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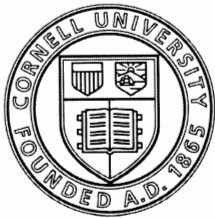
THE COLD WAR AT WAR

AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

ED. TONY DAY AND MAYA HT LIEM

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Cultures at War



Cornell University

Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem, editors

Cultures at War
The Cold War and Cultural
Expression in Southeast Asia

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Tony Day and Maya Liem
New Haven and Bilthoven
April 9, 2010

CULTURES AT WAR IN COLD WAR SOUTHEAST ASIA: AN INTRODUCTION

Tony Day*

George Orwell coined the neologism “Cold War” in a 1945 newspaper article, “You and the Atomic Bomb,” in which he criticized both the United States and the Soviet Union for “robbing the exploited classes and peoples of all power to revolt ... [and] ruling the world between them.”¹ At the end of World War II, the two atomic superpowers had both emerged victorious and so became natural rivals for hegemony in the postwar world. That rivalry turned into a “cold war” (a term used by the Americans but not the Russians until the 1980s) because of American fear that the spread of communism and its “alternative form of modernity” would threaten US security and the American mission to reform the world according to its own theories of capitalist modernization.² While nuclear stalemate and the worldwide competition for influence between the two superpowers persisted from 1945 to 1991, when the Cold War officially ended, Southeast Asia became the battleground for a number of very “hot” conflicts as the United States shifted its policy of “aggressive

* I want to extend my warmest thanks to my co-editor, Maya Liem, who was one of the organizers of the panel, “Arts, Globalization, and Political Landslides in Asia: Internal Dynamics and International Comparisons,” which was held at the Fifth International Conference for Asian Studies (ICA55) in Kuala Lumpur, August 2–5, 2007. The idea for a collection of essays on the Cold War and cultural expression in Southeast Asia, as well as several of the chapters in our book, began to take shape during that stimulating panel. Maya invited me to join her in expanding the scope of the original project and turn it into a book. Her suggestions and support during the writing of the introduction have been invaluable.

¹ Quoted in Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 33. Of the two superpowers, the United States was in a far stronger economic and military position to dominate global developments at the end of World War II, but “the depression and the war left the United States feeling vulnerable and uncertain. Consequently, American officials entered the postwar era thinking more expansively than ever before about their nation’s security requirements.” See David S. Painter and Melvyn P. Leffler, “Introduction: The International System and the Origins of the Cold War,” in *Origins of the Cold War: An International History*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and David S. Painter (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005 [1994]), p. 3.

containment without a state of war"³ to one of direct involvement in military attempts to contain and destroy revolutionary communism, as well as what Michael Bodden, in his contribution to this volume, calls "left-nationalism." In Southeast Asia, the Cold War lasted from 1948 to the late 1970s,⁴ but as two of the essays in this collection demonstrate and others suggest, the war has still not ended in the minds of post-Cold War Southeast Asian generations who seek to understand the nature and extent of the Cold War's destructive impact on their societies. There are also many Southeast Asians who want to rediscover the untraveled roads to potential social well-being that were blocked as a result of that era's conflicts and occlusions.⁵

Recent scholarship on the Cold War in Southeast Asia stresses the many-faceted nature of the conflict, which was driven by regional historical imperatives as much as by global forces. Karl Hack and Geoff Wade argue that the "'Southeast Asian Cold War' was constituted by local forces drawing on outside actors for their own ideological and material purposes, more than by great powers seeking local allies and proxy theatres of conflict"⁶ Odd Westad, Christopher Goscha, and Christian Ostermann demonstrate the continuous interaction between regional decolonization and global Cold War superpower rivalry.⁷ The interest in Southeast Asian postcolonial nationalism, and in the agency of local Southeast Asians as "shapers of the international system in the Cold War era,"⁸ expressed in these and other scholarly works also extends to culture as one of the major battlegrounds of Cold War ideological conflict.⁹

³ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, p. 2.

⁴ For discussions of 1948 and the late 1970s as starting and ending points of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, see Karl Hack and Geoff Wade, "The Origins of the Southeast Asian Cold War," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40,3 (2009): 441–48; and Benedict Anderson, "Sauve Qui Peut," in Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London and New York, NY: Verso, 1998), pp. 299–317, esp. p. 308.

⁵ For an excellent collection of essays that responds to the contemporary demand for more knowledge about possible alternatives to existing Cold War political and cultural outcomes, see Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki, ed., *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

⁶ Hack and Wade, "The Origins," p. 443.

⁷ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, p. 5; Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann, "Introduction: Connecting Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia," in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann (Washington, DC, and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–12.

⁸ Goscha and Ostermann, "Introduction," p. 9.

