *adat* regarded as traditionally tolerant (though still patriarchal) and more open to sensual or sexual matters than resurgent Islam thus share common traits with secular modernity.

The form of recuperating *adat* that I want to discuss in this chapter is the portrayal of female sexuality embedded in the image of the Malay woman (*perempuan*) wearing a sarung tied around her midriff (*berkemban*). Such an image evokes an earthiness and raw sensuality that is rooted

in the imagery of the *kampung*, suggesting a kind of Malay essentialist femininity before the advent of urban modernity, and the period of *dakwah* (Islamic proselytizing) activism which dictated Muslim women cover themselves by wearing head scarves (*tudung*) and the *baju kurung*, a long sleeved loose-fitting blouse over a long skirt. This representation of native, female sexuality seems to emerge from male filmmakers[8] recuperating an essential Malayness or an essentialized ethnicity that is cathected onto the body of the gendered Other. Thus, in the process of reclaiming ethnic roots while resisting a homogeneous global modernity and fundamentalist Islam, an elision or sleight-of-hand of another kind occurs; privileging ethnicity in this case means sacrificing gender politics.

In fact, women's bodies are usually the ambivalent markers of cultural and socioeconomic changes: not only does her *berkemban* image recuperate *adat*, her western dress or fashion may reflect "loose" western values (or Westoxification) whether she is in typical hooker gear (e.g. Erma Fatima in *Bintang Malam*) or chic evening gowns (e.g. Nina Juren in *Lenjan*). Alternatively, by wearing the *tudung* and *baju kurung*, she embodies Islamic values and piety. This is notable, as representations of male characters are not so frequently encoded through fashion. Aihwa Ong has discussed "the ways in which competing state and Islamic resurgent discourses use women as symbols of motherhood, Malay vulnerability, and as boundary markers in their visions of Malaysian modernity" (1995: 163). In other words, women end up bearing the burden of nationalist, ethnoreligious representation in the (male) politics of modernity which usually places them at a socioeconomic and political disadvantage. At a discursive level, "Women . . . are deployed as metaphors for often conflicting aspects of modernity in popular, religious and official discourse" (Stivens, 1998: 93).

In the next section, I analyze a film auteured by U-Wei Haji Saari, *Perempuan, Isteri Dan . . . ?* (1994) as an example of a film that represents the image of the *perempuan berkemban*. I will then suggest that in contrast, women filmmakers like Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima do not focus so heavily on female sexuality as part of the project of recuperating *adat*.

II

The woman in a sarung is perfectly embodied by Sofia Jane's character, sultry Zaleha, in *Perempuan, Isteri Dan . . . ?* (*Woman, Wife, and Whore*). This was a popular and controversial film in Malaysia, partly because of the provocative elision in the title brought about by opposition from local

feminists, not to mention its topic of unleashed female sexuality. Sofia Jane plays a simple *kampung* girl turned prostitute by her jealous and vengeful jilted fiancé Amir, who is forced to take her back to his village as his wife after she tricks him into marriage. The narrative encourages the viewer to feel that it is Amir who has transformed the naive village girl, who believed she was eloping with a man who truly loved her, into a whore, and that additionally, it is prostitution which unleashes her sexuality, shaping all her consequent actions in the plot. The notion of unleashed female sexuality ties into my theory that 1990s Malay male filmmakers are responding to perceived Islamic trends which suppress female sexuality by recuperating *adat* and recognizing the latent power of female sexuality in Malay culture. On the other hand, though, there is ambivalence and uncertainty about how to deal with an *adat* that is offset by the modern liberal discourse of female emancipation. By the time Amir returns to collect her from the pimp, she has become a true "jalang," wearing a short Western dress and chain-smoking.[9] Amir, as the one responsible for releasing Zaleha's female sexuality, is unable to keep it in check. A conversation she has with her neighbor, Kak Maria, is telling. She describes how she feels after flirting with a lorry driver in a restaurant: "Don't you feel our blood rise? This feeling is difficult to imagine. How shall I say it? Surrender. I like it. It makes my blood hot. Can you feel it? Not knowing what will happen next, left to the circumstance at hand. Don't you?" Kak Mariah hesitantly adds, "Isn't that dangerous?" and Zaleha admits, "Precisely" [my translation]. These are the words of a woman who courts danger when exercising libidinal power. Embodying female sexuality and femininity, Zaleha exudes and projects this on the social gaze in her husband's village that defines her as "perempuan" (woman) and "isteri Amir" (Amir's wife).

