

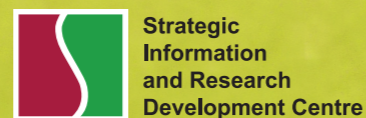
From ethnicity to music, religion to parenthood, sexuality to blogging, and more besides, Thinking Through Malaysia presents new examinations into some of the most interesting building blocks of a complex country. Founded on original research, the authors of these twelve stimulating chapters provide insights into key developments and give us important new perspectives on aspects of culture and society about which sometimes much is said while - until now - too little is known. For those seeking fresh angles and new thinking on Malaysia, Thinking Through Malaysia is a rich resource.

“While official national narrative touts the multifarious nature of Malaysia’s peoples, though never beyond the usual triumvirate of Malay, Chinese and Indian, with the *Dan Lain-Lain* tacked on afterwards, this much needed book shows, however, that ‘Malaysia’ is an assemblage of stories from within and without the *Tanah Air*; a promised land continually made and remade in the hearts of minds of newer and older generations of Malaysians, all of whom are ultimately migrants, looking and relooking for home.”

Jason Tan, editor and producer at BFM, the business radio station

“Julian Hopkins and Julian C. H. Lee have put together an outstanding book – one of the most original and innovative volumes on contemporary Malaysian culture and society that has been published in recent years. The twelve empirically rich and thought-provoking chapters do not shy away from sensitive issues and reflect the fresh ideas and novel analyses of a new generation of emerging scholars. A must read for anyone who wants to truly understand Malaysia.”

Professor Jörn Dosch, Monash University, Malaysia



Thinking Through Malaysia

edited by Hopkins & Lee



Thinking Through Malaysia

culture and identity in the 21st century



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Julian Hopkins & Julian CH Lee

Thinking Through Malaysia

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Thinking Through Malaysia

culture and identity in the 21st century

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Julian Hopkins & Julian CH Lee



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Contents

	Introduction	
	<i>Julian Hopkins and Julian CH Lee</i>	1
CHAPTER 1	▪ Locating ‘Mixed’ Identities in a Racialized Society <i>Caryn Lim</i>	11
CHAPTER 2	▪ Redefining ‘Malayness’: Expectations of Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims <i>Dahlia Martin</i>	31
CHAPTER 3	▪ Power, Agency and the Tithe <i>Cheah Wui Jia</i>	51
CHAPTER 4	▪ Negotiating the Liberties and Boundaries of Malaysian Online Christian Expression: Case Studies <i>Tan Meng Yoe</i>	67
CHAPTER 5	▪ From All-Blogs to Blog House Malaysia: SoPo Blogging, Journalism, and Politics in Malaysia <i>Julian Hopkins</i>	83
CHAPTER 6	▪ Examining the Exploitation of Indonesian Domestic Workers in Malaysia: Gender and National Policy Factors <i>Nadiyah Ahmad</i>	109

CHAPTER 7	▪ Solving (Some of) Shirley Lim's <i>Life's Mysteries</i> <i>Theresa Holtby</i>	125
CHAPTER 8	▪ Asian Third Culture Kids: Growing Up in Malaysia <i>Abeer Yusuf and Batul Mohsinali</i>	141
CHAPTER 9	▪ Parenting: Some Selected Narratives of Mothers <i>Ng Siow San</i>	153
CHAPTER 10	▪ The Homosexual Threat: Appraising Masculinities and Men's Sexualities in Malaysia <i>Joseph Goh</i>	167
CHAPTER 11	▪ Malaysian Rocks: An Introduction to the Contemporary Malaysian Extreme Music Underground, 2010-2011 <i>Marco Ferrarese</i>	187
CHAPTER 12	▪ Chinese Independent Music: Resisting and Negotiating with the Popular in Malaysia <i>Liew Shao Yi</i>	205



To Dr Yeoh Seng Guan





Introduction

Julian C. H. Lee & Julian Hopkins

Many do not realize that there is a great deal of excellent, thoughtful and important research being undertaken in and about Malaysian society and culture, which unfortunately only comes to be read by less than a handful of people. This book is an attempt to rectify this situation by collecting together eleven pieces of writing that describe some of the findings from young researchers who are working, or have worked on, diverse but compelling areas of investigation.

The setting is of course Malaysia, but, as we shall see, things quickly become more complicated, and much richer. The Malaysian story reveals itself to be hardly a story at all and instead, perhaps, something closer to a kaleidoscopic assemblage of fragments that are clearly *of* Malaysia, and yet which struggle to be seen clearly or understood through the outdated lenses with which so many of us still try to see this country. In the chapters that follow, we learn that there are scenes that we never knew existed, gain insight into previously ignored characters, and familiar figures turn out to think about themselves quite differently to the way we understood them.

In all cases, the work has the essential traits of sound, critical research and writing with opinions and conclusions drawn carefully and thoughtfully, and with an eye to the limitations of the data (which all research has). You will not find the underbaked and over-confident conclusions that too often pass for

‘informed opinion’. You will find explorations that are at once considered yet forthright, and understanding while critical.

The research that informs these chapters is qualitative in nature. Often underrated in the face of quantitative research, because of the more sound-bite friendly and quotable nature of figures and ‘hard facts’, qualitative research is no less important or useful. It is frequently overlooked that the fundamental requirement of social science research is *empirical* data – information that is gathered from the world, coming from real people and situations, and documented in a transparent manner. Both quantitative and qualitative data depend on this foundation, but the output often looks very different. To the untrained eye, the more comprehensible output of quantitative data – figures, charts and statistics – may resemble ‘facts’ more than detailed qualitative analysis and commentary such as is presented in this volume. However, they are not the same. The important difference between quantitative and qualitative research is the ability of the former to summarise empirical data from across a much larger sample, whereas qualitative data delves deeper into case studies and the subjective human understanding that lies at the root of all action. Each method sacrifices either depth or breadth, but ultimately neither can be considered superior to the other.

All societies, and perhaps few more so than Malaysian society, are much more than a collection of numbers and weighted percentages – these reflect the trends and broad outlines emerging from people living together, sharing spaces and co-creating contexts. The role of the arts and the social sciences is to reflect and deepen our understanding of the ties that bind us all, as well as the cultures and societies that both form and are formed by us. Where the researcher is required to lay bare his or her reasoning, the underlying technique is carried out spontaneously everyday by everyone – reading verbal and non-verbal interactions, placing them in context and choosing a response based on a theory of why people are doing what they do. Malaysia, in particular, is a country where a nuanced

understanding of discourse – that is, a skilful assessment of the relative collective placement and individual positioning of everyday situations and speech – is part and parcel of the carefully negotiated paths that each Malaysian treads: along and between the multiplicity of cultural, social, religious, ethnic, and political discourses that form the shifting tapestry of 21st century Malaysia.

The chapters herein have diverse interests which are interrogated in various ways, but always in view of past scholarly research on the subject. While all the chapters are based on qualitative research, some chapters are more descriptive in nature, focusing on examining a particular situation or phenomenon. Here we gain a greater, more nuanced, understanding through a more detailed and thoughtfully portrayed account of the phenomenon of interest. Others have a dual interest in both the concrete situation at hand and bringing theoretical ideas generated in other contexts to bear on the interpretation and analysis of what is described. Whereas one periodically hears warnings about ‘importing’ theories from elsewhere (usually ‘the West’) to other contexts, what the pieces in this book that deploy theory demonstrate is that, as noted by Patricia Martinez, “while theory is at stake in an analysis, it is not what determines it” (2002: 21). Indeed, what these chapters demonstrate is the appropriate use of ‘theory’ in helping us come to a better understanding of the things that we very often see around us.

Whether the chapter is more empirically focused or engages with theory, the writing here helps us, with due contemplation, to think through the grain of sand to understand the world. In what follows, the insights – whether social or personal, descriptive or occasionally prescriptive – help us to think through Malaysia to see some of what it is composed of, to adjust our lenses, and to return again with a different vision and a better understanding of that whole. In this book we curate a collage of facets, cut from the rough diamond that is Malaysia. Each cut reflects the vision of committed thinkers, whose light, shone through the prism of their subject matter, refracts onto the pages of this book.

About This Book

This book was conceived as a way of sharing examples of the work that the young 21st century has inspired in scholars of Malaysia. Both Lee and Hopkins have been associated with the School of Arts and Social Sciences¹ at Monash University's campus in Malaysia since 2007. In Lee's capacity as a Senior Lecturer in International Studies and Hopkins's capacity as a postgraduate first, and more recently as a Lecturer in Communication Studies, we have had the privilege of having discussions with these talented researchers as they developed their work and progressed in their analyses, culminating in original and thought-provoking theses. A frequent lamentation of students and their supervisors is that their carefully nurtured creations will never be seen by more than a handful of persons, and this is all the more a loss when they contain material that can inform public opinion about an array of issues, some of which are a site of misunderstanding and social and political anxiety. Thus, this volume brings together twelve chapters that offer a fresh view on a number of aspects of Malaysian culture and society in the 21st century.

The journey begins with Caryn Lim's chapter which interrogates the way in which Malaysians of 'mixed' ethnicity understand their identities. By examining 'mixed-race' Malaysians, she explores ways in which Malaysian society forms racialized identities by interpellating – publicly categorizing – its citizens. This interpellation depends on mutually exclusive racial categories, and the question she addresses is, how then do those who are not clearly one 'race' or another formulate their identity? By describing processes of identity negotiation, she is able to conclude that even the ostensibly unproblematically 'unmixed' ethnic identities develop through "active processes of

¹ Formerly the School of Arts and Sciences. In 2008, this school became two schools: the School of Sciences and the School of Arts and Social Sciences.

identity negotiation” – thus raising questions about many taken for granted assumptions about ‘race’² in Malaysia.

The exploration of ethnic identity is continued in Dahlia Martin’s “Redefining ‘Malayness’: Expectations of Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims,” in which religion as a marker of identity for young adult Malays is explored. Among that which is examined are statements from members of the Malaysian State³ about young adult Malays as bearers of the future of the Malay community, and official discourse arguing that adherence to Islam will strengthen both them as young people and ‘the Malays’ *per se*. Through her interviews with young Malaysian Muslims, Martin uncovers diverse ways of understanding the role of Islam in their lives, and a willingness to decouple the religion from their identity as ‘Malays,’ with which they are less likely to self-identify.

The relationship that Malaysians have with religion is also explored by Cheah Wui Jia with respect to Christians and tithing practices. In “Power, Agency and the Tithe,” Cheah focuses on how academic understandings of the concept of ‘the gift’

² In the social sciences, ‘race’ is a term that is largely regarded as highly problematic. Speaking in terms of ‘race’ is seen to suggest the validity of the idea that there are real, distinguishable ‘races’ of people and that these ‘races’ each possess various immutable characteristics. This idea is essentially rejected in the social sciences. The term ‘ethnicity’, often used interchangeably with ‘race’, is however different. While it acknowledges that people *perceive* themselves and others as belonging to an ethnic group (which they might perceive to be a racial group), the term ‘ethnicity’ seeks to suggest that these groupings are in fact socially constructed. Thus, two groups of people who may be genetically indistinguishable may regard themselves as ethnically distinct if they speak a different language, have different beliefs, etc. The term ‘race’, however, is used in this book owing to the fact that it is commonly used in Malaysia and the authors wish to capture that fact. You may find it in quotation marks to recall the problematic nature of the word.

³ In this book, where the word ‘State’ is capitalized, it intends to refer to the governmental infrastructure of a country. Where ‘state’ is not capitalized, it refers to unit of governance below the Federal level, but above the level of local councils (in Malay, *negeri*; for example, the state of Perak.)

can illuminate the relationship that her Christian interviewees have with obligations to donate to their church. In view of their obligations, Cheah demonstrates how Christians exercise agency – rather than acquiescing to a doctrinal logic where the “tithe is necessarily embedded in an exchange system of guilt and power relations,” she demonstrates how, through managing their relationships with the church and with what they understand the tithe to be about, her interviewees negate the costs (both financial and emotional) of giving and not giving.

Tan Meng Yoe continues the discussion of the tensions between individuals and their religions in his chapter, “Negotiating the Liberties and Boundaries of Malaysian Online Christian Expression: Case Studies.” He asks, “How do Malaysian Christians express their personal Christianity online?” and argues against an intrinsic separation of the on- and offline spheres, describing how two Christians – drawn from a larger sample he is using for a PhD thesis – use their blogs to facilitate their personal journeys and theological development. Although blogging and the internet are often assumed to drive new ways of thinking, he clearly shows how some of the boundaries that exist for people in the offline world are recreated online.

The role of blogs as proposed agents of change is then situated in the wider socio-political context by Julian Hopkins, who draws from his ethnographic research into blogging to discuss the relationship of blogging, journalists, mainstream newspaper ownership, and the government. Although blogging was initially cast as an inherently oppositional medium, he focuses on the development of a blogging association over five years to outline how, from an oppositional stance, it developed into a position aligned with the government. His analysis shows how blogging has become an integral part of the public sphere and a network of actors – with journalists performing a key role – who operate with regards to both oppositional politics as well as factional politics within the Barisan Nasional, and also demonstrates government influence in the management of newspapers.

The impact of government on the lives of those who live in Malaysia also comes through in Nadiyah Ahmad's chapter which focuses on non-Malaysian domestic workers. In a chapter that sheds light on the tensions between the Malaysian and Indonesian governments with respect to domestic workers, Nadiyah evaluates the roles and responsibilities of the Malaysian government in affording Indonesian domestic workers protection from exploitation. She describes how the concerns of these workers are often rendered invisible by their position in the home, which mirrors a pervasive relegation of women to the domestic sphere – a position exacerbated by their exclusion in Malaysia from legal protection as workers.

Whereas Nadiyah's chapter examines the place of a category of non-Malaysians in Malaysia, Theresa Holtby examines the writing of a Malaysian living abroad. Of concern to Holtby is how this writer understands her relationship with her country of origin as an expatriate. Through an examination of three stories by Shirley Lim, Holtby explores the sophisticated expressions of nostalgia and ambivalence in Lim's writing, the close reading of which demonstrates the potential richness and complexity of one's feelings of belonging and identity.

In a jointly authored paper, Abeer Yusof and Batul 'Bats' Mohsinali address similar questions relating to identity and belonging that occur in Holtby's paper, except as expressed by the children of expatriates living in Malaysia. Such children, termed 'Third Culture Kids' (TCK), live between the worlds of their parents and the world of their country of residence. Abeer and Batul describe the various internal conflicts that these TCKs have with respect to their identity and where they feel 'home' is. What this suggests, and what is probably not realized by many Malaysians, is that there are many non-Malaysian residents who feel that Malaysia is their home, but as a result of a number of factors including red tape, passports and visas, are barred from committing to Malaysia in the long term.

Among the impacts on identity that Abeer and Batul describe

is that of the parents of the TCKs, and it is the feelings of parents about parenting in contemporary Malaysia that Ng Siow San examines in her chapter, "Parenting: Some Selected Narratives of Mothers." Of concern to the mothers that Ng spoke to are issues relating to their understanding of new tools of communication, particularly the internet, as well as their relationships with their own parents and how this affects their own parenting style. How these issues are approached are described by Ng to demonstrate the way in which her interviewees maintain a sense of their competence as mothers as providing the best they can for their children.

Turning from the focus on women by Ng, Joseph N. Goh's chapter, "The Homosexual Threat: Appraising Masculinities and Men's Sexualities in Malaysia" situates the study of masculinities in Malaysia in the context of wider academic studies of masculinity in general, notably hegemonic masculinity. His timely analysis of the negative portrayals of homosexual men, and men who do not conform to gender norms, insightfully addresses the impacts that such representations have on both men and women. Drawing on the implications of contemporary homophobia in Malaysia, Goh describes how trends towards the subordination of gay men and effeminate men are intertwined with new forms of women's subordination in Malaysia, as well as challenging the established Malaysian masculine order.

Beginning with the male-dominated scenes of punk and heavy metal, the final two chapters in this book examine live music in Malaysia. Often a source of anxiety for parents, these two chapters expose the rich intermingling of ethnicity, youth subcultures and globalizing influences on musicians and fans in Malaysia. Marco Ferrarese, a musician himself, uses observations derived from his ethnographic research in these fields to take us to the Malaysian punk and extreme heavy metal music scene and to explain the relevance of different genres and associated subcultural practices. He notes the influence of western music and practices, but questions the cogency of discussions that

suggest that ostensibly ‘Western’ musical styles are, when performed in non-Western contexts, somewhat ‘inauthentic.’

While the scenes that Ferrarese examines are largely dominated by Malay musicians and fans, Liew Shao Yi looks at the Chinese indie scene in Malaysia. Just as the punk musicians described by Ferrarese are critical of various aspects of contemporary society, Liew also describes how the Chinese indie scene “encompasses an entire subculture that situates itself in opposition to popular, commoditized culture and music.” However, while this is the case, in her analyses of two Chinese indie rock bands, Liew notes how they also adopt some practices from mainstream music purveyors in order to increase the appeal of their music, while at the same time sometimes integrating non-conventional elements into their music, such as the use of indigenous instrumentation.

It is worth noting that Liew’s chapter, like all the chapters in this book, were written by individuals associated with Monash University’s School of Arts and Social Sciences. These authors are, or were, conducting research for theses which were either PhD theses of between 80-100,000 words, or Honours theses⁴ of between 15-20,000 words. In both cases, these theses were conducted in close consultation with an experienced supervisor who assists in the gathering, interpretation, and presentation of the data collected. Similarly, these theses are examined by scholars of the field in question: the Honours theses have examiners both internal and external to Monash University, and the PhD theses have only external, usually internationally based, academics.

Finally, we, the editors of this book, wish to thank those whose assistance made this book possible. We thank Monash University’s Campus Research Committee and the School of Arts

⁴ In the Australian system, the Honours degree is more or less equivalent to a Masters degree in other countries, such as the United States. With an Honours degree, one may go on directly to pursue a PhD without first obtaining a Masters degree.

and Social Sciences Research Committee for their support of this project, which included some editorial costs. We also thank Monash University's campus in Malaysia for the financial support of the students in this collection in the form of the scholarships they received to support their study. In addition to the authors, we would also like to thank Caryn Lim for her editorial assistance with the manuscript.

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CHAPTER 1

Locating 'Mixed' Identities in a Racialized Society¹

*Caryn Lim*²

Introduction

In June 2011, state assemblyperson Hannah Yeoh, her husband Ramachandran Muniandy and their new-born baby became a hot topic amongst Malaysians when a bid to register the child's race as Anak Malaysia (Child of Malaysia) was rejected (*The Star* 2011: 34). For weeks, public debates raged over forums, blogs and social networking sites about the need for the 'race box'. The furore eventually fizzled out, as these things often do, but it raised several questions usually taken for granted. Questions like: is the concept of 'race' antithetical to that of a Malaysian identity? If not, what 'race' are individuals of mixed-parentage? In this case, is the child 'Indian', 'Malay' or 'Chinese'?

¹ A version of this chapter was presented in February 2012 at the seminar series of Monash University's School of Arts and Social Sciences, and in March 2012 at the conference on *Lived Cosmopolitanisms: Identities, Languages and Literatures in Littoral Asia*, University of Malaya.

² The author graduated with an Honours degree in 2011. She is now a tutor in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Monash University, Sunway campus.

In the current context of Malaysia, 'race' as a discourse itself is particularly problematic because of its politicized and institutionalized nature. There is what is often described as a disconnect between the official or political rhetoric of 'race' and racial identities, and that of the real lived experiences of the individuals within it. In particular, instances of cultural boundary crossing and hybridity are often ignored or suppressed in favour of traditional narratives of rigidly defined groups co-existing in harmony under the umbrella of a Malaysian national identity. Thus, racialization – the process in which the concept of 'race' is discursively produced and increasingly reified – is particularly ubiquitous in Malaysia (Mandal 2003). 'Race' and racial identities such as 'Indian', 'Malay' and 'Chinese' are understood as primordial, immutable and utterly inescapable, yet, miscegenation – if we accept the premise that pure 'races' exist – does occur. As a result, more and more Malaysians are finding it necessary to identify with the label 'mixed' or to create their own hybridized identities such as Chindian, Chalay, or as in a case of Yeoh's child, Anak Malaysia. Still, these alternative identities have largely remained in the realm of the colloquial and carry little significance outside of everyday social interactions. Furthermore, unlike in other parts of the world, there is not a significant discourse about being 'mixed' in Malaysia. In South America for instance, generations of intermarriage and miscegenation between Spanish colonialists and indigenous peoples or 'Indians' have resulted in a large population of mixed peoples called the Mestizo (Hurd 2008; Weismantel 2001). The Mestizo, unlike mixed Malaysians, are very much visible in political and social discourse, so much so that they are often thought of as a third 'race' or ethnicity beside the Spanish descendants or 'White race' and the indigenous Indians (Hurd 2008).

In this chapter, I look at some of the ways in which 'mixed' Malaysian narratives are regulated and, to an extent, erased by various state-mediated processes. In particular, I use Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation to understand the ways in

which Malaysians – ‘mixed’ or otherwise – come to understand themselves as racial citizens. I suggest that, as a result of regular interpellations of officialized racial identities such as ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’ or ‘Malay’, ‘mixed’ identities are effaced and, with them, evidence of the lived interconnections of all Malaysians. With the help of semi-structured interviews conducted with nine Malaysian adults aged between 21 and 29 who identified as ‘mixed-race’, and subsequent qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts, I will detail the various signs and signifiers that accompany interpellations of officialized ethnic identities and the ways in which ‘mixed’ Malaysians interact with them. I will demonstrate that, as symptomatic of racialization, ‘mixed’ Malaysians in particular are very well aware of the often subtle diacritical symbols and markers that make normative ‘Indians’, ‘Malays’ or ‘Chinese’. While there have been discussions regarding ethnic identity markers in Malaysia, the discussion here seeks to explore how ‘mixed’ Malaysians identify the salient markers and how they try to or fail to accommodate themselves within it.

The production of Racialized Subjects

To a large extent, the development of Malaysia has been predicated on the maintenance of separate and distinct ethnic groups in a way that harks back to John Furnivall’s (1948) conception of a pluralistic society, particularly after the riots of May 1969. As Furnivall saw it, plural societies were a result of colonialist “divide and conquer” strategies that produced a situation in which every sphere of society was divided according to race (1948: 304).

Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labour along racial lines (ibid.).

Such a description of society is in line with the way in which contemporary Malaysia, and certainly colonial Malaya, has been represented in political and popular discourse. Indeed, as Graham Brown suggests, nation building in Malaysia operates in such a way that nationhood, “rather than transcending ethnic allegiances, is explicitly based on ethnic stratification” and that this ideology is taught to Malaysians from a young age (2005: 4). This is also evident in various nation building campaigns over the years, such as former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad’s *Wawasan 2020*, which promoted a multicultural Malaysia amongst others things,³ and current Prime Minister Najib Razak’s ‘1Malaysia’, where visions of pluralistic utopias composed of harmonious but discrete ethnic groups are regularly propagated. This is also evident in the structure of the dominant political coalition where ethnicity is a legitimate platform. Useful in understanding these processes of racialization in Malaysia is Althusser’s notion of interpellation, which suggests that identities are imposed upon subjects through a naming process which is mediated by institutions such as education, religion and the media (1971). I would suggest that it is this pluralistic approach to nationhood that interpellates Malaysians as ethnicized citizens; that this is conducted systematically and often quite directly; and that as a result, most Malaysians – mixed or otherwise – have internalized this ideology.

In the context of Malaysia, ‘racial’ ideologies and discourse are often imparted upon its citizens in a blunt and direct manner. When asked about how he understood the concept of race in Malaysia, G,⁴ a self-identified ‘mixed Malaysian’, expressed the following view:

G: Well, we’re taught to understand that race means you’re different – you know, if you’re Malay you’re like this and if you’re Chinese you’re like that, but one of my lecturers

³ See Lee (1997: 80-1) for more on *Wawasan 2020*.

⁴ In this chapter, interviewees are referred to only by a single initial in order to preserve their anonymity. Where ‘C’ occurs, however, it refers to the author of this chapter.

asked the best question and she almost killed a student because of his answer. She asked this guy, "What makes you Chinese?"; and he stood for a good 5 minutes thinking and his best answer was "I use chopsticks." So when you start to ask what makes you whatever you say you are ... you can't really answer.

G highlights the problems associated with conceiving of ethnic categories as having rigid definitions and boundaries. His use of the term "taught," in particular, and the way in which identities such as Malay and Chinese are imparted and come to be accepted as common sense is in line with Althusser's explanation of interpellation as a mode by which identities can be produced and disseminated by institutions he terms the "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISA) (1971: 149). For Althusser, identity, including ethnic identity, is an illusion that is mediated through ideological institutions such as the ISA and these institutions cause individuals to believe themselves to be of a particular identity through a naming or "hailing" process called interpellation. He described it as a process in which an individual is made to think of him/herself as having or being of a particular identity through the act of naming. When an individual is named or consistently called 'Indian', for instance, the individual will begin to internalize the identity over time and understand him/herself as 'Indian'. In other words, in naming a subject, that subject is discursively constituted. In the context of Malaysia, such subjects as 'Malays', 'Indians' and 'Chinese' are not therefore natural or immutable but are instead interpellated categories that Malaysians are constantly subjected to.

Here, it is useful to discriminate between ethnic categories and ethnic groups. In his book *National Identity*, Anthony D. Smith (1991) proposes that ethnic categories and ethnic groups differ in terms of the consciousness of those individuals within the groups. Ethnic categories for instance represent an etic account of identity where the individuals themselves within the category may not necessarily think of themselves as part of

a distinct or separate culture.⁵ Thus, when British colonialist Thomas Stamford Raffles said, “I cannot but consider the *Melayu* [Malay] nation as one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space,” he assigned an ethnic category to those he saw as “*Melayu*” (1816: 103). On the other hand, an ethnic group is one in which the individuals within the group themselves are conscious of its existence and perceive, amongst others, a shared history, common ancestry and association with a homeland (Smith 1991: 20-21). In this respect, the ‘Malays’, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Indians’ in Malaya prior to independence had not constituted ethnic groups, but had been assigned ethnic categories in colonial processes. Through an organized system of population censuses and division of labour along ‘racial’ lines, British colonists classified and segregated all whom they encountered.⁶ Today, many Malaysians have internalized these categories, and the result is a successful interpellation of ethnic identity that, for theorists such as Stuart Hall, requires not only that an individual is named or hailed but that the individual also invests in the subject position that is interpellated (2000: 19). Rather than understanding labels such as ‘Malay’ or ‘Chinese’ as convenient categories originating from a colonial past, ideas about the existence of ‘the Malays’ or the possibility of being ‘an Indian’ are taken for granted as fact. What I am trying to suggest is that, in the same way that colonialists in pre-independence Malaya systematically instilled a previously weak sense of belonging to particular categories, contemporary state-mediated institutions in education, politics and the media today continue to accord Malaysians racial labels and in so doing create racialized citizens.

⁵ JC Mitchell similarly sees ethnic identities as constructed as a result of a labelling or categorization of individuals and that these categorical identities - in the sense of being explicit and unambiguous - have more to do with expectations of behaviour in public that, in a sense, “enable behaviour to be predicted” and so provide order (Mitchell 1974: 23).

⁶ For more on British colonial involvement in the creation of ethnic categories see Hirschman (1987).

Of the various ISAs that Althusser identifies, three are of most relevance in the context of contemporary Malaysia – “the legal ISA,” “the educational ISA,” and “the political ISA” (1971: 137). First, the inclusion of ethnicity in legal and constitutional frameworks and the method by which national identity is framed represents a direct interpellation of ethnic identity. To a large extent, the need for officialized ethnic identity in Malaysia has been driven by the recognition of the “special rights of the Malays” as enshrined in the constitution. According to Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, ‘Malay’ refers to a person who is Muslim, “habitually speaks the Malay language,” and “conforms to Malay custom.”⁷ The significance of this clause is twofold: on the one hand, it created and consolidated an objective ‘Malay’ identity where previously it had been quite fluid and subjective (Shamsul 2001: 361-362; Reid 2001); on the other hand, it has been used to legitimize the notion of *Ketuanan Melayu* (literally Malay Supremacy), which is popularly used to refer to the “special position” of “the Malays” as first settlers or indigenous people, and the political precedence of Bumiputeras.⁸ As Arjun Appadurai notes in a discussion of contemporary ethnic violence,

the ethnic labels and categories involved in contemporary ethnic violence are frequently products of recent state policies and techniques, such as censuses, partitions and constitutions. Labels such as ‘Yugoslav’, ‘Sikh’, ‘Kurd’ and ‘Muslim’, which *appear* to be the same as long-standing ethnic names and terms, are frequently transformations of existing names and terms to serve substantially new frameworks of identity, entitlement and spatial sovereignty (Appadurai 1998: 3).

⁷ It should be noted that this definition is not an ethnographic description of fact, but a description intended only for the purposes of interpreting the constitution (see Lee 2010: 70).

⁸ Bumiputera, meaning “sons of the soil or indigenous people,” refers generally to ‘Malays’ and various aboriginal groups. As part of a series of affirmative action policies put in place to reduce the socioeconomic gap that persisted post-independence, the Bumiputera enjoy special economic privileges (Leifer 1995: 43).

Moreover, such a simultaneously strict and vague definition serves not only to constitute a Malay subject position for which individuals may be easily 'recruited' or into which they may be easily transformed, but also to create non-Malay subject positions. Outside of the Constitution, ethnic identities are often also interpellated through legal channels such as in the collection of vital records as birth certificates, Identity Cards (ICs) and other documentation. Interviewees such as Z and P for instance demonstrate that their official identity as informed by their ICs play a significant role in their own understanding of self-identity.

C: And what do you usually tick on official forms and documents?

Z: I'll tick Malay ... because I'm more Malay than the other races but then you know because of the whole Bumiputera situation and on my I.C. it says I'm Bumiputera and I'm Malay and I'm Muslim so it's just the formality of it all ...

In the excerpt above, Z demonstrates that her identity (or identities) as 'Malay', as Bumiputera and as Muslim are linked and, in a way, each identity necessitates the other. This identity 'package' is then anchored in what she calls the "Bumiputera situation," in reference to the affirmative action policies which define a Bumiputera as either Malay or of indigenous origin. Her interpellated identity is thus easily accepted in the name of formality, and because she understands that 'Malay' does not simply mean 'Malay', but also Bumiputera and also Muslim. Similarly, P notes that though she describes her ethnic background as quite diverse including an officially Malay mother and Chinese father, she most often identifies herself as Chinese because, as she revealed, "I was allowed to identify myself as a Chinese Bumiputera when I was doing my IC" (at the discretion of a particular National Registration Department officer). Interestingly, this suggests that if she were not allowed to

register officially as Chinese and Bumiputera,⁹ P's identity – both official and perhaps even un-official – may have emerged quite differently.

The pluralistic understanding of Malaysian society as regularly propagated in schools represents a second, more diffuse interpellation of ethnic identity. As is widely accepted and openly affirmed by the State, in its National Philosophy of Education, the Malaysian education system is used as an ideological vehicle in what would clearly seem to be an Althusserian way for the purposes of promoting national unity and producing a national identity (Brown 2005; Joseph 2006: 59; Shamsul 2001: 361). It is here, in school, that Malaysians from the early ages of ten and eleven begin their inculcation into the revised and narrativized understandings of Malaysian society and their role in it. Brown (2005) notes in particular that three compulsory modules in the state approved curriculum – Pendidikan Moral (Moral Studies), Kajian Tempatan (Local Studies) and Sejarah (History) – are driven specifically by a national ideology that reinforces ethnic boundaries through a discourse of multiculturalism.

From the first year of primary school a heavy focus of the Moral Education curriculum is the role and responsibilities of the individual in a multi-ethnic society through activities such as singing songs themed on 'unity' and talking about friends from other ethnic groups. By middle school, a whole field of values is dedicated to 'values relating to peace and harmony', but aspects of multiculturalism are promoted throughout the curriculum, such as sections on 'tolerance' and 'moderation' (largely defined in religious terms) in the field of self-development (Brown 2005: 10).

⁹ Being a Chinese Bumiputera is significant because the two categories, 'Chinese' and 'Bumiputera' are usually thought to be mutually exclusive. In the interview however, P explains that upon registration for an identity card, the clerk in charge permitted her to be identified as Chinese and Bumiputera. Instances such as these are rare but do occur on occasion.

In this way, Malaysians are *taught*, as G pointed out, from a very early age to situate themselves within a multi-ethnic – or more accurately a tri-ethnic – structure. They are *taught* from an early age to recognize their ethnic Other and to understand that although they are ‘different’, ‘peace’ and ‘harmony’ can be achieved through values such as ‘tolerance’ and ‘moderation’. These tropes, already all too familiar, are then employed as fact in various political campaigns, which will be discussed in more detail below. In addition to the dissemination of the national ideology, the system of education itself is one that encourages if not enforces racialization. The presence of vernacular schools in particular promotes the development of hermetic ethnic groups and ensures students are separated physically as well as discursively (through language and culture) (Shamsul 2001: 361).

Thirdly, the manner in which ethnicity and culture are treated in the political campaigns such as 1Malaysia and its predecessors works to reinforce what Shamsul Amri Baharuddin calls “authority-defined identities” and reify the already salient boundaries between recognizable ethnic groups (1996: 477). The 1Malaysia campaign for instance, is one that endeavours to “preserve and enhance [Malaysian] unity in diversity” (Najib Razak 2011). Here, key phrases such as ‘tolerance’, ‘harmony’ and ‘multi-racial society’ are carried over from the education system and from the old Bangsa Malaysia rhetoric to help remind the citizenry of their duty to the nation. In an analysis of Mahathir’s vision of a Bangsa Malaysia or Malaysian Ethnicity, Ooi Kee Beng concludes that it was never meant to mean assimilation or integration but rather called for national unity (in spite or regardless of race) (2006: 62). The 1Malaysia campaign seems to reflect a similar logic and suffers similar side-effects – that in employing ethnicity for the purposes of national unity the campaign has only highlighted ethnic identities and difference where before it may not have been apparent. As N recollected in her interview,

N: you know when we were in school our best friend was a Chinese girl and it never occurred to us that she was

Chinese. She was just a friend you know? And then, we were recollecting how in college our circle of friends were Indian and Chinese and we always hang out together and this idea of race was never in the picture. And we were thinking about it, like, maybe there was ... and we thought about it and ... no, there never was ... so this idea of a 1Malaysia campaign is making us realize like, Oh! There is Malay, there is Chinese and there is Indian. But before this ... I think to a certain extent a lot of us, especially the much older generation, our parents our grandparents generation, they never saw it that way. There was never a question of Oh, Malay, Chinese, Indian.

In this way, political campaigns such as 1Malaysia and Wawasan 2020, whether intentionally or not, have acted as ideological apparatuses for the interpellation of officialized ethnic identities. By reinforcing the idea that being Malaysian entails first an affiliation to an officialized ethnic identity through the narrative of multiculturalism, such subject positions such as 'Malay' are offered as part and parcel with the position of 'Malaysian'. To be Malaysian then, one must first be 'Malay', 'Indian', 'Chinese' or 'Lain-Lain' (though the lattermost category is often neglected in popular narrative and in political discourse).