⁹ For studies of U Nu's play "The People Win Through," Indonesian Islamic reactions to communism during the Cold War, and "civilization, culture, and the Cold War in the foreign policy of Ngo Dinh Diem," see the essays by Michael W. Charney, Rémy Madinier, and Edward Miller, respectively, in Goscha and Ostermann, *Connecting Histories*, pp. 335–402. See also Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds., *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), which contains fascinating discussions of cultural aspects of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. For a lively and polemical declaration of the need for East–West comparative study of cultural expression during the Cold War, see Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, "East is East and West is West? Towards a Comparative Socio-Cultural History of the Cold War," *Cold War History* 4,1 (October 2003): 1–22, as well as their assessment of studies of "the cultural cold war" and "cold war culture" (two categories examined in Jennifer Lindsay's contribution to this book), in which the dearth of research on the Third World is noted: Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, "Culture," in *Palgrave*

The essays in this book offer the most detailed and probing examination to date of the cultural dimension of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. Cultural expression in this period was primarily shaped by the long-standing search by Southeast Asians, begun in the colonial period, for national identity, modernity, and independence. It was also strongly influenced by the international context in which this search took place after 1945, by the global rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, with a third power, the People's Republic of China (PRC), emerging onto the scene in 1949 as a major Cold War contender for influence over Southeast Asian political and cultural affairs. Unlike the writings on Southeast Asian culture that appear in the most recent publications on the Cold War in Southeast Asia, however, the essays in this book provide a vivid sense of the creative energy and cultural originality of the early years of postwar independence. Common to all of the studies in this collection is an effort not just to explain, but to break with the "Zhdanovism"¹⁰ commonly found in approaches to cultural expression in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, in which the politics of Left and Right are presented as deterministically polar rather than as openly dialectical or dialogical opposites driving cultural debate.¹¹ The meanings of words such as "communist," "cosmopolitan," "nationalistic," or "modern" that were used to describe cultural processes during the Cold War in Southeast Asia were being constantly debated and explored. It is the dialogic nature of culture during the Cold War that interests the authors in this volume, as well as the multiple possibilities for the future of Southeast Asia that were being imagined by means of cultural debate. With the exception of Jennifer Lindsay's chapter, the essays in this book make only tangential reference to the "cultural cold war" as it was waged in Southeast Asia by various states or the covert agencies of both blocs, a subject about which very little has been written.¹² Instead, these chapters analyze in detail the ways in which art, literature, theater, film,

Advances in Cold War History, ed. Saki R. Dockrill and Geraint Hughes (Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 240–62.

¹⁰ Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov (1896–1948), whose speech "Soviet Literature—The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," presented to the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, helped formulate the concept of "socialist realism," was put in charge of Soviet cultural policy in 1946. Zhdanov's "two-camp line" divided the world into "two camps—the imperialist, headed by the United States, and the democratic, headed by the Soviet Union" and predicted the inevitability of conflict between them. See Hack and Wade, "The Origins," p. 442. For more on Zhdanov and Soviet Cold War policy on art, compared to the situation and practices of artists in the US, see the entry on "art" in Richard A. Schwartz, *Cold War Culture: Media and the Arts, 1945–1990* (New York, NY: Checkmark Books, 2000), pp. 17–20. Schwartz makes clear that American artists and writers were subjected to a similarly oppressive, if indirect, form of state control. During the Cold War, US artists and writers were "politically and economically marginalized," tolerated because they were perceived as "largely irrelevant" to the political process, and pressured to address issues in "the more private sphere ... as the only area in which individuals were able to exert a meaningful influence." *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 176.

¹¹ This tendency in interpretation is a natural consequence of the fact noted by Westad that "the Cold War was bipolar to the point of exclusivity." Westad, *The Global Cold War*, p. 89.

¹² See Marc Frey, "Tools of Empire: Persuasion and the United States' Modernizing Mission in Southeast Asia," *Diplomatic History*, 27,4 (September 2003): 543–68; and Ingrid Muan, "Playing with Powers: The Politics of Art in Newly Independent Cambodia," *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 6 (2005): 41–56. Muan's essay will be discussed below. The classic study of American Cold War cultural policy in Europe is Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2000).

festival, physical culture, and the popular press expressed not only Southeast Asian responses to Cold War ideologies and political pressures, but also ideas that had very little to do with the Cold War as it was being promoted in Washington, Moscow, or Beijing. The examples of Southeast Asian cultural expression examined here involved various solutions to the cultural dilemmas of the newly independent nation-states of the region. All of these solutions were responses to social and aesthetic concerns that antedated, outlasted, and never became entirely aligned with the ideologies of either bloc.¹³