Her sexuality figures largely in the diegesis of the film. This is a woman who tells her neighbor that she prefers to bathe in the river than using indoor plumbing, probably because she is an exhibitionist who is keenly aware of the many male heads she can turn being clad only in a sarung and sunshades. One hot night, she sits on a low stool in the kitchen facing an electric fan, her top shirt button undone. Using a metal plate, she fans into her sarung. The camera then cuts to a close-up of her uplifted face with eyes closed, a slight smile gripping her cigarette, looking either aroused or relieved from the heat. Meanwhile, the audience is aware of the presence of a peeping-tom, Tapa, spying at her through a hole in the outer wall of the house. Next, she levels her look straight into the camera as if she is aware of being stared at by Tapa (and the cinema spectator), still fanning herself and smoking. Contextually, this voyeurism reinforces the spectator's

sense of forbidden pleasure and encourages us to suspect a sexual underlying meaning in her facial expression.

She is perfectly aware of herself as the object of the male gaze as she states candidly, "Kita orang perempuan, orang suka tengok cantik" ["We are women and people like to look at attractive women"]. She even encourages the other women to be proud of their bodies, "Kalau kita dah ada, kita tunjukkanlah" [which loosely translates into "if you have it, flaunt it"]. These occasions of boosting female pride occur at the seamstress's house, demonstrating that Zaleha's clothing expenses are utilized to "accessorize" and enhance her sexual appeal. It might be conceived as disempowering to cater to the male gaze, but in Zaleha's case, her sexual image is her only weapon of power – evident in the sway of her hips while walking, her eye contact with men, her flirtatious gestures. She attracts the attention of male onlookers even without trying. Totally comfortable with her body and sexuality, she immodestly speaks to the cloth merchant dressed only with a sarung tied around her midriff (*berkemban*), exposing areas of her body such as her shoulders and arms considered *haram* [not kosher] under Islamic law. Granted most women represented in the film do not wear the *tudung*, yet they are not shown "berkemban" either except when they are bathing and washing clothes at the river. She does not hesitate to carry out her heart's desires, whether it is eloping with her first husband, a town dandy, or having a secret tryst in the rubber estate with Tapa during a stormy afternoon. In her relationship with Tapa, she has complete autonomy and power in deciding when they meet. Unsurprisingly, then, she encourages a young village girl, Mina, to respond to the attentions of Bakri, a young man who has been trailing the girl around. She tells Mina to be direct, and as a result Mina willingly meets Bakri in secret for a sexual tryst. Unfortunately, the pair is caught by the villagers and punished. Thus, Zaleha triggers conflict among the villagers with her lack of concern for social propriety.

Just what are the consequences of unleashing female sexuality and feminine libidinal desires? What is Zaleha's impact on the community? First, she encourages conspicuous consumption among the women when she goes to Asiah, the local seamstress, to make some new clothes. Her trendy fashion sense infects the village women and, soon, Asiah is sewing full time and neglecting her cooking chores as she tries to cope with new orders. This incurs the wrath of her husband who demands to know why his wife has not prepared his dinner. But Asiah is not easily cowed like Maria, Zaleha's neighbor, who gets slapped by her husband in an earlier scene where he, too, wants to know why she has not prepared his dinner. Asiah

confronts her husband in front of the other women and produces the money she has earned from taking in sewing. She tells him in Malay, "I've worked nonstop with my hands from this morning, do you know that? Here, here [she pulls out the dollar notes from her neckline], who do you think all this is for? Have you ever asked me where I get the money for the children's education? From this, this [she flings the money at him]! You don't realize anything!" [my translation]. Her husband is stunned into a shamed silence. While Zaleha herself does not have the skills to earn any income in a legitimate way and is forced to rely totally on her husband for money, she has created business for Asiah, unintentionally demonstrating that the only way for women in the village to earn any respect and power from the men is to become wage earners themselves.

Zaleha continually challenges the boundaries of the village mindset, and in doing so, exposes the repressive limits on women in the *kampung*. She persuades her neighbor, Maria, to accept the invitation from the truck driver and his friend to go to the cinema. She convinces her that they should not give up the opportunity as, after all, women are usually cooped up in the house.[10] While the complaint is uttered by a bored young woman, it also highlights that *kampung* women are restricted in terms of social and spatial mobility. It seems women are denied any interlude for recreation or levity; just as Zaleha succeeds in persuading a group of women who were washing clothes by the river to join her for a swim or to play some kind of girlish game in the water, a male passerby orders the women back to work.