Looking back again at the anecdote by G in which he described a student's response to the question, "what makes you Chinese?" as, "I use chopsticks," we can extrapolate that though Malaysians are so often recruited as or transformed to fit Malay, Indian or Chinese ethnic categories, the process of labelling or categorization is quite superficial and relies mostly on observable features or behaviour such as "using chopsticks." Though the Malay ethnic category appears more complex due to its explicit constitutional definition and links with Islam, P's identity as Chinese Bumiputera (both self-ascribed and officialized), for instance, suggests that other characteristics less explicitly linked with the Malay identity are at least of equal importance. Nevertheless, these officialized identities have become for many

Malaysians ‘real’ and are reaffirmed on a daily basis. The result is an incredible aptitude for discerning ethnic difference and detecting ethnic signifiers. In the following section, I turn to the particular ethnic signs and signifiers that ‘mixed’ Malaysians consider salient and the ways in which they may use them to understand their own identity.

Articulating Ethnic Difference

In *Dead Certainty*, Appadurai discusses the way in which “the question of identification and knowledge of the ethnic body lay at the heart of the atrocious violence” of the Rwandan genocide (1998: 7; see also Malkki 1995). I suggest that, in the same way, “acquired knowledge” of the ethnic body (or bodies) in Malaysia lies at the heart of endemic racialization (Appadurai 1998: 7). From my interviews, it was clear that all were adept at recognizing the various interpellated ethnic categories that were discussed earlier and tended to utilize them as part of an interpretive framework for imagining their own self-identity. Three markers stood out as most important in imagining ethnic difference: language, physical characteristics and customs or behaviour.

In a press release, Chandra Muzaffar, Chairman of the Yayasan 1Malaysia¹⁰ commented on the use of the term race in Malaysia:

The term ‘race’ has a biological or physical dimension to it. It has been employed in studies about relations between ‘white’ and ‘coloured’ peoples in the United States and Europe. Physical attributes such as skin pigmentation figure to a degree in their relations.

However, in societies like ours, the physical characteristics of a community have very little bearing upon its relations with

¹⁰ Yayasan 1Malaysia is “a non-partisan, independent, and non-profit foundation” that hopes “to engage all Malaysians in working towards national unity and the 1Malaysia concept” (Yayasan 1Malaysia 2011).

another community. Attitudes in various spheres of activity are not shaped by these characteristics. This is why it is wrong to use the term 'race' or 'racist' or 'racism' in any discourse about community relations in Malaysia (Muzaffar 2010).

Whilst I agree that the term race is used unproblematically in the country, often to detrimental results, and the term ethnicity is a better description of difference, I argue that contrary to Muzaffar's belief, the idea of innate characteristics and indeed physical ones do continue to figure greatly in the way in which Malaysians understand their ethnic identity. In fact, when interviewed, most 'mixed' Malaysians who participated alluded to or relied heavily on biologically essentialist notions to convey ethnic difference. For example, many interviewees referred to skin tone or physical characteristics as an easy marker of ethnicity and as having an impact on their social relations.

P: from what I like to say 'cause it's easier, because people will always think I'm Malay 'cause of my skin tone but when I take out my glasses, my eyes ... my Chinese eyes can be seen. See? [Takes off her glasses] Yeah.

I usually get more mixed reaction when I'm not wearing my glasses for some reason. That's why I said my Chinese mata [eyes] comes out when I'm not wearing my glasses. It's usually mix between Chinese or Malay lah, though. I think I look pretty Chinese or Malay rather than anything else.

C: Which side (of your family) do you affiliate more with, your Eurasian or your Chinese side?

D: I think I affiliate more with the Eurasian side (of my family) because I don't really look Chinese.

C: What does that mean?

D: Well my features are very ... more Portuguese, I guess, compared to Chinese ... and people don't really say 'oh, you look Chinese', they say, oh, you either look Malay ... Indian ... Eurasian maybe, but never Chinese.

In the above extracts, both P and D demonstrate the interpellations of ethnic identity that they commonly face. The way in which these 'facts' about 'Chinese' eyes and 'Malay' skin tone come to be accepted easily is a testament to the force of the interpellative process. Thus, whilst race as a concept may be erroneous in light of biological knowledge regarding the human genetic makeup, the way in which many Malaysians continue to understand their identity and difference can be accurately described as 'racial'. This idea is particularly apparent in D's matter of fact explanation of her own relationship to the Chinese and Eurasian ethnic categories, which was quickly linked to phenotypic qualities rather than to the cultural or emotional ones. What this suggests is that racialization in the Malaysian context refers not only to an intensification of ethnic boundaries but also that this is often predicated on the physical as well as the (ostensibly) primordial.

A second key ethnic identifier that emerged in the interview process was language. In the intermediary period between decolonization and independence, the issue of language took centre stage in discussions pertaining to developing a Malayan nation. Language at the time was considered a major barrier to national unity. When contextualized, these issues with language – particularly which languages would be taught in schools – had more to do with the intra-ethnic political battles of the period (Brown 2005: 5). Today, language continues to function as an important marker of ethnic difference where 'Malays' are expected to converse primarily in Bahasa Melayu,¹¹ and 'Indians'

¹¹ Translated in English, Bahasa Melayu, or Bahasa Malaysia as it is now officially called, mean Malay Language and Malaysian Language respectively.

and 'Chinese' in one of a number of dialects that originate from India and China respectively. Meanwhile, 'mixed' Malaysians such as Z and S use this ethnic marker to situate themselves based on which language they consider themselves most proficient at.

C: And what do you usually put down in official forms and documents?

S: Usually I put in Malay, because in terms of culture it's more Malay. For example language my Chinese grandma did not bring down Mandarin or Chinese culture although in terms of ... my mom can speak some dialects, a few words, though there's no over-powering influence. And my grandpa, although he could speak Tamil, and he tried with his children ... saris and dressing ... but it did not really go down with my father.

C: What about culturally? Do you feel like there's a stronger influence from any one ethnicity?

Z: Well ... I'm Malaysian definitely. That kind of says it all ... right? Well I don't think I'm more Malay ... well because my Bahasa Melayu sucks. My Malay is very bad and I don't know Chinese. My dad knows a bit of Tamil, but I don't know Tamil at all.

Thus, that both Z and S link their identity with their ability or inability to speak languages associated with the various officialized ethnic identities demonstrates the significance of language in their imagination of 'the Malay', 'the Chinese' and 'the Indian'.

In addition to language and physical features, many interviewees also referred to behavioural or cultural characteristics as identifiably Chinese, Malay or Indian. For example, H preferred to relate "being Chinese" with customs

and values relating to family dynamics rather than to language (although she seemed aware that speaking Mandarin is usually associated with being Chinese).

C: What do you think it means to be Chinese?

H: What do you think it means ... like things you do? Um ... I think ... [laughs] It's probably the way that you ... act, maybe? Like ... like you know Chinese cultural stuff, like respecting parents and like ... having family dinners and gatherings. Not so much speaking the language since I don't know it ... but [laughs] ... I mean I would want to learn Mandarin. It will be beneficial lah ... and just the whole ... family orientation of Chinese culture? But I can't really relate because I'm like the only child and I only live with my dad so ...

When asked to describe Malay culture, Z similarly refers to values and expected behaviour associated with 'being Malay'.

Z: Culturally I wouldn't say I fit into the Malay stereotype...

C: [Can you please expand?]

Z: Um because I can't think of any ... oh wear baju kurung! The girls are very very soft spoken. They don't raise their voice ... they're not really like ... uh ... I don't know, liberated, in a way? Like the ways of thinking ... you gotta watch what you say and ... stuff. Um what's that term you use? Face? Keep face ... show face ... what face?

C: Save face?

Z: Yes! Don't create unnecessary attention. It will be embarrassing to the family ... blah blah blah ... dishonour! So like, yeah, culture!

Therefore, although cultural theorists often caution against conceiving culture as static or monolithic, it is nevertheless a commonplace occurrence in Malaysia for symbols and traditions

to be regularly designated Chinese, Malay or Indian despite obvious instances of hybridity in a number of areas such as language, food and tradition.

Conclusion

In Malaysia, ethnic identity, or race as it is more commonly referred to, enjoys a particularly privileged position where all individuals are expected to embody one of a few officially sanctioned ethnic identities. Indeed, to a large extent, nationhood and nation building has revolved almost paradoxically around maintaining the rigid boundaries of officialized ethnic identity and, as a result, alternative identities are either neglected, suppressed or subsumed under the 'Dan lain lain' ('Other') category. Thus, in this chapter I sought both to look closer at the mechanisms that facilitate the racialization of Malaysian citizens and to act as a stage from which the voices of others or Others, so often overlooked in the broader narrative of Malaysian society, may be heard.

In the first section of this chapter, I examined the processes by which the Malay, Indian and Chinese identities came to be officialized and accepted as constitutive of the Malaysian social milieu, and argued that state-mediated mechanisms such as the national registry of its citizens, education institutions and multicultural policies and programs effectively name its citizens on a regular basis. These interpellations encourage the development of an ethnicized national identity where 'Malaysian' is often supplanted with 'Indian (Malaysian)', 'Malay (Malaysian)' or 'Chinese (Malaysian)'. In the second section of this chapter, I looked at the various interpellations that 'mixed' Malaysians experienced and the ethnic markers that they thought were most significant in understanding their own identities.

What comes through particularly in my discussion of 'mixed' Malaysians is that though they appear to be rooted in 'history', 'blood' and other ostensibly meaningful and primordial notions,

these identities – ‘the Indian,’ ‘the Malay’ and ‘the Chinese’ – in fact show themselves to be relatively simple and modern constructs predicated on largely surface-level markers that are continuously reenacted or reproduced. As in the case of Yeoh and Muniandy’s child, who is now officially registered as ‘Chinese’ (*The Star* 2011: 34), ‘mixed’ Malaysians must often contend with one or more of the officialized identities and their corresponding markers to make sense of their place in Malaysian society. Nevertheless, in doing so they demonstrate the active processes of identity negotiation undertaken by all Malaysians, including those of seemingly homogenous or ‘un-mixed’ descent.

Decision on newborn’s racial identity slammed

PETALING JAYA: Selangor MCA has expressed its sympathy to the Indian community who are unhappy with Subang Jaya assemblyman Hannah Yeoh over the racial identity of her newborn baby girl.

Its Public Complaints Bureau said it regretted Yeoh’s action in not putting the ethnicity of Shay Adora Ram as that of her Indian husband.

Bureau adviser Datuk C.K. Lim told a press conference that based on convention, the child’s ethnicity should follow that of the father.

“Her husband is an Indian and it is customary to name the child’s ethnicity as Indian,” he said, adding the assemblyman’s initial stance to define her baby as *anak Malaysia* (child of Malaysia) was politically motivated.

The issue began when the baby was defined as Chinese after the NRD in Putrajaya declined the couple’s initial proposal to use *anak Malaysia* as an ethnicity or race of their child.

Yeoh had claimed she and her husband opted to leave the column for “race” blank but was

rejected by the NRD official who attended to them.

To safeguard their daughter’s interest, the couple then registered Shay as Chinese, for the timebeing.

Earlier, scores of Indians from various non-governmental organisations in Petaling Jaya handed over a memorandum to Lim at the MCA complaints bureau here.

The group’s spokesman P. Balakrishnan said Yeoh’s husband Ramachandran Muniandy had demeaned the Indians by not standing up for his right to decide the race of his child.

He urged the NRD to cancel the baby’s birth certificate and issue a fresh one identifying her race as “Indian”.

In Kuala Lumpur, Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said the registration of *anak Malaysia* as a child’s ethnicity or race would involve changes to the country’s laws and amendments to the Federal Constitution.

“Whatever changes involving this matter will need amendments to the law and considerations on the constitution,” he said.

Plate 1: A cutting from *The Star* on 17 June 2011 describes the attempt by Hannah Yeoh to register her child as ‘*anak Malaysia*.’

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CHAPTER 2

Redefining 'Malayness': Expectations of Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims¹

*Dahlia Martin*²

Introduction

In Malaysia, the position of Islam in public life is very much linked with national politics. The United Malays Nationalist Organization (UMNO), the Malay race-based and largest party in the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN) or 'National Front', has, for decades now, been locked in a rivalry with the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) over the command of the Muslim-Malay electorate. This rivalry has seen the use of an increasingly Islamic rhetoric, contributing to a blurring of the distinction between ethnicity and religion. Former Malaysian Prime

¹ This chapter is based on research undertaken for my Honours thesis: Dahlia Martin, *Religious Discourses of Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims*, Honours Thesis, Monash University, 2008. An earlier version was previously published as *Identity Politics and Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims*, *Eras*, Vol. 12, No. 1. I would like to thank here the anonymous referees of *Eras* for their feedback.

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Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi confirmed as much when he said that “the Malays, UMNO and Islam in this country cannot be separated” (2006: 6).

To the rest of the world, Malaysia projects itself as a role model for other Muslim countries (Saw 2006: 19). In 2004, Badawi declared that “Malaysia can be a showcase of what it is to be a successful, modern Muslim country” (2006: 45). The Badawi administration attempted this with the aid of Islam Hadhari (Civilisational Islam), an ideology developed by Badawi and which is UMNO’s Islamized “understanding of the concept of development” (ibid.: 1). However, this is not the first time a discourse of nation-building has been adopted by UMNO, nor the first time that religion has been employed in such a discourse – the national ideology of Rukun Negara, or national principles, also has a religious theme.

The targets of these discourses are frequently young people, framed by the government as “an invaluable asset with tremendous potential” (ibid.: 28). However, Maila Stevens has suggested that the interest concerning young people is because “the nature of Muslim and ‘Asian’ family life have become central to cultural contests about being ‘modern’ in contemporary Malaysia” (2002: 193). In other words, with Malaysian youth, and especially Muslim youth, the outcome is that they have become a scapegoat for modernity-related anxieties (ibid.: 190). There is now constant scrutiny of young people, and much discussion is carried out with regards to what they can do for Malaysia. As it is with most discourses in Malaysia, the role of the youth has become intertwined with the role of religion, as “the task of moulding the youth has also been seen as closely involving Islam in producing an ethical vision of economic development” (ibid.: 195).

Indeed, what young people have to say for themselves on the role of religion in their identities, lives, and in Malaysia as whole, remains largely unknown, not least because of the marginalization of young people and scant attention paid to them in scholarly work (ibid.: 190). This chapter hopes to begin to

rectify that by, firstly, examining more closely what expectations there are of young-adult Malaysian Muslims as outlined in recent political rhetoric; and secondly, by investigating how urban young-adult Malaysian Muslims construct discourses through which they live their lives. The latter is done by an analysis of research data collected through interviews with eight young-adult participants who identified themselves as being both Malaysian and Muslim.

Young People and a National Ideology

As is well known to Malaysians, for legal and administrative purposes, all Malays are also legally Muslim. The fact that this is clearly defined in the constitution is a clear result of the Malay-Muslim identity formation and reformation process that began taking place in the 19th century (Noor 2001). The battering of the Malay self-esteem by Western colonial rule helped to make such reflection occur, and modern colonialism came to be seen as an obstacle to the advancement of the Malays. The would-be reformers, borrowing from reformist and revivalist movements in global Islamic thought at the time, then came to see pagan pre-Islamic Malay traditions as being the other obstacle. The experiences of being “Malay” and “Muslim” have been linked ever since, although there has always been tension in the relationship between the two.

Patricia Martinez discussed a belief amongst some non-Malays that “Islam is yet another way of continuing Malay hegemony” (Martinez 2001: 487), especially since the lines between ethnicity and religion are somewhat indistinct and can be adapted to suit different situations. For instance, since the constitution states that a Malay is someone who is a Muslim, speaks Malay, adheres to Malay customs and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore, it is technically possible for a non-Malay who becomes a Muslim to ‘masuk Melayu’, or ‘become Malay’. The Chief Minister of the state of Malacca said as much when

he noted in 1997 that it was “easy to become Malay,” further demonstrating the possibility of a link between Islam and extending Malay influence (Daily Express 1997).

Despite the unifying aims of some discourses or ideologies such as the Rukun Negara, it was clear that politics, and indeed Malaysia as a whole, was remaining “quintessentially ethnic” (Brown 2008: 320). Indeed, UMNO continued to remain concerned over the potential of Malay voters to swing to PAS. This was perceived as more and more voters wanting to live in an Islamic state (Martinez 2001: 483) and UMNO has often reacted by employing an increasingly Islamic discourse (Chong 2006: 35).

The race between UMNO and PAS thus helped trigger another wave of an Islamization of Malay identity beginning in the 1960s, marked by the emergence of student groups such as Darul Arqam, the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) once led by former Deputy Prime Minister and current leader of the Opposition Anwar Ibrahim, and the National Association of Malaysian Muslim Students (PKPIM). There was increasing criticism of the UMNO-led government’s friendly relations with the Western world, and in the 1970s, signs of popular Islamic resurgence began appearing “in the form of Islamic dress, social norms, modes of communication and Islamic literature” (Noor 2001). The Muslim identity tag became more and more prominent, with PAS continuing to position itself as a Muslim-based party as opposed to an ethnic-based one.

However, in spite of this increasing Islamization, it was only in recent years that Badawi, the holder of a university degree in Islamic studies and member of a family of religious scholars (Badawi 2006: ix-xi), formally introduced the concept of a “progressive” Islam into the political trajectory, despite the idea of it having been a recurring feature since the 1970s (Chong 2006: 26). In the run-up to the 2004 general elections, Badawi promoted Islam Hadhari, and PAS found it hard to respond to Badawi’s religious rhetoric and background (ibid.: 39). When the BN coalition won the elections by a landslide, Islam Hadhari was

viewed as a significant contributor to the electoral success, and Badawi made several speeches on the matter.

Whilst speaking on Islam Hadhari, Badawi would often reaffirm his position as the premier of a multi-religious nation, stating, "I am a Muslim, but I am also a leader of all Malaysians – regardless of their faith" (Badawi 2006: 62). He would reassure audiences that Islam Hadhari "does not threaten the rights of non-Muslims," saying that his administration had no tolerance for prejudice or discrimination (ibid.: 61).

Still, Islam Hadhari as a concept was often addressed to Malays, and often with overtones of predestination, as exemplified by the following case which he made for the necessity and importance of Islam Hadhari:

By the year 2020, in line with our objective of becoming a developed nation, the Malays must be a people who possess the positive qualities that can enable them to be the prime movers of a developed nation. In 2020, the Malays must be a people who are respected, highly educated, skilled, and a people who can stand tall with others. Let us therefore make this our pledge. Arise my people! Go forth and become Malays of strong character, enlightened Malays, skilled Malays, independent Malays, successful Malays, be it as farmer, teacher or poet, trader or businessman, writer or producer, administrator or manager. Arise my people! ... Remember, my people, we must not lose the battle, we must win the war. We seek guidance and enlightenment from Allah in directing us down the path that has received His blessings (ibid.: 175-6).

Furthermore, Badawi had more specific ideas about who was to execute Islam Hadhari and win this "war" for the Malays. In his very first speech on Islam Hadhari at the 2004 UMNO General Assembly, Badawi also discussed the role that Malaysian youth, and in particular Malay Muslim youth, had to play. He discussed the necessity of developing an education system that could mould not only a young progressive adult, but a God-fearing one too. In a remark that sounded reminiscent of the first principle of

Rukun Negara, Badawi said that “the young Malaysian must be taught to believe in God, to be of good morally upright character, to uphold family values and to be confident and patriotic” (ibid.: 28). He further continued:

The youth ... are an invaluable asset with tremendous potential. Therefore, we must never sideline or marginalize them when formulating policies for the country. We must also empathise with their ideals and their aspirations. All parties must be resolute, unwavering and committed in ensuring the success of the agenda to strengthen the Malay race (ibid.: 28).

Young Malays, Badawi seems to be saying here, are essential for the success of “the Malay race.” The ethnicized message of Islam Hadhari undoubtedly reflects the quintessential ethnicity of Malaysian politics; that is, that Islam Hadhari appears to be more about maintaining Malay hegemony, and thus giving UMNO the upper hand in its rivalry with PAS.

Moreover, as Stivens notes in an article detailing a series of media reports into *boh sia* (promiscuous girls) and other similar “moral panics” concerning young people in Malaysia, “gossip alleged that the main focus of the moral panic as it unfolded was ‘Muslim youth’” (Stivens 2002: 190). It is clear, then, that Muslim youth bear the brunt of anxieties regarding the direction young people take with their lives, but also the hopes of those in power, especially considering the special role carved out for young people by Badawi.

With this in mind, and the continuing significance of ethnic politics, young people in Malaysia are clearly at a precarious point. When the March 2008 elections resulted in the worst ever results for the ruling coalition, the BN government expressed surprise, indicating a clear lack of knowledge as to what the electorate was thinking. Young people, as a group which is inadequately represented by the authorities and in scholarly work, are likely to be an important category of Malaysians who may have been misapprehended by UMNO, and therefore, by the government as well. The following section seeks to unearth

what discourses young-adult Malaysian Muslims are employing in their daily lives, to describe shifts in ethnic and religious identities, especially in light of the government's efforts to ensure a continuing place for the Malay Muslim identity.

Discourses of Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims

I previously briefly discussed how the Malaysian government has, since independence, attempted to govern a multiethnic country and what the roles of young people are in this. Here, I examine the views of some self-identified young-adult Malaysian Muslims, in order to examine how this group of people manage their identities, and what role, if any, they see themselves playing in a Malaysian context.

All of the interviewees, at the time of the interviews, resided in Kuala Lumpur, were between the ages of 21 and 27, fitted the constitutional definition of Malay (and were therefore eligible for Malay privileges), and had completed or were in the process of completing their education at a tertiary level. The interviewees, recruited by sending a 'Call for Participants' notice to the mailing lists of local Muslim youth groups, were deliberately intended to be urban-dwelling and English-speaking as it was assumed that such participants were more likely to be situated at the crossroads of Islam and modernity. The low number of interviewees (eight) reflects the exploratory and preliminary nature of the research into an area where no work had previously been done.

When it came to how they would publicly identify themselves, all but one interviewee (Natasha) said they would publicly identify themselves as being Muslim. All of the interviewees also said that they identified themselves as Malaysian, for reasons such as the fact that they were born here, and/or grew up here, and/or happened to have Malaysian citizenship. Only two interviewees (Roger and Jim) called themselves Malay, although this was more because they tended to look at it as something they had been born into.

Many of the interviewees saw a distinction between race and religion in Malaysia, and were critical of the association between being Malay and Muslim. Indeed, all of them were critical of the Malaysian government, with most of the interviewees arguing that some of the actions undertaken by the Malaysian government they found fault with were, in fact, against certain tenets of Islam. There was also a consensus established that young people were indeed marginalized in Malaysia.

The interviewees also frequently employed an Islamic discourse when discussing their stand on various issues, demonstrating the continuing relevance of the faith in their lives. They felt that there was an array of challenges facing young Muslims in both Malaysia and the world today, with all of them feeling that the main challenge is not to fall prey to authoritative depictions and societal expectations – lending support to the idea that the Malaysian government's efforts at nation-building and promoting a national ideology have not quite had the desired effect, at least as far as these urban youth are concerned.

The interviewees discussed with me their thoughts on identity issues, religious, political and social issues in Malaysia, and what role they saw for their individual selves in a Malaysian and global context. Although there were some similarities in their patterns of thought, there was a variety of opinions offered, reflecting the different extent of the use of religious discourses in their everyday lives. It was apparent that the interviewees saw themselves as having dissenting views, and, to one degree or another, saw themselves as being more progressive in that they were generally pushing for more openness.

Two of the interviewees, Roger, a 26-year-old who runs a tuition centre, and Jim, a 23-year-old medical student at a public university, said being Malay was a part of their identity, but they both considered it more of a technicality than anything else (in fact, for all of the interviewees, matters of ethnicity were almost completely “technical,” something that they were born into or simply on account of not fitting any other description). Said Jim

when explaining his identity as Malay:

Being Malay is quite difficult to define ... But I guess I was raised as a Malay, in Malay custom, like, with people who eat Malay food, practiced Malay styles of living. We practiced Islam. I'm neither Chinese nor Indian, so I guess I would define myself as a Malay.

When asked if being Malay was an important marker of identity to him, Jim replied: "Not really. Being a true Muslim is more important, to me."

There were several interviewees for whom ethnicity was not an issue with regards to their identity. Ayu, a 21-year-old design student in a private college; Danny, a 27-year-old photographer; Lara, a 26-year-old housewife; Mahmud, a 23-year-old business student at a private university; Natasha, a 25-year-old graduate who is planning on embarking on a medical degree in Australia; and Sarah, a 21-year-old law student at a public university, did not consider being Malay as an identity marker, although reasons for this differed between individuals.

For instance, for some, this was because matters relating to their ethnicity were not so clear-cut:

When I say I'm Malaysian and I'm Muslim, people typically think I'm Malay. But I'm not. I'm actually from two ethnic groups in Sabah. My father is Kadazan, and his family was made up more of free-thinkers or Catholics. My mother is Bajau, and they were more Muslim. I get offended when people say I'm Malay – they don't get you could be Chinese but still Muslim.

– Ayu

I don't fully see myself as just Malay, because I'm not. My Mum is from the States, my Dad is from Pahang. So I'm half-Caucasian. I see myself as Malay or Caucasian depending on the situation. ... Sometimes, it doesn't even occur to me that I'm one or the other.

– Danny

My father's parents came from Indonesia. My mother has Thai and Chinese blood. So I don't consider myself Malay.

– Lara

Mahmud, meanwhile, said he did not like to think of himself as Malay because he saw a lot of negative associations with being Malay:

Well, I don't want to stereotype, but a lot of people think Malays are lazy ... I feel bad saying this. But yeah, a lot of Malays, they stick to their own race. I'm talking about the majority of Malays. They're not punctual. And lazy, maybe.

Mahmud was not the only interviewee to voice such critical opinions of Malays; several other interviewees said there were aspects of being Malay they did not like, echoing attempts to “supplant forever the emasculated, fatalistic and negligent Malay of the colonial ‘lazy native’ discourse” (Stivens 2002: 192) and contribute unsuccessfully to the rewriting of the *Melayu baru*, or New Malay.

It's so politicized – you know, politics shapes your society. Malay culture is very clannish ... I blame it on the politicians. I think it's because of UMNO. They're so worried about losing their grip on the Malays, so one of their strategies is fear-mongering.

– Roger

Malays tend to take things for granted ... Especially with the special privileges around.

– Jim

I find, when I hang out with Malays, that they tend to look down on other races, and make disparaging remarks about their lifestyle choices, the way they dress.

– Ayu

What the interviewees demonstrated here was the association of several negative characteristics with being Malay, which helped

in their decision to not see themselves as Malay. Because of the Malay identity being unimportant for some or too problematic for others, Malay nationalism did not appear to hold any appeal for them either.

What appeared to be the more important marker of identity for most interviewees, though, was their Islamic faith. Even though some of the interviewees stated that they did not faithfully follow orthodox Islamic teachings, all of the interviewees mostly saw being a Muslim in a positive light.

I don't really live like a Muslim. I drink, I do drugs, I sin. I don't pray. During Ramadan, I don't fast the full thirty days. But I still call myself a Muslim. Because I do believe in God. But it's tough because I'm young, and I want to do stuff, and in Islam, there are so many restrictions on what you can do. But if I wasn't a Muslim, I'd probably be a worse person than I am now. Because, you know, I don't lie, or hurt other people.

– Mahmud

Being a Muslim for me is about believing in God, the Prophet, and His teachings ... In Islam, you can't drink; you're supposed to fast, and pray five times a day, and I don't. But I believe Islam's more than that. It's more personal, it's between you and God. If I want to be a good person, it doesn't mean I have to abstain from drinking.

– Sarah

The other interviewees also continued with the theme of religion being personal. Many of them emphasized the importance of the need for an individual to reach out and learn about the religion by themselves.

For me, being a Muslim means total submission to God ... I decided to learn more about Islam at the beginning of the year, after my brother passed away, so I'm practically quite new. I wasn't a practicing Muslim. I had actually declared myself to not be one, I said I'm not going to be a hypocrite, I don't practice it. But then I wanted to find out more, so I started by reading

the Quran ... My mother wanted me to see an ustaz, but I said no, this is my personal journey, I don't want a mediator to tell me what's right and what's wrong, I want to find out myself. I'm trying to be a Muslim now; I started wearing the headscarf recently, after reading the Quran, finding out a few more things.

– Lara

I define myself as Muslim because I do try to follow the five pillars of Islam, and what I think are correct Islamic principles. I'm always trying to improve my religious knowledge ... By reading the Quran, attending talks, and consulting with scholars. As a Muslim, I feel I have a purpose and an objective in life.

– Jim

I'm beginning to learn that being a Muslim is not so constricting. I feel more liberated than how I was before. When I was in secondary school, the Islam I learnt about through the government-approved syllabus at school appeared very bland and boring. It seemed too difficult. But when I got older and more mature, I really wanted to find out more about my identity, so I started to actually learn about the religion. I did look at other religions, but I wanted to give Islam a chance. Plus, I was more exposed to Islamic literature, and started learning. And I suppose I didn't have to look any further because it made sense.

– Roger

Natasha, despite wearing a headscarf and stating that she is a practicing Muslim, was the only interviewee who said she would not publicly identify herself as being a Muslim.

Most of the time, it (being a Muslim) doesn't become an issue, because people have their own preferences. If it becomes an issue, like if someone were to ask me, then yes, I am a Muslim, but because I see the world as we are all entitled to our own opinions and beliefs, that doesn't strike me as something that I need spelt out in my identity. But for me personally, I know I am.

These excerpts demonstrate that although most of the interviewees found the Malay identity marker stifling or even irrelevant, their faith was viewed as being of continuing relevance and even empowering. Even Mahmud, who admitted he sometimes found practicing Islam difficult in a modern setting, stated that without his faith, he would be worse off.

The mindset of the interviewees when it comes to constructing their identities appears to reflect a shift in Malaysian politics and society. UMNO has often worried that it is losing its grip on the Malay vote; the views of this sample of urban youth, officially counted as members of the ethnic group UMNO has traditionally relied on for support, could provide some food for thought about the surprising 'defeat' of the BN coalition in the March 2008 elections.

When it came to political and social issues, there was a consensus that the government was not handling current issues in Malaysia well, with most of the interviewees saying it is time for a change, either in government or within BN, in particular UMNO. When asked to explain how they justify these views, the interviewees often made use of religious discourse.

The 'bargain', wherein non-Malays were granted citizenship upon the independence of Malaya in exchange for agreeing to special privileges for the Malays (cf. Puthuchearry 2008), were deemed inappropriate and unnecessary by all of the interviewees.

As a Muslim, I disagree with the notion of special privileges for the Malays. It's purely on racially-drawn lines, and that's always a step backwards, not forwards It doesn't encourage people to compete, to think, and I would say, yes, it's opposed to what, I would say, Prophet Muhammad would have recommended.

– Danny

I think there's hypocrisy in a person who can call themselves a Muslim but justify that you can have special privileges because you're from a certain group of people.

– Lara

Asked for their opinions on Badawi's Islam Hadhari initiative, Ayu and Mahmud said they had never heard of the term. Sarah said she had heard of the ideology, but did not know what its contents were. However, the rest of the interviewees revealed in their responses that they were suspicious, at the very least, of the ideology.

I can appreciate that Badawi might have had good intentions. But I don't see it being particularly effective, or anything new. And anyway, Muslims should strive for excellence without policies.

– Jim

It's rubbish. It's Pak Lah's [an informal reference to Badawi] way of making a name for himself. I suppose he wanted to bring a moderate and correct image of Islam, but to me, if you follow the principles of Islam, minus the Malay culture, it's moderate enough.

– Roger

All of the interviewees acknowledged some frustration at being inadequately represented and heard in the political process, with Sarah complaining about what she called the “oppressiveness” of the University & University Colleges Act (UUCA).³ She noted that she felt it restricting her ability to contribute to Malaysia – which is ironic when considering that the Malaysian government very much wants young people to contribute to the country.

Politicians don't listen to youth ... Youth don't think anyone's going to listen, anyway, so they just want to get a degree, start working, take care of their own life, and be done with politicians. So you could also blame youth for not taking enough action, but they probably just think that way because the education system here taught them to think so.

– Danny

³ The University & University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) prohibits students from affiliating with any society, political party, trade union or organization without the written approval of the vice-chancellor. Students can be suspended should they go against any of these prohibitions (SUARAM 2007: 76).

Are young people represented at an official level? You mean besides Khairy Jamaluddin?⁴ No! But I'm starting to see young opposition Members of Parliament (MP), like Nik Nazmi,⁵ and I like that.

– Lara

These extracts demonstrate that the interviewees were mostly frustrated by the political process in Malaysia, and felt there was little opportunity for dialogue with BN. Still, most of them see themselves staying in Malaysia for the foreseeable future, and being able to contribute, in some way or another, to Malaysia.

Badawi's grand hopes for young-adult Malaysian Muslims as articulated in his speeches on Islam Hadhari were, considering the way the sample of young-adult Malaysian Muslims constructed their identity, clearly not about to be fully subscribed to by the interviewees. Whilst all but one of them (Ayu) did indeed envision a part they can play in the development of the country, for the most part, this seemed to focus around charity, education and advocacy for change in whatever ways they could. None of them spoke in a way that reflects advancement and protection of a Malay hegemony. Their ideal roles revolve around doing their bit to bring about change to a political system that most of them find discriminatory and oppressive.

The interview data indicates a trend towards the ascendance of religion over race as an identity marker among young-adult Malaysian Muslims. As noted earlier, none of the interviewees comfortably and unproblematically embraced Malay identity. All of them did, however, indicate Islam was an important part of their lives, although there were some admissions that they may not practice according to conventional understandings of it.⁶

⁴ At that time the deputy head of UMNO's Youth wing, and Badawi's son-in-law.

⁵ Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad was, at the time of the interview, the youngest Member of Parliament (MP) in Malaysia, at 26 (Malaysiakini 2008).

⁶ Even in the event that a young-adult Malaysian Muslim decided they would no longer be a Muslim, Malaysia's laws on apostasy and leaving Islam and therefore Malayness mean it unlikely such a decision would ever be legally

The trend that the interview data picks up could be seen to echo discussions earlier in this chapter as to how the Muslim identity marker is becoming more detached from other markers of Malay identity. Of particular interest, though, was the way in which the interviewees used an Islamic discourse combined with elements of particularism to reject the Malaysian political framework. Even the way that Islam was propagated by the Malaysian government (for instance, in schools) was criticized using an Islamic discourse.

Islam, it was held by the interviewees, is a religion of tolerance and openness. Many of the interviewees put an emphasis on a personal relationship with God and not relying on 'official' interpretations of Islam. The religious studies module taught in public schools in Malaysia, and the general way religious affairs were dealt with, were for many of the interviewees not reflective of the Islam they practiced.