Francisco Benitez opens the discussion with an analysis of three films made during the years 1953 to 1957 and directed by Lamberto Avellana (1915–91), an Ateneo de Manila-educated film and theater director who won the award for best film at the 1956 Asia-Pacific Film Festival. With close attention to the medium and techniques used by the filmmaker to communicate to his audiences, Benitez argues that Avellana sought to create “a coherent Filipino citizen subject” on the screen during a period of social upheaval in which Huk communist insurgents, the Filipino political elite, and powerful US interests and agents contested with one another over the definition of being “Filipino.” Although Avellana worked closely with the United States Information Service (USIS) and the notorious American CIA agent Edward Lansdale to produce pro-American documentaries and feature films, he presented the Huks on screen as “Filipino men of action united in a common cause,” even though they opposed the ideals of liberal democracy espoused by Avellana himself. Avellana used USIS-inspired documentary and melodrama techniques to heighten the reality of his depictions of the struggle by ordinary Filipinos to become members of a “liberal agrarian” or urban bourgeoisie. By means of fixed-camera shots, Avellana made his fictional heroes into life-like subjects of documentary-like movies that recorded attempts to “recreate the Filipino way of life after the trauma of war.” Avellana’s real heroes were ordinary Filipinos, stripped of their foreign allegiances and dependence on money. On screen, Avellana clothed his characters in an indigenous “aura of facticity” as they sought to recover traditional values, demand a state responsive to its citizens, and assume a modern identity in an unstable postcolonial Cold War environment. By means of various film techniques, Avellana localized the Cold War content of his films, foregrounding the “ordinary quotidian vitality” of the Philippines and placing his characters in control of their own individual destinies. Yet, as Benitez demonstrates in his analysis of the ethno-nationalistic, award-winning film *Badjao*, about a romance between a Badjao (Sea Gypsy) boy and a Tausug girl, the Filipino national subjects of Avellana’s films tended to become embodiments of a timeless universal humanism, as defined by (American) liberalism. In contrast to Filipino modern art, which provided a “leftist critique of imperialism,” the medium of film, in Benitez’s view, acted as a “liberal,

¹³ For an interesting collection of essays in which the influence of the Cold War on the United States is debated, see Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (London and Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001). Kuznick and Gilbert’s summarizing comment (page 11) is pertinent to Southeast Asia: “We take strong issue with those observers who have found the Cold War to be responsible for every change and cultural distortion occurring during these years ... [The Cold War] persuaded millions of Americans to interpret their world in terms of insidious enemies at home and abroad who threatened them with nuclear and other forms of annihilation. Seeing the world through this dark, distorting lens and setting global and domestic policies to counter these fanciful as well as real threats was and is ... the largest impact of the Cold War.”

nationalist, pedagogical machine" for the production of "particularly Filipino, perceptive, autonomous, law-abiding" citizen-subjects. Yet Avellana's Filipinos were also resistant to becoming docile subjects of the American Cold War imperium.

Benitez draws on Jonathan Beller's argument about the Filipino painter H. R. Ocampo's abstract art and applies it to Avellana's abstract humanism: Avellana's films were both a critique and rejection of the dilemma facing Filipinos in the 1950s of having to choose between undesirable alternatives for becoming "Filipino" according to communist, cacique, or American definitions of that term. Beyond universal humanism, to which Avellana's screen characters laid claim, there lay a "deferred future," a distant shore of authentic, everyday Filipino nationhood that was anticipated in the "reality in-depth" of Avellana's mise-en-scène.¹⁴

In Indonesia, covert American assistance for the overthrow of Sukarno's Left-nationalist government, followed by the massacre of hundreds of thousands of alleged communists and the imprisonment of thousands more, occurred a decade after the defeat of the Huk insurgency. Michael Bodden sketches the history and impact of American anticommunist intrigue in Indonesia from 1948 to 1965 in order to show that successive US governments profoundly misunderstood the significance of Sukarno, the nature of his power, and the meaning of the ever intensifying political debate in Indonesia during the 1950s and early 1960s. "Sukarno's strong belief in the importance of national unity, national character, and anti-imperialism ... made it inevitable that battles among the antagonistic camps within Indonesian politics were often contests to see who could proclaim their nationalist credentials most loudly and prove them most obviously," Bodden writes.

Yet, by 1963–64, the entire Indonesian political system at the national level had become polarized along Cold War lines, a polarization that reflected Indonesia's engagement with the PRC, the influence of American anticommunist propaganda, as well as local political rivalries. It is the post-1965 legacy of this Cold War polarization, the effects of which are still present in Indonesia today,¹⁵ that Bodden seeks to expose as a misrepresentation of Indonesia's past by painstakingly piecing together, through interviews and newspaper accounts, the history of leftist theater groups and performances in North Sumatra during the decade 1955–65.

Bodden's choice of the site for his investigation is not adventitious. By shifting the spotlight on cultural expression away from Java to the multiethnic world of Indonesia's largest "outer island," where a serious CIA-aided regional rebellion took place in 1958, Bodden sets up a perfect test case for his thesis that in areas distant from the modern cities and the stifling cultural heritage of Java, leftist Indonesian

¹⁴ See Jonathan Beller, *Acquiring Eyes: Philippines Visuality, Nationalist Struggle, and the World-Media System* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press), p. 94: "In the conjuncture specified by the Second World War and the period immediately following, both in the Philippines as well as elsewhere, only in a place outside of existing narrative constraints and beyond logical history could freedom be posited."

¹⁵ On December 23, 2009, the Indonesian High Court issued a ban on the Indonesian translation of John Roosa's *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (Madison, WI, and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), as well as several published collections of left-wing short stories and poetry from the period 1950–65 edited by Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri and Muhidin M. Dahlan, on the grounds that these works "disturb the public order" (*mengganggu ketertiban umum*). See Hilmar Farid, "Censorship Makes a Comeback: Recent Book Bannings Mark a Return to the Repressive Practices of the New Order," *Inside Indonesia* 99 (January–March 2010), accessed online at: www.insideindonesia.org.

theater practitioners crafted theater forms that drew on traditional, regional, as well as modern Western techniques to stage performances that appealed to multiethnic audiences of “Indonesians” across a wide political spectrum.