If Amir has indeed unleashed Zaleha's feminine libidinal desires by forcing her into prostitution, he is totally at a loss as to how to control her except through the threat of physical violence. She, however, manipulates him without utilizing violence or her sexuality, knowing full well that she is no match for him in terms of physical strength and hypermasculinity (having witnessed his cold-blooded murder of her first husband) and understanding that he is immune to her physical attractions.[11] Her manipulation begins as early as the time he collects her from the pimp and humiliates her: he makes her sleep on the floor and refuses to let her share his bed, saying it is reserved for his wife and that she is only a prostitute. In response to his cruelty and in an attempt to regain some social standing, she tricks him into marrying her when they get "caught" for *khalwat* [close proximity] in the hotel in Golok, a border town infamous for its brothels and hasty marriages. Unknown to him, she tips off the religious office that there is an unmarried couple in their hotel room and the religious officers appear at their door. After the married couple return to Amir's village, her attempts to be a good wife fail as he refuses to play his part as a caring

husband, thereby violating that reciprocal contract which is integral to bilaterality. Finally, when she has had enough of his abuse and finds another man who can satisfy her sexual desires (Tapa), she puts a spell or charm on Amir. This controversial scene, what is known as the *nasi kangkang* [straddled rice] scene, was censored because it was considered un-Islamic. It is an *adat* undertaken by menstruating women to gain control over straying husbands: standing with her legs apart over his rice bowl, she urinates on the rice, symbolizing the assertion of female power and dominance over the man who eats this charmed rice.

As a result of her spell, he becomes more generous and caring. For example, he gives his brother a generous bunch of fresh *buah petai* (a type of vegetable) for his family the day after he has been hexed. The spell weakens his constitution and he suffers from headache, fatigue, and pallor and sweats the following day. There is also heavy rain, "a type that does not bode well," as a man tells Amir: "Hujan macam ini, tak elok pula" [my translation]. As if to confirm these words, when he starts his truck in the downpour, he punctures a tire. The cross-cutting between scenes of Amir changing the tire in the rain and Zaleha's seduction of Tapa among the rubber trees juxtaposes emasculation and cuckoldry, reinforcing the overall sense of Amir's emasculation by Zaleha. To carry the metaphor of emasculation further, there is even a scene when a male villager slaughtering the calf teases the young uncircumcised boys about splitting a boy's penis into four if he, the butcher, were blind. Zaleha's hex domesticates Amir and he even returns home early to look for his wife, intending to spend more time with her. Another day, he decides to go home early to rest when he spies Zaleha outside the meeting-hall. And then he does something completely out of character: he hurries to the passenger side of the car and holds the door open for her to get in, smiling at her. This kind of deference towards his wife does not go unnoticed by his friends who are equally misogynistic in their treatment of women; thus far in the film, erring wives are slapped or reprimanded. For instance, Maria is slapped in public for returning late at night in a lorry with two male strangers and, secondly, Halim, Amir's older brother, does not intervene to prevent Amir from forcing the soup bowl to Zaleha's mouth and spilling soup all over her. Careful to preserve his younger brother's "face," his advice about letting bygones be bygones and being a better husband only comes when both their wives are out of earshot. In addition, Halim is also the man who yells at the women to return to work, i.e. to washing clothes, when he sees them having fun and playing in the river. If we include the close homosocial rapport Amir evidently has with the men in the village and their treatment

of women, it would seem that Amir signifies the typical *kampung* male who outlines and prescribes the gender mores and conduct for women.

Zaleha's hex is so effective that she is able to safely reject Amir's sexual advances with the excuse that she does not feel well. The dialogue between the two here hints of irony and role reversal as he asks her to approach, "Mai sini" ["Come here"]. She is standing at the entrance of the bedroom and she answers in an incredulous tone, "Who? Me? You want me?" [my translation]. Suddenly finding herself in charge, she seizes the opportunity for vengeance and denies him his spousal "rights" to her body. After all, he has not performed his social role as a husband by caring for her, providing adequately for her, and fulfilling her sexual needs. (For example, when she first arrives at his village, she has no other dresses or clothes of her own apart from the one she is wearing. Consequently, she gets into debt with the cloth merchant because Amir has not given her any money for clothing. Moreover, they have not been having any sexual relations as husband and wife.) Unsound as it may seem, this is a valid argument that Malay Muslim men would be likely to make. The same men might claim that had Amir kept her sexually gratified, she would not have turned to Tapa, even though her reasons might have more to do with Tapa's kindness and simplicity.