In the early 1990s, Ernest Gellner wrote of "an ideology of self-rectification, of purification, of recovery" which he believed had swept over the Muslim world (1992: 20). Many interviewees have chosen to do this by viewing faith as something personal rather than that which should be decided by laws or the constitution. The 'purification' of their faith can be reflected in the emphasis on the practice of Islam being about an individual journey and private relationship with God. The 'recovery' is the use of the Islamic discourse in denouncing what they saw as injustices in Malaysia.

Gellner concluded his observations on the question of the relevance of Islam: "The world of Islam demonstrates that it is possible to run a modern, or at any rate modernizing, economy, reasonably permeated by the appropriate technological, strong, organization principles, *and* combine it with a strong, pervasive, powerfully internalized Muslim conviction and identification"

recognized. In recent times, the case of Lina Joy has served as an example of this: Joy was born to Malay Muslim parents, but her application to have her conversion to Christianity legally recognized was denied (Neoh 2008).

(ibid.: 22). The responses of the interviewees back this assertion; they certainly do not see their Muslim identity as being an obstruction to reconciliation with democracy and modernization in Malaysia.

Conclusion

From an analysis of the discourses targeting Malay Muslim youth and any dissent targeting Malay nationalism, it is evident how Malay Muslim youth are viewed as essential in advancing Malay hegemony in Malaysia. The findings indicated that there was some anxiety amongst young-adult Malaysian Muslims regarding their allocation to a particular identity label. A trend was indicated whereby the interviewees tended to reject the identity of 'Malay Muslim', with all of the interviewees finding the identity marker of 'Malay' problematic and instead choosing to focus on a 'Muslim' identity.

To conclude, the Malay Muslim hegemony which UMNO seeks to expound can only be maintained and advanced through the use of several discourses. These discourses have included the establishment and maintenance of ethnicity as a marker of an individual, and national ideologies such as the Rukun Negara and Islam Hadhari. However, these efforts do not appear to have amounted to much for a sample of urban young-adult Malaysian Muslims. The fluid and often complicated notion of ethnicity in Malaysia that has been propagated since the country's independence has, it would appear, floundered, in favour of a religious discourse.

There is little sign that the Islamization process in Malaysia will slow down. What remains to be seen is if and how UMNO will stay relevant among urban youth in an arena where some who are feeding an Islamic resurgence insist race does not matter.

Another important point here concerns how the urban youth will respond to the Islamic revival itself. Although the interviewees here did hold a religious identity as more important

than an ethnic one, they were not uniform in how they regarded themselves as Muslims (whether or not they practiced their faith strictly), something which is not in line with the increasing Islamic discourse affecting everyday life.

It would appear so far that there has been an active renegotiation of identity at play here, as opposed to simply playing out the roles that various groups would prefer young people take up. However, the study of the discourses concerning and employed by young-adult Malaysian Muslims undertaken for this chapter is in no way exhaustive or representative of all young-adult Malaysian Muslims. Further research needs to be done, especially regarding young-adult Malaysian Muslims in rural areas, on how they are responding to political pressure and Islamization. It is hoped that this study does, however, help lay some groundwork for future research regarding young-adult Malaysian Muslims.

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CHAPTER 3

Power, Agency and the Tithe

*Cheah Wui Jia*¹

Introduction

The founder of City Harvest Church Singapore, together with 16 others, were investigated for the alleged abuse of church funds on 31 May 2010 (Hoe and Choo 2010). This reveals the possibility that unequal power relations within the church are susceptible to exploitation. As a Christian, I come from a Protestant Charismatic church that emphasizes the importance of tithing and supporting church ministries through donations. Based on my personal involvement in this research, I seek to offer a deeper study of tithing that examines power relations between church leaders and the laity, and how the personal decision to tithe is not merely a response to obligation, but one which exhibits agency, by which I mean that people exert some control over their tithing.

There are various ways to understand tithing. The practice of tithing is the act of donating ten percent of one's income to the church (Dahl and Ransom 1999). I explore the tithe in relation to the Derridean notion of the "impossible gift," the act of giving freely that cannot be realized. The tithe is portrayed as that which should be given freely, with no sense of receiving anything in

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return, and holding back one's money is regarded as stinginess, a trait that is said to oppose genuine Christianity. Carson remarks that "Christians will want to acknowledge with gratitude that they are mere stewards in all that they 'possess'" (1999: 94). Christians are being persuaded to tithe with the promise at hand: that "just as you enjoy giving gifts to others, so God enjoys giving to you" (Ekman, quoted in Coleman 2004: 434). The tithe is framed as a 'gift' that is associated with pleasure and joy. It is assumed that one would 'enjoy giving gifts.' But tithing is also defined by a persuasive invoking of God and God's authority over humans in Christian discourse. The tithe is not merely defined by positive feelings of pleasure but also by 'fear and trembling' in obligatory submission to a superior power.

Literature Review

The tithe, as a form of gift, is defined by a sense of compulsion in submission to a higher authority. The giver receives something in return – a relief for the guilt that was triggered by an invoking of scripture. The tithe is not a pure gift, but implied in an exchange system. This exchange system that grounds tithing is characterized by power relations. However, personal preference or agency may be woven into the tithe. The conscious decision to tithe is carved out of a personal framework of beliefs as opposed to unquestioning subordination to authority.

Studies on the gift have utilized Mauss's (1950) seminal work, *The Gift*. Mauss looks at the exchange system that operates in North America, Melanesia and Polynesia, establishing that giving is not an act of pure altruism, but rather intends to receive something in return. His anthropological studies of the potlatch focus on an elaborate system of exchanging gifts that entails rivalry and fierce competition. He defines the gift as consisting of three obligations: to give, to receive and to reciprocate, that is, to continue the cycle of exchange. In his examination of gift-giving practices in Samoa, he proposed that what he observed entailed

a system of exchange that implicated notions of obligation and reciprocity. Studies have extended his anthropological work on gift exchange to study the concept of the gift in the examination of religious ethics (Carmenisch 1981; Hauerwas and Bondi 1976), intergenerational relationships (Rasmussen 2000) and communal practices within the church – specifically donations, worship, and bible studies (Coleman 2004; Baker 2005; Miyazaki 2000). My study is an extension of Mauss's work as it explores the church practice of tithing as a form of gift exchange.

Economic Intentions of the Gift as Exchange – Power, Status and Agency

The gift that is given in the context of unequal relations symbolizes power. Wooten's (2000) qualitative study of gift giving finds that receiving a gift from a financially inferior donor may provoke the need to outdo the giver with a more expensive present. As an affirmation of one's power, the reluctance to appear inferior to the donor motivates a return of a gift of equivalent or greater value (Blau, in Carmenisch 1981). The mental calculation of the risks involved in giving a gift that lacks the appearance of lustre triggers anxiety as an ungenerous gift may be a threat to one's reputation as a giver (Wooten 2000). Gifts presented in public confer dignified status to the recipient, announcing the recipient's affiliations with privileged individuals (Schwartz 1967).

Charismatic Christianity in Malaysia

My study on tithing practices locates itself within the context of power and agency. The two churches I am exploring are located in West Malaysia. Here, practices of Christianity, a minority religion practiced by 9.2 percent of the population, are circumscribed within constraints to protect the privileged position of Islam (Goh 2005). Governmental policies are tailored to favour the indigenous Malays in exchange for a securing of Malay votes for the UMNO-led (United Malay National

Organization) government (Kortteinen 2008). Koning and Dahles investigate how the popular embracing of Charismatic Christianity among Chinese citizens, who are “rarely Muslim” (2009: 15) and are therefore excluded from privileges that favour the Malay Muslims can serve as a means of empowerment. The Charismatic focus on power that the believer receives, in the form of spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit (which would constitute tongues, prophesy, healing and wealth), instils confidence and meaning (Robbins 2004; Koning and Dahles 2009; Ackerman 1984).

The Tithe as Exchange and Power within the Church

Donations as a form of gift to the church have been suggested as indicating unequal power relations. In research on Charismatic churches in Singapore, Goh notes how the invoking of scripture tied in with a persuasion of the congregation to donate to the church with the promise that one would gain wealth as a blessing (1999: 103). This “theology of success,” grounded in a literal understanding of specific Scriptural passages such as 2 Corinthians 8:9 (“Yet for your sakes He became poor so that by His poverty He could make you rich”), is invoked as a means of, in Goh’s terms, “emotional and ideational manipulation” (ibid.: 103). Some church members are willing to give to the church donations in addition to their tithes even though they are in debt (ibid.). The idea of exchange, that occurs as one gives with the expectation of receiving monetary blessings in return, is grounded in a trust and obedience to a leadership that is characterized by an “authoritarian government” (ibid.: 98), where the pastor issues commands to which adherence is expected. Giving monetary gifts is inscribed within structural power that operates within the church.

Theoretical Framework

In my literature review, I earlier explored how gift exchange involves economic considerations of power and status. Next,

I highlight the range of theories that I utilize in order to help interpret the tithing practices of interest in this chapter, namely Derrida (1992) and the gift, Droogers (2003) and power dimensions of the Christian community, Foucault (1978, 1979, 1980) and productive power which involves the technologies of the self and Caputo's (1997) theory on God's Kingdom.

Derrida and the Gift

Here, I explore how the tithe demonstrates the gift that is impossible in its inevitable link to exchange among unequal leader-member relations within the church. Derrida asserts that the gift that is pure breaks the "vicious circle" of exchange (1992: 9); the pure gift never returns to the giver, or to its point of origin in the way a circle is drawn. In contrast, the cycle or circle is linked to exchange – reciprocity results in the gift returning to the giver in some form. Derrida ascribes this circularity of the gift to time and rhythm of "a sun's course" (ibid.: 6). The cycle of morning and evening is endless and repetitive, a return to the origin. Since human experience is conditioned by time, whereby the time that we understand operates in a circular manner, the gift is implicated in time and its circularity.

The protocol of gift-giving ensures that time lapses before a gift is reciprocated. This measuring of time that should ensue before the recipient gives a gift in return involves calculation, not just of time that elapses, but also the value of the gift received. This assessing of the amount of time that should lapse, and the value that the gift should reciprocate reflect calculation and the notion of economy: "Each time, according to the same circular ring that leads to 'giving back' ... there is payment and discharge of a debt" (ibid.: 12). "Payment" and "debt" refer to how the gift is paid for symbolically by 'thank you' or by a sense of pride that the giver has for having been 'generous'. Giving is therefore ruled by calculation and self-interest, subjected to economy and exchange. Gift-giving becomes no different from economy and the exchange of "goods, products, monetary signs or merchandize,

[and] amortization of expenditures” (ibid.: 37), through relieving debt or payment for a service or purchase made.

Foucault and the Technologies of the Self

A deeper examination of power relations within the church is assisted by the employment of Foucault’s theory of productive power. Foucault (1980) speaks of a subjectivity of self-examination and a renunciation of the self that characterizes traditional Christian thought. A mastering of desires to achieve an understanding of the divine also entails a confession of one’s thoughts and feelings to a spiritual leader. Here a “technology of domination” (ibid.: 162) works hand in hand with a “technology of the self” (ibid.); the disciple is expected to “inform” (Foucault 1979: 142) the leader of his or her inner thoughts. This entails a searching of the conscience and a deep reflection of the thoughts and feelings for the disciple. I look at how the “technology of the self” (Foucault 1980: 162) works to achieve an “internalized obedience” (Foucault 1978: 124) within the church member who takes it upon his/herself to obey authority, and who feels guilty if he/she does not honour the leader’s wishes or teachings.

Droogers and the Power Dimensions of the Christian Community

As I study unequal power relations, I also look at the notion of agency in relation to power. Droogers (2003) proposes a “three dimensional model.” He describes power relations in a Christian community as comprising the “external,” the “internal,” and the “beliefs-oriented” dimensions. In this chapter I examine the third dimension, the “beliefs-oriented” dimension, which pertains to the believer’s negotiation processes in the personal management of material derived from institutionalized practice that would lead to an individualized “hierarchical belief system” (ibid.: 271). I look at how individual believers exercise agency by incorporating their own ideas or beliefs into tithing discourse.

Caputo and the Kingdom of God

Unity and the body of Christian community are related to connectedness and love. Caputo (1997) suggests that Christianity, is less focused on institutional power, and is more characterized by forgiveness and a forgetting of hatred or retribution. I examine this idea in relation to how tithing is motivated by guilt and a constant awareness of falling short of standards upheld by biblical doctrine. I look at how a believer suggests a focus on redemption and forgiveness as opposed to sin and punishment so that the tithe may be conceived in mutual respect instead of oppressive power.

Methodology and Ethics

The nine participants who informed my research undertaken in 2011 were English-speaking Christians of Malaysian nationality between the ages of eighteen and forty. In this chapter, however, I focus on data that showcases two of my participants – Miss A and Jac. Miss A is a student pursuing her tertiary education, and Jac has recently completed her postgraduate education overseas.

Agency and the Gift

This section comprises my findings, examining individual negotiation of political processes that sustain the flow of the tithe and exploring Droogers' (2003) "beliefs-oriented" dimension of power:

In their personal faith praxis, individual members may develop their own highly individual schemas, having been brought up in a certain way, by following the preferences of their own personality, through reflection, or as a consequence of some dramatic experience. These individual schemas may escape control by the leadership if they are never expressed, or only in passing. Believers may be very good at maintaining their own repertoire, while visibly conforming to the officially correct schemas (ibid.: 268).

The individual believer “may develop their own highly individual schemas,” and make sense of tithing via private means. “Individual schemas may escape control by the leadership” via two types of responses: 1) “private resistance,” or 2) a rejection of one belief system for another. Tithing practices are therefore shaped by personal “reflection” or evaluation of tithing, or “preferences of ... personality” (ibid.).

“Praxis” or the manifestation of faith as practice may deviate from institutionalized doctrine. Such deviations indicate human agency. After “reflection” on institutionalized dogma, one may choose not to adhere to official doctrine if one disagrees; “dramatic experience” like conflict, or exposure to different ways of behaving or belief systems that challenge church doctrine, encourage individual adjustment of beliefs. Private adjustment of faith may be maintained quietly because visible behaviour agrees with church regulations; hence, such “highly individual schemas” go unnoticed by church authority (ibid.).

Private Resistance and Maturation of the Individual

As mentioned in the introduction, this section focuses on a believer’s ability to select which of the church dogmas to adhere to. This particular believer does not unquestioningly conform to teachings. The announcement of a plea for donations to the building fund occurs weekly at church service. When asked how often these announcements are made, she thinks that these announcements will continue weekly “until the building is completed, which is like in a year or two!” Miss A is a university student who is passionate about children and music. She is disturbed by the consistent reiteration of the need to give because of its tendency to produce guilt. Miss A,

I feel quite bad because I really don’t feel like giving but I try to give lah as much as I can ... it’s guilty conscience! (gasp) Because I know I am not tight for money so ... I should be giving lah. Some people are tight with money and yet they give so much,

they really have faith lah, and you want to compare with them you like, why you like so teruk [terrible] one?

The struggle to break from the “circle” of battling against the self is evident: “When the soul has only itself to combat, the wheel comes full *circle*, the battle begins again and the pricklings of the flesh are felt anew ... a *perpetual* recurrence” (Foucault 1980: 189; emphasis added). Miss A wants to break away from what she wants, “because [she really doesn’t] feel like giving,” but, she tells herself “I should be giving.” Repeated attempts to master one’s own wishes form a vicious cycle. The gift cannot be removed from a cycle of debt and exchange; a “countergift” or payment in kind always occurs (Derrida 1992: 108). Therefore, the guilt is compensated with self-condemnation: “I should be giving ... why you like so teruk?” While she seems to be torn by guilt because of her decision not to donate here, it shall be demonstrated later that despite her feelings of condemnation, Miss A exercises agency when she selectively abides by certain official church practices and not others. She chooses not to donate to the building fund. Her habit of tithing, however, adheres to official church practice. Tithing is something she is “*willing* to do every month” (emphasis added); it is her choice. She says:

Sometimes I feel like it’s just the process of giving for such a long period of time, not tithes lah. I’m willing to do that every month, it’s more of the building funds ... after a long period of time it’s just, I guess I lose the passion to want to give however much I can, so yeah ... Just go back to the normal routine, at the beginning of the month that first week I give my tithes ... then after that, successive weeks I will give my offerings yeah ... I always hold on to what Pastor said lah, about, she never lets the bag go without putting anything inside, so I kind of hold on to that also.

Miss A is “*willing* to [tithe] every month” (emphasis added), but she admits she “[loses] the passion to want to give.” Hence, she gives her tithes “at the beginning of the month” and additional “offerings” that are separate from the building fund during

the “successive weeks.” Her behaviour of “never [letting] the bag [pass by her] without putting anything inside” during the collection of tithes via the passing of the collection bag from hand to hand amongst the congregation, manifests as observable compliance to church authority. Miss A does not verbally oppose the building fund, but through her engagement in the ritual of tithes and offerings collection that conforms to official doctrine, putting money into the bag that is passed shows her subscribing to doctrine. Miss A “visibly [conforms] to officially correct schemas” (Droogers 2003: 268). Tithing is a “normal routine” that she is “willing” (ibid.) to abide by, but Miss A selects which regulation to abide by instead of unquestioningly adhering to the normative practices within the church. Through “reflection” (ibid.) of her intentions of giving to the building fund (“it’s guilty conscience!”), she realizes that she gives to receive something in return: to assuage guilt. Miss A matures from believing in the illusion of pure gift, to refraining from giving at all. She releases herself from the bond of exchange, allowing her self to emerge.

For Miss A the gift that is followed by another should only ensue after a period of time. If the gift is returned immediately to discharge the debt, it becomes meaningless (see Derrida 1992). Hence, “the thing would demand limit and time ... the difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift ... must not be *restituted immediately and right away*” (Derrida 1992: 41). Time must lapse before the gift is returned with another, so that the giver may ‘forget’ that one has given, and the recipient, that one has received. Lengthening time before a gift is reciprocated is to engage in social protocol or acceptable self-deception, to ‘forget’ that the gift was presented, and to ‘forget’ the debt of the gift. However, the debt, for the recipient, is unconsciously remembered. Time leaves traces of the memory in the unconscious (ibid.).

In addition to the short periods of time between requests for gifts, Miss A also criticizes the “process of giving for such a long period of time” which drains her. But after “a long period of time”

of giving to the building fund, Miss A violates the exchange cycle as she stops donating. Her “passion to want to give” is lost. She ceases to give anymore, realizing that her gift is but an “illusion” of the real thing that is given freely without obligation (ibid.: 29). There is absence of guilt, and an acceptance of her own lack of “passion” to give. She stops the cycle of “guilt conscience” that keeps the gift going. While time conventionally does not erase guilt or the debt one has been placed in (ibid.), the “long period of time” has enabled Miss A to genuinely forget the “guilty conscience” of a ‘sinner’ and put it behind her; guilt no longer compels her to donate. The kingdom that “turns away from the economics of sin and redemption, and turns on the notions of giving and for-giving, of for-giving and for-getting” is realized (Caputo 1997: 222).

Time and maturation are also prominent in twenty-five year old Jac’s account of leaving a church and its emphasis on sin, for another church that focuses on grace and forgiveness. For Jac,

I just felt that I can’t grow there. Every time I go there, there is no passion ... you don’t feel the love of God ... you feel condemned for not serving or preaching the gospel, [and] last time I hadn’t really experienced God’s love ... they made people feel that they are being forced to do, that it is a duty not out of willingness, when I was young, even offerings I don’t want to give ... without the truth I don’t know the truth, when I come to this church I’m going to now, I find that the teaching that the pastor preaches ... was new to me, the finished work of Christ on the cross, what is the significance, I only knew about sin, but He died for us so that we could get healing and wholeness ... suddenly in this church all the truth sank into my heart.

Jac refutes the connection between growth and such a cycle of guilt, disciplining the human before “an angry God.” For Jac, that is not “love” or “truth.” The pointlessness of not developing in her faith, or since she “can’t grow there,” resembles the futile cycle of traditional self-renunciation (Foucault 1980). Accessing God’s truth, according to Christian conventional thought, entails

confession of sinful desire. God's truth, in return, facilitates the purification of the soul by removing sinful desire such that, as mentioned above, there is a cycle (ibid.: 179). "Healing" and "wholeness," aligned with newness and the "truth," are juxtaposed to "sin," aligned with "duty" and "condemnation." Contrary to a focus on ritual and "duty," the Kingdom of God is "love," void of obligation and compulsion (Caputo 1997). Where the previous church emphasized "sin," "duty" and "condemnation," Jac "[did not] feel the love of God," instead, she felt "an angry God." The gift of freedom that God gives opposes oppressive condemnation, and bears a love that incurs no debt or guilt. Jac refused to tithe in the previous church that propagates a cycle of discipline and condemnation because her gift would be annulled in the cycle.

Having tasted the "truth," Jac tithes freely without a sense of obligation in the current church, like the "love" that loosens the cycle of "sin" or condemnation. Forgiveness does not "remove" (ibid.: 227) the tithe from the cycle of debt but loosens it, allowing a relationship between the donor, Jac, and the recipient, a church worker, that constitutes a friendship of respect, one of "neither *master* nor *slave*" (ibid.: 228; emphasis added). The binary that threatens to come up between the "pastor" and the lay member is flattened, freed from "stricture and constricture" of submission to coercive authority or invoking of mandates (ibid.). Jac tithes knowing that the church leader has no hold on her money; she is not indebted to anyone.

Jac connects a 'past' and a 'present' temporality to the tithe, too. Her former desire not to tithe constitutes the period of "last time", whereas tithing occurs in "the church I'm going to *now*" (emphasis added). Her description of "*last time* when I hadn't really experienced God's love" (emphasis added) connects her decision to tithe with a past, which she describes as "last time." This was a period when she "felt condemned" for not fulfilling the rituals of "serving or preaching the gospel" that the church delineated for its members. She then proceeds to link her decision to tithe with the present here:

If I go back to that church I will give regardless of what the pastor preaches ... I was a baby Christian then that's why I don't want to give. If I am serving in that church now I would give.

There is conscious calculation that involves time. Jac privileges the “now” as apparent in her description that “if I am serving in that church now I would give.” She sees herself as matured from the “baby Christian” that she “*was*” (emphasis added). However, she says she would “give *regardless of what the pastor preaches*” (emphasis added). While Jac expressed her distaste at the previous church due to its emphasis on “sin,” she would tithe to the church, even if the church gave her a negative impression of Christianity. Her tithe is unconditional; she forgets the guilt that the previous church instilled. As mentioned by Caputo, love forgets and forgives. Jac does not hold it against the church for having preached a message that resulted in shame or guilt, “since I only knew about sin [as opposed to] healing and wholeness” (ibid.). She would tithe to the church anyway, subverting the teachings of the previous church, which were focused on a conscious memory of failures or sins, by choosing to forgive its failure to convey the valued aspects of Christianity – “healing and wholeness” (ibid.). She therefore has matured from being a “baby Christian” to the assumption of agency as she liberates herself from the guilt that once paralyzed her in the previous church and chooses to subscribe to the ideology of another church.

Conclusion

It is evident that while tithing is an act that the church circumscribes within a framework of compulsion or obligation, members like Miss A and Jac evaluate church teachings instead of conforming to authorities with an attitude of ‘fear and trembling.’ By doing so, they conceive tithing meaningfully and infuse it with agency. The gift of the tithe that becomes a non-gift when it is inserted in a discourse of commandments from God, or an economy of debt, is redeemed as gift once more when free will

is allowed to surface. It becomes loosened from an exchange of money for the alleviating of guilt as gift proper.

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CHAPTER 4

Negotiating the Liberties and Boundaries of Malaysian Online Christian Expression: Case Studies

Tan Meng Yoe¹

Introduction

Ever since the Internet made its way into society, it has revolutionized communication processes on many levels. While the emergence of internet technology is not the only factor in instigating any particular social or institutional change, it is certainly a prominent actor. Today, the World Wide Web is home to an immense network of institutions, industries, and individuals, and among these, religion is no stranger to the supposedly immaterial world of cyberspace. The Vatican, for example, ventured into setting up an official website in 1995. The first version of the website included a function that allowed users to send emails to the Pope (then Pope John Paul II). Perhaps owing to an underestimation of the social geography of cyberspace, the website crashed shortly after its

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introduction owing to a flood of emails. The website resumed its presence online sometime afterwards with upgraded servers and systems, but without the previous interactive function to email the Pope (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 34). Apart from being an early example of an institution's foray in cyberspace, the Vatican's initial openness to interactivity and its reaction to the overwhelming response serve as one of the earliest case studies for online religion.

Since then, thousands of religious institutions have established an official online presence. Within Christianity, an increasing number of churches have websites that offer information and other Christian resources such as articles, sermons, videos and testimonies. With the recent popularity of social networking websites such as Twitter and Facebook, some churches have, in a sense, begun to re-explore 'interactivity' by setting up Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.² Using the media for religious purposes is not new, with Christian radio and television programmes in existence (largely in Western societies), but with the Internet, more churches and Christian individuals are able to participate as authors, writing and posting content for public consumption.

This begs the question, however – has the Internet changed Christianity? Or, has the Internet changed Christians? The presence of Christianity in cyberspace – be it church websites or personal Christian blogs – is undeniable, but the intangible aspect of its exact nature and influence in Christianity itself is difficult to grasp. Several studies have made inroads, such as Heidi Campbell's (2007) research on how the Internet potentially changes religious hierarchy and power structures,³ and Mia

² There are several examples of church websites in Malaysia. An example of a church website that combined conventional web-design with Facebook, Twitter and other social networking components is Alpha Colors, accessible at www.alphacolors.org.

³ See also Campbell (2010) *When Religion Meets New Media*, for an up-to-date and well written study on how Jewish, Muslim, and Christian

Lövheim's (2004) research on young people in Europe engaging with social media for religious purposes.

This chapter is an attempt to 'start somewhere' with regards to Malaysian Christian bloggers. Two case studies are used to discuss and demonstrate two aspects of the Internet in relation to Christian bloggers in Malaysia. Firstly, we will examine the fluidity of the online/offline binary of the Internet, and how both the online and offline can potentially be in a constant mode of interacting and influencing one another. Secondly, the case studies will demonstrate how the Internet can provide a liberating experience for Christians in Malaysia. However, I will show that, at the same time, there is also a paradox that exists within what many consider to be the liberating qualities of the Internet. Mark W. MacWilliams, in *Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet*, describes the Internet, within the context of religion, as an interactive medium (as compared to radio and TV), providing "a dynamic multimedia environment for communing with the sacred" (2002: 319). Whilst that is true, it is important to note that dynamism and interaction, while often lauded as strengths of the Internet, are not necessarily unbridled, unrestrained, or uncensored. MacWilliams, in the same article, also aptly notes that "cyberspace is not only textual" (ibid.: 322). Although in his writing MacWilliams suggests that one can have a sense of a real presence in cyberspace, I think there is more to it. In the case studies below I will describe how cyberspace is lived and practiced in 'real' life, and is therefore not just "textual."

In what follows, I will give ethnographic descriptions of two Malaysian Christian bloggers and their respective approaches to their blog, both on a personal level and an extended social level.

communities interact with new media. Also a good reading in the field of online religion is Robert Glenn Howard's (2011) *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*, an ethnographic account of how the Internet empowers and disempowers Christian institutions in various ways, and how new communities are being organized without a central leadership.

After that, I will introduce the metaphor of the social cyborg, along with its characteristics and potential, and how it can help us in making sense of the case studies. The following case studies come out of my ethnographic fieldwork⁴ exercise interviewing various Christian bloggers who actively blog Christian content. My approach to interviews and writing up on my findings is primarily inspired by Clifford Geertz's call for "thick description" (1993: 2) of research observations, as well as Bruno Latour and John Law's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which advocates a method for building a comprehensive inventory of the research participants' network of events, traces, associations, and actions (Latour 2006: 23). These approaches require, then, a more comprehensive description of the people, events and relationships which foregrounds any subsequent analysis, as opposed to presenting any hypothesis and theoretical preferences prior to the actual case study itself.

New Expressions, Old Boundaries

Stark⁵ grew up as a Taoist in Nilai, a major township along the West coast of Malaysia. She describes herself as inquisitive, and always "asking people questions and examining my own beliefs since I was little."⁶ She goes on to say that as early as she could remember, she was a "stickler for setting things straight," especially if it was something that mattered to her. She attributes to this inquisitive approach to life her subsequent conversion to Christianity at the age of 18, against the wishes of her parents.

⁴ I say (cyber)-ethnographic because my fieldwork included an almost equal component of online/offline observation and interaction with research participants.

⁵ The identities of my research participants for both my case studies are pseudonymized for the purposes of confidentiality. Their location of birth, upbringing, as well as their current church and blog address are also de-identified.

⁶ All of Stark's direct quotes are taken from an interview conducted by me on 4/8/2011.

Stark's conversion to Christianity, coupled with her ongoing relationship with her parents and other relatives, plays an integral role in the making, motivation, and maintenance of her blog – *Another Christian Girl's Journey*. Stark explains that prior to her conversion, she had heard the message of Christianity a couple of times from friends, but those attempts never convinced her to convert. This was mainly because of her experiences as a Taoist – which up to 18 were “real” enough for her to not consider other faiths. She explains it as such:

I'd seen a lot of supernatural stuff as a Taoist. The fact that these deities were real spirit beings and had power was quite firmly established in my head. So previously, whenever my Christian friends tried to convert me, it never worked because I knew that my religion was real.

The felt reality of her spiritual experiences changed when she met Rob through mIRC, an online chat program. Although never having met Rob in person, Stark struck up a friendship with him, and began discussing Christianity. Rob, according to Stark, is a rather motivated Christian, trying to share his Christian beliefs with whomever he can. Much of their early discussion, however, was limited to just that – discussion. As mentioned earlier, Stark believed in the reality of the tenets of her former religion due to her experiences with séances, spirit-embodiment, fortune telling, and other forms of spiritual rituals performed by Taoist mediums, sometimes at her home by invitation of her parents.

Over the months, the friendship continued to grow and Rob decided to visit Stark. He lived in another state, and they had begun to develop a romantic interest in each other. During his brief visit, Rob made Stark a deal: “Why not pray to God? If God doesn't answer, then go on believing what you believe. You have nothing to lose.” Concluding that Rob was right, Stark decided to ask Rob how to pray. Stark says that “when I decided to do that, you could say all hell broke loose.” This event led to a form of spiritual experience, explained Stark. By the time Stark reached home from her meeting with Rob, there was already

a séance taking place in her house, and the medium was with her parents – accusing Stark of starting a relationship with a foreigner, sleeping together out of wedlock, and other matters that Stark explains were untrue. Stark felt that this was a form of hostility, demonstrated by the spirits that she usually prayed to, just because she wanted to inquire if the Christian God was real. This ultimately served as a launch pad for her to find out more about Christianity, as she could not accept that all along she was worshipping a god that, in her words, was “malicious, slanderous, wholly without honour or kindness, comfortable with accusing and lying ... basically, every emotionally manipulative and psychological trick in the book that might work, this thing had no problem saying it.”

One of the events that allowed Stark to finally find some space to sort out her spiritual journey was going to college. Moving out on her own to the city for her A-levels gave her the opportunity to visit churches, attend Christian Fellowship (CF)⁷ through her college years, and freely explore Christianity both on a personal and an intellectual level. Because she was entirely new to the faith, she began to “ask a lot of questions that people couldn’t really give answers to,” which led to a lecturer from college who had become her mentor buying her a study Bible for her to further study Christianity. She describes her time in college as such:

It wasn’t a very happy time. It wasn’t a secret to other people apart from my own family and that was easy enough to do, ‘cause college was far from home and there was no overlap. I kept quiet when I went home; my behavior there didn’t change too much. But yeah, on campus, I talked to my friends. What happened with the spirits had a really deep effect on me. My entire worldview shifted and I wanted to tell people, if I could, what I knew of the truth. I wanted them to know that God is the only God who should be worshiped ... the only One you can trust and believe in Everything else is a lie.

⁷ It is quite common for education institutions in Malaysia to have a Christian Fellowship (CF) formed by students as an extra-curricular club or society.

Stark's tendency to ask many questions regarding Christianity, as well as her aforementioned desire to tell people about Christianity are evidently expressed on her blog, *Another Christian Girl's Journey*. Stark says that "if people ask me for my testimony, I tell them. If they want to talk about God, I tell them. Basically if I think there's an opening I tend to talk about it," and one of the ways she chooses to "talk about it" is through her blog. Stark started blogging roughly five years after her conversion to Christianity. By then, she had married Rob and moved away from her parents. The permanency of her separation from her parents was not mainly because of her marriage, but owing to various events that affected her family. Stark explained to me that she does not know all the details to this day, but her parents at some point became involved with loan sharks, borrowing large amounts of money, and, being unable to pay off the debts, went into hiding. Stark currently suspects that both her parents are out of the country, although they still have the occasional phone conversation.

The origins of her blog had a specific trigger. Stark had been contemplating for some time the idea of starting a blog as a means to share her personal Christian journey with others, but somehow never got around to doing it. It was when her sister-in-law, who she termed a "backslidden Christian" (by which she meant a Christian who had stopped practising the faith), lost a baby and became bitter with God, blaming God for the loss of her child. Stark interpreted the bitterness of her sister-in-law as the grief coming out as anger, and chose not to argue or suggest otherwise. However, "biting her tongue" around the sister-in-law, as Stark puts it, pushed her to start a blog as she needed an outlet "for all the things I was thinking and more importantly *why* I was thinking them."

Writing blog posts wasn't initially particularly difficult for Stark, especially in terms of content. With her sister-in-law in mind, she started writing her personal testimony of all that she had experienced with regard to her Christian faith. However, that was only the beginning.

I knew where I wanted to start, so the first 40 posts or so was just me writing out my testimony. Once that was done, I started writing the things that stuck on my heart the most because of unbelief ... what does the fear of the Lord mean; how should you look at the problem of evil; why should Christians choose to do the right thing; abortion; creation ...

According to Stark then, the second audience that she wished to address after writing her personal journey of faith were unbelievers. A brief glance at her blog topics and categories confirms this – a recent post was titled “of monkeys and men,” in which she wrote at length in defence of creationism. Another frequent category of her postings are what she calls “debunking” posts, where she attempts to contribute to inter-religious as well as intra-religious debates about various issues. The posts are written largely in essay form, with references to the Bible and articles. This meticulous blogging behaviour can be traced back to her life-long habits of reading, writing, and “wanting to set things straight.” She tells me that sometimes, it takes her days to finish writing a particular blog post.