All the plays and performances Bodden examines were “vitaly concerned with defending the nation, creating a specifically Indonesian national culture, or propagating ideas of democracy and rights not entirely unfamiliar to Western liberal democracies.” In his detailed mapping of theater groups and performances across the landscape of North Sumatra, Bodden finds that even in 1964, at the height of the Cold War polarization of Left and Right in Java, “the lines of division” in North Sumatra “were not always as clearly drawn as they appeared to be at the national level.” Like Avellana, North Sumatran theater practitioners of the 1950s made it possible for their audiences to imagine a tolerant and multiethnic “nation” of the future.

Engaged in a similar game of “‘catch-up’ with the West while aspiring to evade its shadow,” the modern Saigon artists discussed in Boitran Huynh-Beattie’s essay had to create their art while an intensifying war raged around them and an American army occupied their land. Since the Cold War had split Vietnam in two, with the South still “half-colonial” because of the persistence of French cultural influences from the past and the daily reminders of American ones in the present, even as the North was held in the grip of Chinese Maoist communist ideas that dominated both politics and the arts, the future establishment of an independent nation was even harder to imagine in Vietnam than it was in either the Philippines or Indonesia. Yet Saigon’s artists were as adept at negotiating their way past the treacherous politics of the era as were the newsboys witnessed by Huynh-Beattie’s own father in the 1950s, who outraced the police to hawk soon-to-be-confiscated issues of Saigon’s forty-four daily papers. Despite the war, the American occupation, and continual political crisis, Saigon artists lived in a cultural climate notable for its political diversity and cultural cosmopolitanism. Given the situation of their war-torn nation, it is not surprising that these artists were “inclined toward new horizons” rather than any “particular ‘Vietnamese’ direction.” The American presence, in fact, encouraged the pursuit of “art for art’s sake” in Saigon by providing buyers for paintings and one more good reason for rejecting political influence over art in any form. Painting of traditional subjects was stimulated by the nostalgia for their homeland felt by Northern artists who had fled to the South, and such art expressed their rejection of communism. Southern painters also conveyed their longing for a long-lost homeland, even if that imagined community had been constantly ravaged by war. But at least in those now distant wars the Vietnamese had expelled the foreign invader! Other Saigon artists captured the ambivalent political loyalties felt by Southerners of the day; practicing “art for art’s sake,” they created paintings whose formal beauty could address that ambivalence and express the human pathos the image contained, without requiring the artist to choose sides. Western-bloc embassies were instrumental in stimulating Saigon’s modernists, who adopted European techniques, rather than those of American abstract expressionism,¹⁶ in order to represent the fragile and vulnerable beauty of the South

¹⁶ In other words, Saigon modernists rejected the claim implicit in abstract expressionism that modern avant-garde art was, by definition, “purely American.” See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 200 and passim.

in an abstract manner. As in the case of Lamberto Avellana or the leftist theater practitioners of 1950s North Sumatra, abstraction for these Saigon artists served the crucial function of invoking universal values as a way of imagining a future for their homeland, a future that might have to be indefinitely deferred but would never be forgotten.

The published work of the late Ingrid Muan on modern Cambodian art adds further testimony to the themes of Huynh-Beattie's essay.¹⁷ In "Haunted Scenes: Painting and History in Phnom Penh," for example, Muan describes how the controlling grip of the French colonial painter George Groslier over Khmer artists was loosened once independence was attained. At the command of King Sihanouk, and under instruction by a Japanese artist trained at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Tokyo, Khmer students were taught "no longer to copy a received ornamental tradition through the means of a standard grid. Instead, they were to observe and render what they saw around themselves, focusing on the transitory qualities of light and shade, and the immediacy of individual perception."¹⁸ Piecing together the history of Cambodian art from the 1950s and 1960s, much of the documentation for which was lost during the Khmer Rouge period (1975–79) and is only retraceable by means of records kept by the United States Information Service,¹⁹ Muan records the progressive "congealing" of any Right–Left polarity in Cambodian artistic circles as time passed. Under the Khmer Rouge, and the Vietnamese after 1979, artists who were able to survive "adapted with a kind of chameleon-like facility" to the demand for socialist realist art.²⁰ In paintings from the 1990s, however, Muan finds "a perverse return to Groslier's notion of tradition and permissible change," which expressed, in her view, the absence of fundamental change at the level of the political elite over the decades of genocidal war and social upheaval since the end of the colonial period.²¹

In another essay in which she directly addresses the impact of the Cold War on Cambodia, Muan describes how documentary films from both the American and Soviet blocs flooded the Cambodian countryside via roving "cinecars"; USIS magazines were put in the hands of 70,000 Cambodian readers by the late 1950s; traveling exhibitions promoted American sport and technological advances; and Marian Anderson, the Czechoslovakian Dance Troupe, and Russian Ballet all performed before Cambodian audiences.²² But how this Cold War propaganda was

¹⁷ Ingrid Muan's PhD thesis on Cambodian art, "Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration, 1918–2000" (Columbia University, New York, NY, 2001) is currently being prepared for publication by Penny Edwards. Edwards had hoped to offer a chapter of Muan's dissertation for inclusion in the present volume, but was unable to secure the necessary permission to do so. Because of the importance of Muan's work on Cold War culture in Cambodia, the editors decided to include a discussion of some of her published work on the subject here.