Female sexuality or libidinal desires seems to be a popular theme in Malay 1990s cinema because, while being sensationalist in attracting audiences, it also reflects modernity and the liberal challenges posed by changing gender configurations. Nevertheless, it should be added that these are male projections; women filmmakers like Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima seem more interested in exploring the fuller sense of female subjectivity (more later). In U-Wei Haji Saari's vision, as woman, wife, and whore, Zaleha symbolizes modernity and capitalism (but which, unconsciously perhaps, taps into female power in *adat*). Her cigarette-smoking which encodes the contagion of urban modernity marks her as rebellious, independent, and transgressive. In short, she epitomizes female sexual autonomy and sexual liberation which is good for some men, but not for others. Hence, female sexual activity has to be regulated by the patriarchy, as illustrated in hypermasculine acts of violence on intruding male strangers in the village such as the lorry driver and his friend, and the itinerant cloth merchant, Si Majeet, who is killed by Tapa. In both instances, the male villagers act aggressively and violently before giving their victims any opportunity for explanation. The adulterous Tapa, in turn, is slain by Amir. It is her presumption that she has such liberties that enrages and emasculates Amir. Zaleha also spends a lot of her husband's money – money that she

does not have – on consumer goods and is able to create a high demand for Majeet's goods as well as Asiah's skills. One of the women comments that ever since Zaleha's arrival, the cloth merchant's trips to their village have become regular/more frequent. In keeping with the capitalist fashion industry, she advocates the modern and the *en vogue*, telling Kak Maria that "if you make a modern baju kurung, it would suit your skin" [my translation].

Deeply resilient and ever resourceful, she utilizes whatever talents and skills she may possess to survive. Her assets being her sexual charms and body, she uses both to full advantage by flirting and seducing men to get what she wants. Yet, her desires for material things seem to undermine a story that may be trying to deal sympathetically with the alienation and oppression of women. Her desires are for beautiful, fashionable clothes, jewelry, high-heel shoes – essentially the trappings of femininity that cater to her vanity and self-image. Even though some sense of female bonding develops around the shared interests in fashion and femininity, the issues are too shallow to guarantee any strong female solidarity in the village. For example, feeling as though their presence is intruding on a domestic argument, the women make their excuses and start leaving after Asiah's confrontation with her husband. Moreover, Zaleha's decision to try to make the best of the volatile situation that is her marriage is problematic. She may have tricked him into marrying her to gain herself some social respectability, to ensure that her past profession stays a secret, and to get back at Amir (who has to marry a woman he forced into prostitution). But there is a streak of recklessness in her, too, for wanting to marry Amir despite having witnessed his cruelty and egoism. Assuming she has no family or is too proud/ashamed to return to them, should she try to make her marriage to a cold-blooded murderer work? And to dispute with those viewers who might actually want it to work, why should she want any kind of sexual attention from him after all the abuse she has suffered in his hands? For a film that purports to represent the power of unleashed female sexuality, it seems all too eager to co-opt its heroine into the bourgeois fantasy of heterosexual marriage. Note how she plays wife to him by preparing him dinner and, in front of the neighbors, when she tells Maria that they will go shopping together once he gets back from work. She actually ends up going to the store alone as he has intentionally stayed out till late at night.

By killing her, Amir destroys the dominant symbol of female libidinal desires in the village. When she dies, most probably the spirit of female autonomy and libidinal agency and of feminine consumerism die with her,

for she has been the agent of change, the symbol of the gender of modernity, all dolled up with no place to run to within the oppressive patriarchal structures of the *kampung*. She becomes an example to the other women that testing patriarchal boundaries will not be tolerated; and neither will emasculating female libidinal desires. In fact, these will be punished severely through hypermasculinity that seeks to empower men to reestablish their hegemonic control.

III

In contrast to the representation of the *perempuan berkemban*, Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima's strong-minded, articulate, educated, and independent heroines imply that it is not necessary for their male counterparts to remind the Malay woman about her own "essential" pre-*dakwah* sexuality, or to free her from her own Islamicized sexual inhibitions and repressions. Rather, the female character's desires revolve around other crucial issues: career choices, emotional relationships with friends, family, and the potential romantic partner, and lastly, how to lead a productive, satisfactory life as a decent human being in a rapidly industrializing society. In all of Baba's films, *Selubung* (1991), *Ringgit Kasorrga* (1994), *Layar Lara* (1996), and *Mimpi Moon* (2000), striking a balance between rural and urban spaces which symbolize tradition/the past and modernity/the future is a key theme. Her female protagonists played by Deanna Yusoff in *Selubung* and *Ringgit Kasorrga* are both at home in the *kampung* setting as well as in the city.[12] While Baba continues with the notion of recuperating *adat* in her latest film *Mimpi Moon* by exploring the hitherto unknown properties of the sea cucumber, *gamat emas*, to heal the wounds of landmine victims, Erma Fatima's newer work, I think, mainly revolves around the formation of modern Malay identity and gender politics which may include sexuality but not be at the service of recuperating *adat*.