Despite the blog being very public and accessible to anyone who might come across it, Stark is careful not to let her parents know about its existence, which is why she uses a pseudonym on her blog. Her real name, or her husband’s and any other person’s name, is never mentioned anywhere on her blog – all characters in her thirty-something posts of her personal testimony have pseudonyms. Stark explains the reason for this:

I’ve thought many times about opening the blog and not keeping it anonymous anymore, because I actually want people to know my testimony. But it’s never felt right. It’s like I know there will be a day when it’ll all come out in the open, all the disconnected dots will connect and the full picture will be seen by everybody ... but my family’s not in the place for that. For their sake, I don’t let as many people know about the blog as I would like, because I didn’t spare details. There are things that would shame and infuriate my parents if they knew I’d written them down

for people to read. So I think on some level, I'm waiting for the day when they will want to testify how lost they were, and then there'll be no problem ... whereas if I did it now, they wouldn't understand and it'd have quite the opposite effect.

It is clear that the blog has provided Stark with an outlet to express her religious beliefs, as well as her side of the story with regard to her conversion. These expressions would not have been possible, or at best, received with some measure of hostility, in the physical presence of her parents. However, as we can see from the above quote by Stark, the liberty within cyberspace is hampered by the possibility of her parents, or some relative, having the same freedom to access her blog. Stark consciously reconstructed the boundary of not addressing the issue of religion with her family members on her blog. It is worth noting as well that although the taboo is recreated, her motives for doing so were different. In her earlier years in college, her silence at home was driven largely by a fear of yet another argument with her parents. The blog, however, remains anonymous by choice because she is hoping for her parents to become Christians one day, to "testify how lost they were, and then there'll be no problem." However, these different motivations produced the same effect – a distance between Stark and her parents. Here we can see that by crossing certain boundaries into particular networks, be it online or offline, Stark was very aware of the performance that was required by her to maintain her relationship with her parents.

Alternative Theology, Conventional Boundaries

While Stark's online/offline negotiations revolve largely around her relationship with her parents and her conscious efforts to conceal her identity, Alfred's approach to building boundaries is somewhat different in that the subject of his blog – his church – is well aware of his blog's contents, but feigns ignorance at the same time.

The blog in question here is *Winged*. *Winged* is actually

Alfred's fourth foray into writing online. In my interview with him, he described to me at length his online journey over the last several years. It began roughly in the year 2000 with a website hosted on web-provider Angelfire⁸ (the website still exists, although it is no longer updated). He started that blog when he was in college, where he first discovered theological concepts such as Armenian theology, open-theism, logical contradictions, and others. These theological inclinations are quite contrary to his experiences as a Christian growing up in a Lutheran church in Petaling Jaya, as I shall demonstrate below.

Shortly after, he was introduced to blogging. He set up an account with Blogdrive.⁹ The flexibility of the blog (as opposed to a website) which is easier to update coincided with his new interest in post-modernism and writing about cultural issues. His third foray into the web (this time with a Blogger¹⁰ account) started when he began working in the college where he currently teaches. His current blog, *Winged*, was created in 2010, after a one year hiatus from blogging. The current blog is perhaps best described as an amalgamation of his previous blogs, with theological discussion, cultural and political commentary, and philosophical inquiries into thinkers like Slavoj Zizek (his philosophical muse at the time of interview).

Somewhat like Stark, Alfred has a deep love for reading, although he attributes a surge in his interest for alternative views of theology to a break-up with a girlfriend when he was around 18 years old. Coincidentally, it was also the same period of time where Alfred, being raised in a Christian-Lutheran home, says he made the Christian faith his own.

My first girlfriend left me one or two years after form 5. Being a rather intra-personal kinda guy, it hit me quite deep. It didn't really affect my faith, it's just that I clung on to my faith as a

⁸ <http://angelfire.lycos.com/>

⁹ <http://www.blogdrive.com/>

¹⁰ <http://www.blogger.com/>

result of that. And at the time, so happen books started coming in ... and because when you are very emotionally hot, you grab on to a book, and it feeds very strong.

It was during this period that he started taking his faith seriously, getting more involved with church activities as well as with his college CF. He acquired a taste for what he calls “quirky stuff,” such as Brian McLaren’s idea of the “emergent church,” which is a self-described post-modern church, as well as open-theism. Open-theism is what Alfred describes as a brand of Christian belief where “God can be influenced by what we do and God truly responds to what we do. God genuinely interacts and enters into dynamic give-and-take relationships with us.” In short, Alfred describes open-theism’s primary belief as being that “God faces an open future,” where individuals are given complete free-will, and salvation is not predestined. Open-theism is quite clearly at odds with classical theological perspectives, which commonly imply that God is omnipotent and omniscient, suggesting that God already has foreknowledge of who will be taken to heaven and who will go to hell, even before the existence of man. This difference is important because Alfred’s leaning toward open-theistic discourses is not endorsed by his Lutheran church.

As Alfred began to explore these church and theological approaches, he ran into conflict both offline and online. Alfred said “Yes!” with certainty when I asked him if it is difficult being a Lutheran and endorsing open-theism at the same time. He says his father, who was a pastor, warned him against the teachings of open-theism. Alfred recalls a major instance of tension:

In 2007, Brian McLaren came down ... I took some of his DVDs and I wanted to introduce some ideas on the gospel and the world to the youth. Some of the young adults who were very highly Calvinistic came in and told me to stop. There was a brief moment of revolt. It was very strong tension, and I was in the thick of it.

While Alfred did not elaborate on that event, he noted that he doesn’t think anyone in his church accepts his open-theism,

although they accept him as a friend. He acknowledges that his viewpoints are quite well known in church, yet he is still on the roster for preaching in the church every month or two. He says that his blog is well known to his members but it is clear that it is not discussed. Also, Alfred states that it is within his personal ethics that he never preaches open-theism when he takes the pulpit. “Keep the quirky stuff to a minimum,” he said, and “don’t piss people off.” He indicated that his primary goal when addressing his church is to edify and preach on whatever would be of help to the congregation. When asked to clarify, Alfred agrees that what he is in fact doing is separating his blogging and pulpit activities.

The Social Cyborg: A Brief Discussion

To advance my examination of the descriptions above, I will in this section bring to bear on my discussion the social metaphor of the cyborg, first put forth by Donna Haraway (1991) in *The Cyborg Manifesto*. Haraway’s development and use of the cyborg was initially applied to feminist studies, but has since proved to be a useful theoretical platform for Internet studies. According to Haraway, “a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (ibid.: 149). Conventionally, the term “cyborg” may generate images of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his Terminator form, or Luke Skywalker with a robotic arm. However, the important distinction to make here is that it is the philosophical construction of the cyborg that the social sciences are interested in.

The unique characteristic of a cyborg is its dualistic nature, of inhabiting both machine and flesh, organic and technological, veins and wires, and other tangible binaries. In a philosophical sense, the cyborg is a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of

historical transformation” (ibid.: 150). The cyborg’s ability to fuse two strongly oppositional binaries – such as fact and fiction, black and white, immaterial and material, racist and non-racist, etc. can provide us with a unique perspective of the world we live in.¹¹

Chris Hables Gray, in *Cyborg Citizen*, states that “cyborgs are proliferating throughout contemporary culture, and as they do they are redefining many of the most basic political concepts of human existence” (2001: 19). To use the Internet as an example, Gray notes that cyberspace is “part of the rest of reality. It does open ways of relating and being that are entirely new” (ibid.: 132). The argument that the Internet is a conjoined part of the rest of reality, rather than a separate space or entity, is described in a similar vein by Cathryn Vasseleu, who reminds us that “cyberspace is also a medium of participatory orientation between bodies and objects in different spaces” (1997: 46), and that the participant’s body is “the medium in this interface” (ibid.). Vasseleu’s point brings to the fore the intersecting point between the intangible world of cyberspace and the tangible world of the ‘offline’.

The theoretical discussion above regarding a cyborg’s approach to internet is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates that the study of the virtual alone is not enough simply because the virtual, or cyberspace, overlaps and interacts with the ‘non-virtual’. In fact, I would argue that cyberspace is less a place than it is a state of being. It is easier to approach the cyborg notion of inhabiting binaries when we consider cyberspace as a ‘state’ – Basically, we can be online and offline at the same time. As Teli et al. put it, “the virtual is not the opposite of real. ‘Virtuality’ is one of the multiple ways of

¹¹ Some of these themes have been explored by various scholars, such as Jutta Weldes (2002), who considered the original fictional concept of “globalization” and how it is politically tangible today; as well as Constance Penley (1997), who detailed how Star Trek and NASA’s history is somewhat a sequence of mutual influence, from technological advancement to crisis management.

living in a context” (2007) and that “virtuality is one of the most important devices involved in reality creation” (ibid.). In the case of online Christianity, one can identify the fusing of an old institution – Christianity, and an infant (relative to Christianity) technological medium – the Internet. These merging components create exciting prospects regarding how Christians experience and express spirituality.

However, the cyborg is not all about freedom and new expressions. It has a paradox. While there has been much celebration regarding the philosophical potential of the social cyborg – to transcend boundaries and binaries, it can only achieve this if there are existing boundaries and binaries. A simple analogy would be to say that one can only fight an enemy if there is an enemy in the first place. Although he does not specifically refer to the cyborg, Michel Foucault says that, “on the one hand, they [the oppressed] assert the right to be different and underline everything that makes individuals truly individual. On the other hand, they attack everything that separates the individual, breaks his links with others ... and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way” (1982: 212).

That is to say, because of the cyborg’s oppositional qualities, it is then forced to identify itself with the subject that it resists. This means that the cyborg is never fully able to be the liberating metaphor that it strives to be. The paradox of the cyborg is that it requires an ‘other’ to exist. To take the Internet as an example – the paradox of liberty and boundaries is clear. The Internet can potentially actively build boundaries as well as break them – if one argues that powerful binaries encapsulate gender, race, and others, are deconstructed online, I would propose two questions. First, are these binaries deconstructed in practice? Second, if there is an active deconstruction of familiar boundaries, are there new boundaries and binaries that are being set up? I suspect so, as demonstrated in the case studies of Stark and Alfred, but a detailed description of the nature and extent of these boundaries has yet to be undertaken.

Conclusion

Many of the ideas described above in relation to the cyborg are, I believe, evident in Stark and Alfred's experiences with their personal and online Christianity. In the case of Stark, the boundaries and dynamics of her networks changed after she left her parents' household and got married. It may appear that these changes, while circumstantially difficult, would provide her with new personal freedoms, particularly in the area of Christian expression. Furthermore, the Internet would enhance these freedoms with the many liberties with which many have credited it. To a large extent, Stark does explore these freedoms, tells her stories openly and shares it with others freely, yet she consciously reconstructed the boundary between herself and her parents that existed offline. Therefore, it seems clear that despite the potential for a blurring of many boundaries, the 'human half' of the cyborg is still human in its need for boundaries, and thus Stark replicates an old boundary, despite the liberties that the online world offers.

In the case of Alfred, we can observe the way that he carefully manages his online and offline presences, and keeps them distinct. While his Lutheran church knows about Alfred's core doctrinal beliefs, which are in direct opposition to Lutheran doctrine, he is, however, given regular responsibilities to preach during the church services. Accordingly, Alfred never allows his blog topics to cross into the church pulpit. There is a balancing act taking place – one in which Alfred's church participates in – which makes the discrepancies between his online and offline views possible.

Therefore, what we can see in my description of Stark and Alfred's experiences is that, while the Internet does facilitate new ways and possibilities of Christian expression, some of the boundaries that occur in the offline world are replicated online. Thus the liberties of the Internet are at present circumscribed by the limitations of the human being's existing social boundaries.

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CHAPTER 5

From All-Blogs to Blog House Malaysia: SoPo Blogging, Journalism and Politics in Malaysia

*Julian Hopkins*¹

Introduction

In 2011, Blog House Malaysia (BHM), an association aimed at protecting and promoting bloggers' interests, organized a conference at which the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, was the keynote speaker. In his speech, he identified "Digital Democracy" as being "open democracy and the online media," and he argued that "it would be silly – perhaps even futile – for governments to resist or ignore [it]" (Najib Razak 2011). In Malaysia, this 'digital democracy' is often associated with blogs, especially since the General Elections of 2008 (GE2008) which saw a major setback for the Barisan Nasional party (BN).

The PM also said "Digital Democracy [has] made it harder to win elections" (ibid.), hinting at the challenge faced by his party as a result of criticisms expressed online. The political system in Malaysia has been described as a "pseudo-democracy" (Tan and Zawawi 2008: 9–11), or an "electoral autocrac[y]" (Diamond in

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George 2003: 249). Political activity and freedom of expression is curtailed through various legislative and structural means and – importantly – most of the national media is either directly controlled by the government, or indirectly through financial interests held by government-linked political parties (George 2007; Wang 2010). Blogs and online media are mostly free from the legal and financial constraints placed upon offline media, which explains why they play such an important role in sustaining and advancing public contestation of government policy.

Using material drawn from media reports and from a long term ethnographic study of blogging in Malaysia, this paper will trace the development of two bloggers' associations, BHM and All-Blogs, the former of which is the successor of a previous association of bloggers, the 'Alliance of Bloggers' (aka All-Blogs), which started in 2007 in the wake of a defamation case against two bloggers by a national newspaper – *The New Straits Times* (NST) – and associated persons (Tan and Zawawi 2008: 22–9). I show how they are related both to oppositional politics as well as to factional politics within BN. For the latter, the role of journalists and political interference in the management of newspapers is highlighted.

The Malaysian SoPo Blog Genre

A blog is a website that enables a person to publish multimedia webpages, displayed in reverse chronological order (Schmidt 2007). A distinguishing feature of blogs, as opposed to websites in general, is that readers can usually make publicly visible comments on each post (although this is controlled by the blogger who can deny, delete or edit them at will). Well-frequented blogs – with thousands of daily readers – are part of hyperlinked networks that may place them within ongoing conversations between bloggers. The comments also provide an opportunity for readers to converse with the blogger as well as with each other, adding to the content of the blog. Thus a

blog can also be described as a *dialogical medium* – that is, it is produced not only by the blogger, but also by multidirectional overlapping voices.

There are many blog genres, and the one considered in this chapter is known in Malaysia as the ‘Social-Political’ (SoPo) blog – similar to the ‘filter blog’, which is the most commonly studied blog genre (e.g. Armstrong and McAdams 2009; Efimova and De Moor 2005; Harper 2005; Wall 2005). Blog genres are considered here as sociotechnical assemblages that “specify and generalize communication, ensuring coordination of specific practices involving many people, and contributing to the reproduction of social institutions and sectors in society” (Lüders et al. 2010: 950). Thus, Malaysian SoPo blogs tend to focus on opinionated commentary, with an aim of achieving some measure of influence over social and political matters. Blogs become associated with individuals because of the regular postings written in a personal style that enable a regular reader to develop a sense of the blogger as a person. Added to this are the comments, whereby regular commenters establish relatively stabilized patterns of interaction and debate amongst themselves and with the blogger.

Although blogs are online media, they are relevant to the offline context – as demonstrated in the GE2008, for example. A common flaw of internet analysis is to divide activity into a less meaningful ‘virtual’ sphere online, and a ‘real world’ offline. As this paper will demonstrate, blogs, newspaper management, and political competition integrate both on- and offline activities. Neither is understandable without the other (see also the chapter by Tan in this volume).

SoPo Blogging and All-Blogs

Jeff Ooi is widely regarded as a pioneer of SoPo blogging in Malaysia, and in October 2004 SoPo blogging was brought into the national spotlight when his blog attracted controversy because of a comment that had compared the then Prime

Minister Abdullah Badawi's concept of Islam Hadhari to human waste (Ooi 2004a). This was highlighted in *Berita Harian*, a Bahasa Malaysia newspaper, which led the story on its front page for four days (Centre for Independent Journalism 2004). In response, Ooi (2004b) challenged the journalists on their motivations and professionalism, reflecting a common tension between journalists and bloggers that revolves around the latter's perceived lack of professional ethics and standards, and the former's perceived subordination to corporate and institutional interests (see also boyd 2006: para 21).

Continuing this theme, in late October 2006 Ooi published a detailed accusation of plagiarism against a senior editor of the *NST* (Ooi 2006); his allegations were repeated by another blogger known as Rocky (aka Ahirudin Attan), and in January 2007, defamation suits were filed against both bloggers by the New Straits Times Press (NSTP) and associated individuals, including deputy chairman Kalimullah bin Masheerul Hassan (Ooi 2007; Tan and Zawawi 2008: 23). This defamation suit was perceived by many bloggers as an attempt to muzzle SoPo bloggers and there was a rapid mobilization of support online, first under the banner of 'Bloggers United' and then, in April 2007, by the National Alliance of Bloggers, which came to be known as 'All-Blogs'. All-Blogs' aim was "to promote blogging and to protect bloggers" (Samad 2007a), and was founded at a meeting held at the National Press Club in Kuala Lumpur (Samad 2007a; Tan and Zawawi 2008: 24–9).

The connection with the National Press Club was not fortuitous. Soon after the GE2008, at a seminar in Singapore, Rocky shared some insights into how Badawi and his administration were believed by NSTP journalists to be in control of changes in personnel and managerial policy at NSTP. He recounted how Nuraina Samad – who had resigned as Deputy Chief News Editor at *NST* in January 2007 – had started her blog in the same month, publishing an open letter demanding that Badawi "instruct New Straits Times Press to drop the legal suit

against Jeff Ooi and [Rocky]” (Ahirudin Attan 2008).² Rocky also stated that the group editor of NSTP, Ahmad A. Talib, also “had to leave after Abdullah Badawi took over” (ibid.). Speaking of those journalists who started blogging during that period, Rocky explained that they “lashed back because they were frustrated and lost their jobs because of [Badawi’s] administration” (ibid.). Nonetheless, he also revealed the conflicted position of these journalists, saying that “most of us [i.e. ‘journalist bloggers’] were mainstream journalists, we were with the government. We did the very same things we hate the mainstream media for doing today” (ibid.).

Thus, All-Blogs was closely connected to journalists disenchanted with the BN administration as well as to opposition-aligned bloggers. Although these groups had different political objectives, their blogging tended to be formed by a common journalistic approach. The relationship of SoPo blogging and journalism is strong, and was evident in a series of annual ‘blogmeets’ organized by journalists and bloggers, known as the ‘BUM’ meetings, which are described below.

Bloggers United Malaysia 2007

Soon after All-Blogs was formed, a blogmeet was organized in conjunction with the World Press Freedom Day. It had panels composed of bloggers, journalists and opposition politicians, and focused on the challenge that blogging (dubbed the ‘fifth estate’) posed to government control of the mainstream media (the ‘fourth estate’).³ Although the Bloggers United Meeting (BUM) 2007 was not organized by All-Blogs, Rocky was given time to explain the progress of All-Blogs, and received many expressions of support. As Pro-tem president of All-Blogs, he emphasized its

² She later also reported that NSTP was paying for the legal fees of the individuals suing Ooi and Rocky (Samad 2007b).

³ Fieldnotes dated 19 May 2007. Unless otherwise stated, all references to this event are based on these notes.

non-partisan nature, as evidenced by committee members drawn from different political parties, and discussed various difficulties in terms of deciding who could be members, and managing anonymous memberships. He also expressed doubts about being able to easily register as a society, as the Registrar of Societies (ROS) was perceived to reflect government interests.



Plate 1: BUM2007 poster (Artwork by mob1900.blogspot.com)

Regarding anonymity, often seen as a cause of distrust of bloggers, Ooi argued that foregoing anonymity would enable bloggers to respond to accusations of irresponsibility. Nades, a journalist, supported bloggers in principle, but referred to the importance of the editorial process and journalists' responsibilities with regards to avoiding matters that may cause ethnic disharmony. Marina Mahathir – a noted NGO activist, newspaper columnist, and daughter of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, described how she became a blogger somewhat “by default.” Someone had been reproducing her newspaper articles in a blog, but was not responding to the

comments, and she worried that maybe people thought that blog was being run by her. Lending support to the argument that a blog is a dialogical medium, she reflected upon the importance of the commenting function for both the readers and the writer, remarking on how much more feedback she got from her own blog as opposed to her column, and saying that “comments are really important,” and that they “add value.” Amongst other matters such as media legislation and restrictions on open debate, this blogmeet thus saw blogging and journalism being both contrasted with each other as well having their similarities and complementarities discussed.⁴

Blog House

In the months after the formation of All-Blogs, and the BUM2007 blogmeet, various incidents kept blogs in the public eye. In July, Tian Chua – the Media Officer of the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) – created controversy by posting a purportedly satirical doctored picture connecting the then Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) – Najib Razak – with Altantuya Shaariibuu, the murdered Mongolian assistant and ex-mistress of one of his aides (Chua 2007). In August, the blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin (RPK) was questioned by police with regards to a blog post that accused a previous state Chief Minister of corruption (Raja Petra Kamarudin 2007). In the same month, a blogger and PKR staff member – Nathaniel Tan – was arrested and remanded for four days under the Official Secrets Act (The Star Online 2007a); he was questioned about a comment left on one of his blog posts where someone had reposted material from an anonymous blog accusing a government minister of corruption.⁵

The government’s concern about online debate, and its inability to control it in the same manner as offline media – i.e.

⁴ There were non-SoPo bloggers there, some of whom expressed unhappiness that All-Blogs and BUM seemed to reflect SoPo bloggers’ interests alone.

⁵ Fieldnotes dated July 28, 2007.

through legal and financial controls – was made evident in July 2007 when UMNO was reported as “recruiting [a] team of writers to fight ‘cyber war’” (The Star Online 2007b), under the leadership of the Youth and Sports Minister, Azalina Othman Said. That there was concern about intra-party debate was also revealed when she said “many [UMNO] members liked visiting certain websites and could end up believing what was posted there” (ibid.). Later in November of the same year, Najib Razak – who had launched his own “personal website” in September (*theSun* 2008) – confirmed the use of this tactic, saying that “Umno would tackle the misinformation and lies about the party on the internet [...] through its own website and its own bloggers” (Ram 2007).

In late August 2007, a blogmeet was organized by All-Blogs to launch their logo and to inaugurate the ‘Blog House’ – a new locale for the organization.⁶ The secretary of All-Blogs explained that the Blog House was for all members, and the keys would be held by Executive Committee members. However, as far as I could ascertain, there were never any formal members – possibly due to its inability to register as a society. In addition, access to the Blog House always remained controlled by a few individuals, and the ownership of the house – located in an expensive neighbourhood⁷ – was never clarified.⁸ Also present at the August 2007 blogmeet, Ooi explained his much remarked-upon decision to join the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) – thus moving from a civil society role to active political participation.

The meeting also held a forum on an initiative called ‘Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia’ (‘I am a child of the Malaysian race’ – i.e. an identity transcending conventional ethnic divides within Malaysia), led by Haris Ibrahim, a lawyer and activist⁹ who was

⁶ Fieldnotes dated 25 August 2007. Unless otherwise stated, all references to this event are based on these notes.

⁷ Bukit Damansara, Kuala Lumpur.

⁸ Fieldnotes dated 25 August 2007, 6 July 2008.

⁹ <http://harismibrahim.wordpress.com/>

also representing Rocky in his case against the NSTP. During the discussion, it was suggested that the Bangsa Malaysia campaign and All-Blogs operate in tandem, but no clear support for this move was expressed. The All-Blogs logo and inauguration of Blog House, and the Bangsa Malaysia initiative, were two separate components of the evening. An analysis of the online blog activity following the event showed that most online activity clustered around Rocky's and Haris Ibrahim's blogs. Although Ooi was the most well-known of the bloggers, hardly any online activity connected him and the event. These indicators of differing interests suggest that the initial unifying impulse of All-Blogs was forking into various threads.

March 2008 General Elections

After unprecedentedly poor results for the ruling coalition in the GE2008, the Prime Minister noted that they “lost the Internet war, the cyberwar” (Dzulkifli Abdul Razak 2008). Many aspects of the internet, as well as mobile telephony, were important in undermining the government-dominated mainstream media. However, that blogs were seen as being central was evidenced in a number of government initiatives that focused on blogs and bloggers: in March, the Information Minister was instructed by the PM to prioritize meeting bloggers “to better understand their sentiments and give them an avenue to express themselves” (*The New Straits Times* 2008); in April, the Umno youth wing required that all electoral candidates set up blogs (Phang and Pua 2008); in May, the Information Minister (ironically underscoring the government control of television) announced the intention of “giving bloggers air time on TV once a week” (Shahanaaz 2008), an initiative that was carried through for a few months. The month of May also saw discussion of the need for a code of ethics for bloggers based on journalistic ethics (Kushairi 2008), and the proposition for a university course that would “enable bloggers to be more professional and ethical” (*The Star* 2008).

During this gradual shift, the government attempts to placate bloggers by opening up to them were only marginally successful, and many continued to attack the BN. In particular, Raja Petra Kamarudin (RPK) continued to publish leaked documents, launch trenchant broadsides, and most controversially, repeated allegations that the DPM and his wife were implicated in the murder of Altantuya Shaariibuu (Raja Petra Kamarudin 2008). In August his blog was briefly blocked by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, a move widely derided as pointless since a mirror site was available almost immediately (Wong 2008).

Another significant effect of the GE2008 was that it led to open dissent and dissatisfaction with Badawi from within UMNO. The voice with the highest profile was that of Mahathir, the ex-PM, who started his own blog in May 2008,¹⁰ and also resigned from UMNO – stating that he would only rejoin once Badawi stepped down. Mukhriz Mahathir – Mahathir’s son and a candidate for the leadership of the UMNO Youth – also openly called for Badawi’s resignation. Eventually, Badawi announced in October that he would step down in favour of the DPM Najib Razak (Badawi 2008), and the handover happened in April 2009. Two days after Badawi’s announcement, the deputy chairman of the NSTP – Kalimullah Hassan – tendered his resignation (Lau 2008).

As will be outlined below, this removal of Badawi from government represented the accomplishment of a goal for one portion of All-Blogs associates, loosely assembled around Rocky, and with probable connections to the pro-Najib faction of UMNO. On the other hand, for other associates, loosely assembled around opposition parties and civil society actors such as Haris Ibrahim or RPK, the goal was the removal of UMNO and BN altogether. Thus, with Najib at the helm of UMNO, this alliance of convenience had lost its *raison d'être*. In addition, the need for closer political strategizing and party discipline within

¹⁰ <http://chedet.cc/blog/>

the opposition coalition, which now ruled five federal states as well as forming a large minority in Parliament, meant that the opposition bloggers, some of whom were also elected to offices that require heavy workloads, found that their ability to blog at will was more circumscribed.

Bloggers Universe Malaysia 2008

The celebratory atmosphere of the second BUM event, which was held in May 2008, was significantly different to the previous year. Two newly elected opposition Yang Berhomats (YBs)¹¹ attended, one of them being Ooi who did so via teleconferencing facilities while on official state government business in Vietnam.¹² Another difference pointed out to me by a blogger known as the ‘Ancient Mariner’,¹³ was that the usual UMNO bloggers were absent, as were, so I also noticed, the non-SoPo bloggers who had expressed unhappiness at being marginalized in the previous year’s event.

Rocky gave a summary of All-Blogs’ past year’s activities – noting that most were skewed towards civil society initiatives. All-Blogs was still not a registered society, and as such had not been able to formally register any members, or have elections for the Executive Committee. However, he asserted that All-Blogs had been part of the process that “turned Malaysia from a blogging hostile country to [a] blogging friendly [country].” He also mentioned three initiatives led by Haris Ibrahim that had taken place at the Blog House, including the launch of the “Paper-Free Tuesday” campaign which called for boycotting of the mainstream newspapers. The newspaper boycott raised some debate amongst the journalists present, in particular regarding concerns that fellow journalists could be affected if newspapers’ profitability was reduced.

¹¹ Yang Berhormat – a Member of Parliament

¹² Fieldnotes dated 2 May 2008. Unless otherwise stated, all references to this event are based on these notes.

¹³ Now deceased. <http://cyusof.blogspot.com/>

One journalist panel member, Jacqueline Surin, had previously been with *theSun*, a newspaper that had become known for pushing the conventional boundaries of self-censorship. Following a recent change in ownership, that brought *theSun* under the full control of a corporation believed to have close ties to the government (Venkiteswaran and Wong 2008), she and others had left and founded an online newspaper – *The Nutgraph*.¹⁴ She explained that she had learnt more about bloggers' values since starting it, for example, when they had been criticized for not letting comments appear unfiltered. However, although she welcomed the way in which comments meant that journalists did not have the last say, she also argued that an online newspaper should function as a form of “alternative” media like a blog were misguided.

A code of ethics for bloggers was briefly discussed; parallels with journalistic ethics were drawn, but the need for it to be voluntary was emphasized. Lim Teck Ghee, public intellectual and Director of the Centre for Policy Initiatives (CPI), argued that the “divisive forces in society” were not to be found in blogs, where he had noted an increase in civility, but instead in state institutions such as the *Biro Tata Negara*,¹⁵ and the *Utusan Malaysia* newspaper.

The salience of journalistic concerns, relative to those of bloggers, points to another way of understanding the blogmeet – as an opportunity for journalists and bloggers to explore the tensions between these two occupations. In addition, the absence of non-SoPo bloggers suggested that All-Blogs and the BUM events were becoming less relevant to bloggers as a whole.

¹⁴ <http://www.thenutgraph.com/>

¹⁵ The National Civics Bureau. A department concerned with instilling “patriotism, moral values and loyalty to the elected government” (Biro Tatanegara 2005). It has been associated with controversy regarding courses that purportedly promote Malay supremacy and ethnic stereotyping.

100 Days

July 2008 saw a meeting jointly commemorating one year of All-Blogs, and 100 days after the GE2008. In addition to seven YBs, as well as a sprinkling of prominent NGO activists and public figures, there were corporate sponsors (e.g. LG and Air Asia), who participated in raising the funds for All-Blogs. RM42,647 was raised in total, of which RM36,000 was from corporate sponsors.¹⁶

Also remarked upon was the simultaneous presence of people who would normally be considered political foes – thus the evening saw Mukhriz, the only BN party YB there, and RPK chatting and posing for photos together (see Plate 2). Nonetheless,



Plate 2: RPK (left) and Mukhriz (whose wife stands in the middle) pose together at the All-Blogs '100 Days' event (6 July 2008)

¹⁶ Fieldnotes dated 6 July 2008. Unless otherwise stated, all references to this event are based on these notes.

this period of relative entente did not last. One blogger expressed disappointment, noting that the event was “PR¹⁷ partisan dominated” and expressed misgivings at what he saw as a hijacking of All-Blogs by people who hold a “certain liberal idea” (probably alluding to Haris Ibrahim). Citing other bloggers in support of his argument, he concluded by saying, “So lets [sic.] not deviate from real issue Rid the country of the root cause of our present dissatisfaction. Thats [sic.] Abdullah Badawi!” (A Voice 2008).¹⁸

Anti-ISA Vigil

In September 2008, in a febrile atmosphere precipitated by an announced (but ultimately unforthcoming) 16 September government takeover by the PR, and a recent furore over perceived racist comments by an UMNO official, there were three high profile arrests under the Internal Security Act (ISA), which enables indefinite detention without trial: YB Theresa Kok (also a SoPo blogger), Tan Hoon Cheng (a journalist), and RPK (Chelvi 2008; The Star Online 2008). A vigil in Kuala Lumpur was organized in six hours (Nathaniel Tan 2008), with messages being distributed by SMS and blogs. That evening between 125-160 persons came to the Blog House to listen to speeches protesting the ISA and calling for the release of all detainees. A police presence was conspicuous outside the house, which – as private property – escapes the restrictions on public assembly that could otherwise have been deployed. As with the ‘100 Days’ event, the All-Blogs network was instrumental in being able to invite some MPs and provide a physical space – the Blog House – for political activity. This reflected the online space blogs provide for political

¹⁷ Pakatan Rakyat (PR): the name of the coalition of opposition parties.

¹⁸ All quotations from blogs are reproduced as is, without editing for spelling and grammar.

dissent, and underlines the interaction between on- and offline political activity in Malaysia.¹⁹

Book launch: Blogging and Democratization

In December 2008, the launch of an academic book about blogging in Malaysia²⁰ provided an opportunity to reflect on changes since the 2007 research upon which it was based. The success of bloggers in creating alternative information channels, driving political agendas in the public sphere, and becoming “thought leaders” was noted by Wan Zawawi. The key speaker, Nik Nazmi – a PKR YB, State Assemblyman and political secretary to the Chief Minister of Selangor – recalled how he had spoken at BUM2007 with two other bloggers who were now also YBs.²¹

With regards to limits on open debate, he argued that bloggers need to “maintain the highest journalistic ethics and standards,” but not that they should “watch what they say”. [Because] Overcautious self-censorship and the lack of courage will doubtlessly compromise the new media the same way it emasculated its mainstream counterpart” (quoted in Chong 2008).

Rocky opened his presentation by asking whether bloggers were “still united.” He answered with a qualified yes – noting that there were “cracks appearing in the blogosphere,” and that although bloggers were no longer as united, there are the “same hopes and fears.” He argued that some behaved like the mainstream media, being “biased [...] blindly working for political masters.” He added that it was acceptable for bloggers to be partisan, but when others are not listened to, and they don’t agree to disagree, then bloggers will lose credibility. Because

¹⁹ Fieldnotes dated 14 September 2008. Unless otherwise stated, all references to this event are based on these notes.

²⁰ Tan and Zawawi 2008 *op. cit.*

²¹ Fieldnotes dated 5 December 2008. Unless otherwise stated, all references to this event are based on these notes.

any significant political change inevitably requires a break with consensus, and a refusal to agree to disagree, this position in effect implies that those currently holding the legal and political authority to effect change are to remain the ultimate arbiters of change. Thus, the positions of Rocky and Nik Nazmi differed with regards to the proper use of blogs as a medium for public debate.

In a reference to the speculations about the changes Najib's administration would bring, Rocky was challenged with rumours that he would return to his editorial job in the *Malay Mail*. At the time, he avoided giving a straight answer, but in June 2009 re-entered the *Malay Mail* as editor (Ahirudin Attan 2009a). In July 2009 Samad returned to the *NST* as Managing Editor (Ahirudin

Bloggers Universe Malaysia 2009



Plate 3: BUM2009 poster (Artwork by mob1900.blogspot.com)

Attan 2009b). Further evidence of their return to favour by the government was demonstrated when Rocky was awarded the title of ‘Datuk’ in January 2010 (Pasquale 2010), as was Samad in February 2011 (Ahirudin Attan 2011).

Soon before the BUM 2009 blogmeet in May 2009, the divergence of interests within All-Blogs finally surfaced into open disagreement between Rocky and Haris Ibrahim. The latter explained that “the divide between pro-government bloggers and non pro-government bloggers was becoming wider”, and the former explained that “the divide was a natural evolution of the blogger's community,” the “common goal ... the political tsunami [i.e. GE2008]” having been achieved (Leonard 2009).

That blogging played a role in promoting the anti-Badawi faction was also demonstrated by the star speaker that year, former Prime Minister Mahathir.²² He explained that he had started his blog – which gained one million visitors in the first month – because he was being excluded from the mainstream media. He alluded in particular to a “press supremo” whose name is a “combination of an Indian god together with a Muslim priest” (a reference to Kalimullah, the previous deputy chairman of NSTP) who prevented the press from mentioning him. Ironically, Mahathir welcomed the opportunity to bypass government controls on the mainstream media, noting that when he was PM one could close down printing presses, but this was not possible with blogs. His speech thus highlighted how the Badawi government had – in his opinion – manipulated the mainstream media and forced him to resort to ‘joining the enemy’ (the bloggers).