¹⁸ Ingrid Muan, "Haunted Scenes: Painting and History in Phnom Penh," *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies*, 6 (2005): 22.

¹⁹ USIS sponsored exhibitions in Cambodia and training for Khmer artists such as Nhek Dim, who was first sent to the Philippines and later to Walt Disney Studios in the United States. See *ibid.*, p. 24, and Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, "Kon Khmer (Cambodian Cinema)," in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, ed. Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: Institute of Arts and Culture, 2001), p. 148.

²⁰ Muan, "Haunted Scenes," p. 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–37.

²² Muan, "Playing with Powers," pp. 41–42.

received is another question: "Whereas the Cold War read from its centers was a competition produced by the polarized aftermath of a war," Muan writes, "in peripheries like Cambodia, it was what followed colonialism, toning and tempering new-found independence."²³ The filmmaker Sun Bun Ly, for example, learned basic film techniques from USIS while serving with his US-trained police unit, was sent to the US for further training, then returned to Cambodia, resigned from the police, and established one of Cambodia's first commercial movie companies.²⁴ Similar stories abound for "many of the major players" in the Cambodian film industry and art world from this period. Having learned to make films, cartoons, and paintings using American techniques, Cambodian artists and filmmakers turned to traditional Khmer folklore for images with which to fashion a "self-consciously 'modern' yet explicitly 'Cambodian' visual art."²⁵

In the two essays by Ingrid Muan discussed above, Cold War Khmer artists are shown to have engaged in a process of self-decolonization without allowing themselves to be recolonized by a new set of Cold War masters. Simon Creak expands the meaning of "culture" beyond film, art, and theater in his analysis of a form of recolonization in Southeast Asia, that of the physical body in Laos after 1975.

Asians had sought to free themselves physically from colonial control since the late nineteenth century. Applying ideas drawn from Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, Asians called for the strengthening of bodies as well as the modernization of minds in the life-and-death struggle with Western imperialism.²⁶ Colonialists themselves joined in support of this campaign. French colonial authorities promoted sport and youth programs in Indochina during the far-Right Vichy period in France (1940–45), so that, to quote a Vichy governor of Indochina, Admiral Jean Decoux, "the true type of Indochinese man" could be born "after centuries of indifference to physical development."²⁷ The "true type of Indochinese man" emerged along clearly demarcated gender pathways, which he continued to follow once independence had been attained in 1954. "If the strength of human bodies emerged as a metaphor for national strength" in Laos, and in Indochina generally, Creak writes, "it was the male body that counted. Women's bodies stood for tradition." Delicately female embodiments of Vietnamese tradition, reflecting a similar gendered differentiation, can be seen in the Cold War Saigon paintings *Summer Light* by Lê Văn Đệ and *By the*

²³ Ibid., pp. 43–44.

²⁴ Ibid., 48–49; and Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, "Kon Khmer," p. 148.

²⁵ Muan, "Playing with Powers," p. 51.

²⁶ In his first published essay (1917), written at the age of twenty-four, Mao Zedong urged his Chinese readers to concentrate on building their bodies: "Exercise must be savage and rude. To be able to leap on horseback and to shoot at the same time; to go from battle to battle; to shake the mountains by one's cries, and the colors of the sky by one's roars ... " would enable them to defeat their Western imperialist enemies (quoted in Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd ed. [New York, NY, and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990], p. 293). Mao was well-versed in the writings of Yan Fu (1854–1921), China's famous translator of Herbert Spencer and other Western authors whose works were relevant to China's "self-strengthening" movement. Yan Fu wrote in 1898: "A nation is like a body (*shen*); the arteries and veins are linked together, the system of organs (*guanti*) helps each other. When the head is attacked, all four limbs respond; when the belly is stabbed, the whole body (*ti*) will perish" (quoted in Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* [Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995], p. 44).

²⁷ Quoted in Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940–1944* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 188.

Ocean by Nguyễn Trung, discussed by Huynh-Beattie. The effects of a lingering colonial influence may also be present here, since the most important Vichy-era all-male schools for training the “true type of Indochinese man” were located in Pan Thiet, near Saigon.²⁸

Western Cold War warriors who arrived in Laos in the 1950s found the capital, Vientiane, to be impoverished and grubby, “a century away from Saigon,” in the words of Graham Greene.²⁹ The Royal Lao Government made the case to the Americans that Laos was, in the words of a pamphlet by Prime Minister Katay from 1954, the “ideal cornerstone in the anti-Communist struggle in Southeast Asia.”³⁰ In the 1960s and early 1970s, US aid and “modernizing propaganda” helped create a new urban elite, possessed of “a cosmopolitan outlook and confidence” that modernized the Lao language and debated social and political issues in the pages of the “vibrant daily press,” as well as in literary journals.³¹ The US presence also provoked the rejection by the Lao Patriotic Front of American popular culture, as US financial aid programs contributed to corruption. US funds, in any case, offered new incentives for Lao political and army leaders, who were regarded in Lao cultural terms as *phu nyai*, “big men,” to embrace anti-communism in order to secure US dollars for their entourages, the primary markers of their prestige.³² The “muted violence”³³ embodied in the rightist politician and *phu nyai* Phoumi Nosavan (1920–85)³⁴ and other Lao males in the 1950s and 1960s would be disciplined and redirected to new social ends after the victory of the communists in 1975, who also swept away “‘decadent’ foreign influences.”³⁵