The sexual continues to be political in the Malaysian media. But what bears closer examination is how that discourse of sexuality is shaped or transformed and by whom. There are two articles posted on the malaysiakini website[13] that I would like to mention in closing which deal with female sexuality in the contemporary Malaysian film/entertainment industry. The first is Amir Muhammad's article "The State of Erma Fatima," which, in the course of discussing Erma's rising career as actor and director, mentions that her third feature, *Bulan Dan Matahari* [*Moon and Sun*], is "about a married man who decides that he is homosexual." Again, I think

this supports my thesis that women filmmakers are not so much interested in dealing with the sole idea of uncontrollable female (hetero)sexuality as they are in exploring other more subversive issues related to modern Malay identity today. In fact, Erma Fatima's past film projects have included directing an award-winning telemovie, *Jangan* (1995), about "a Malaysian woman caught in a bureaucratic mess when she marries a Bangladeshi immigrant" (Amir). Film critic Amir Muhammad claims that *Jangan* was "so daring in its indictment of official hypocrisy that it was then banned from TV." Her second film, *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* [*The Last Malay Woman*], he says, "clashed religious fundamentalism against the sexual awakening of a young woman."

Female sexuality is a hot topic for men across the politically and culturally conservative to liberal spectrum, attracting the attention of those who claim that women should stay at home and be covered as well as those who "defend" women's right to expression of their sexual fantasies and whatnot in the newspapers, in men's English-language magazines, and on the internet (in both the English and Malay languages). An example of this is Farish A. Noor's article "Sex and the Asian Woman" written in defense of young Malay R&B pop diva Ning Baizura's frank interview about her sexual fantasies in an English-language men's magazine, *FHM*. I problematize this and suggest, at the risk of destabilizing an already fragile solidarity with liberal heterosexual men of goodwill, to women themselves to reclaim their spaces for vocal expression. Indeed, Malaysian writer Sheryll Stodhard claims in the online version of music magazine, *Tone*, that *FHM*, "a milder Malaysian version of its almost soft-porn British progenitor, still unabashedly makes full use of its cover girls as selling tools for the sex slant of the publication here." What is worse is that instead of targeting *FHM* as sexually exploitive and sexist, the Malay media and English mainstream press as well as assorted politicians zoomed in on Ning for being sexually explicit. Ning Baizura's sexuality gets "exploited twice; once, by *FHM*, in a bid to cash in on her sexuality to sell magazines, and again, by other media who have cashed in on second-hand sex for their audiences" (Stodhard). As example, Stodhard refers to the August 6 issue of Malay tabloid *Mingguan Perdana* whose cover features "a headline quoting an Ustaz's exhortations that Ning is spiritually 'sick' and needs immediate treatment. [Yet] in the centrespread of the same issue, the newspaper lifts a shot of Ning in the same short black dress from *FHM* and re-sells it as their 'Poster *Mingguan Perdana*'."

Lastly, I should point out that the narrowing of public discourse on the television screen when filtered through the new Islamic lenses already oper-

ates as more and more rural and working-class Malays gain access to film and video-making techniques.[14] While the film industry is largely run by and supported by the secularist elite, the growing interest in film and video production, and the proliferation of satellite and cable television as global media networks expand, will eventually lead to the desire for more and more self-representations from the young *dakwah* generation.

The acts of recuperating *adat* that I have described in this essay may indeed be tiny, tiny points of resistance, especially when we take into account the growing sense of Islam as the central pole of Malay identity in the current post-Anwar climate in Malaysia. And perhaps in that light, it is all the more vital and necessary to highlight these little precious points of resistance just as secularist cultural producers, writers, and journalists so often write appealing for tolerance, open-mindedness, and striving for commonalities – "the ethics and values of our shared humanity" (Martinez, 1999: 11) – in a multiracial nation.