In other discussions, heavy criticism was reserved for the mainstream media, but its relationship with blogs was usually described as complementary – noting that professional news organizations are needed to find the news, and that blogs are a way of “contextualizing” that news, as Ooi put it.

²² Fieldnotes dated 16 May 2009. Unless otherwise stated, all references to this event are based on these notes.

Blog House Malaysia and the ASEAN Regional Bloggers Conference

In October 2010, some blogs discussed possible conflicts of interest with regards to the son of the Information, Communication and Culture Minister Rais Yatim and a government grant for national broadband expansion. The Minister responded by lodging a police report, and in a manner that echoed the events of 2007, a new association 'Bloggers for Malaysia' (BfM) was formed (the name was changed afterwards to 'Blog House Malaysia' (BHM). Rocky, one of the attendees and an Executive Committee member, wrote:

The meeting took place in the conference room of the National Press Club, the same place the so-called 'Band of Bloggers' [sic.] was formed one still night in 2007 by a group of Malay bloggers from different political backgrounds who met discreetly to plan a new media 'war' against the arrogant and ignorant Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration.

The NPC was also where some 60 socio-political bloggers of various races and political affiliation met to set up the National Alliance of Bloggers, or All-Blogs, after the shocking lawsuits against me and Jeff Ooi.

With the setting up of BfM, All-Blogs will cease to be. I will be writing to the other All-Blogs' office bearers in my capacity as the interim president [sic.] of All-Blogs of my plan to disband it.

I am confident that BfM will be able to pursue All-Blogs' objectives of promoting responsible blogging and providing a shield for bloggers (Ahirudin Attan 2010).

Thus All-Blogs – mostly inactive since the 2008GE – was disbanded and BfM proposed as its successor. However, the political context and leanings was different. The President of BfM is a self-identified "pro Government' blogger" (Syed Akbar Ali

2010), who implied that the other founding members had similar leanings. Nonetheless, he also noted that the impetus for the founding of BfM was a government minister “bringing down the sledgehammer on Bloggers” (ibid.).

In April 2011, BHM organized the “1st Malaysian – ASEAN Regional Bloggers Conference: Blogging Mindfully and Responsibly” (MARBC). The venue was a five star hotel in the centre of Kuala Lumpur, it was free for attendants, and had all the trappings of a high level conference. One of the items in the briefcase given as a welcome pack was a cartoon account of Najib’s life (see Plate 4).²³ The expense of the event, which included foreign ASEAN bloggers being flown in and hosted at the hotel, was supported by the sponsorship from large corporations such as Telekom Malaysia and Petronas, which – as a Petronas employee present there said to me – suggested government approval of the event.

The conference was in two parts. The wider public was not invited to the first day, which saw workshops for invited local and ASEAN bloggers. The second day, open to the public, had morning and afternoon panels, and speeches over lunch. These speeches were by the President of Blog House, by Mahathir – the official patron of Blog House – and the keynote address was delivered by Najib Razak. In this respect, Blog House was receiving official consecration from the highest powers in the land, and from UMNO in particular.

The theme of the conference was “Blogging Mindfully and Responsibly.” The PM reasserted his support for the guarantee that the internet not be censored, first laid down by Mahathir, and noted the inevitability of uncontrolled diffusion of information online. He struck a note of caution, recalling the ways in which the internet and social media have “led to the downfall of regimes and governments. At the very least, they create havoc and instability.”

²³ Fieldnotes dated 24 April 2011. Unless otherwise stated, all references to this event are based on these notes.



Plate 4: PM Najib Razak, Dr Mahathir, and Blog House president Syed Akbar Ali at the 1st Malaysian-ASEAN Regional Bloggers Conference, 24 April 2011.

The conference sounded many positive notes with regards to free speech and democracy. However, a panel, entitled “Parameters – The fine line between what’s allowed and what’s not,” seemed to focus on mechanisms to control, or discipline, bloggers.²⁴ However, the difficulty of controlling bloggers was again foregrounded, and the emphasis was – as one blogger put it – on how, in return for the authorities granting “the fundamental human rights of freedom of expression and freedom of choice, bloggers themselves must fundamentally demonstrate civic responsibility by choosing their words and expressions with care” (ninitalk 2011). Thus, as with the theme of the conference, the main concern seemed to be with ways in which expression could be limited, rather than a primary concern with rights of free speech.

As also noted by one attendee, many prominent Malaysian

²⁴ This is based on online reports. Unfortunately, I missed this session.

SoPo bloggers were absent – notably those who opposed the government. Some of the organizers stated that there was an open invitation, but some bloggers did not want to come to the event because of its connection with the ruling party. This was seen as evidence of their ‘partisanship’, and lack of true commitment to open debate. Two Blog House committee members told me that although they had previously been against the government of Badawi, and used their blogs to that effect, Najib listened to bloggers and was worthy of support. Thus, they seemed happy to accept his patronage. However, other bloggers who opposed the government were described as partisan, in a manner that did not seem to recognize the political nature of their own decision to associate themselves with the Najib administration.

Conclusions

From a loose collective of bloggers and journalists in 2007, marginalized and condemned by the mainstream media, by 2011 All-Blogs had morphed into BHM, which hosted the head of the government in a five-star hotel conference. The composition of the attendees changed – from people gathered around blogging as a practice in 2007, to more organized political parties and factions in 2008, to an organization clearly aligned with the government of the day in 2011.

With regards to digital media, one of the notable features of Najib’s tenure thus far has been an extensive use of blogs, Twitter and Facebook. He has also twice held public events to which Facebook ‘friends’, Twitter followers, and other social media users were invited (The Star Online 2011). His patronage of the 1st Malaysian-ASEAN Regional Bloggers Conference falls within this strategy. The co-opting of the bloggers’ collective also provides insight into the governments’ strategy with regards to influencing media beyond the ‘old’ mainstream media.

This paper has described how blogs were an integral part of both intra-UMNO politics and oppositional politics in the

period leading up to and following the GE2008. In addition, the movement of journalists from the NSTP to blogs, and then back, not only indicates the suitability of blogs for journalistic genres, but also reveals the ways in which the news organization is influenced by Umno. Thus, blogs have been shown to allow individuals and collectives to bypass conventional controls on political activity. However, this has been demonstrated to apply to actors with both progressive and reactionary aims – demonstrating that the ‘digital democracy’ that is associated with blogs is not a foregone conclusion, and potentially subject to similar manipulations to that which has led to Malaysia being described as a “pseudo-democracy” (Tan and Zawawi 2008 op. cit.).

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CHAPTER 6

Examining the Exploitation of Indonesian Domestic Workers in Malaysia: Gender and National Policy Factors

Nadiah Ahmad¹

Introduction

In May 2004, the abuse case of an Indonesian domestic worker by the name of Nirmala Bonat circulated in local and international news. The 19-year-old was found wounded from abuses inflicted by her 35-year-old female employer who had “burned her with an iron and boiling water” (*NY Times* 2004). The domestic worker eventually sought help from security guards of the luxury condominium complex she worked at. Abuses started five months prior to the employer’s arrest on 21 May 2004, after an incident in which Nirmala broke a tea cup.

Malaysia periodically finds itself in the headlines around the world (e.g. *The Jakarta Globe*, *NY Times*, *Bernamea*, *Channel News Asia*) for its cases of Indonesian domestic worker abuse. According to Human Rights Watch in May 2010, many domestic

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workers face socio-cultural and psychological trauma from their employers as they are often restricted from interactions with others, and are physically confined to the house of the employers. The occupational welfare of domestic workers is also frequently poor as they can be made to perform duties for more than 10 hours a day, and many are not allowed to have any rest days. Partly in response to these common abuses, the Indonesian government ordered a maid freeze that became effective in June 2009 (*The Star* 2009). In 2010, a number of Indonesians reacted by holding a protest outside the Malaysian ambassador's Indonesian residence to express their discontent over the inadequate protection of its migrant workers in Malaysia (*The Jakarta Globe* 2010). They viewed the inadequate protections as both an indictment of their value as workers and as an insult to them as Indonesians.

Indonesian domestic workers constitute an important segment of the migrant workforce in Malaysia. As of February 2010, out of the 1,803,260 legal migrant workers in Malaysia, 12.45 percent (224,544) work as domestic workers, 90.50 percent (203,225) of which come from Indonesia, and 100 percent of whom are women. These Indonesian women seek work in Malaysia for various, yet straightforward, reasons including those relating to economic necessity as well as family pressure (Chin 1998: 119).

Malaysia has historically been employing domestic workers since the colonial era. *Amahs*, as they were called, were Cantonese women from Southern China who migrated to British Malaya to seek jobs as domestic workers. *Amahs* were a notable subset of domestic workers because of their disinclination towards marriage and they travelled to Malaya to gain economic independence (ibid.: 119). *Amahs* were able to negotiate wages for themselves, and were given permission for rest days when needed, which meant fewer restrictions imposed on them in terms of exercising their rights to meet basic needs (ibid.: 75).

Amahs also had a great sense of sisterhood that culminated into an “*amah* network that established rules and boundaries ... that mitigated physical and sexual abuse” (ibid.). The *amah* network slowly died with time because they had no lineage to carry on the *amah* tradition. The relative empowerment of *amahs* described by Chin might then lead one to wonder about the differences between *amahs* and contemporary domestic workers. Why is it that today’s domestic workers so often find themselves in positions of disempowerment and vulnerability to abuse? And what might be done to address this problem?

In trying to answer these questions, two factors are identified which contribute to the exploitation of domestic workers: the first factor, gender; and the second, national labour policies. Domestic work is seen as gender-specific for two reasons: the overall ‘feminization’ of the global labour economy and how this entrenches domestic work as informal work in the private sphere; and secondly, the ubiquity of women in this working sector (Elias 2007: 53). In the matter of national policies, female Indonesian domestic workers are migrant workers subject to Malaysian labour laws, specifically the Employment Act 1955 (EA 1955), which more often than not leave them in a vulnerable position due to the weak enforcement and oversight of laws. Other labour policy initiatives include the Memorandum of Understanding between Malaysia and Indonesia signed in 2006 (Indonesia-Malaysia MOU). The Philippines, who also out-migrate its female citizens to work in the domestic sector abroad, has a national policy to protect them, namely the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act 1996 (MWOFA 1996). However, unlike the MWOFA 1996, the protection provided by the MOU and the EA 1955 are not as far reaching in intent or function. Why they differ in levels of protection is a result of factors relating to the functioning of the global economy and differences in the way the legislations were drafted.

Legislation

Before moving on to discuss the findings of my research, it is necessary to note some of the relevant policies and legislation that affects domestic workers in Malaysia. There are two main pieces of legislation that concern the protection of workers in Malaysia: the EA 1955 (Act 265) and the Workers Compensation Act 1952 (Act 273).

The EA 1955 (Act 265) deals with the terms and conditions of work in Malaysia. Section 2(1), Part I of the Act defines a “contract of service” as:

any agreement, whether oral or in writing and whether express or implied, whereby one person agrees to employ another as an employee and the other agrees to serve his employer as an employee

The legislation recognizes domestic workers as “domestic servants,” and they are defined as:

persons employed in connection with work of a private dwelling-house and not in connection of any trade, business or profession carried on by the employer in such dwelling-house and includes a cook, house servant, butler, child’s or baby’s nurse, valet, footman, gardener, washerman or washerwoman, watchman, groom and driver or cleaner of any vehicle licensed for private use.

In this legislation, there are several exemptions that limit the scope of protection for domestic servants. For example, due to their exemption from Part XII, domestic servants are not afforded a day of rest like other employees governed by the act, nor can they demand the right to work for only eight hours, or request for holidays, annual leave and sick leave. Their exemption from Part IX means that they are not given the right to maternity protection which affords them leave for sixty consecutive days with maternity allowance, while being exempted from Part XIIa means that they are not entitled to termination, lay-off or retirement benefits.

Meanwhile, the Workmen's Compensation Act 1952 (Act 273) directly governs the protection of workers in Malaysia, including foreign workers, in relation to compensation for injuries that result from any form of manual labour. In Part II, section four, employers are made responsible for compensating any physical injuries, including death, through the purchase of insurance schemes from private insurance companies. The compensation is rather limited because it only deals with physical injuries and omits the need to compensate for psychological or emotional injuries. Critically, Part I, Section 2(c), stipulates that domestic workers or servants are "excepted from the definition of workman," contradicting the EA 1955 which recognizes a person under contract as being a worker. So, domestic workers are denied the limited protection that the Workmen's Compensation Act provides. The contract of employment for domestic workers issued by the Immigration Department of Malaysia does include the duty of the employer to insure his foreign worker, citing Section 26(2) of the Worker Compensation Act. However, this is rather contradictory to the act stipulating the exemption of domestic workers as a "workman," and so one wonders the extent to which this compulsory insurance is enforced on employers.

For migrant Filipino workers, the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act 1995 (MWOFA Act 1995) stipulates measures to be carried out by various government-based organizations to ensure the safety and welfare of Filipinos in receiving countries as well as assuring stipulations in work contracts that benefit the worker. The act is extensive, and it includes the responsibilities of various Filipino government bodies at home and abroad in ensuring protection.

As Indonesia does not have similar laws, the most important document for Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia is the Indonesia-Malaysia MOU, signed on May 13 2006, between the Indonesian Minister of Manpower and Transmigration and the Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs. This stipulates the conduct of recruiting and placement of Indonesian women for domestic

work, and the responsibilities of the various actors who supply and maintain the market and the employer-employee relations.

However, as the articles are assessed, one notices how the ideal work relations portrayed within the memorandum give more discretion to the employer than the employee. For example, Article 10 permits the continued work of a domestic worker “as required by the employer” – this suggests that the worker is not able to refuse work expected by the employer. Significantly, Articles 6 and 7 state the criteria of an ideal domestic worker who is to “possess sufficient knowledge of Malaysian laws, culture and social practices,” and is “certified fit and healthy in accordance with the requirements of the relevant authorities in Malaysia and Indonesia,” whereas Appendix A (d) gives a more elaborate and quite demanding list of criteria for prospective employees to adhere to before being eligible for employment and which include physical, intellectual, social, legal and cultural competencies.

On the Vulnerabilities of Domestic Workers in Malaysia: a discussion of findings

This section presents the findings of this research, which further supplements the above analysis with existing scholarly material, online news articles on Indonesian maid abuse cases, and interviews with key actors in the Malaysian maid trade, notably representatives from The Malaysian Association of Maid Agencies (PAPA), the Labour Department of the Ministry of Human Resources, non-profit organizations Migrant Care and Tenaganita, and several maid agents.

Gender

When the feminization of the workforce increased after the 1970s as a result of industrialization, women entered the formal economy but domestic work remained informal. The entry of domestic workers into middle class homes in Malaysia only

relieves the former housewives “of the more labour-intensive aspects of housework” and transfers them to the vulnerable female migrant workers (Jenkins 2004: 7). The divide of the public and private sphere remains and the dual roles women play sustained; the introduction of female domestic workers only creates a new intra-gender power relation in the household, with one woman becoming the supervisor while the other becomes the employee. This does not take the woman out of the home completely, and nor does it change the stereotype of women in the household. Instead, it extends it.

News of abuse cases, mostly involving women inflicting harm on their female domestic workers, also dehumanizes women per se and reinforces the view women may be subordinated. An article in *The Star* illustrates how dependant many Malaysians have become on domestic workers, and the way in which the latter are often dehumanized (*The Star* 2012c). Citing how domestic workers take advantage of employers by “running away,” that they “steal husbands,” or that they are “diseased” shows the extent of distrust employers have for their domestic workers, who are alienated as foreign bodies in the domestic realm (ibid.). One rationale for the abuse of women by women is the commodification of the domestic worker. Another could be the lack of satisfaction that comes with the work that is done. Many of the cases involve female employers punishing the domestic worker for not doing her job well. This may be the result of reality not meeting expectation, but the perception of the commoditized domestic worker as being non-human makes it easier to place blame and punish ‘accordingly’ without remorse. An example of this rationale is illustrated in a particular case in 2009 in which 44-year-old Hau Yuan Tyung, a female employer who punished her domestic worker, 34-year-old Siti Hajar, with “hammer, scissors, and boiling water,” was found guilty the following year on three counts of abuse (Channel News Asia 2010). Siti Hajar had escaped her employer’s Kuala Lumpur condominium unit before seeking refuge at the Indonesian

embassy. The employer had displayed a lack of empathy and compassion at her sentencing, in which she was to serve eight years in jail and pay monetary compensation of RM5000 for her offense. She felt her sentence to be excessive and filed an appeal against it (ibid.).

Secondly, while sections of the EA 1955 seek to protect women from retrenchment, exhausting working hours and workplaces, these only apply to those working in the formal and public sector and not to women who work as domestic workers. Domestic workers, even though they are employed under a contract of service, are still short-changed because of the positioning of their workplace, namely the home. The home becomes a dangerous territory for domestic workers because of its inherent invisibility. Unlike their historical counterparts, the *amahs* who were generally more visible in the public, contemporary domestic workers – particularly those from Indonesia – are less able to negotiate their work conditions, are often not mobile, and cannot create a support system beyond the household. Instead, politicians who create policies that determine such factors have as advisors maid agents and employers (as opposed to the workers themselves), and due to their lack of appreciation for the labour they do, policies end up stifling the worker as opposed to empowering them (Elias 2009: 470).

But why do politicians prefer to listen to maid agents and employers, and not the workers themselves? Among the most important reasons is that the domestic worker does not contribute to the economy as apparently, as much, or as directly as her employer and agent. This then creates a hierarchy of importance, leaving the domestic worker at the bottom of the pile (Ong 2007: 101). To illustrate this further, one might cite the case of the Indonesian domestic worker who was allegedly raped in 2007 by Malaysia's Minister of Communication and Culture, Rais Yatim (The Malaysian Insider 2011). The Indonesian non-governmental organization Migrant Care had documented the

rape case for Rubingah, the Indonesian domestic worker, and gave copies of the report to the Malaysian national police and the Indonesian embassy in 2007. The report became public four years later after a leak from Wikileaks. However, another non-profit organization from Indonesia as well as the Minister in Malaysia denied the allegations, and Rais Yatim has never been formally questioned by the police (*The Jakarta Globe* 2011). Rubingah has since denied the allegations as well, though the exemption of the Minister from any questioning by any criminal authority proves the significance of a person to the State in accordance to his hierarchy of importance (*The Star* 2011).

In 2012, a Malaysian-Indonesian joint task force concluded that the best way to curb exploitation of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysian homes was to ensure specific assignment of tasks to the worker. For example, if an Indonesian woman is hired to cook for the family, that would be her only formal duty as an employee. This skill, as well as housekeeping, babysitting and caretaking of elderly people will be taught by various Indonesian employment agencies (*The Star* 2012b). A minimum wage of RM700 per month has also been stipulated and Indonesia will regulate the number of women coming into Malaysia as domestic workers to between 4000 and 5000 a month (*ibid.*). Though this is a step forward towards providing more formal protection, there has been no explanation by the task force about how to ensure domestic workers will not be exploited regardless of the stipulations. They have also not explained if these terms of employment extends to current Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia. The task force has not addressed the need to ensure competencies of employers either; the focus on rectifying discrepancies of Indonesian women, without considering those of the employer will not curb exploitation completely. Employment agency associations have responded negatively to these new conditions of employment. Some have called the move “extreme” and “ridiculous” (*The Star* 2012a).

National Labour Policies

Indonesia itself does not have any migrant workers act to protect its people overseas; instead, it relies on the policies and legislations of host countries. The Indonesia-Malaysia MOU described earlier is essentially a gesture of friendly diplomacy between two States. The memorandum is nominal and general in its content – it lists the types of responsibilities of various actors summarized in three appendices, has a rough template of a contract of service, and notes the intention to form a Joint Working Group to “discuss any matters arising from the implementation of this memorandum” (Article 12). It does not however address the inadequacies of the EA 1955, and it does not specify the various amendments that need to be made to Malaysian labour laws to ensure protection of domestic workers, instead expressing an adherence to “all Malaysian laws, rules, regulations, policies and directives” already in existence (Article 7). Moreover, there are also contradictions in the memorandum; an example is the mention of adequate rest for employees, but at the same time, domestic workers are exempted from the article which stipulates conditions of rest in the EA 1955.

In comparison, the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act 1996 (MWOFA Act 1996) is more comprehensive in its intent to protect. Not only limited to domestic workers, the MWOFA Act 1996 sets out to ensure “full protection to labour, local and overseas,” and includes the “assurance that the dignity and fundamental human rights and freedoms ... not be compromised or violated.” The act tries to fulfil this through various initiatives such as establishing a repatriation fund (in Section 15), the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), and providing legal assistance overseas through the Foreign Affairs Department (Section 19). There is also the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration which is a body that monitors and helps to ensure that protection is provided. The Philippines also negotiates work conditions for its people overseas to ensure the

best working environment, and this effort manifests itself in a standard contract of service with specific stipulations.

Indonesia and the Philippines in this context have very similar intentions for the out-migration of their peoples. The lack of employment opportunities for under-skilled labourers (defined as those with only high school qualifications) in Indonesia as well as a growing demand for “domestic labourers” overseas led to a growth in out-migration (Tirtosudarmo 2009). Concurrently in the Philippines, low levels of wage regulation, exploitative production processes in the industrial sector, and a suppressed union movement encouraged many to out-migrate (Bahramitash 2005: 158). The educational qualifications of Filipino and Indonesian workers are different, as the former saw a mix of under-skilled and skilled workers like teachers and nurses opting to migrate to become domestic workers abroad as it garnered higher wages (*ibid.*: 164). Thus, out-migration became a solution to reduce unemployment, and it also increases national revenue through remittances.

In 2006, Indonesian workers in Malaysia remitted USD 262 million back home. In total, Indonesian migrant workers worldwide remitted USD 6.6 billion back home in 2008, comprising 6.2 percent of the GDP (IOM Indonesia 2009). In 2006, the Filipino migrant workers remitted USD 40.7 million from Malaysia (Overseas Filipino Remittance 2010). The Filipino government responded to this trend through the Filipino Labour Code of 1974 which formally recognized the need to increase regulation of overseas migration as it helped to reduce unemployment and to solve the problem of “shortage of foreign currency needed for development” (Raj-Hashim 1994: 122). In 1992, “emigration and the export of labour” became part of the Filipino employment policy (*ibid.*). Although Indonesia enjoys the benefits of remittances which increase national revenue and decrease unemployment, it did not create any formal policies.

The two countries are polarized examples of State reasoning. While the Philippines exercise regulation, Indonesia exercises

deregulation. Both countries are relieved from the pressures of unemployment whilst gaining national revenue. The difference between Filipinos abroad and Indonesians is the protection: Indonesia rationalizes its people abroad as commodities while the Philippines does not. How these sending countries treat their citizens abroad extends into the way host countries treat them.

Concluding Remarks

Gender is an important factor in the exploitation of domestic workers not only because only women engage in it, but also because it is related to the global economy which generally characterizes female labour as informal, flexible, and precarious. Meanwhile, the greater the visibility that a form of work and its product have in the economy, the more protection the State affords it. This neoliberal logic of separating public and private spheres is further exemplified in the aforementioned labour policies, most notably the EA 1955. An interview with the Malaysian Association of Foreign Maid Agencies (PAPA) confirmed the ambiguous definitions of domestic work and its subsequent lack of protection which is exacerbated by its location in the home.

Besides the EA 1955, the Indonesia-Malaysia MOU has very little practical function, although it had the potential to extend protection for Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia. The memorandum is more an acknowledgement that confirms the exploitation that happens to domestic workers in Malaysia. The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act 1996 is, however, a good example of how legislation can protect its people abroad, also acknowledging the importance of out-migration in contributing to national revenue and reducing unemployment. Each State rationalizes the protection of these women in different ways; Malaysia and Indonesia distance themselves from ensuring safe work conditions, while the Philippines does the opposite.

Gender and national factors are mutually informing in determining protection for Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia. Taking into account issues discussed – gender placement in the economy between the public or visible and private or invisible, the general precariousness of labour in the economy, and the commoditization of workers – domestic work is one of the most disadvantaged forms of employment in the labour economy. This can be repaired by addressing the invisibility of the work, by valuing its workers as more than commodities, as well as the implementation of effective legislation.

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CHAPTER 7

Solving (Some of) Shirley Lim's *Life's Mysteries*

*Theresa Holtby*¹

Introduction

Shirley Lim was born in Melaka in 1944 and left the homeland of her early life for the United States of America in 1969. She went on to become an acclaimed critic and writer, and is now a professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara. *Life's Mysteries: The Best of Shirley Lim* is a collection of nineteen of Lim's most memorable short stories, written over four decades from the 1960s to the 1990s. Malaysian scholar and critic, Andrew Ng, notes that despite Lim's more than four decades of self-imposed exile and her Western-influenced development as a feminist and Asian-American critic, Lim "has never relinquished her Malaysian identity" and repeatedly revisits the setting of her "first" life – Malaysia – in her fiction (2011: 157). In this paper I will perform a hermeneutical reading of three pieces taken from Lim's *Life's Mysteries: Two Dreams, The Good Old Days*, and the eponymous *Life's Mysteries*. Although these stories address themselves to a wide variety of issues, in

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this short essay I will perforce limit my attention primarily to a consideration of nostalgia, both in tone and as a theme.

Hermeneutics

A hermeneutical approach to Lim's stories is apt, since the very title of this collection suggests that they deal with puzzles that need to be solved. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, a philosopher whose hermeneutical theory is vital to contemporary literary studies: "art is knowledge and the experience of the work of art is a sharing of this knowledge" (1988: 87). A work of art, such as one of Lim's stories, can therefore not only be enjoyed as an aesthetic experience, but can be understood as a contribution to knowledge. Concerning the form this understanding must take, Gadamer claims that "interpretation is not an occasional act subsequent to understanding, but rather understanding is always an interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding" (ibid.: 274). That is, the process of understanding something inevitably involves interpreting it to ourselves. According to literary theorist Wolfgang Iser, Gadamer, following Hegel, contends that "art reveals the historic manifestations of what the human mind had been trying to achieve. This is the knowledge to be obtained from the work of art, and it engenders self-understanding through its experience" (2006: 35). The reasons to attempt to interpret a work of art are therefore, in Gadamer's view, (at least) twofold: obviously, interpretation is performed in order to understand what the author is contributing to human knowledge; second, one interprets a work of art to be able to understand oneself more clearly in the light of the knowledge thereby attained.

Regarding the method by which a reader is to set about accomplishing the aim of understanding via interpretation, Gadamer avers: "The voice that speaks to us from the past – be it text, work, trace – poses a question and places our meaning in openness. ... we must attempt to reconstruct the question to which the transmitted

text is the answer For the text must be understood as an answer to a real question" (1988: 337). My interpretation of this selection of Lim's stories will therefore be an attempt to discern the questions to which the selected texts form answers.

Following the question-and-answer logic proposed by R. G. Collingwood (1889 – 1943) for the interpretation of art via re-enactment of history in the present, Iser declares that:

every work of art is to be conceived as an answer to a question or problem prevalent in the respective historical situation within which it was produced. The work as an answer is bound to contain the question in the form of an issue that had to be addressed. Through the logic of question and answer we are able to reconstruct the context of the work to which it has reacted, thereby making us present to a historical situation that has never been our own. Thus a truly historical interpretation of the work of art emerges, which allows us both to re-enact the work on its own terms, and to begin to understand its otherness. Furthermore, the question-and-answer logic does not subject tradition to preconceived principles ... instead of downgrading tradition to a foil for umbrella concepts, it allows tradition to speak to the present in its own language (2006: 39).

Iser emphasizes the open-endedness of the hermeneutical method as its main strength. This method of literary analysis seeks to examine a work on its own terms, rather than measuring it against an external and pre-determined theory, such as feminist or socialist analyses might employ. A danger for literary analysis that focuses on exposing the influence of political, social or ideological structures is the inherent limitation of its own perceptions to just those factors. Iser seems to have this self-limiting in mind when he says deconstruction "tends to become captive to the position whose hidden assumptions it uncovers" (*ibid.*: 157). That is, this form of reading focuses only on a narrow range of factors, and ignores considerations that are outside its indubitably important but inherently limited *cynosure*. Iser quotes Showalter making a similar point regarding feminist

literary theory: “one of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented” (ibid.). Joseph Hillis Miller, a literary critic with keen interest in the ethics of reading, and in reading as a cultural act, argues that if literature is read only to have its tributary ideologies deconstructed, it loses its power to have any significant effect on readers, since they must approach it with “a principled resistance” (2002: 159). In contrast to these self-limiting approaches, the obvious advantage of hermeneutical literary analysis is its openness to ideas outside a pre-chosen theoretical focus.

In response to Iser’s assertion of the need for a survey of the most pertinent aspects of the “respective historical situation” of a text to be considered hermeneutically, a contextualization of Lim’s work might go as follows: these works were written in the last four decades of the twentieth century, from a position of self-exile in the United States, by a Malaysian woman of Chinese ethnicity whose cultural background contains elements of both Confucianism and Catholicism (Ng 2011: 159, 164). Some obvious questions that might prevail in such a life are: What does my Asian ethnicity mean to me as an American? What preconceptions from my Asian childhood shape my understanding of life as an Asian-American adult? What beliefs did I develop as a child that might surface, transmogrified, in my thinking as an adult? What room should I give, mentally, to the powerful emotions of nostalgia?

Exile and Nostalgia

Lim’s status as a self-exile has already been noted. Carol Siegel writes that the psychological position of the exile is one of being “removed from the past but not cut off from it: looking back, vacillating between longing and repulsion, alienated from but contemplating something that was or could have been home” (1995: 50). Siegel’s description of the mental and emotional

experience of exile reveals why nostalgia can come to form the permanent background to an exile's inner life. Lim's stories evocatively exemplify the exilic psychological space identified by Siegel, rendering Lim's personal and apparently Malaysia-specific account more broadly applicable than it might first seem. In fact, Ng reports that Lim views herself as writing as a "free-floating" exile, in the sense that Lim's writing "turf" does not fully belong to either Malaysia or America (2011: 188, 190). Her insights into the life of the exile therefore speak to the experiences of exiles anywhere and everywhere.

In his exegesis of hermeneutics in *How to Do Theory*, Iser explains that the human past gains significance because history is "taken as humanity's knowledge of itself, and thus a resuscitation of the past allowed humans to look into a mirror, thereby becoming conscious of themselves" (2006: 29). Iser is here speaking in general terms, but a similar phenomenon arguably occurs on the individual level: a person looks to her own history in order to understand herself, and when her physical location in the past is different from her physical location in the present, as is the case for an exile such as Lim, the space associated with the past can take on almost mystical dimensions in the imagination of the subject, as is evidenced by the phenomena of homesickness and nostalgia. Childhood memories sometimes assume the dimensions of (personal) myth, to which the subject returns again and again over time in the quest for self-understanding. On my reading, this phenomenon is explored in Lim's "*Two Dreams*."

Two Dreams

The first thing to note about this story is that there are more than two dreams mentioned, despite its title:

1. During the cold and cloudy "snow-sooted month" of a New York February, Martha dreams of riding along the beach on the carrier rack of her brother's bicycle (2001: 38).

2. During the first few jet-lagged days after her arrival in Malaysia, Martha dreams of “New York’s Grand Central, of dark menacing faces, and of hurrying down long deserted streets shadowed by crumbling buildings” (2001: 39).
3. After seeing a policeman’s attack on a kereta boy, Martha dreams of a classroom of students in New York being attacked by policemen (2001: 43).

Why, then, is the story called *Two Dreams*? I contend that a persuasive solution of this puzzle is that the “dreams” referred to in the title are not the literal dreams that Martha has while sleeping, but rather the emotions, beliefs and aspirations that a person has concerning a well-known place when absent from it. In this case: Martha’s homesick thoughts about Malaysia while she lives in America form the first, idealizing dream; and her realist thoughts concerning America while visiting Malaysia are the second dream.

This interpretation (viz. that the “dreams” of the title are not the literal dreams of the narrative) seems to be supported by Martha’s reaction to the first dream mentioned in the story. She wakes herself laughing at her own statement, made in her dream: “Only in Malaysia ... do people take you on pleasure rides” (2001: 38). Martha’s laughter at this obvious fallacy or exaggeration seems to indicate her perception of its naïve idealization of her native land. This dream-scene thus draws attention to the exile’s propensity to imagine or ‘dream’ the homeland as an exalted expression of excellence and perfection. A simile in the very next paragraph, connecting the potently primeval symbol of embryonic fluid with the sea of her childhood home, further highlights the exile’s idealization of the forsaken homeland: “the warm, salty sea of her childhood, like embryonic fluid, she thought, to which she returned in her sleep” (2001: 38). The second ‘dream’ of the title contrasts with this idealism, and will be treated later.

Martha, like Lim herself, is a Chinese-Malaysian woman living in America. Martha is homesick for Malaysia, as her first dream reveals. Driven by homesickness, Martha borrows the money for an airfare back to Malaysia from her husband. After being welcomed back by her family, Martha sleeps a lot, having metaphorically left her worries behind her (along with her winter coat) in the European cold of London en route from New York to Malaysia (2001: 38). Martha is invited by an old friend, Harry, to accompany him to a political rally. There, Martha is charmed by the Malaysian Prime Minister's sincerity and statesmanship, contrasting him favourably in her mind with the "sweating and incoherent" American President Nixon, whom she cannot respect (2001: 40). The first part of this outing thus tends to confirm and strengthen Martha's nostalgic view of Malaysia. However, during the rally Martha witnesses a policeman brutally beating a young kereta boy on the head and shoulders with his baton, for some trifling offence.

On a first reading, the episode of the kereta boy appears merely to record a jarring moment; an unpleasant incident that clashed with Martha's idealizing nostalgia. On closer inspection, however, the story reconstructs such a moment for what I suspect is a didactic purpose. There is nothing didactic or pedantic in the story's light and airy tone, which leads me to suspect that the chief intended beneficiary of the lesson is the narrator herself. The reader is simply allowed to be privy to a process that would be entirely complete even if its writer were its only reader. The story has the wry understatement of a self-denigrating joke, in which the narrator reminds herself of the deceptiveness of nostalgia.

Martha is deeply troubled by what she has seen, as is demonstrated by her subsequent dream of a whole classroom full of students being beaten by policemen. In this dream, though, the beating happens in America. The transference of the beating from Malaysia in Martha's waking experience to New York in Martha's dream might be read as an indication of the psychological tendency to interpret experiences and perceptions

according to preconceived notions. That is, because the violence that Martha witnessed at the rally in Malaysia does not fit with her idealized view of her homeland, in her dream she relocates it to New York. This story therefore addresses the very deep question of how the human unconscious orders perceptions, and seems to suggest, at least on my reading, that humans have a sub-conscious tendency to re-interpret experiences to make them fit with deeply held beliefs, even when conscious experience contradicts those beliefs.