Creak argues that revolutionary rhetoric was a principle instrument of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic’s attempt to fashion the “new socialist person,” one who would have “great physical strength ... strong health ... knowledge and ability in various subjects ... revolutionary ideology and qualities ...,” in the words of the Central Committee of the Lao Patriotic Front in 1971, in a statement broadcast while it was still based in jungle caves in the northeast of the country.³⁶ When the communists seized power four years later, the rhetoric of physicality “developed

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²⁹ Quoted in Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2002), p. 97. Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American* (1955), which was made into a film in 1958, criticized American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. The character Alden Pyle, an idealistic American CIA agent who kills innocent Vietnamese civilians in order to save Vietnam from communism, is based on CIA agent Edward Lansdale, who moved his base of operations from the Philippines to Saigon in 1953.

³⁰ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 100.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–53.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 106, 112.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 115, quoting from Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 147.

³⁴ For more on Phoumi Nosavan and his role in founding the National Games of 1961 and 1964 in Laos, see Simon Creak, “Sport and the Theatrics of Power in a Postcolonial State: The National Games of 1960s Laos,” *Asian Studies Review* 34 (June 2010): 191–210.

³⁵ Evans, *A Short History*, p. 156.

³⁶ The similarity of these qualities to the ideals set forth by Decoux in 1944 for the 600,000 Indochinese students who participated in Vichy physical training programs—“more virility, more elevation of hearts, more rectitude of conscience” (quoted in Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics*, p. 191)—is striking.

into a more structured theoretical framework," which was closely modeled on Vietnamese, rather than Chinese or Soviet, formulations of socialist ideas.³⁷ Education was the key to creating a new culture for the new socialist person. The body was an important element in the way "culture" would now be defined in Laos.³⁸ Kaysone Phomvihane, who was secretary-general of the Lao People's Party from 1955 to 1991 and prime minister from 1975 to 1991, used "strident language" in a speech in 1977 to attack what he called "the wicked poison of the ideology and culture of neocolonialism that the American imperialists and reactionaries introduced and propagated throughout" Laos. Kaysone's vocabulary in this and other statements argued for an abrasive physical and moral cleansing that morphed from speech into action when the party-state reformed the nation's sporting and other cultural activities.³⁹ The "new" sport was defined in nationalist as well as internationalist terms, for it preserved elements of the old whenever, as in the case of Lao boxing, these elements expressed the "national heritage." The glorification of sport and physical labor also extended now to women, who were no longer to be regarded as mere embodiments of Lao tradition, and to party leaders, who were expected to set good examples. Pictures of Kaysone exercising or playing table tennis are still displayed in public places throughout the country. The body, in short, was the central metaphor in the Lao socialist cosmology. Like prisoners in Lao reeducation camps, the Lao nation was a "weak, ill, or otherwise substandard body that could be ameliorated with the right attention."⁴⁰ To promote the amelioration of the nation's body, the state developed a national calisthenics program and taught physical education in Lao primary schools. More successful in the cities than the countryside, these measures reinforced socialist ideology, but also recycled principles that had been part of Lao culture since French colonial days. In general, though, notwithstanding the rigorous rhetoric on the subject, Lao physical culture in practice lacked "revolutionary effervescence." Yet even though efforts to establish a mass sport and physical culture movement fell short of expectations, the regime was successful in suppressing independent thinking "as the party became the thinker for the nation."⁴¹

³⁷ Many members of the Lao communist leadership had been educated in Vietnam or, like Kaysone Phomvihane, were bicultural through upbringing or marriage. See Evans, *A Short History*, pp. 188–91.

³⁸ Vatthana Pholsena notes the longevity of this idea, which had its origins in traditional Lao culture, in her discussion of a school textbook titled "Lao Culture and Society," published in 1998. See Vatthana Pholsena, *Post-War Laos: The Politics of Culture, History, and Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 58–66. "In this textbook, the body takes the central stage. ... The body is strictly constrained through exhaustive codification..." *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁹ Quoting the journalist John Everingham, who reported to *The Far Eastern Economic Review* on the situation in Laos in April 1976, Grant Evans notes how youths "were dragged in for haircuts and women admonished not to wear makeup. To listen to Thai radio stations was to risk being labeled 'reactionary,' as with playing western music." Evans, *A Short History*, p. 179.

⁴⁰ Ex-prisoner Thongthip Rathanavilai recorded the following admonition, delivered in 1976, in his account of life in a Lao reeducation camp: "You have been brought here for your own good. If this was Cambodia, you would have already disappeared. You have been brought here to be cured and cleansed and to become new men. All of you have been leaders, but you are really ignorant. But whoever listens to us and reforms will be able to return home and become a good citizen." Quoted in Evans, *A Short History*, p. 182.