Afterword

For me, writing about Malaysian culture and film from Vancouver, British Columbia, has often been a somewhat alienated process. Information garnered from the internet can never make up for my not being physically present in Malaysia, for having one's research be shaped by current Malaysian political and cultural discourse and the multiple local insights from Malaysian academia and popular cultural activists. I was made more conscious of this aspect in the summer of 2001 when I returned to Malaysia. In a conversation with two young, cynical Malaysian journalists (both of whom used to write for the mainstream press) about malaysiakini.com providing a great alternative media perspective to the other state-controlled presses, I was informed that the online journalists could have conducted a more thorough investigation before preparing their story about the outbreak of racial violence in Petaling Jaya in March 2001 (July 9, 2001). Being here in Vancouver, my only source of information about events in Malaysia comes through the internet. After all, not every magazine has been put online or has an up-to-date website. For example, Malay-language media such as pop magazines, some journals, the FINAS (Film Development Board of Malaysia) newsletter, and comics have no internet equivalent. Thus, I was quite relieved and gratified to learn that my interpretations of U-Wei and Shuhaimi Baba's works, formulated during the thesis-writing stage in Vancouver over the late 1990s, were not inaccurate

upon talking to U-Wei himself and film animator Hassan Muthalib (July 6, 2001).

Having said that, at the same time, there are advantages to being a researcher on Malaysian culture who is based abroad at a time when the Malaysian government has threatened to censor any academic criticism of government policies through expulsion (for university students) and job termination (for its faculty members). Malaysia-based academics nowadays are lamenting more and more about the difficulty of conducting cutting-edge research or producing radical criticism of the nation-state within Malaysia without facing terrible repercussions. Moreover, Vancouver, situated in British Columbia on the edge of the Asian Pacific Rim, is significant first as a cosmopolitan city with a large Asian population. It is home to *The Asian Post*, a fortnightly paper started by Malaysian immigrants which used to focus substantially on southeast Asian news. During the Anwar debacle, the paper's coverage (then *The Southeast Asian Post*) was more in-depth and comprehensive than that in the daily *Vancouver Sun*. Secondly, the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria form two important points on the North American academic circuit of Southeast Asian Studies on the west coast. Hence, Malaysian academics and writers such as Maznah Mohamad, Shamsul A.cB., and Karim Raslan have stopped by to give talks at both BC universities.

Unfortunately, when the funding from the Ford Foundation runs out for the North West Consortium for SE Asian Studies (NWCSEAS), and as the pioneer Canadian Southeast Asianists retire and are not being replaced due to federal and provincial funding cuts to universities, not to mention the academic shift away from area/regional studies to Global Studies, being an institutionally independent scholar of southeast Asia in BC will become more and more an isolating experience and career.

Notes

1 Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was removed from office for allegations of sexual misconduct, specifically sodomy (a sin for Muslims), as the government-controlled newspapers were loudly proclaiming in their headlines in September 1998. Anwar believes his removal from office is motivated by a political conspiracy by Mahathir and his cronies to preserve their own positions of power and wealth. After a trial which critics have called "an absolute travesty of justice" (Rajendra, 1999: 10), he was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to 6 years' imprisonment. A later trial added another 9 years' sentence for sodomy. For more details and analysis of the Anwar case,

see *Aliran Monthly*, May 1999. Up-to-date information is readily available on the internet by typing in Anwar Ibrahim's name.

2 PAS's political agenda has always been total islamicization of the state, which, unsurprisingly, is opposed by the ethnic Chinese (26% of the population), who are mostly Taoist/Buddhist, and the Indians (7%), who are predominantly Hindu. The PAS leadership consists of conservative Muslim *ulama* or clergy.

3 ABIM's motto since its inception in 1969 has been "Islam first, Malay second" (Shamsul, 1999: 8). The formation of ABIM signaled the beginning of the *dakwah* movement in Malaysia.

4 Critics see the patronage system within UMNO functioning in the form of cronyism, nepotism, and corruption.

5 This shows the integration of Islam and *adat*. Many anthropologists studying Malaysia find the dichotomy between *adat* and Islam that Malaysian anthropologist Wazir Jahan Karim makes problematic. Her point is to valorize *adat* as being more fair to women than contemporary revivalist Islam, which she views more as an arabicization that threatens to transform Malay culture and to purge *adat*. See her book *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam*. My position is that while some aspects of *adat* seem more liberal to women and women's equality, this is not to say that the culture is not patriarchal. Moreover, as capitalism, urbanization, and development continue to expand, those very aspects of *adat* that give women power as farmers and landholders are eroding. Ong discusses, for example, how "population growth and land scarcity have affected gender relations and peasant householding" so that "the *adat* practice of awarding equal land shares to sons and daughters has been superseded by the Islamic Shafi'i law dictating that sons be entitled to claim shares twice those of their sisters" (1995: 164).

6 Malay middle class.

7 Shahnon Ahmad, a Malay writer whose works have become more religious over the years, is a prime example. He was a member of Al Arqam, a radical Islamic group which got shut down by the government in the early 1990s. Earlier, Shahnon had worked and studied at the Australian National University in Canberra from 1968 to 1972. He lost his poet laureate status after the publication of his novelette *Shit@PukiMak@PM* (1999) a political satire of Mahathir's corrupt regime. "PukiMak" is an obscenity referring to one's mother's vagina.