The naïvete of Martha's nostalgia is exposed – most especially to Martha herself – through the kereta boy incident. Martha tells the friend who took her to the rally, Harry, about her dream, and he says “I am sorry you won't be coming back [to Malaysia]. It isn't really as bad as you think” (2001: 44). Martha nominally agrees:

‘No,’ she replied, ‘it isn't as bad.’

But she was already wondering about finding her winter coat in London (2001: 44).

That is, Martha is already psychologically returning to the concerns of the ‘cold’ reality of her life in America. This might be read as an indictment of Martha's superficiality: she might be thought to care more about her own comfort than about injustice in her native country. Alternatively, this involuntary winging of Martha's thoughts back to her more personal and pressing concerns (being cold en route from London to New York) might be a comment on the general human tendency to make priorities of whatever circumstances prevail in our immediate experience. This interpretation carries more weight than the former, since it reinforces the anti-idealism of Martha's discovery concerning nostalgia: Martha cannot afford to dwell long and idealistically on the injustices done to vulnerable Malaysians such as the kereta boy by those in authority in Malaysia, in the face of the exigencies of her own all-too-real circumstances. The second ‘dream’ therefore concerns the narrator's adult reality of cold pragmatism. Arguably, a question addressed by *Two Dreams* is this: What

role does nostalgia play in the mental life – both conscious and unconscious – of the exile?

The Good Old Days

The Good Old Days is an account of the interactions of the narrator's extended family following the death of her grandfather. This story shares a common thread of nostalgia with *Two Dreams* but in this instance the narrator's psyche is purportedly not itself a site of nostalgia. Instead, the story gives an ironic glimpse into the betrayals and hardships that are now affectionately referred to by the narrator's aging mother as "the good old days." It is interesting to note that according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the word 'nostalgia' means "homesickness as a disease; regretful or wistful memory of an earlier time." The second of these definitions is now the more commonly used sense of the word. The first, however, is closer to the original sense, which was derived from the Greek *nostos* 'return home' + *algos* 'pain'. 'Nostalgia' in its original sense thus has a depth and gravity that are missing from the usual and more sentimental sense of the contemporary use of the word. In fact, the use of the word "disease" in the definition conveys the profundity and even the physicality of the grief and yearning sense of loss that may be experienced as nostalgia, exemplified by Martha's homesickness at the beginning of *Two Dreams*. Another point of significance is the word's vital link with displacement in *space*, which has become somewhat muted in the contemporary sense of nostalgia as sadness over displacement in *time*.

This story cynically exposes the facile nostalgia that forgets the harshness of bygone times and foolishly laments the passing of what were in fact bitter days. To a certain extent, this point is well made. However, the story is a little glib in that it does not stop to explore why a person might long for the past, despite its inherent difficulties. The subtleties of the human tendency to long for the days of one's youth, however fraught with difficulty

they may have been, and the validity of a retrospective recognition that much that was good was mixed with the bad, are ignored by Lim. In that sense, this story seems to be a clear example of a phenomenon identified in Lim's writing by Ng when he notes that, "Undoubtedly, there seems to be an underlying nostalgia that threads through her stories, which ends up conspiring with the traditions that she sets out to challenge with her irony" (2011: 191). Ironically, when it is nostalgia itself that Lim sets out to ironize, the (nostalgic) result is, to some extent, self-defeating.

The narrator's unilateral condemnation of (another's) nostalgia in this story overlooks the fact that, histories of petty bickering notwithstanding, long-held relationships offer a way to reconnect, albeit tenuously, with one's younger self. The obvious question addressed by this story is: Were the good old days really good? It is useful at this point to recall that one of the strengths of a hermeneutical approach is an examination of a work on its own terms. In this context, a shortcoming of the story highlighted by the hermeneutical approach is that it fails to address a far more profound question that is suggested, indirectly, by this story itself. That question is: Why is it that we often fondly remember times that were in reality unpleasant in so many ways? It seems to me that Lim has missed an opportunity to devote her talent and attention to a consideration of the human tendency, under the influence of nostalgia, to elide the negative aspects of memory. An exploration of the impetus behind this tendency seems (to me, at least) a far more worthwhile endeavour than satirizing the nostalgia of an older and less privileged generation. The by-passing of this opportunity is difficult to understand, particularly in the light of the large place Lim gives, in her fiction, to nostalgia.

I would like to examine more closely how *The Good Old Days* is undermined by the complicity of the narrator's own nostalgic tone against the irony with which she seeks to treat nostalgia in this story. A prime example of this phenomenon is that the very same impulse that causes the narrator's mother to long for the "good old days" is exhibited by the narrator herself

when she tenderly reports that, on being forbidden to invite their poor cousins home any more: “We dutifully promised [not to do so ...] but we also vowed among ourselves to take our morning bread to school to share with them during recess” (2001: 108). The narrator’s obviously nostalgic cherishing of an act of kindness (and other similar memories of sweetness amidst bitterness) is not allowed, by the narrator, to be part of the mother’s experience. The resulting shallowness of the narrative perspective creates a hollowness at the heart of this text. A similar shortcoming is shown by Ng to be entrenched in Lim’s fiction, specifically in relation to women and religion, but the point seems equally applicable to her treatment of nostalgia:

As I see it, in Lim’s fiction, the objectification of religion and women to ironize or criticize patriarchy’s oppression, and the assertion of anomalous female subjectivities, rehearse precisely one version – albeit a sophisticated one – of such an “old subject /object dichotomy” [... leading to] myopic, even prejudicial viewpoints and arguments (2011: 191).

In a very general sense, that is, Lim’s fiction tends to reproduce the limitations it sets out to criticize. That tendency is perfectly exemplified in this story, albeit concerning nostalgia instead of women and religion. Iser posits that “encountering the past entails being confronted with otherness” (2006: 35). The narrator does not seem entirely free, in this instance, to enter in to such a confrontation. Therefore her readers, likewise, cannot; at least, not via this story. As a reader, my dissatisfaction with this story lies in its failure to grapple with the deeper questions of nostalgia, raised by the story itself.

Life’s Mysteries

‘*Life’s Mysteries*’ opens with the child narrator, Swee Liang, crying as she cuts onions. Ah Phan, the maid, berates the child for making the onions dirty with her tears, and the child wonders how this can happen. Remembering that Ah Phan has lately

become less willing to answer Swee's many questions because, as Ah Phan says, the ten-year-old is now "old enough to know these things by herself" (2001: 87), Swee Liang deliberates fearfully before succumbing to her curiosity and asking how tears can make onions dirty. Ah Phan answers "Aii! Tears are bitter things. They come from bad feelings. If someone eats your tears, he will also have bad feelings. Do you want your father's friends to eat your tears?" (2001: 87).

Ah Phan is preparing a meal for a visit from Swee Liang's father's friend and his girlfriend. There are several things Swee Liang does not understand about the evening that ensues, things that are destined to enter her psyche as some of "life's mysteries." I will discuss the two that seem to me most pertinent to the story's title. The first is Swee Liang's mother's outburst after the men discuss Ah Phan's status as a "black and white" amah. The father's friend explains that Ah Phan is "a member of a society of women from China who've sworn never to marry. The black and white *samfoo* is their trade uniform" (2011: 90). The men jovially discuss the possible reasons for women taking such a vow, which all centre on men: "Maybe they hate men ... They may have been unwanted women. Perhaps their fathers almost drowned them when they were born. Perhaps they are too ugly to marry" (2001: 91). The men's conversation moves on to consider freedom as the motivation for the amahs' vows never to marry: "It's this thing called freedom ... once the people get a taste of it, they never get enough. ... It's all the fault of the West. Freedom is a terrible thing. We are all suffering because of it," says Swee's father's friend (2001: 91). During this discussion, Swee Liang's mother, Poh, silently begins to cry. Her husband remonstrates with her, to which she replies with a heartfelt outburst: "You men. It isn't freedom. It's men. She has freedom, but what about me?" A question suggested by this scene is: What conditions in a society might produce a situation where a young and beautiful wife and mother is passionately jealous of the "freedom" of her unmarried and aging servant?

What does this jealousy imply? Obviously, that Poh does not feel free, and that she attributes her lack of freedom to her circumstances as a woman in a society run primarily by and for the benefit of men. In a sense, the middle-class Poh appears to have a measure of success beyond the reach of the working-class Ah Phan, in that she is married to a man who can afford to support her, their child, and a servant, and she therefore does not have to work. However, Poh's ostensible success is qualified by the question Swee Liang reports overhearing: "Is it my fault if you don't have a son?" (2001: 88). Ng notes the importance of Confucianism in Lim's fiction, writing that it "tacitly forms the socio-ideological foundation for many of [her] stories" (2011: 165). In the Confucian universe of this story, a woman in Poh's position is constrained, her cry implies, to produce a male heir for her husband, and Poh has 'failed' to do so. Perhaps her jealousy of Ah Phan's "freedom" is a jealousy of the fact that Ah Phan has no man to place such an expectation on her.

The second mystery to be dealt with here concerns the whereabouts of Swee Liang's father later that night, when he is absent from home until early morning. Swee Liang asks her mother: "I saw Father coming home. Where was he last night?" (2001: 92). Her mother refuses to answer, and tells Ah Phan to answer Swee Liang. However, Lim closes the story with the following scene:

Ah Phan stood by the sink rinsing the pan which was now shining aluminium again. Observing her black-and-white back, Swee Liang knew Ah Phan wouldn't tell her. She knew also that she would never ask and that her father's whereabouts and her mother's outburst would remain, forever, for her, another of life's mysteries (2001: 93).

I will discuss the nostalgic tone of this closing statement below. Before that, I would like to consider a question that is indirectly related to nostalgia, concerning the childhood training of sensibilities and thought-processes, and the repercussions of such training in adult life. Swee Liang is portrayed as having

resigned herself to not understanding many of the daily events around her. According to Ng: “Confucianism and Christianity are the two faiths which feature most distinctively, although often indirectly, in Lim’s narratives, and despite doctrinal differences, both religions proffer teachings about family and gender roles that ascribe women to socio-ideologically confined spaces” (2011: 159). This story can be read as a subtly nuanced feminist critique of Confucian family dynamics: it artfully reveals the fact that even a child can see that there is something wrong in such a family. The child may not be able to articulate the problem, but she is fully aware of its existence. Swee Liang is being trained to conform to a type described by Ng: women should be “weak, submissive and silent, and therefore embody the feminine ideal as promoted by Confucianism” (2011: 158).

Lim’s story arguably implies that rigid social structures necessitate the repression of curiosity. The Confucian restriction of women to “socio-ideologically confined spaces” noted by Ng (ibid.: 159) necessitates such an approach to “life’s mysteries.” When people (especially repressed people such as, in this story, Chinese Malaysian women and children) have the freedom to ask questions and expect them to be answered by the powers that be, rigid social structures cannot last. Thus children (or at least female children) must be trained from an early age to peacefully accept that many things will never be explained. This process of inculcating unquestioning acceptance in disenfranchised persons may serve a society for a time, but Lim’s story shows that it can never eradicate the propensity to question from the human heart. The persistence of these questions, carried into the narrator’s adulthood as “life’s mysteries” despite the discouragement of her curiosity by her elders, belies a human desire to understand the reasons behind events in our lives. This apparently indestructible innate faith in cause and effect stands witness against regimes and philosophies that would deny the existence of such logical relations in the events enmeshing our lives. *Life’s Mysteries* seems to me, ultimately, to be a statement about the crushing of natural

childlike curiosity taking place in a traditional Confucian home, answering the question: Why are the natural questions of this childhood unanswered, or even treated as unanswerable?

On my reading, this question seems intimately related to nostalgia. Unlike the nostalgia for a land that is lost as in *Two Dreams*, in this case the nostalgia is the more common variety: longing for a time that has passed. The wistful closing line: "She knew also that she would never ask and that her father's whereabouts and her mother's outburst would remain, forever, for her, another of life's mysteries" (2001: 93), portrays a recognition of the poignancy of the lingering psychological and social effects of childhood. Nostalgia is not a theme of this story in the same sense that it is a theme of the two stories discussed previously. Nevertheless, it is a powerful presence, driving the narrator's consideration of other issues, specifically: adult reactions to the questions of childhood, and the lifelong response induced in a person by such reactions.

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CHAPTER 8

Asian Third Culture Kids: Growing Up in Malaysia

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Introduction

Conventionally we identify ourselves based on where our home is and where our family is. Our ‘map’ grows from the place where there are people like us. There we find where we belong, and where we fit. We understand those places as our own and, subsequently, we find our identities in relation to it. Factors such as parents, family, community, culture, fellow country-people and education all add up to how we understand ourselves and those around us. This would be easy enough to understand if we lived in monocultural countries with people who look, act, and behave like us. However, with rapid globalization, this becomes problematic. People increasingly come from varied backgrounds and cultures, and identities become less clear. With constant moving from one place to another in search of better lives and jobs, there is greater instability. Perhaps the pre-eminent example

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of the contemporary condition is the Third Culture Kid (TCK). Born in one country and raised in another (or others), their identity becomes unclear primarily because there is so much to contribute to it. What kind of a country map does a TCK hold close? Identity issues become pronounced as TCKs have mixed feelings about whether they are from their passport country, or from the country/ies they grew up in. Where a TCK belongs, where a TCK feels at home and where a TCK is from may seem like questions that all lead to the same answer, but more often than not, this is not true.

Given the likes of US President Barack Obama and over four million other such TCKs in the world (Pollock and Van Reken 2009: 4), this chapter aims to understand factors that contribute to a TCK identity among Malaysian TCKs, i.e. those who have lived in Malaysia or might be regarded as 'originally' from Malaysia. Indeed, TCKs constitute a largely unseen and unrecognized population whose lives, identities and futures are greatly conditioned by their relationship with Malaysia, and by an array of influences from within and beyond Malaysia. This chapter examines how two such young adult TCKs have responded to their betwixt-and-between statuses, which have been influenced by factors and causes such as language, school environments and the feeling of 'home', and how these have affected their understanding of their cultural identity and their place and home in the world.

Third Culture Kids

During the 1950s, Useem first observed the uniqueness of children that resided within a culture that was different from that of their parents (Useem and Useem 1969: 131). She coined the term "Third Culture Kid" (TCK) to signify the assimilation of two cultures into a third interstitial culture. The textbook definition of a TCK is

A person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any (Pollock and Van Reken 2009: 13).

Thus, for a TCK, their first culture is thought to be their parents' culture or that of their passport. The second culture is the culture of the country or countries in which the TCK spends his or her developmental years. The third culture is the result of an interaction between the first and the second. Third cultures differ from one TCK to another depending upon a multitude of factors and on each person's specific biographical history.

The term 'culture' in Third Culture Kid is suggestive of the fact that culture plays an important role in defining their identity. Useem and Useem define the culture of TCKs as the cultural patterns that are created, learned and shared by members of different societies who are personally involved in relating their societies (or sections thereof) to each other (Useem and Useem 1976:131).

Such a culture, therefore, may be created when individuals such as missionaries, international business people and diplomats attempt to build bridges between cultural groups. But it should also be noted that the term 'third culture' may be misleading. No uniform or bounded third culture could exist, as might be implied by the statement above. Rather, as noted by Finn-Jordan, the participants of the third culture generate a composite of values, role-related norms and social structures that make them a part of, yet apart from, their first and second cultures (Finn-Jordan 2002: 211).

TCKs cannot be accurately described as, for example, Indian-American or German-Indonesian (for Indians living in the US or Germans living in Indonesia) because the cultural environment that they live in is distinct from either culture. Finn-Jordan suggests that the third culture is not a "blended or hyphenated culture. [It is instead a] relating culture of linkages and networks" (ibid.: 226). That said, one of the aims of this chapter is to provide a

reason as to why the TCKs that we describe find it hard to blend in with their parents' culture, even with their cross-cultural skills.

While TCK literature has expanded in the last two decades, to date the discussion and examination of TCKs has largely focused on American TCKs and their identity struggles. The Asian experience is somewhat covered in studies on *kaigai/kikoku-shijos* (the Japanese equivalent of TCKs; see Pollock and Van Reken, 2009: 279-86) and Australasian TCKs (see Cameron 2003), but no research has been done on Malaysian TCKs or TCKs that have grown up in Malaysia. To better understand Malaysian TCKs, we explore in this chapter the illustrative cases of two TCKs: Siddharth, who calls Malaysia 'home' but doesn't have a Malaysian passport; and in the latter half of this chapter, Aliyah, who has a Malaysian passport, but doesn't call Malaysia home. The responses of Siddharth and Aliyah were drawn from a pool of about 20 people, aged between 21 and 25, who we spoke to during our research, and whose responses inform our remarks in this chapter. While our focus in this chapter is on Siddharth and Aliyah, we do, however, make reference to some of these other interviewees in the final section of this chapter. The semi-structured interviews with these individuals were conducted between June and July 2011. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the interviewees whose remarks below illustrate the impact on their identities and sense of belonging of a number of factors, including their parents, language competency, school and red tape.

The Malaysian TCK Experience

The Role of Parents

Although parents may live away from their homeland, they very often continue to observe – sometimes more strongly than when actually at 'home' – many of the cultural practices of their homeland culture. Thus, they may also seek to raise children to have an awareness of their roots. However, there often develops a

gap between children and parents in the understanding of the former's 'true' identity. Children may not understand this need to espouse the first culture while they live in the second culture every day, leading to differences between the two generations. As Sethi discovered in his study on people of Indian origin in the United States, "the clash of tradition occurs when parents with a collectivist ethnic orientation are attempting to raise children in a society with an individualist orientation" (Sethi in Ghuman 2000: 306). This clash is exacerbated when TCKs associate more with people and entities from their second culture, such as at school, where they meet people from a culture different to that of their parents.

In such contexts, it is often the case that parents have difficulty in relating and communicating with their children, especially if parents come from a monocultural background – exposed to a single culture for most of their developmental years, and then moved to other countries after adulthood. This difference can create a communication barrier between parents and children as parents struggle to understand the reason behind a perceived loss of culture in their children. Siddharth, whose Indian parents moved to Malaysia when he was seven, and who has also lived in the United Arab Emirates, Switzerland and The Netherlands, attested to this when describing tensions between him and his parents as a result of moving countries: "it becomes difficult because they just don't get it. They don't know how upsetting an upheaval can be, because they haven't lived our lives and they don't get what we go through."

Siddharth's parents were active in keeping him close to his Indian culture as he grew up: "We would visit the temple during special occasions and meet with other people from the community." While Siddharth lived in Malaysia, he resided in an area that was favoured by expatriate Indian families, which increased his exposure to the Indian community. This is perhaps in part why Siddharth today feels close to his Indian heritage and has a good grasp of some Indian languages.

The Role of Language

Siddharth admits that his exposure to his ‘mother tongue’ of Hindi comes as a result of his parents’ involvement in his life. Over time and with interest in Indian culture, Siddharth has also picked up Tamil and has an ‘O’ Level qualification in Hindi. Having lived in Switzerland for a year and Malaysia for nine years, Siddharth can also communicate in French and Malay. While knowing multiple languages is helpful in many situations, it is also important in facilitating a sense of belonging. As Siddharth puts it, “the colloquialisms draw you closer to home and between learning your own language [Hindi] as a school subject and interacting in Malay with local people, you tend to gravitate towards what is more natural and what you feel more comfortable and at home with that.” Thus, Siddharth felt at home in Malaysia given his ability to converse in Malay, and while in Switzerland, his sense of acceptance was bolstered by his ability to speak French. As Siddharth notes, learning the local language was necessary because “if you don’t know it, you have trouble integrating.”

Owing to the usefulness of being multilingual, it is therefore a trait that many TCKs possess, and so are able to code-switch rapidly according to context. While a TCK’s first language can be the language of the parents’ country of origin and learnt at home, much language learning and use also occurs at school, which is another important site that affects TCKs’ sense of belonging and identity.

Feeling at Home

While relating the above, it was apparent that Siddharth mostly identified his home as being Malaysia. This was largely because he schooled in the country for nine years. Spending time in one school and growing up with the same circle of friends has meant that Malaysia came to be regarded as home. A study conducted by John Nette and Mary Hayden on TCKs in Botswana revealed

that in addition to friendships, being familiar with a place, its physical aspects, shops and roads, all added to a feeling of belonging (2007: 440). For Siddharth,

I felt the most comfortable in Malaysia because those were my friends, I grew up with them and it's where I was most comfortable. Coming to Switzerland I didn't really feel that kind of familiar home-like environment. Home was, and always will be, Malaysia.

However, differences in opinions between TCKs and their parents regarding where home is can sometimes lead to friction. As noted by Van Reken, "even when TCKs live in one place for an extended time, they still travel back and forth between home and host cultures at regular intervals" (2010: 637). This was true of all of the TCKs we interviewed including Siddharth, who would regularly travel back to India for school holidays. The trips were his parent's way of keeping Siddharth in touch with his 'true' culture and country. These trips, however, only served to highlight the fact that his parents' 'home' was not his. Siddharth noted feeling like an outsider – "It was obvious in the way my cousins introduced me to other people. They would say 'Oh, he's from Malaysia.'" Wendy Stultz claims that to "feel more alien upon arriving in what is supposedly one's home culture than in 'foreign country' is a common trend among TCKs" (2003: 3). Siddharth's trips 'home' only re-affirmed that while he may legally be from India, his home is Malaysia.

For Aliyah – 23, born in Singapore with a Malaysian passport but having lived a significant part of her life in Australia – "Where are you from?" is a tricky question.

Explaining where I'm from becomes so much of a task. The easiest is just to say that I'm Australian because I spent the most amount of time there and I was the happiest there. So I choose Australia to state where I'm from. Sometimes I love the fact that I've lived in so many places, it becomes a cool ice-breaker. But when I'm not in the mood I'm an Australian ... I don't even know what Australians [are supposed to] look like. They don't

have a certain look anymore. It's all Asians there anyways. So yeah I fit the bill I think ...

In many of our interviews, it was apparent that TCKs battle with themselves to decide what to say when they are asked where they feel they belong. They are often torn between giving the answer that they feel is accurate and an answer that will be accepted by the asker without further interrogation. It is apparent from both the above narratives that the word home does not conjure a defined physical space, and is a concept that develops with time. For some, like Aliyah, there is still no place to call home although she nominates Australia when she must.

Another quandary arises when TCKs cannot exhibit typical traits of those who would be regarded as 'of' a particular country or culture, such as being able to speak a particular language. Aliyah noted for example that "I don't know much about my culture actually." When asked what exactly her culture was Aliyah replied that,

I'm supposed to be Malaysian by culture. But I don't know much about culture and stuff. But culture to me is where I come from. The origin of my parents etc. ... since my mom is Filipino and my dad is Malaysian, I guess I'm a mix of both? I was born in Singapore. So I have a bit of that too. But my passport is Malaysian. How am I supposed to be culturally aware when I don't even have a fixed culture? That's why I choose to be Australian. It's better that way. Easier too.

Legality and Identity

Despite holding a Malaysian passport, Aliyah feels no sense of home or belonging in Malaysia. However, one's legal position a country can have a significant impact on this ability to feel at home and Aliyah feels uncertain about her future as a consequence of issues relating to nationality.

At the age of 17, Siddharth moved to Switzerland and then onto the Netherlands, while all the while unable to legally claim

Malaysia his home. Siddharth now has to apply for a Social Visit Pass/Visa like any other tourist/traveller to visit the very place he calls home. And India, his parents' home, happens to be a country that Siddharth never sees himself as settling down in, professing instead that he would much rather live in Malaysia, or else a European country.

Interestingly in Siddharth's case, there is a distinction between his sense of self and his sense of home. He noted that

I feel quite Indian these days; I listen to more Indian music; I've started doing yoga. There was a period when I was basically distancing myself from my country; that was basically my adolescent years, and since basically when maturity hit and hormones stopped raging, I've been drawn more closer to my country. I even dress more Indian now.

While Siddharth was able to identify Malaysia as his home, especially during trips to India where he felt very much not at home, he nevertheless identifies himself as quite Indian. Perhaps this affinity towards an Indian identity comes following a realization he had about his place in Malaysia – “I know Malaysia will never give me a Permanent Resident status and will always treat me like a foreigner, even if I do get a job here.”

Sentiments such as those above were not uncommon among our other interviewees, some of whose remarks we feel it is worth describing here for what they tell us about the very real and felt impacts on people of red tape, and the equivocal grounds on which people are often tolerated in many countries. For Naaya, a South Asian living in Oman, she notes that

Your visa gets renewed every year, it's a residency visa. It's not a guaranteed visa, you're not a resident there, just because you're born there or whatever. And unless you get that you're not a resident of Oman, we are just temporary residents. Basically since we are under my mum, if she gets her visa renewed for 5 years, then we get 5 years. So it's basically dependant on her job and job stability. Most people renew their visas for 1 year but since her office people knew that we [her children] were there,

they would just tell her to renew it for 5 years. But it still is very unstable. Because you know as the date for renewal comes near to renew your visa, as a parent she would always get worried like y'know, 'What if something goes wrong? What if they say this, or we have to go back?' So there are a lot of issues.

Despite recognizing Oman as home, Naaya was made aware of the fact that her passport stated otherwise, which effectively meant that she would never be truly Omani. Visa renewal time would remind Naaya of where her home 'really' was, a thought she dreaded as she does not identify with the birth places of her parents. For Naaya, the resident visa was a constant reminder that she was only here temporarily, even if 'temporary' meant Naaya has now grown up in Oman.

Similarly, Natasha, a Pakistani in the United Arab Emirates, notes the impact on her and her family of uncertain immigration laws.

Natasha: Pakistanis are not welcome to Dubai. Very recently Dubai has put a quota on Pakistani work visas.

Interviewer: On white collar jobs?

Natasha: That's the thing. The UAE is very stupid when it comes to making laws, rules and regulations. Very recently my cousin faced this issue, he came down from Karachi to look for a job, he found a job but his work visa couldn't get through, which was ridiculous because of this quota on work visas which is not only for unskilled workers, skilled workers, it's not specified, it's in general on Pakistanis. The problem with the UAE is that the laws change every day. Dubai is our home, but at the end of the day, we're not UAE nationals, it officially is not our home, which is sad, because we consider it our home.

Just as was the case for Siddharth living in Malaysia, and Aliyah living in Australia with her Malaysian passport, Naaya's and

Natasha's ability to feel at home and settled is deeply compromised by the red tape of those countries in which they would wish to live. This is an aspect of identity and home often overlooked and unappreciated by those for whom this is not an issue.

By Way of Conclusion

Where home is for Siddharth and Aliyah is for them as difficult a question as they come. The difficulties of being TCK – which include having an ambiguous identity and not having an unproblematic 'home', among others – are ones that were commonly seen among our interviewees. One might then conclude that the life of a TCK is one to be avoided if possible – one to be suffered rather than enjoyed or appreciated. Nonetheless, Aliyah noted the positives of being a TCK, citing a rich bank of world experiences and a more open-minded approach to all her endeavours due to her encounters with people from all walks of life.

Similarly, Siddharth stated unhesitatingly that he would choose to be a TCK if given the choice between that and what might be considered a more conventional upbringing – “As a TCK, I have a broader perspective and I'm not narrow minded. I also have a lot more experiences to draw from and learn from.” Siddharth believes that as opposed to others, he also has a competitive business advantage in the experiences he can bring to the workplace, and like Aliyah and some of our other interviewees, he felt that, in addition to the languages he speaks, he was better able to look at life and issues from a multitude of viewpoints.

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CHAPTER 9

Parenting: Some Selected Narratives of Mothers

*Ng Siow San*¹

Introduction

I was brought up in a fairly conservative family. My late father was a liberal person; we had diverse topics of conversations and shared common viewpoints and when there were disagreements, it was never resolved through an imposition of authority. On the other hand, my mother is conservative and the power relationship is simple: my mother is *the* boss. I struggled with the contradictions in both my parents' thinking and parenting styles. I strove to understand the significance of filial piety and, despite being called old-fashioned by my peers, I try to be dutiful while attempting to establish my identity. But above all, I am dedicated to seeking equilibrium in comprehension, love and respect towards both my parents regardless of our similarities and differences.

My reflections on these matters led me to conduct research in 2010 on how parents felt about the challenges of parenting in contemporary Malaysia, and how they compare these with their experiences of being parented. Thus I describe in this chapter

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some of my findings with respect to the ways mothers have understood and experienced their role as parents. Although the original research included interviews with fourteen participants, I focus in this chapter on the responses of six mothers (who are in turn, daughters) to questions relating to concerns they have about parenting today, the influences on their parenting style, the impacts of their husbands on parenting, as well as the legacy of their own parents' parenting methods. In order to better understand my descriptions of the parents described in this chapter, I will first situate this chapter in some of the current scholarship relating to parenting, as well as noting other theoretical influences on my interpretation of the data gathered.

On Being a Mother

It has often been noted that the identity of a woman changes as she takes on the role of mothering, which is influenced by a complex interplay of social, political and cultural factors, and which is also often described as their most satisfying and empowering experience (Jeremiah 2006; Speier 2001). Much research on mothering has tended to focus on the biological parents of children (Büskens 2001); the experiences of stepmothers are also rich, although they are often seen as outsiders and experience other societal pressures (Deans 2001; Verbian 2006).

Also subject to social pressures are single-parents despite positive media portrayals of celebrities who, as single mothers, have alleviated some of the social stigma and could be seen as emancipating women from two-parent family settings. Hence, the choice to become a single-mother has, to some extent, redefined the meaning of becoming a mother, and, being single-mothers by choice, they can experience an array of emotional and financial pleasures and freedoms (Gearing and Campbell 2000; Roh-Spaulding 2001).

Whether as a single-parent or as part of a family, one parenting relationship – the mother-daughter relationship – is

worth noting, and has in fact been a focus of particular attention by researchers (Nelson 2006). Women who mother are daughters too, and often learned about womanhood and motherhood through examples transmitted to them through experiences (Quah 2009). These range from the time of infancy to the experience of menarche (Lee 2008), to maternal health (Park and Grindel 2007) and finally adulthood (Moloney 2008). These experiences have an array of impacts, and influence important life decisions relating to sexual orientation, marriage and religion (Roer-Strier and Sands 2004).

From a theoretical perspective motherhood has also been subjected to some scrutiny from various perspectives. In *Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond*, Jeremiah suggests that feminist approaches to maternity “no longer [see it] as a fixed, static state; rather, it is viewed as a set of ideas and behaviours that are mutable, contextual” (2006: 21). She critiques the essentialization of maternity in theories that concentrate on female biology, patriarchal conceptualizations of motherhood and the psychoanalytical perspectives of maternity. In thinking about my data, I found her notion of ‘attentive love’ useful. The flexibility of this notion contributed to my analyses of the mode of parenting of interviewees and/or their parents, which refers to “mothering as a kind of work, involving protection, nurturance, and training, and that maternal activity gives rise to a specific mode of cognition” (Ruddick 1995: 119-23).

Additionally, the limitations of feminist mothering theory were considered by Middleton in *Mothering Under Duress* (2006: 72-82). She draws the definition of “empowered mothering” from Andrea O’Reilly, who states that “[e]mpowered mothers seek to fashion a mode of mothering that affords and affirms maternal agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity and which confers and confirms power to and for mothers” (2004: 15). These four conditions – agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity – are more achievable when a woman is educated (Middleton 2006: 76). I draw on this concept of ‘empowered mothers’ to analyze the

interviewees' perspectives on education which offers hope for an improved quality of life.

Also useful is the notion of 'good mothers', who are considered to be "altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful [mothers who put] the needs of their children before their own ... [and] are the primary caregivers of their children" (O'Reilly 2004: 4). Similarly useful is the notion of 'intensive mothering', that firstly "demands that women continue to be the primary, central caregivers of children [and] ... when the mother is unavailable, it is other women who should serve as temporary substitutes." Secondly, it "requires mothers to lavish copious amounts of time and energy on their children." Lastly, "it takes a logic that separates mothering from professional paid work [as] ... children [are] ... innocent, pure, and 'priceless'" (Hays 1996).

With respect to the region in which my study took place, Quah's (2009) *Families in Asia* provides a comprehensive analysis of the development of studies pertaining to homes, kinships and families across ten Asian countries, including Malaysia.² According to Quah, Asian families maintain closeness by "follow[ing] and transmit[ting] the way they encourage at least three generations of people – parents and some of their children and those who are married, their spouses and children too – to stay together" (ibid.: 2). Bearing in mind that all ten Asian countries have different cultural traditions and have undergone social changes owing to social, political and economic factors, Quah's 'ideal family' was nevertheless helpful in my understanding in the ways interviewees, as well as their parents 'do family'.

On Parenting in Contemporary Malaysia

In view of the insights of past research on parenting, I might begin by noting that the mothers interviewed in my study all

² China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam.

appeared to be “altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful [and put] the needs of [their] children before [their] own.” These traits, as Andrea O’Reilly, a key researcher in feminist mothering, describes are the qualities of a “good mother” (2004: 4). These mothers also manifest “intensive mothering.” As described by Hays, they “feel a deep commitment to their children and they do not experience this feeling as something men impose on them” (1996: 107). The commitment of the mothers is ultimately expressed through the care and love they have for their children to whom they are dedicated to “protect, nurture and train” (Ruddick 1995), with the goal of helping them to become good individuals.

In what follows I present findings from my research and these findings I divide into two sections. The first section, ‘Parenting Today’, articulates and contrasts the contemporary *experiences* of parenting as compared to the mothers’ experiences of being parented. The second section, ‘Parenting like I was Parented’, involves narratives that articulate how the *methods* of parenting are derived from the way they were parented. All their narratives demonstrate intergenerational influences in parenting from sources that include their own family members, extended family members, and friends.

Parenting Today

Among the points of comparison that interviewees drew between their role as parents and that of their own parents was that they were, in addition to being mothers, also working. This adds to the challenges of parenting as they are expected to be able to juggle their work, home, family and other life responsibilities in a balanced manner.

When asked for her reflections about becoming a mother and her parenting experiences, Cindy, a 40-something Chinese working mother with a ten-year old daughter and one-year old son says:

It is a heavy responsibility which I take very seriously ... my kids always come first ... even if my daughter wants to eat the thing that I like [or that I'm] having for lunch and she wants to finish it, I don't mind ... I'll give it all to her ... It's tough being a mom, really tough. It's a big difference you know ... emotionally in a sense that ... when they make you upset ... and they don't do the things that you think they should do, you cannot ... force the kid to be something that they're not because each person is different ... and if you want to force the kid to be something that you want, why don't you just get a robot [laughs]. I'll keep advising them, I say, 'You're old enough to think for yourself, I've explained to you.' I always explain the reason why I scold her or the reason I'm upset with her.