⁴¹ In both Laos and southern Vietnam, pre-socialist cultural traditions and tastes resurfaced during the 1990s. See Evans, *A Short History*, pp. 205–8. For southern Vietnam, see Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Crows Nest, NSW,

The question of independent thinking, of the expression or repression of subjectivity in critical and literary debates in 1950s Indonesia and Vietnam, is the main topic of my essay. What I document for writers and critics in Indonesia and North Vietnam during the 1950s reinforces Bodden's argument about leftist Sumatran theater and echoes the conclusions reached by Benitez, Huynh-Beattie, and by Ingrid Muan in the published essays by her discussed above. Southeast Asians continually crossed over the clear-cut boundaries of Cold War categories, categories by means of which they have been classified as either "rightists" or "leftists" by later generations.

Two characteristics shared by the four writers I examine stand out. The first was a commitment to building the new nation in a way that did not sacrifice the artist's freedom to think for him- or herself. The second was an eclectic cosmopolitanism cultivated by reading translations of Chinese or Western literature. American, Soviet, and Chinese publications during the Cold War era were a major source of translations that gave Southeast Asian writers access to literature and cultural criticism from elsewhere in the world, but Southeast Asian writers made their own creative use of this material. The three translations that fiercely nationalistic prose writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006) published in the Jakarta cultural studies journal *Indonesia* in 1955–56, for example, illuminate some of the major themes of his mature work, which was inspired, in part, by the Chinese writer Ding Ling (1904–86), a prize-winning feminist author who suffered censorship and internal exile in China because of her defense of subjectivity in literature. The iconoclastic but also fervently communist Vietnamese poet Trần Dần (1926–97) modeled himself on the most famous, and famously individualistic, poet of the Russian revolution, Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), whose work was available in Vietnamese translation in the 1950s. Pramoedya, Trần Dần, the modernist painters of Saigon, and the Filipino film director Lamberto Avellana were equally "stuck in the mud" of the contradictory demands of their respective nations in the early years of the Cold War. All were committed to the collective effort to build a strong, new nation, but also to "the inner quest for subjective truth" and the freedom of the individual. And all appealed to some kind of "universal" set of values, whether liberal or socialist, as a source of independence from the colonial past as well as from the new imperialisms of the Cold War present. Their work gave lasting expression, in short, to the failed attempt by the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955 to chart a neutral "third way" in international affairs. I conclude that the "cosmopolitanism" of the writers I discuss was firmly grounded in their nationalism rather than the politics of the Cold War, a conclusion that allows me to evaluate the usefulness of two theoretical models in the field of comparative literature for interpreting Indonesian and Vietnamese literature as examples of "world literature." In connecting these writers to some of the foreign writers they read in translation, I also show that similar debates over the role of subjectivity in literature took place in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of

and Honolulu, HI: Allen and Unwin and University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), especially p. 55, where Taylor describes men sitting in a small town café listening to the "sultry croonings" of music popular in the Republic of South Vietnam. "Behind the café, obscured by a pile of sugarcane stalks, is an enormous billboard of workers and soldiers heroically saluting the achievement of a new production victory. Although the paint is fading, their resolute, block-like forms are clear enough to reveal traces of an alien, or just a long-lost, mobilizational ideal."

China. Nowhere in the world were the Cold War blocs as monolithic as they were made out to be by the propagandists of both sides.

But throughout Southeast Asia during the Cold War, the longing for individual freedom was subordinated to the need for a strong state. Nowhere in the region was the state weaker than in Burma at the end of World War II. With the country devastated by the war, as well as by the assassination of its most able leader in 1947, a communist insurgency, a CIA-backed Chinese Guomindang (GMD) occupation, and ethnic rebel insurrections in the provinces and on the frontiers, the newly reconstituted and largely ethnic Burman *tatmadaw* (armed forces) under General Ne Win (1910–2002) emerged in 1962 as the guarantor of “a strong, unified Burma as a self-sufficient, developmentalist state, free from foreign tutelage and interference.”⁴² This military regime replaced the short-lived Burmese parliamentary government (1948–62). Mary Callahan, a scholar of Burma, has pointed out that Ne Win’s “Burmese Road to Socialism” contained many of the ideas put forward by the assassinated Aung San as well as by U Nu (1907–95), prime minister in 1948–56 and 1960–62. In 1950, U Nu wrote a play, which was broadcast over the radio, turned into a cartoon strip, and made required reading in national schools, titled *Ludu Aung Than* (The People Win Through). The play “emphasizes not so much the evils of Communism but the problems caused when external forces, from any quarter, attempt to interfere in Burma’s internal problems.”⁴³ The fear of “external forces” was what drove the formation of an authoritarian state in Cold War Burma.

A publication from the 1950s that provides insight into this process is the popular monthly literary periodical *Myawaddy*, published by the Burma Army, and analyzed in fascinating detail in this collection by the Burmese writer Bo Bo. Launched in 1952 as a result of U Nu’s interest in psychological warfare,⁴⁴ this journal became the *tatmadaw*’s leading forum for debating issues and ideas prior to Ne Win’s seizure of power in 1962.