8 The *perempuan berkemban* is also featured in *Amok* (Adman Salleh, 1994), and *Panas* (Nurhalim Hj. Ismail, 1998).

9 Malay cinema encodes a woman who smokes usually as a prostitute or, at least, as someone aspiring to have the same privileges as men.

10 "Ini kita perempuan asyik duduk di rumah saja."

11 He warns her after they get married that despite her official status as legal wife, it does not change his feelings towards her: "Although we are married, you are still dirty and don't think you are now clean" [my translation]. His murder of her first husband is treated as almost incidental, the murder scene does not recur in flashbacks, and there is no discussion or internal reflection about it by any of the characters.

12 For a brief analysis of *Layar Lara*, see "Recuperating Malay Custom/*adat* in the Malaysian New Wave: Responses from the Work of Woman Filmmaker Shuhaimi Baba," in *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing* (2002, University of British Columbia Press). A short discussion of Erma Fatima's teledrama appears in "What is it to be a Man? Hypermasculinity in Contemporary Malaysian Cinema," *West Coast Line reZonings 2* 34(2) (2000): 43–60. For an in-depth discussion of *Selubung*, see chapter 4 of my dissertation, "Gender, Modernity and the Nation in Malaysian Literature and Film (1980s–1990s)."

13 Since the Anwar affair, Malaysians have begun to turn to the internet as a more reliable news source. Malaysiakini.com, launched on Nov. 20, 1999, aims to provide unbiased and responsible news, analysis, and feature stories "in the spirit of inquiry with truth being the sole criterion of investigation" (editorial policy).

14 When I was doing fieldwork in Malaysia in 1998, I had the opportunity of catching the preview of a television drama entitled *An-Nur* at FINAS, the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia, which houses a film academy as well. Made by a young male film student, the tone was heavily moralistic, as highlighted by, first, the Quranic quote in the beginning of the film, the thunderous nondiegetic music, and the content whereby the young couple is finally punished for premarital sex. The title of the film refers to surah 434, a line in the Quran which highlights men's superior position over women. The film's ending with the adulterous couple being given a hundred strokes of the rotan each is an intertextual reference to a classic *purba* (drawing from Malay history/mythology) film, P. Ramlee's *Semerah Padi* (1956). But given the different era and social climate, *An-Nur* reflects a less forgiving, *dakwah* perspective unlike Ramlee's conclusion in which "having survived the ordeal, the couple is reinstated into society as a legitimately married couple via a traditional ceremony" (Kueh, 1997: 27).