Becoming a mother for Cindy is a “heavy responsibility” and “really tough.” This experience is “a big difference” because the transition she experiences, from being a daughter to becoming a mother, changes her, and it compels her to renegotiate her perceptions and priorities. When she says with reference to her daughter that “I'll give it all to her,” this indicates that her wants and needs are no longer self-centred but involve the health and well-being of her children. Parenting involves an entirely different set of experiences from being parented. Instead of just “shout[ing],” Cindy opts to “advise[e]” and “explain,” which demonstrate qualities of being supportive and reasonable in her mode of parenting, that in turn fosters positive relationships with her children over time. Perhaps this is inspired from her own experiences of being parented where her mother was strict and used punitive disciplinary methods, in contrast to her father who is soft-spoken and approachable. The task of mothering is also challenging “emotionally,” especially “when they make [her] upset” or “[when] they don't do the things that [she thinks] they should do.” However, as she negotiates the challenges and conflicting differences by remembering that “each person is different,” Cindy demonstrates the quality of being a ‘good mother’ as described by O'Reilly (2004: 4).

That parenting is impacted by differences in lifestyles across generations is noted by Pei Yee, a 40-something Chinese working mother to a nine-year old daughter and five-year old son. She says:

I believe that the style of mentoring and bringing up kids back in those days cannot be fully applied to the current generation, reason being, the kind of exposure that the kids are getting. I recall the first ... time that I started to use [the] internet was during my varsity years but my daughter is starting to ask me things like, I just created an email address for her, “Mom please create Facebook for me. My friends are asking me, ‘Do I have a Facebook account?’ Mom I want to know what is Twitter.” You know, all these kinds of social networking are really getting into the kids and my daughter’s only at Year 3 and even that is considered [to be] quite late.

Through this response, Pei Yee acknowledges an intergenerational difference, namely, the influences of the internet in her daughter’s life as compared to hers. Moreover, this “social networking” expands the influences that may play a part in shaping and reshaping both Pei Yee and her daughter’s respective perspectives and experiences of parenting. Pei Yee’s narrative suggests that there is a need for parents to stay current and be informed in order to parent effectively. This is emphasized when Pei Yee adds that:

My mom has friends who have younger kids and grandchild[ren], so they talk among themselves. My mom was the one asking me, ‘How come I don’t see you getting your daughter online? Please go and get her a laptop. She needs to go on the internet.’ Because my mom’s friend’s grandson is already well-versed and they are going online to do Google search and things like that. So, I’m surprised that my mom is actually telling me to get her a laptop.

The intergenerational influences, though different, are shared and acknowledged by Pei Yee and her mother as well, where the latter is now a grandmother. The enthusiastic involvement of the grandmother here also demonstrates how parenting is not a

unilateral task and one's parenting approaches and perspectives are informed by a variety of influences including other parents as well as one's own parents.

In a discussion regarding parenting today, Pei Yee, articulates her own parenting experiences and her ideal approach to parenting her nine-year old daughter.

I cannot be keeping her in a cocoon world and adopting the same style of parenting my parents [applied] to me ... But I'm not saying that I should give her total freedom; yes, I'm adopting a very open policy where [I] try to be friends with my kids, but at the same time they [have to] know where to draw the boundary ... because they know that to [a] certain extent, there is still a limit to the things that needs to be done ... And there is certain level of authority that I'm still keeping ... That's the kind of style I'm using and hopefully it works. So far, touch wood, it has been working ... Sometimes there are certain things I wanted to ask my parents but because of a [certain] barricade, I think I better not ask because I don't think I'm ready to talk about it; like for example, sex education, which is [now] hotly debated you know, whether [or not it] should be taught in school.

Inspired by her own experiences of being parented, Pei Yee displays similar parenting qualities to Cindy in seeking to be a supportive and reasonable parent with an "open policy" that nevertheless maintains some boundaries. However, she regrets not being able to ask her own parents "certain things." While "barricading" herself from discussing sex education with her parents, she later breaks the "barricade" when talking with her daughter about her period. Pei Yee's mother had not prepared her for the experience of her first period, and Pei Yee wants to ensure that her daughter is prepared for this bodily change. Openness in discussing menarche in this way has been described as strengthening the mother-daughter bond (Lee 2008; Moloney 2008; Park and Grindel 2007). Parenting today, for Pei Yee and Cindy – and as also described by Jeremiah – is not "seen as a

fixed, static; rather, it is viewed as a set of ideas and behaviours that are mutable, contextual” (2006: 21) and requires dedication as well as improvisation for effectiveness.

As has been demonstrated, the way one does parenting varies and is subjected to transformations. Therefore, it may create shared, complementary and/or conflicting parenting beliefs between those involved. Pei Yee said that “my husband and I share the responsibility but he has very different parenting skills compared to me which I feel is good ... it’s a balance.” Cindy, however, holds a different opinion and her feelings heightened when she noted that:

[When my husband interferes with me disciplining my daughter] I get very angry [laughs]. I say, ‘You’re undermining me. I’m trying to discipline the kids ... and you wanna play the goody goody and in the end when they grow up they’re going to be problematic people or burdens to their future partners’ ... So I said, ‘Please ... can we know our boundaries when I’m disciplining them ... Do not butt in. You want to say your piece, you say after I’ve taught them’ ... He said, ‘Fine, OK, we will come to an agreement’ ... So I said, ‘I have ... given birth to them, I know them inside out ... and I spend more time with them than you do ... OK, it doesn’t mean that I know everything but I know most of how they would behave and react ... so, leave it to me.’ ... So we know our boundaries but we do share the parenting ... responsibilities.

Both Pei Yee and Cindy share parenting responsibilities with their husbands with whom there are often differences in opinion with respect to parenting. In the case of Pei Yee who says, “I don’t mind if I say goodbye, mommy love you kinda thing you know, [but] not so much my husband [as he is] a man of few words with the kids.” As for Cindy, who emphasized how she had given birth to her children, she unconsciously essentializes mothering as a natural skill that women like her would *naturally* have. She criticized her husband for being “stupid [such that she has to] knock some sense into his thick skull ... , [wasting]

time [in finding things because] sometimes [he puts things] here, sometimes [he puts things] there ... [and in speaking] broken English in front of [her] children” which she feels is a bad influence on them.

This is also demonstrated by Nikki, a 40-something Chinese working mother to an 11-year old son and eight-year old daughter. Nikki, who is currently experiencing marital problems, expressed a desire for her children to acquire a good education. “I want my children to be educated ... better than me ... so they can have a better living compared to me.” She values education as a form of empowerment, a belief that stems from her experiences where, “even though [she’s] very hardworking [and puts] in a lot of effort,” she feels devalued and disadvantaged at work because of her lack of education. Thus, in addition to wanting her children to be more educated than her, she also wanted her children to “move out from Malaysia” to where she felt the prospects of a good future were greater.

Parenting Like I was Parented

In doing parenting, one draws on multiple sources although most mothers noted that their foremost influence was the way one was parented. According to Quah (2009), the ideal family in Asian communities portrays a household structure consisting of at least three generations of family members where parents and some of their own children and their extended family members – spouses and children of their own children – all live together or within the vicinity. This highlights the significant influence exerted by the parents of parents in raising children. And while none lived in the kind of household described by Quah, these influences were clear in the narratives of the women to whom I spoke.

Sunderi, a 40-something, Indian, single and working mother of a 12-year old daughter explained her experiences of being parented. There was “strict disciplin[ing] because [my mother] likes everything clean and up-to-date, no half-way jobs [where]

you go [off] and do other [things], she doesn't like that so it's already in me I think, that upbringing ... so I [do likewise] with my daughter." Thus, Sunderi believes that how she was parented not only shaped her identity as an individual but also as a mother. Similar to Sunderi whose parenting styles and identity are effects of her experiences of being parented, Jen, a 30-something, Chinese-Catholic working mother to a 14-month old son also notes similar experiences. She says:

[My parents] always advised me, saying that, 'Being parents, we can [only] advise you but we can't force you to make a decision ... When you're a parent one day, you will know what is best for your kids and you'll always hope for the best. But you can't decide their lives for them.' So this is one thing that I learn from them and I'm using the same parenting skills for my little boy.

Thus Jen's parents shaped her ideal parenting style and she seeks to use the same parenting skills for her boy. Interestingly, the parenting narratives of mothers like Jen and Sunderi seem to hint at their knowledge of doing parenting before they even became mothers. For them, the way they have been parented significantly influenced their mode of thinking and as a result, they emulate and draw voluntarily and other times involuntarily from their experiences of being parented (see also Quah 2009: 2).

Conclusion

From the narratives of all six mothers who participated in this study, parenting is neither unilateral nor a job with detailed descriptions or prescribed skills but it is influenced by multiple persons and factors that come at it from multiple directions and thus shape and reshape the way one does parenting. Additionally, the challenges and difficulties these interviewees face are somewhat complicated when parenting responsibilities are shared and assisted. What is more, with mothers like Nikki and Sunderi, who on top of having to deal with their painful memories, have to do parenting as single-mothers as a

consequence of undesired outcomes of their difficult marriages. In spite of all that, the six mothers continue to go through emotive, educative and transformative processes in the ways that they care, love and mother their children.

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■
CHAPTER 10

The Homosexual Threat: Appraising Masculinities and Men's Sexualities in Malaysia

*Joseph N. Goh*¹

Introduction

In its 2009 *Report of the Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*, the American Psychiatric Association affirmed that “same-sex sexual attractions, behaviour, and orientations per se are normal and positive variants of human sexuality – in other words, they *do not* indicate either mental or developmental *disorders*” (2009: 2; emphasis added). Thus, the announcement of Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin in April 2012 that a generous sum had been allocated for the rehabilitation of those bearing “the symptoms of sexual orientation *disorder* like LGBT” (Arukesamy 2012) through counselling echoes a perception prevalent in some Malaysian circles that is not merely archaic, but which

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demonstrates an almost xenophobic fear towards Malaysians with non-heteronormative inclinations.

The repulsion of same-sex behaviour is not one that has emerged from a socio-political vacuum. Sexuality is considered “taboo” (Jerome 2008a: 36) and appears to have a prominent place in the psyche of many Malaysians, notably institutional quadrants of Islam. Islamic civil and religious authorities exact feverish surveillance on Muslims in Malaysia, ravaging the sexual lives of Muslims that are as private as “khalwat (illicit close proximity) [and] zinna (illicit sex or adultery)” (Lee 2010: 31). Sexual practices between men are viewed with disdain as permutations of the transgression of legitimate and divinely-sanctioned gender and sexual configurations. In the Malaysian legal context, male homosexuality or ‘gayness’ as a globally-recognized cultural trope has no direct equivalence to sexual identities that assume what Stephen Epstein describes as a “quasi-‘ethnic’ status” (1987: 12). Sections 377A, 377B and 377C of the Malaysian Penal Code make provisions against acts of sodomy or liwat without being gender-specific, although it is in section 2 of the Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territory) Act 1997 that one discovers a clearly-defined morphology of liwat as “sexual relations between male persons.” Moreover, men who engage in sexual practices with other men, or who desire other men on an emotional plane are often erroneously conflated with transgenders or transsexuals – known as *mak nyahs*– who are frequently subjected to discrimination and stigmatisation (Teh 2002). Furthermore, *lelaki lembut* (soft men) or effeminate men are frequently regarded as homosexual or gay (Aziz 2012). Public health systems in Malaysia have also lent a hand in etching out their version of male homosexuality by using the term “men who have sex with men” (MSM) in studies on HIV and AIDS (Kanter et al. 2011). Their intents and purposes notwithstanding, men who pursue other men in Malaysia often display both similitudes and disparities with the stereotype of the global, gay white male (Altman 2001). There are Malaysian men who are desirous of

other men either for romantic or sexual purposes or both, those who adopt a more masculine manner of acting and those are effeminate in varying degrees. My use of the terms 'homosexual' and 'homosexuality' in this chapter must thus be seen as embracing of these diverse representations that eludes any stable permanence in its meaning.

Uproars over male homosexuality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries came into prominence with two major events: the sodomy charges of the former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the festival celebrating the human rights of sexually-diverse persons, *Seksualiti Merdeka*. Raging debates on homosexuality in relation to Anwar (Kanaraju 2007) and the banning of *Seksualiti Merdeka* in 2011 (Shazwan 2011) caused innumerable forums to mushroom among the Malaysian populace on the question of men's masculinities. In my own mind, the "man question" (Dowd 2010) adopted a plethora of forms: What particular representation of 'manness' harbours greater currency in Malaysia? What kind of 'man' is one who dabbles in homosexual behaviour? What constitutes the Malaysian male-bodied person? How does male homosexuality reconfigure Malaysian masculinities and vice versa?

Heeding the wisdom of Michael S. Kimmel that "masculinity is tied intimately to sexuality" (1987:19), this chapter aims to examine how issues of masculinities and homosexuality in Malaysia bear on each other by examining a diverse selection of academic publications in the twenty-first century. At this juncture, I wish to name three provisos. First, as a contribution to existing scholarship, this chapter does not presume to be the definitive word on Malaysian masculinities or male sexualities, nor does it claim to be an exhaustive examination of extant resources. Second, my focus on masculinities of this period stems from a desire to unveil what masculinities and male sexualities mean to Malaysians in this particular era, cognizant that "manhood means different things at different times to different people" (Kimmel 2002: 267). Third, I wish to note that

such studies have weighed in more heavily on men of Malay ethnicity and Islam,² as is reflected in this chapter. I begin with a brief survey of the global terrain on men's studies in issues of masculinities and sexualities before embarking on a scrutiny of the Malaysian scene. In discussing the latter through some key concepts of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Wetherell and Edley 1999), I am devoting particular attention to the concept of "complicity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832), which I will explain in due course. I continue with a treatment on homosexuality in Malaysia, its implications for women and the dynamics which render it as both as an accomplice and a threat to hegemonic masculinity.

Cruising Studies on Men

"Look, there he stands ... looking through the lattice."

Song of Solomon (2: 9; NRSV)

Studies on men and masculinities in the west arose from a critique of reified gender roles and the unquestioned preponderance of the male standard during the second wave of feminist activism in the 1960s (Cochran 2010), the rise of pre-feminist scholarship (Kimmel 1992) and the contributions of exemplary scholars (Connell 1987; Pleck 1981). What was notably salient in the movement was a peering through the lattice of the dominant social order to uncover new understandings of gender relations, leading to the gradual deconstruction of age-old notions that had assumed an almost apotheosized position of patrimony among men. In a relatively brief period of time, scholarship on men and masculinities blossomed. This endeavour was not a bid to take up the cause of masculinity. Rather, the position of prominence that was assumed lay in "a critical analysis

² Malays are constitutionally defined as Muslims in Malaysia. See Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 160(2).

of masculinities” that critically interrogated “gender hierarchy” (Elias and Beasley 2009; endnote 1). This became evident with work from scholars such as Kimmel in the late 1980s, as these studies were “attempts to treat masculinity not as the normative referent against which standards are assessed but as a problematic gender construct” (Kimmel 1987: 10).

Sam V. Cochran’s bold claim that studies on men and masculinities assumed a universal enterprise in the 1990s forces one to raise the proverbial eyebrow, as his definitive vision of “global” was limited to Australia, Europe and the United States (2010: 44). Claims of a universal scholarly enquiry can hardly assume legitimacy if it does not pay homage to the contributions made by a diminutive group of Asian scholars in that same era, both in heterosexual (Inoue et al. 1998) and non-heterosexual (Zhang 1998) contexts. The twenty-first century saw a groundswell in truly global academic endeavours on men and masculinities. Studies from all over the world straddled a diverse range of topics including the complexities of socio-political, cultural and economic issues of countries in a globalized world (Clark 2010), emotional, psychological and sexual experiences (Seidler 2006; Smiler 2004), and religion (Barker 2008; Hodge 2005; Ouzgane 2006). Studies on men in relation to homosexuality also burgeoned and encompassed topics such as tensions in global and local homosexual subjectivities (Benedicto 2008); sexual practices (Dean 2009); identity (Wilkerson 2007); psychology and aesthetics (Bersani 2009); Asian-American issues (Han 2010); public health (Newcomb and Mustanski 2011); political tensions (Boellstorff 2004); religion (Alcedo 2007; Brintnall 2011) and theology (Cheng 2011).

From this mammoth corpus of literature on masculinities studies, I draw attention to the notion of hegemonic masculinity which has seen both its genesis and development in the genius of R. W. Connell (1987; 2005). In a nutshell, hegemonic masculinity refers to positions in gender relations that contribute to the subordination of women, as well as to the subordination of

certain forms of masculinity through the exaltation of other forms of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). It is often supported by the alliance of “cultural ideal and institutional power” (Connell 2005: 77). Hegemonic masculinity can be further elucidated by examining “practices and relations” in masculine patterns, particularly “complicity,” understood as participation in and benefitting from the advantages of the “patriarchal dividend,” despite not actively or consciously plotting gender subordination (ibid.: 78-80). Despite its overarching Western frameworks and criticisms from contemporary scholars, I have found this investigative concept useful in interpreting the results of my survey of a selection of twenty-first century academic resources on Malaysian masculinities and sexualities.

The Politics of Malaysian Male Embodiment

“Every worldview refracts reality”

David R. Hodge (2005: 215)

Critical analyses of masculinities in Malaysia in the twentieth century were made by scholars such as Donald M. Nonini (1999) and Jean Morrison (1995), focusing on class, gender relations and kinship. Such studies gained increasing visibility by the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, while popular Malaysian discourses often conflate homosexuality with transgenderism or transsexualism, a definitive delineation in the identities of both is evident (Teh 2002). Academic ventures on men and masculinities in Malaysia have examined issues as divergent as reconstituted kinship roles in matters of difference and inequality, as well as the amalgam of Malay adat (tradition, custom, customary law) (Peletz 2007: 15) and Islam that acts as justification for dominance, patriarchy and male privilege, the association of masculinity with personal traits, class, careers, machinery, healthcare, literary works and homosexuality. In this section, I aspire to locate how

elements of masculinities and men's sexualities interface with the "hegemonic project" (Connell 2005: 79).

The use of machinery and technology in the mediation of masculinities has been dealt with by Ulf Mellström (2002; 2010). Drawing from his ethnographical work, he looks at the patriarchal privileges and masculine fraternal homosocial bonds that are mediated in men-machine interactions among Chinese Malaysians. The male body becomes an inscriptional device of labour, skill, hardship and experience to manifest manhood. Such demonstrations of masculinity are also extended to other activities, including drinking, gambling and womanizing that have formed negative but indisputable, essentialized scripts of masculinities. In his examination of the biker movie *K.L. Menjerit* (Kuala Lumpur is Screaming), David C. L. Lim (2006) looks at Malay biker masculinity and friendships that may not be completely "heterosexual" in the popular sense. He also notes how issues of class, religion and economic sensibilities are imbricated in masculinity as the "assemblage of meanings and behaviours socially-constructed as expressive of power and control, and as the grounds on which men root their sense of themselves as men" (2006: 63). Lim's (2006) analyses are important in uncovering the filmmaker's challenge to the hegemonic notion of the "new Malay man" as the epitome of masculinity in Malaysia's efforts to modernise rural Malays through the New Economic Policy (see also Shamsul 2001), by emphasising physical and emotional strength and health, and traditional values that may not be personified in the "new Malay man." While issues of homosexuality are either absent or simply alluded to in these studies, they reflect a niche in Malaysian masculinities studies that are complicit with "the currently most honored (sic) way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832) and show what masculinity *is* and what masculinity *is not*. The celebration of such popular masculinities may arguably be devoid of insidious agendas, but are undoubtedly vivifying for hegemonic masculinities.

Studies also seem to indicate the fortification of the patriarchal privilege of masculinity in Malaysia. Patriarchy, “which guarantees ... the subordination of women” (Connell 2005: 77), becomes manifestly clear in issues concerning Malay men and Islam. Maznah Mohamad (2010) for instance, expresses concern over the creation of a new Muslim masculinity, in which patriarchy is re-established as the telos of Islamization in family matters in opposition to more bilateral Malay familial approaches. A very vivid contrast to Maznah’s work appears in Noritah Omar’s (2006) critique of Azizi Haji Abdullah’s satire *Kawin-Kawin* (2002) for aping and importing western literary forms at the expense of sacrificing “Malay aesthetics” (2006:118) and being disrespectful towards Islam in the portrayal of hegemonic Malay masculinity.

Closely connected to issues of patriarchy and masculine privilege are topics of male sexualities – both heterosexual and homosexual. Malay masculinities have taken the lion’s share in discourses of male sexualities, particularly when it entails Islam. I note with a tinge of incredulity that in deploring how issues of “gender and sexuality are largely defined in terms of cultural and religious influences and practices” (Jerome 2008b: 114), Collin Jerome appears to gloss over the reality that religion, particularly Islamic ethics, appropriates a potent position in discourses that affect gender relations and sexual subjectivities in Malaysia. Andrew Hock Soon Ng’s (2010) critical reading of Kok Liang Lee’s short literary piece *Ibrahim Something* (1992), for instance, highlights the author’s insights on how issues of religion can intersect with masculinity. Shamsul A.B. and Mohamad Fauzi Sukimi (2006) expose how *kejantanan* (machismo) is constituted even through measures that are immoral in Islam, including illicit sex with women. It is also helpful to recall Peletz’s “practical representations” of Malay men in the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan that evince “less reasonable” and “less responsible” masculinities in household and kinship matters, and which are far from the Islamic ideal (2007: 19). Similarly, Mellström also

discovers that gambling, womanizing and drinking are some constituents of the “nature’ of men” among Chinese Malaysians (2010: 259- 271).

The topic of homosexuality in the twenty-first century has found notable coverage in political exposés on Anwar and related arguments that uphold human rights (Berman 2008; Williams 2010) as well as in works that reaffirm the pathological implications of homosexuality (Hashim et al. 2007; Haslinda 2007). Conversely, studies in this period on how homosexuality intersects with masculinities in Malaysia are scant. Nevertheless, available scholarship has concentrated on ‘straight-acting’ homosexual Malay men, even though Malaysia can certainly claim the existence of many effeminate homosexual men. Regardless of the degree to which the Anwar saga has been responsible for this focus, the fact remains that it is masculine homosexual men who have received greater attention in contemporary studies on Malaysian masculinities and men’s sexualities. Ismail Baba (2001) was one of the earliest Malaysian scholars to address psychosocial issues of men and women who engage in same-sex practices in Malaysia. His definition of ‘gay’ appears unilateral in its usage despite the many complexities that were expounded by his research respondents. The singularity of homosexuality is also echoed in Jerome’s (2008a) undifferentiated melange of gay and mak nyah subjectivities as he critically assesses Karim Raslan’s 1996 anthology, *Heroes and Other Stories*. Nonetheless, in his section on homosexual men, Ismail (2001) foregrounds the crucial point that not only are homosexual men often conflated with mak nyahs, but, that they feel compelled to perform “straightness” in order to resist identification with mak nyahs, eschew associations of homosexuality with effeminacy and provide a subterfuge from judgemental gazing that seeks to nullify their masculinities. His research signposts a growing emergence of homosexual Malaysian men who identify as masculine, prefer men akin to themselves, and disassociate from effeminate homosexual men or mak nyahs. This topic, which

has witnessed various debates in Southeast Asian scholarship and beyond (Altman 1996; Tan 2001), attests to the growing tensions among certain homosexual men who seek to unravel the intricacies of their own masculinities and homosexuality without linkages to femininity. Furthermore, Shamsul and Fauzi contend that homosexuality has become the diabolical antithesis of masculinity and its associations. Here, the religion-sexuality nexus is again invoked. Shamsul and Fauzi conclude – and aptly so – that Anwar’s forceful removal from the political sphere was based on “alleged gross sexual misconduct unbecoming for a male Muslim, a father ... a top leader in the country ... a pious and serious Muslim intellectual” (2006: 64). This litanic stringing demonstrates that religion, heteronormativity, patriarchy and nationalism have become the lynchpins that create the illusion of masculine fixities not only for Anwar, but for all Malay men. In a similar vein, Sharon A. Bong’s (2011) qualitative studies on homosexual Malaysian (and Singaporean) men highlight how familial and godly approval among Christian men is inherently bound to compliance with the performance of a specific masculinity.

There are also studies that highlight the emergence of masculinities that resist immutability and singularity. Zuhaili Akmal Ismail (2010) contends that in large-scale multicultural societies like Malaysia, multiple representations of masculine identities abound. He elaborates on how men often find themselves forced into opposing poles of identities, such as muscularity and power as well as the androgynous, metrosexual male. In analyzing actual responses to representations of masculinity in men’s lifestyle magazines – chiefly *Men’s Folio* that allows for the interface of both western and eastern representations of masculinity – Jerome detected articulations of masculinity that either reinforced stereotypical beliefs, or which challenged and reformulated non-stereotypical beliefs based on personal lived experiences. The latter were reconstructing “their own visions of a modern man” (2008b: 125).

What are we to make of this matrix? On one hand, a selection of scholarship on Malaysian masculinities corroborates the aforementioned “complicity with the hegemonic project.” These studies uncover how Malaysian masculinities are devised from notions of power, strength, sexual prowess and patriarchal positions – often riding on technology and machinery, and the exclusion of women³ – in an uncompromisingly heterosexual framework of “frontiersmanship” (Clarkson 2006: 199). In the collusion between the “cultural ideal and institutional power,” an “over-phallusized picture of man” (Morgan 1993: 71) is constructed and maintained on social and political levels. On the other hand, scholarship denotes a resistance to these forms of hegemonic masculinity through a “critique of macho styles and a distinct separation of self from what could be specified as hegemonic or dominant” (Wetherell and Edley 1999: 346). Notions that “frontiersmanship” belong to the realm of heterosexual men, or are the prerogative of “straight-acting” men, or that resistance is held either by those who are unable to live up to expectations of “frontiersmanship” or those who are effeminate homosexual men, are false presuppositions that do not take into account the highly complex lived realities of Malaysian men, or the pluralistic forms and practices of hegemonic masculinity. In this display of masculinities in flux, it is surely worthwhile to consider how homosexual men who express their masculinities in varying degrees engage in the complicity and resistance of “hegemonic sense-making” (Wetherell and Edley 1999: 351).

The Dreaded Masculine Alternative

“There are multiple ways to be masculine”

Andrew P. Smiler (2004: 20)

The previous section dealt with scholarship on issues of hegemonic masculinities that are inextricably bound to notions

³ Studies on women and gender in Malaysia will not be treated in this essay due to their sheer magnitude.

of “frontiersmanship,” religion, patriarchy and heteronormativity. The discussion also recognized the entanglement of issues on homosexuality, effeminacy and masculinities. Such scholarship encapsulates the wealth of intellectual thought that provides a fertile ground on which to expand the discussion on homosexuality. The transgression of sexual ethics for men figures intimately with notions of hegemonic masculinity. While heterosexual misdemeanours merely merit a slap on the wrist and reinforce the superiority and normalcy of masculinity, homosexual acts are relegated to subordinated positions in which those who either embody or execute them are vilified and accused of being counter-masculine. Here, the hierarchy of masculinities exhibits itself. Certain forms of Malaysian masculinity are privileged while others are contested or reviled. Hegemonic masculinity appears when an exalted masculinity comes to being “in relation to other masculinities” (Connell 2005: 154) in order to pander to the needs of the powerful (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). In this section, I wish to proceed to a further discussion on homosexuality and masculinities from two interlocking perspectives – the ongoing subordination of women and the threat of the homosexual masculine alternative.

Connell and James W. Messerschmidt have affirmed that hegemonic masculinity perpetuates the subordination of women, just as it does the various forms of masculinity that are perceived as lesser representations (2005: 832). In a society where “gender identities ... have always subsumed and effectively defined sexual orientations” (Peletz 2011: 678), homosexual men who are accused of being *lelaki lembut* and engaging in *liwat* are perceived as transgressors of strictly demarcated gender roles and perpetrators of sexual activities that pervert the heterosexual order. Moreover, as masculinity possesses greater cultural currency in Malaysia than femininity, “men who display feminine traits receive more negative reaction than women who display masculine traits” (Besen and Zicklin 2007: 251). I posit that the volatile antagonism that is ceaselessly hurled towards homosexual

Malaysian men represents a “terrified distancing” (Kimmel 1987: 17) between men and women in gender relations. In other words, the practice of strict polarity between men and women is indispensable in sustaining Malaysian masculinity. Men are ‘men’, and women are ‘women’, and never the twain shall meet. Any digression from this gender dictum goes beyond perplexity or bewilderment to being inevitably perceived as emasculation. What rises to the fore are hegemonic representations that have exacted a vice-like grip on Malaysian masculinity, sanctioned and celebrated by civil and religious law, and by popular discourses that have uncritically embraced such representations. What I wish to suggest, however, is that this gender separation aimed at preserving heterosexually-framed hegemonic masculinity is reconfigured in a new contradistinctive form of hegemonic masculinity by homosexual men who are masculine-acting. Through the aforementioned distancing, the subordination of women is unintentionally pursued not only by heterosexual sectors that are intolerant of gender and sexual diversity in homosexual men, but also by certain groups of ‘straight-acting’, homosexual men who seek to carve out their own avowedly masculine identities without any allusions to femininity. Different forms of homosexual embodiments are accepted and rejected as homosexual men strive to negotiate their own sexual identities. By rejecting a feminised embodiment of homosexuality, owing to popular associations of homosexuality with effeminacy, these homosexual men become unwittingly complicit with new hegemonic notions of masculinity as well as patriarchal privilege. In the process of affirming their subjectivities as ‘not-feminine’, they inadvertently highlight the fear of being associated with women, thus engaging in a subtle relegation of femininity to subordinated positions. These homosexual men are neither driven by malicious misogyny, co-opting new ‘macho styles’, nor buttressing their masculinities. Rather, they are actively engaged in resisting stereotypes whereby “gayness is easily assimilated to femininity” (Connell 2005: 78). My goal here is not to perform

ethical tagging, nor am I advocating effeminacy for homosexual men: I am simply highlighting repercussions that have inevitably arisen for certain groups of homosexual men in the process of clarifying their own subjectivities.

Dovetailing with this issue, I wish to suggest further that the adamant disassociation with femininity does not afford 'straight-acting' homosexual Malaysian men any meritorious validation in their subjectivities. In asserting their masculinity on multiple levels, even if they perceive an interior dissonance between social expectations of what men 'should be' vis-à-vis their own innate attraction to other men, these homosexual men unequivocally demonstrate that masculine men are capable of being romantically and erotically involved with other masculine men. As these images of masculinity that are grounded in lived realities gain increasing visibility, they inevitably attract highly unfavourable reactions from those who perceive such images as conflicting and contradictory, yet frighteningly real. The perimeters of common forms of hegemonic masculinity in Malaysia, which at one time were securely fastened by notions of strength, power, patriarchy and heterosexuality, and which assumed an almost "onto-formative" (Connell 2005: 65) status – as well as hallowed by religion in certain instances – have been widened, reworked and occupied by homosexual men. Masculine men who emotionally and physically desire other masculine men have not only challenged the perception of a fixed, immutable Malaysian male domain upon which many Malaysians have forged their gender and sexual securities – *they threaten its very foundations* by increasing performances of masculine alternatives that are struggling to break away from associations with lelaki lembut and mak nyah patterns. This is the dreaded alternative to popular masculinities that subverts the entire concept of what a man *is* and *is not*, and which claims that homosexual masculinity may actually be an alternative and a viable form of Malaysian masculinity.

Conclusion

My appraisal of a selected portion of twenty-first century academic resources on masculinities and men's sexualities was an acknowledgement that men's lives and men's sexualities are inextricably bound, and I sought to unearth how issues of masculinity and homosexuality interact with each other in the Malaysian context. Special focus was given to the notion of hegemonic masculinity as an exalted position which gave life to practices that entrenched the subordination of both women and men, and which flourished under the approval of socio-cultural and political institutions. Studies on Malaysian masculinities and sexualities undertake a variety of approaches, thus yielding equally diverse findings and expert opinions that evince both complicity and resistance towards hegemonic masculinities. Nevertheless, while hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal power in Malaysia are commonly associated with heterosexuality, masculine homosexual men are also – albeit inadvertently – reinventing new forms of hegemonic masculinity by their rejection of effeminacy in personal identities and sexual object choices. In an ironic twist, the subjugation of women continues to occur unpremeditatedly through homosexual men who are engaged in a continuous effort to unsheathe their own tension-ridden identities as Malaysian men who desire other men. Additionally, homosexuality also poses as a threat to more established forms of hegemonic masculinities as concepts of masculinity have ceased to be exclusive domains of heterosexual men. The dreaded alternative, I argue, lies in the fact that homosexual masculinity could prove to be a realisable alternative for Malaysian men.

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CHAPTER 11

Malaysian Rocks: an Introduction to the Contemporary Malaysian Extreme Music Underground, 2010-2011

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Introduction

During one of my recent trips to Kuala Lumpur, I couldn't help but notice a large poster portraying the immortal 1976 line-up of the Ramones – one of America's most worldwide famous punk rock bands – hung at one of Pudu Sentral bus station's shop windows. Next to it, the Guns'n' Roses 'Appetite for Destruction' crucifix was completing an unexpected rock and roll hall-of-fame. More shockingly, on the other side of the window, a menacing punk swastika stood out among many other buttons on offer: a symbol that none of the other Angry Birds and similar cartoons on display could ever match for impact...

To Western eyes, this image may not represent anything worth remarking upon, as punk and extreme music iconographies are a common part of our everyday lives. But to those who have spent considerable time in Southeast Asia, such vestiges of Western rock and roll, and especially punk and heavy

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metal's popular culture, are not a very common finding. Even in the extremely commercial streets of Bangkok's Khao San Road, Thailand's premier version of a Western tourists' heaven (Teo and Leong 2006), it seems that t-shirt sellers got stuck in the 70s and the Jimi Hendrix Experience.

This is a clear example of how punk and metal's iconic brands have remained somewhat unknown to most of Southeast Asia. Malaysia, however, is a different story, as these popular music genres have instead been often embraced by the local popular culture (Lockard 1991; Lockard 1998; Thompson 2002; Wallach, Berger and Greene 2011). As observed by Thompson, we learn that a wide array of 'authentic' British and American rock music has always been readily available in modern Malaysia (2002: 60). What is even more interesting to know is that indigenized, Malay versions of rock music have often outsold the 'authentic' ones, especially among the ethnic Malay consumers. Regardless, Malaysian hard rock inspirational sources are to be sought "outward across the oceans to London, New York, or Los Angeles" (Thompson 2002: 59), as clearly testified by female rock diva Ella's 'Ella USA', one of Malaysia's most popular hard rock albums of the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the kinds of rock genres I want to describe are not to be associated with Ella's. Although quite provocative in the conservative Malaysian society, Ella embodied that kind of commercialized rock *kapak* (Malay slang for 'low class rock') reminiscent of artists such as Jon Bon Jovi. A genre literally frowned upon by a new generation of Malaysian rock and roll extremists: in fact, starting in the 1990s, a new breed of predominantly ethnic Malay rock bands fostered a real 'underground scene', clearly subdivided into diverse subgenres such as thrash, death, black metal and punk. The spread of a growing network of demo tapes and fanzines developed extreme music into the favourite cathartic daily grind's relief for thousands of young Malaysians (Matusky and Tan 2004: 412-13).

Nowadays, contemporary rock music in Malaysia still carries

on the torch of heavy metal and punk by following the most underground and extreme representations to be found around the world. The country's main urban areas in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang and Johor states remain a breeding ground for all sorts of extreme underground rock bands. Hardcore punk, black metal, grindcore, crust-punk, sludge, thrash and death metal keep being played and nurtured in the fertile tropical music landscapes of Malaysia.

In my description of Malaysian extreme music below, I draw on two principal ideas. First, I use the notion of 'subculture', a key concept in popular music studies (Hebdige 1979). Second, I adopt Harris's definition of a 'music scene' as a flexible space within which music is produced, or an 'environment' for musical practice (2000: 14). In the particular case of the extreme music scene, Harris has explained that,

The most common use of it is to refer to local, face-to-face contexts of music-making and consumption (e.g. 'The Gothenburg Death Metal Scene'). This is similar to academic definitions of subculture. The concept is also used in ways that are similar to academic definitions of scene. 'The Extreme Metal Scene' connotes a decentralised, global and diffuse network of producers and consumers of Extreme Metal. The concept of scene therefore allows us to define a unit of analysis that is emergent both from every day reflexivity and from a more systematically theorised, academic space (ibid.: 14).

The natural question we may advance is: first, why is there such a significant amount of Southeast Asian extreme music radiating from Malaysia, a nation with a complex ethnic background and a majority Muslim population, for whom music is haram according to some interpretations (Muzaffar 1986)? And secondly, what are the particularly Malaysian characteristics of these extreme rock music genres and their fans in the country?

In what follows below, I seek to describe the background against which Malaysian extreme music exists. This discussion, and my investigation of the above questions, is based on my

ethnographic observations over 2010 and 2011 – as an insider to the sphere of musical performance with a history of deep involvement in the European and American extreme rock music scenes and who has built strong ties with the Malaysian incarnations. My ethnography was conducted during music performances, visiting record shops, observing recording sessions, playing guitar in WEOT SKAM (Penang's most established hardcore punk band), and ultimately hanging out and befriending local heavy metal and punk musicians in Malaysia.

Contextualizing Punk and Metal in Pacific Southeast Asia

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to trace a complete history of punk and metal music in Southeast Asia, a brief historical introduction and discussion of the social dynamics of such genres may help situate the discussion that follows. This history begins in the 1990s, with the release of Nirvana's 'Nevermind' album and the subsequent flow of commercially hyped American 'punk' bands such as Green Day, the Offspring, Rancid and NOFX. At this time the world witnessed an almost viral spread of rock bands (Tsitsos 1999).

Such globalization of punk and metal began expanding to the Southeast Asian nations as they progressively developed and opened up to Western influences. In fact, as Deena Weinstein (2011: 54) observed, the access and appreciation of punk and metal require individuals to live in industrial societies. As she concluded, there is arguably no trace of metal or punk, nor a working class interested in such musical genres in those parts of the world where the basic electric and plumbing conditions still fail to be met, such as in parts of Africa, the Indian subcontinent and Latin America.

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia retains the largest number of punk and metal bands (Wallach 2008: 99). The island of Bali, for example, has been home to a burgeoning underground rock scene comprised of dedicated punk, death metal and reggae

bands (Baulch 2007) which made a name for themselves in Southeast Asian rock history when the pop-punk band Superman is Dead released their debut album “Kuta Rock City” on major label Sony-BMG Indonesia (Baulch 2008).

Malaysia caught up fast with neighbouring Indonesia by developing an alternative, extreme rock scene to parallel and oppose the pop and disco music played in most Malaysian clubs. One of the first bands to be acknowledged as initiators of a “Malaysian music scene” was Carburetor Dung, an ethnically Malay punk band from Kuala Lumpur. The guitarist Joe Kidd was the author of *Blasting Concept*, an influential weekly music column published in *The Sun* newspaper from 1994 to 1998 (Nizang 2007), which was possibly the first glimpse of alternative rock-oriented music journalism which could be read in the mainstream press at the time. Nowadays, Joe Kidd has become a punk rock icon in the country’s underground scene, and currently runs the record shop and online alternative rock music portal *Ricecooker* out of a shop lot tucked away in the underbelly of Kuala Lumpur’s Pasar Seni. Carburetor Dung, using a moniker inspired by the seminal American *Creem* magazine’s rock critic Lester Bangs (Bangs and Marcus 1988), released a few records locally and in the UK, and have recently toured the Philippines.

The exponential growth of extreme music’s popularity in Malaysia attracted, however, the attention of the authorities, who promptly considered the genre a dangerous corrupter of the youth’s social and sexual mores. The situation degenerated when the authorities understood that black metal’s imagery evoked satanic rituals and the Devil’s worship, and forced a ban on this kind of music in 2001. This was the beginning of a national crackdown on metal. The police, unable to distinguish the genres, started raiding metal and punk concerts, genre-related shops and most other places of teenage gathering in search of Satanists (Liew and Fu 2006). Ultimately, on 5 October 2005, the Malaysian authorities opened an investigation against some “heavy metal cult members” who allegedly “practice

animal sacrifices and destroy religious texts including the Koran” (AP 2005), which saw numerous teenagers detained. Many of them were required to undergo various treatments, including counselling, rehabilitation and the ingestion of an herbal medicine to “stimulate thinking” (BBC 2001). The state of Negeri Sembilan went as far as outlawing black metal music due to its alleged negative effects on Malaysian youth (CNN 2001).

Such episodes have ostracized extreme music in Malaysia, possibly in an attempt to contain and condemn modernization and increased westernization of young Malaysians. In contrast, my concern in what follows below is, in view of my observations of this extreme music scene, to offer an unbiased description of this subculture and to respond to the questions I posed earlier.

Extreme Music Venues in Malaysia

The Malaysian extreme music underground has a vast number of bands, although the choice of appropriate venues to play for the ‘right crowd’ is very limited. Generally run by groups of dedicated volunteers, these spaces are renovated older buildings and organized under a scheme resembling the ‘do it yourself’ punk squats of Europe. These venues are mainstays for extreme music in Malaysia: places like *Rumah Api* in Kuala Lumpur’s Ampang district – previously known as *Gudang Noisy* – or *Soundmaker* in Georgetown, Penang are very good examples of venues run by a collective of individuals. Other examples are *The Rainforest* in Taiping, Perak, and *The Wall* in Batu Pahat, Johor. It is interesting to note that, as far as the East coast of Western Malaysia is concerned, there are no dedicated places where punk and heavy metal shows are held on a regular basis, whereas Malaysian Borneo has a dedicated group of individuals who organize regular shows in Kota Kinabalu and Ranau, Sabah.

Venues generally open during the weekends and have early start times in order to meet a 12am curfew which is common in most municipalities. Consequently, it is quite easy for fans

of all ages, and especially teenagers with no other means of transportation besides motorbikes or public buses, to attend the shows. Mostly, the crowd is male, although a small number of females are always present, especially at those shows where the mellower alternative-rock acts are performing.

The venues are intended as places for music performance only, and do not generally serve drinks, let alone alcohol. Often, a warning emblazoned next to the venues' gates reminds that "no racism, no fascism, no drugs, no alcohol" are allowed. This resembles the strict rules of most anarcho-punk houses found in the largest part of Europe. In Malaysia, it seems that such statements are clearly portrayed in order to scare off potential trouble, and to avoid drastic consequences akin to the police crackdown on black metal music in the first half of the 2000s. Possibly in order to keep the authorities away from the venues, the organizers have taken an intransigent position against alcohol and substance use, a common feature in most Western alternative subcultures. This enforces an extreme music culture embracing the purity ideals of American born punk movements such as "straight edge" who forswear drug and alcohol consumption (Haenfler 2006).

The Extreme Rock People in Malaysia

Malaysian extreme music fans can be generally divided into followers of hardcore punk, or metal. As noted before, the styles these people identify with are the most extreme within the rock musical spectrum and are performed adhering to the well-portrayed features of other Western reference cult bands. Generally, Malaysian hardcore punks follow a musical trend identified with 'crust punk', a fast, obnoxious version of traditional punk with a strong political lyrical content (Thompson 2004: 97). 'Crust punk', or anarcho-punk – anarchic oriented punk – is associated with traditional apparel made of leather or denim jackets adorned with metal spikes, chains and

many patches sporting cult bands' intricate logos, and has been generally described as shocking and provoking (ibid.: 101). Other Malaysian fans of less threatening, moderately political hardcore punk music have a more sober style, often consisting of simple sneakers (Vans and All Star are the favoured shoe brands), shorts and the perennial band t-shirts with which the fans signal their musical preferences, enabling identification by other likeminded individuals group in a venue.

Malaysian metal fans generally share a similar outfit with hardcore punks, but have longer hair, wear pants and boots or closed shoes that do not expose the toes, and sport a range of band t-shirts that clearly shows their affiliation with metal and its subgenres. The favourite metal trends and bands in Malaysia are Scandinavian Death and Black metal and local bands often play the fast, relentless rock music with guttural, undecipherable vocals that is typical of these genres. Metal people in Malaysia have embraced the most extreme subgenres of contemporary heavy metal, spanning from traditional Scandinavian-inspired Death metal, to the ominously named genres known as grindcore, sludge and, to a lesser extent, doom metal.

As in most Western societies (see Hansen and Hansen 1991), in Malaysia there is a marked distinction between punk and heavy metal. Although the two genres have crossed boundaries more than occasionally during the worldwide development of contemporary extreme music (Waksman 2009: 213), in the Malaysian music scene punks and metalheads still seem to belong to two distinct worlds. I have personally witnessed shows where bands performed different music genres, however, most shows tend to feature bands with a similar music style.

In terms of ethnicity and gender, groups are predominantly male and Malay. Notwithstanding the observations of Shao Yi regarding the Chinese indie scene described in the following chapter (which is significantly different in terms of the musical heritage that the bands place themselves in), there are fewer Chinese involved in the extreme metal music scene as performers

or even as show-goers, while there is an extremely limited number of Indians participating. While one can only speculate as to why this may be, it should also be noted that they may prefer to develop their own localized versions of Mandarin Chinese or Tamil-based rock music (Matusky and Tan 2004: 413). That said, James Wallach says of the metal scenes in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, “the exclusive Malayness of metal is entirely illusory” (Wallach 2011: 90), as non-Malays have played and continue to play crucial roles in the development of the region’s extreme music scenes.

A Panorama on the Music

Getting to know the Malaysian extreme music scene, one may conclude that it is a derivative of classic, worldwide and established Western punk and metal models. As noted in the previous sections, Malaysian extreme music does refer to the classics of American and European punk, hardcore and metal. Thrash, a popular music genre developed from the ashes of heavy metal in the ‘80s (Weinstein 1995: 65), is one of the principal influences for Malaysian extreme music. To give an example, the logo of a respected hardcore band from Port Klang, Sarjan Hassan – named after one of Malaysian artist P. Ramlee’s most popular movies – looks like a complete rip-off of seminal American thrash metal band Nuclear Assault. Other bands, such as Penang’s WEOT SKAM (We Express Ourselves through Skateboarding and Music), define themselves as a thrash-skate-core band, influenced by early 80s American bands such as D.R.I., Suicidal Tendencies and S.O.D.

In terms of metal, besides a clear adoration for Scandinavian extreme sounds to be found in the music of bands such as Penang’s Nonserviam, another strong inclination is for grindcore music. Bands like Kuala Lumpur’s Tools of the Trade or Mass Separation verge on the ultrafast side of metal. They are as much influenced by the genre’s godfathers, British bands Carcass and

Napalm Death, as they are by the more contemporary bands such as Sweden's Nasum and Italy's world-famous grindcore act Cripple Bastards.

Among the many bands constellating Malaysia's cities, towns and even kampung, it is important to note that the favourite music styles always lean towards the most hectic, irreverent, fast and raging sides of the punk and metal world. It seems that more canonical and potentially popular genres of rock such as hard rock and classic heavy metal, equally popular in the West, are not well regarded among the preferences of Malaysian punk and metal bands. Trying to understand the reasons behind the attraction of Malaysian youth to black metal music, Beng (2002) advanced the hypothesis that such extreme forms of music offer a cathartic release to the stresses of the daily grind. In terms of language, Malaysian black metal is a subgenre that offers more examples of what Weinstein describes as the *glocalization* of extreme music or the integration of a global template with local tastes (2011: 55). In fact, several of the black metal bands employ Bahasa Malaysia for their lyrical content, whereas death metal and punk bands seem to follow the global trend of using English.

Independent Media in the Malaysian Extreme Music Scenes

In her study on alternative media in Malaysia, Sharon Ling (2003: 289) affirmed that state control is very strong and enforced by political ownership of most mainstream media. Consequently, the Malaysian punk rock and metal scenes have been forced to adopt the same media approach as historically employed by the American and British punk scenes – an independent, 'do it yourself' media network mostly constituted by alternative magazines called *fanzines* and introduced into the heavy metal circles based on the model provided by the punk scene (Weinstein 2011: 49). Furthermore, the digital era has made the fanzine business an easier, more affordable activity. Computers

have trimmed down the expenses associated with paper-based fanzines with their photocopy and printing costs, and have also greatly facilitated the digital distribution of content via email, blogs and Facebook. Therefore, in Malaysia, a nation where digital technology has really taken off (Nain 2000), and where the internet is available at most coffee shops and hang out places, extreme rock music has enjoyed a great computerized boost. Nevertheless, the appeal of independent printed material has remained as strong as in other punk and metal subcultures, and a number of printed or photocopied fanzines circulate at shows and are distributed at the few dedicated rock shops in the country, particularly *Ricemaker* in Kuala Lumpur and *Dead Beat* in Penang which are possibly the most well known business operations.

The most impressive Malaysian fanzine I had the pleasure to discover was *Shock & Awe*, which is produced by a collective of Malaysian punks based in Kuala Lumpur – but who come from diverse geographical backgrounds, reaching as far as Sarawak and Sabah – with a self-proclaimed aim “to promote dialogue especially among punks in Malaysia and to showcase the Malaysian scene to the world” (Shock & Awe 2011). Between June 2010 and January 2011, it produced four editions, and constitutes an interesting piece of work as, besides reviews of records and tapes, it contains a thick section of columns which, in typical punk rock printed media fashion, give an insight into the personal opinions on and descriptions of their music scene as well as life in general as seen from the minds of Malaysian punk rockers. *Shock & Awe* has also produced a series of short documentaries, one being an interview with hardcore band Sarjan Hassan – one of the most gifted and appreciated bands in the central region of Malaysia – and the others being short documentaries on the Malaysian Borneo punk scene and life at Rumah Api, the only independent punk house in Kuala Lumpur’s Northeastern district Ampang. As of today, *Shock & Awe* constitutes what is, to my mind, the best example of independent punk rock press in Malaysia.

As far as metal is concerned, the most professional independent fanzine is *Karisma*, a glossy magazine edited in Melaka and entirely written in Bahasa Malaysia. By comparison, *Shock & Awe*, although featuring many ethnic Malay journalists, is entirely published in English. I might conclude that, if on the one hand Malaysian punks appear to be striving for overseas recognition and a place among the musically developed nations of the West, on the other hand, the Malaysian metal fans appear to have a more inward perspective. They are catering to their own linguistic area and it may appear that by using this linguistic choice, they substantially limit their chances of appealing to a wider English-speaking music circle.

Malaysian Extreme Music and the International Music Scene

Based on the previous conclusion, it is necessary to describe the relationship between the Malaysian extreme music scene and other foreign bands and music scenes. Recent years have seen an increase in the number of foreign bands venturing to play in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. The greatest impact on the development of the local punk and metal scenes is rendered by all of those independent touring bands who have performed with Malaysian bands, and with whom they share stages. I have observed that, as a rule of thumb, having an American, European or Australian passport grants its bearer greater attention among the Malaysian rock fans. American bands are especially well-received with great expectations and enthusiasm during their sets, which are characterized by violent pogo dancing and 'moshing' sessions. To name a few, bands such as Death Angel, Magrudergrind, Harda Tider, La Quiete, Comadre and many others have performed in the region in the last few years, mostly thanks to Singaporean independent booking organization 7X0X7.

Western bands thus still set the standard, and playing with them can create performance anxiety among some of the local Malaysian musicians, who are afraid of not being ‘at their level’. The most famous case of a Malaysian ‘expatriate for rock and roll’ is Yeap Heng Sheng. Yeap was formerly involved with Mass Separation and migrated to Melbourne, Australia, where he became the singer and front man for the very popular crust-punk band Pisschrist – one of the most travelled Australian bands on the worldwide anarcho-punk circuit. Another case is represented by Singapore’s Wormrot, although not properly Malaysian: this grindcore band has signed a record deal with prestigious UK’s extreme metal record label Earache, the pioneering company who supported grindcore genre’s inventors Napalm Death in the mid 1980s. Arif, Wormrot’s singer, when asked about this international record deal, clearly expressed great excitement about leaving the Southeast Asian ‘musical ghetto’:

We approached a few labels but never thought of asking Earache as it’s rather impossible in our point of view to be in such major label. I guess few weeks later Digby, the man himself, hit us up over on Myspace with THE deal. I kept refreshing the goddamn page to see if it’s actually real. I’ve been following Earache during that era of grind so you can basically imagine how stoked I was. Calling the rest and deliver the great news like a high school girl (Blow the Scene, 2011).

These cases have boosted the credibility of the regional extreme rock scene, and given other Malaysian musicians hope for their marginalized, and often misunderstood, musical offerings.

Questions of Authenticity

For me, the results of my observations above converge upon one question: as the nature of Malaysian extreme rock music appears so influenced by Western standards, where is the authenticity? A similar question concluded Jeremy Wallach’s (2008) study on the punk lifestyle in Jakarta. He concluded that “the story of punks

in Jakarta provides one illustration of how Western-derived music have become a fundamental component of generational identity for youth around the world” (ibid.: 112). I would agree, and argue that my observation of punk rockers and metalheads has reached a similar conclusion for Malaysia: Malaysian extreme rock musicians, fans and independent writers are using Western-derived music to replicate in their own country a situation as similar as possible to their idealized vision of the Western music scenes. Based on my personal conversations with many of these rockers, it is evident that their desire to live up to a Westernized alternative music standard is as strong as their own misconception of life in the West. To them, North America and Europe appear to be a place where music is the main daily activity, where musicians are incensed as poets, and everything looks brighter. On the contrary, Southeast Asia to them represents a repressive part of the world where the majority loves commercial pop-music, and where the authorities violently crack down on these forms of alternative music, as it recently happened to 65 punk kids arrested in the Indonesian province of Aceh with the accusation of “being punk” (Hasan 2011). However, many do not consider the opportunity they have, as Malaysian passport holders, to travel with relative freeness to much of the West and experience it for themselves (albeit on a tourist visa), a privilege denied to most other Southeast Asian citizens. When asked about this, they generally complain about the expensiveness of European life, the high costs of air travel to the Western nations, and the inability to take longer leave from their day jobs. One might speculate that, to some extent, they desire something they are afraid to get.

My attempt at responding to the question of authenticity draws on Dick Hebdige’s seminal interpretation of the punk subculture, according to which punk’s authenticity ceased to exist right after its innovative conception, and has “become frozen” (1979: 96). As interpreted by Lewin and Williams, punk has become a commodity to sell back to future generations by a

hegemonic culture (2009: 67). In this perspective, the Malaysian rock scenes appear to have bought into this mechanism of commoditization of punk and metal music exactly as the youth of many other developed and developing nations have (Wallach, Berger and Greene 2011). According to this vision, I argue that punk and metal in Malaysia today cannot be said to be inauthentic, as it has been stated that this same music's authenticity has already been lost elsewhere around the world. Thus, I would suggest that the Malaysian extreme music scene is no less authentic than that to be found in the West. Punk and metal have long ceased to constitute a threat to the global order, and have instead been studied in order to understand how youth are changing their lifestyles and social approaches. This is especially relevant in those societies, including Muslim majority ones, where heavy metal and other hardcore forms of rock have become popular for the same reasons they did a generation ago in the West – to offer powerful cultural tools for their fans to criticize the status quo (Levine 2009: 570).



Plate 1: A group of young hardcore punk musicians and fans at an afternoon show at Soundmaker, the only dedicated extreme rock venue in Pulau Penang.



Plate 2: An example of Malaysian extreme music show: a hardcore punk crowd starts a ‘moshing’ session in front of Soundmaker’s stage, Pulau Penang.

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CHAPTER 12

Chinese Independent Music: Resisting and Negotiating with the Popular in Malaysia

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Introduction

An examination of Chinese underground or independent music in Malaysia, or ‘Chinese indie’, reveals that there is within this scene a wealth of ways in which participants in it demonstrate resistance to popular or mainstream cultures. For those in the scene, Chinese indie is not just a musical form, but encompasses an entire subculture that situates itself in opposition to popular, commoditized culture and music.

Within the context of Chinese independent music’s development in the capital of Kuala Lumpur, this chapter examines Chinese indie’s oppositions to dominant, commercial structures of mainstream, popular music. Informed by research undertaken in 2003 with two case study bands, and using their songs’ lyrics as textual sources, special attention is paid to the production of Chinese underground music as examples of rebellion against the ‘popular’. I frame my observations with

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an eclectic collection of theoretical perspectives in order to demonstrate that resistance in Chinese independent music was never merely oppositional, but constantly negotiating and re-negotiating with and from within hegemonic structures shaping popular music culture.

Conceptualizing Resistance

Malaysian underground music, and Chinese independent music in particular, has often positioned itself in opposition to mainstream, commercial, popular music. Opposition often implies binaries, and according to O'Sullivan et. al., binaries create meaning through three propositions: first, that opposition generates meanings; second, binary logic produces ambiguities that also work against its own logic; and third, binary oppositions are structurally related and function to order meaning (1994: 30-32). In my study, the relationships between several opposing forces are brought to the fore:

Centre	vs.	Margin
Popular music	vs.	Underground music
Commercial production	vs.	Independent production
Commodity	vs.	Art

However, rather than as merely a binary-type opposition, another way of looking at resistance is as a force that exists necessarily alongside power. For Foucault,

Where there is power, there is resistance, not in the sense of an external, contrary force, but by the very fact of [the] existence [of power]. Power relations depend on a multiplicity of points of resistance, which serve at once as adversary, target, support, foothold (1980: 190).

Power and resistance are thus mutually reliant, and indeed, resistance might only come into being from within the dominant system it opposes. Parkins asserts that subordinate classes constantly negotiate with the dominant system and “dominant values [are] not so much rejected or opposed as modified by the subordinate class as a result of circumstances and restricted opportunities” (1971: 92).

Oddly enough, conformity is necessary in any form of opposition because an amount of cultural intelligibility ensures that the general public can see and interpret the resistance for what it is. According to Butler, cultural intelligibility relies on socially instituted and maintained norms that ensure coherence and continuity (1990: 17). For Chinese independent artists, to be intelligible is to be recognizable as musicians whose cultural products not only have value, but are consumable by at least part of the general public. Hence, their acts, practices and products of resistance had to be coherent to some extent with the ‘language’ of popular music, especially its economic infrastructure.

Although there was a need to conform to part of the dominant structure in order to subvert it, resistance cultures, like Chinese independent music, also enact resistance using other tactics. De Certeau asserts that “users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (1984: xiv). For those in the Chinese underground scene, they saw themselves as separate from or in opposition to popular culture and music, and intentionally performed and portrayed themselves in such a way as to materialize their resistance. Some of these tactics are described below, but it may be worth noting that they are in line with Butler’s discussion of performativity, which among other things, emphasizes the need for ongoing demonstrations of one’s identity, rather than one’s identity being able to be captured in one single act (1993: 2). Below, I show how this occurs in the Chinese indie scene.

Case Studies of Two Bands in the 2003 Underground Music Scene

Chinese indie was highly marginalized in contrast to not only Malaysian popular music, but within local underground music, which was largely monopolized by Malay and English language indie scenes. Chinese indie's beginnings may be as recent as 1997 when the 'Guinness Cantonese Rock Competition,' which had run for five years, was cancelled and left numerous amateur bands without an avenue for public performance. According to Mak, the founder of the local Chinese independent label, Soundscape, many bands were formed solely to participate in this rock competition (2003: 1). But enter Huang Huo [Yellow Flame], an informal organization and gig organizer created by these bands to showcase their music, and which held its inaugural show on 26 December 1997 (Huang Huo 2000: 5). Huang Huo remained busy over the next few years scouting for bands, organizing performances, promoting the Chinese underground scene and critiquing the local music industry, establishing a clubhouse, and producing albums and compilations. Its role was later taken over by Soundscape, which maintained the ideologies and functions of the former vanguard and under which many bands flourished. For Soundscape, priority lay with the development of cutting edge Chinese underground music rather than profit and commercialization. Furthermore, because of the marginalization of their scene, this also made the musicians sensitive to social issues, especially capitalism, and thus they "[held] more to the concept of being independent, and [emphasized] more on things beyond music [such as social justice issues]" (Mak 2003: 10).

Among the established bands during the study period of 2003 were R.U.S.H. and Lang Mang, who are the focus of this chapter. They demonstrate the genre's extensive repertoire of sound, which at the time included punk, hip hop, rock, post-rock, elements of jazz and experimental music, to name a

few. Two of the bands' musical performances were used for research informing this chapter: the first is a video-recorded, live performance of R.U.S.H.; the second a studio recording by Lang Mang, intended for album release. These texts are not deconstructed musicologically, but examined through their production process, performance, lyrics, and the interpretation of the artists themselves in respective interviews.

R.U.S.H. Performing "Chasing Tipperary"

R.U.S.H., short for 'Rise Up to Spiritual Haven' was a band formed in 2000. At the time of the research in 2003, the band had a four member line-up: Chong Loong Kae, 22, guitarist; Ronnie Khoo, 26, guitarist and vocalist; Nicholas Peters, 22, bassist; and Jeremy Liew, 22, drummer. The band's resistance was manifested in the perception of themselves and their music, the music production process and through their performances.

R.U.S.H., like many bands in Chinese indie, chose to distance themselves from mainstream, popular music and sought to musically express themselves differently (R.U.S.H. 2003: 3). Members also believed that Chinese underground was distinctive from other independent music scenes. According to one of the band members:

I think the Chinese scene, the bands, individually, they have a lot more character, compared with the English scene. I think the English scene, a lot of the bands are made up of, still people with this idea of very MTV, mainstream influence. But the Chinese scene, the artists there are more sure of themselves, and more established, more stable ... they have their own style ... are more stable as musicians (ibid: 4).

When it came to performance tactics, R.U.S.H. observed a minimalist attitude towards stage performance and props. In a video recording of their live performance, 'Chasing Tipperary' (which was filmed during the first Malaysian Chinese indie music festival 'Street Roar 2003' on 30 August 2003 at Culture

Street, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), R.U.S.H. wore simple clothing, hardly spoke to the crowd, and their song had no lyrics. Members appeared almost unaware of the audience throughout their entire performance, appearing to be totally engaged in their own music making. The idea that pleasing the crowd was important appeared absent, as their performance lacked the stage antics and presence so common in mainstream artists. R.U.S.H. instead almost transformed the public space of the stage into a private one. They focused on producing music that evoked emotion, wordlessly inviting members of the audience to close their eyes and become directly and personally involved with the musical pieces with minimal relation to the band itself.

Production was another area of opposition. With commercial music, musicians produce music under a record label, under the watchful eye of a slew of personnel, who guide them at every step. Musicians cut singles, extended plays or EPs, or albums (LPs) before promoting their music in concerts and public performances. For example, the use of artist and repertoire (A&R) staff is common practice among major recording labels. According to Negus, the A&R department “monitors changes among established artists, new acts that are being acquired by other companies, and attempts to follow developments amongst various audiences and subcultures” (1992: 47). This ultimately led to success formulas, such as song structure, where “verse/ chorus/ verse/ chorus/ middle/ chorus has been an enduring framework within all pop genres” (ibid.: 81).

R.U.S.H., on the other hand, adhered to a do-it-yourself process in the production of their singles and albums. At the time of research, there was a release of ‘Chasing Tipperary’ on a compilation album by a local magazine, *KLUE*. The song was created and produced entirely of their own effort, save the brief employment of a sound engineer hired out of R.U.S.H. members’ own pocket. Instead of a studio, a major portion of the track was recorded in the residence of a band member, using personal music equipment, microphones, computer software, samples and

skills (R.U.S.H. 2003: 7). This enabled the band to exercise the maximum amount of artistic freedom in music production. They were also able to play around with the production order, such as performing 'Chasing Tipperary' live on 30 August 2003, before submitting the recorded version to *KLUE*'s compilation album on 10 October 2003.

And yet R.U.S.H. had to operate within the commercial structure and consumerist-leisure framework of youth culture. The band submitted songs to compilations, cut albums, took part in album launches, committed to marketing, and performed live to promote the band. While they did not see their music making as a profitable commercial venture (*ibid.*: 9), R.U.S.H. still had to align to a certain extent with consumerist, populist frameworks in order to market their music and reach out to a wider audience.

Apart from their personal reservoirs of artistic creativity, R.U.S.H. also drew inspiration from their interactions with multiple fields and discourses. Multiculturalism and being multilingual in a post-colonial environment like Kuala Lumpur, was certainly one of them. A mixture of Chinese, Malaysian and Western influences bore heavily on R.U.S.H. One member admitted a lack of fluency in English and was reliant on Chinese languages as his mother tongue; another lacked literacy in Mandarin and dialects and was oriented towards Western cultures; and the fourth member was of Malaysian Indian descent and did not have any ethnic or cultural identification with Chinese underground music. While mostly instrumental, the music of R.U.S.H. had occasional lyrics that were either in Mandarin or English. According to Mak, while Chinese indie has favoured Chinese lyrics in the music of its bands (2003: 9), it accepted the production of music in languages common to Malaysian culture.

R.U.S.H. also engaged multiple discourses by fusing music of different genres to produce a sound that was very much theirs. In 'Chasing Tipperary', for example, the band combined elements from two genres to produce a kind of technologized music they

called “noise-pop”, and which they maintained had a post-rock sound while adhering to pop-like musical structures (R.U.S.H. 2003: 2). Personal creativity aside, their music stemmed from their ability to appropriate influences from various sources, and to inventively work these appropriations into their music.

Lang Mang’s audio recording of ‘Nan Fang De Shu’ (Tree in the South)

Lang Mang was formed in 1999 and in 2003, the band’s line up consisted of: Stephen Chua, 29, guitarist and vocalist; Wong Wai Kuen, 28, bassist; and Wong Liang Roo, 27, drummer. At the time of research, Lang Mang was recording pieces for an album. Their song, ‘Nan Fang De Shu’ [Tree in the South], was chosen as a case study.

While Lang Mang positioned their music as different to that found in popular culture, rather than playing antagonist to Chinese popular music, the band saw themselves as a bridge between Chinese underground and commercial music (Lang Mang 2003: 7). Chinese mainstream music in Malaysia was especially influenced by popular love songs from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and consumers were reluctant to explore beyond these genres (*ibid.*: 8). Lang Mang, however, hoped to penetrate the popular music market with their emotive songs that were more pop than rock, and siphon fans of the mainstream into the musical territories of Chinese underground. “We can try to show Malaysians that underground music is good as well,” a band member said (*ibid.*: 8).

Similar to R.U.S.H., Lang Mang produced music in an independent framework. They held on to many of the ideals of the Chinese underground, and were part of the independent music label, Soundscape. Not only did they fund their own recordings, Lang Mang was responsible for the production process and they had the freedom to experiment musically. Even though commercial successes was desirable, Lang Mang

wanted to maintain the personal and artistic value of their work as they saw it (ibid.: 8). According to the band, the essence of the concept of independence lay in music produced through the sole efforts of the artists themselves (ibid.: 9). For Lang Mang, the entire process was ‘DIY’: writing, playing, recording, performing, funding and producing.

That they were acting from within dominant practices and discourses was acknowledged by Lang Mang. They made high quality recordings which are essential in commercial pop music, utilizing the best instruments, equipment and digital software available to them. Lang Mang also adhered to certain popular music formats and practices, such as emphasizing vocals, reproducing pop-like song structures, offering easy listening lyrics and melodies, and using simple, repetitive chord progressions. This was intended to increase the fan base of Chinese independent music. One of the musicians said: “We are not being too extreme, neither are we too mainstream, too popular. We want to walk the middle path. Maybe our music will have its commercial value, yet we want it to have an artistic value as well.”

Most of all, Lang Mang combined their various musical influences, which included popular music, to create music that was uniquely theirs. The band members embodied the post-colonial, culturally hybridized musician, which was also representative of multicultural Malaysian subjectivity. The band admitted to Western influences in music (ibid.: 8-9) and they played traditional rock-and-roll instruments such as the guitar, bass and drums, yet Lang Mang’s lyrics were sung in Mandarin, a language spoken mainly by ethnic Chinese. Their music adhered to certain pop song formats popularized by Hong Kong and Taiwanese mainstream music, but having grown up in Sarawak, the lead singer admitted that his creative input to Lang Mang incorporated elements of Iban music (ibid.: 5 & 9). This was especially obvious in the opening guitar solo of ‘Tree in the South,’ which mimicked the melodies of Iban music that

are traditionally played with an indigenous instrument. Thus, they may be seen as resisting many of the homogenizing and formulaic tendencies of popular music production while creating a sound particular to their band.

An Interpretation of Resistance in Chinese Independent Music

In the case studies above, resistance in Chinese independent music may be seen as more than a subversion of - or opposition to - a dominant form, which was in this case popular music and culture. Resistance also had the capacity to produce a creative tension that inspired new musical products, performances and experiences, which sometimes exhibited a creative hybridity. To resist popular culture, opposing or multiple forces were brought together to beget a hybridized, heterogeneous product. This was seen in Chinese indie musicians and their music, where artists blended their various musical and cultural influences to create cultural products that were unlike the homogenized sounds of much popular music.

The reproduction of art for mass consumption was also a point of resistance for actors in the Chinese underground scene. Much art is produced for mass consumption, and commercial pop recordings even more so, as their perfected quality in reproduction is a source of their commercial value. However, in Chinese independent music, musicians often mobilized the live performance as a means to counteract this way of consuming music and art. If only for an instant, the live performance captured a temporal space in time, a mood or ambience for the audience and performer, which began and ended with that performance. As noted by Benjamin, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space” (1994: 526). Through regular performances or gigs, Chinese independent musicians could challenge the reproducibility of their own music for sale in albums by creating original experiences for themselves and their fans.

By way of conclusion, I might note that the tensions and interactions in the relationship between centre and periphery, dominant and marginal, can foster invention. While the marginal strive for transformation and differentiation, the centre sometimes legitimizes changes by adopting them for its own use and re-commoditizing differences. Movements of resistance, negotiations with dominant structures and practices, and creative meaning-making are essential in not just ordering society but ensuring that society does not stagnate. Chinese independent music then, like other forms of resistance in the Malaysian context, should perhaps be seen in this light – not just as oppositional and peripheral, or perhaps irrelevant, but a creative force that has the potential to invigorate.

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