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12

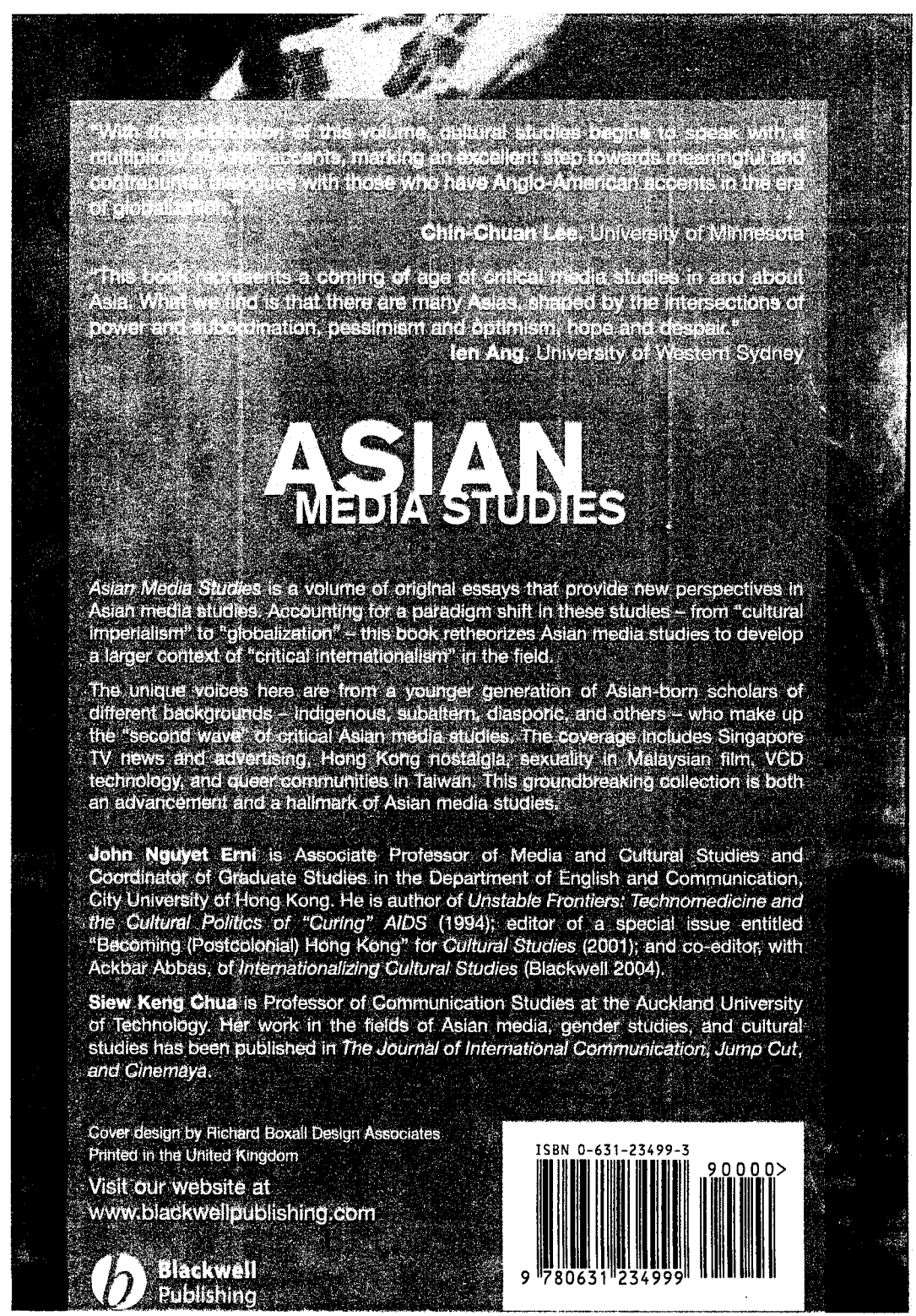
The Formation of a Queer-Imagined Community in Post-Martial Law Taiwan

John Nguyet Erni and Anthony J. Spires[1]

Introduction

In 1996, the first popular lifestyle magazine catering to young Chinese-reading gays and lesbians appeared in Taiwan. *G&L Magazine* was launched only nine years after the end of almost half a century of martial law, during which such a visible cultural production would not have been possible. The magazine was granted permission by the Taipei City government to publish in 1996, and its premiere issue arrived in bookstores in June of that year. Glossy, colorful, and designed with a dual cover featuring images of men on one side and women on the other, the magazine carries with it a vibrantly celebratory tone (figure 12.1). "G&L" signifies more than gays and lesbians; it doubles as a shorthand for a number of multiplying nominations appropriate for its celebratory attitude (e.g. the premiere issue also names the magazine as Glory & Liberty, Gentlemen and Ladies, George & Louis, Gina & Lisa, etc.). Compared to the drabness of other "underground" queer publications or queer-friendly magazines of earlier times (e.g. *Girlfriend* [*Nupengyou*] and *Teacher Zhang Monthly* [*Zhang Laoshi Yuekan*]), *G&L*'s design concept projects positive self-affirmation cloaked in commercial vigor.[2]

"The World's First Chinese-Language Gay and Lesbian Magazine" is how *G&L* proclaims its global appeal. In 2000, its circulation reached 40,000. Besides selling in Taiwan, Japan, Canada, and the US, the magazine achieves one-third of its sales in Hong Kong.[3] In April 2003, the magazine's English name was changed to *Gamma* (issue 42), while its Chinese title remains the



"With the publication of this volume, cultural studies begins to speak with a multiplicity of Asian accents, marking an excellent step towards meaningful and confrontational discourses with those who have Anglo-American accents in the era of globalization."

Chin-Chuan Lee, University of Minnesota

"This book represents a coming of age of critical media studies in and about Asia. What we find is that there are many Asias, shaped by the intersections of power and subordination, pessimism and optimism, hope and despair."

Ien Ang, University of Western Sydney

ASIAN MEDIA STUDIES

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The unique voices here are from a younger generation of Asian-born scholars of different backgrounds – indigenous, subaltern, diasporic, and others – who make up the "second wave" of critical Asian media studies. The coverage includes Singapore TV news and advertising, Hong Kong nostalgia, sexuality in Malaysian film, VCD technology, and queer communities in Taiwan. This groundbreaking collection is both an advancement and a hallmark of Asian media studies.

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