Bo Bo begins by tracing the history of modern Burmese literature from the 1930s to the 1950s in order to show the dominance of leftist writers even as the communist insurrection and the Cold War gave rise to fiercely anti-communist commentary in the pages of *Myawaddy*. He notes, for example, that the Burmese translation of George Orwell’s anti-communist novel *Animal Farm* was unpopular in Burma because it attacked socialist ideas that were widely held by educated Burmese. And “[w]hen the US Embassy printed excerpts as anti-communist propaganda, the book’s fate was sealed.” Burmese of all political persuasions rejected outside meddling in their internal affairs.

Myawaddy’s contributors included writers of various political stripes—ex-communist, socialist, leftist—recruited in the *tatmadaw*’s effort to “win over the

⁴² Mary Callahan, “Myanmar’s Perpetual Junta: Solving the Riddle of the Tatmadaw’s Long Reign,” *New Left Review* 60 (November–December 2009): 41.

⁴³ Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 88. An American-made film based on the play, which was widely shown in Burma, as well as an English translation for consumption by American Cold War readers turned it into “a specifically anti-Communist story ... that served the interests of the West.” For a detailed discussion of this play and its significance for understanding Burmese responses to the Cold War, see Michael W. Charney, “Ludu Aung Than: Nu’s Burma during the Cold War,” in Goscha and Ostermann, *Connecting Histories*, pp. 335–55.

⁴⁴ Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 183.

hearts and minds of the Burmese population, domestic insurgents, and soldiers of the *tatmadaw*.⁴⁵ The leftist writer Thein Pe Myint published his masterful pre-war novel about resistance to colonial domination in *Myawaddy*, as the magazine sought to upstage the appearance of Thein Pe Myint's war-time memoir in a rival anti-government journal. Another left-wing writer for *Myawaddy* published a Burmese adaptation of a story about Andy Hardy, the hero of a Hollywood film series starring Mickey Rooney about a teenager and his family in small-town America,⁴⁶ which he used to praise General Ne Win. Contributor Chit Hlaing, "described as an anti-Soviet, anti-communist Marxist," had written books about and translations of Marx and Lenin between 1948 and 1950. *Myawaddy* writers attacked communists as enemies of Buddhism and democracy, but they also asked for their cooperation in a united fight against common enemies like the opium-smuggling, CIA-backed Chinese Guomindang army units that were occupying territory in northeastern Burma.⁴⁷ Communists as invasive, foreign-supported destroyers of national unity, rather than communism as an ideology, were featured as the principal theme of anti-communist writing in *Myawaddy*.

Another group of writers for the magazine examined the question of ethnic separatism and attempted to formulate, usually in short-story form, a definition of national identity that would be all-inclusive. But this definition was premised on ethnic Burman cultural and political dominance. Some of these stories analyzed the weaknesses in local ethnic governments, while others focused on "the beauty of ethnic girls and seemed to be influenced by the Victorian adventure writer Rider Haggard." Still another source of ideas about national identity for readers of *Myawaddy* were tales of Burmese patriotism taken from the ancient past as well as the colonial period. Burmese tradition was praised, while Western styles and manners, as displayed in Hollywood movies and mimicked by Christian ethnic groups, were soundly criticized.

Suspicion of Western culture and Western interference in Burmese affairs was prevalent in all such writing. Yet the leading ideologist writing for *Myawaddy*, Chit Hlaing, shunned both sides in the Cold War as he tried to formulate "a third way of founding a just society, along the lines of the Scandinavian states, India, or Sukarno's Indonesia" Such a society could only exist on the basis of Burman dominance. "Following a credo that posits Burman superiority, an assumption inherited from the 1930s Dobama Asiayone nationalist movement," Bo Bo concludes, "the *tatmadaw* were bound to adopt a Nietzschean belief in the need for a strong state built by a noble race."

In Burma of the 1950s, anti-communist paranoia was a product of an actual communist insurgency as well as of the fear that the PRC regime to the north would intervene in order to eliminate the American-backed GMD units on its border.⁴⁸ Focusing on Thailand of the 1960s and 1970s, Rachel Harrison argues in her essay that

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See a discussion and synopses of the Andy Hardy films at www.andyhardyfilms.com.

⁴⁷ Callahan, *Making Enemies*, pp. 154–56.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 156. "The Nu government, which notably was the first foreign non-communist country to recognize the PRC in 1949, feared that the continuation on Burmese soil of U.S.-backed preparations for a KMT invasion into China would provoke the Chinese communists into simply annexing all of Burma. Furthermore, with the start of the Korean War, Burmese observers rightfully worried that the United States might be setting up a second front in northeastern Burma."

the representation of the “Red Peril” in the films of male action star and pin-up Mit Chaibancha evidenced a similar anti-communist paranoia, expressed in the Thai context as anxiety about Chinese “otherness.” In this case, however, the Chinese threat was internal to Thailand and endangered not only political unity and survival of the state, but something even more fundamental: Thai ethnic identity itself.

Harrison begins her essay with a discussion of the Americanization of Thailand during the period when Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1897–1964) was prime minister, from 1948 through 1957. Since the 1930s, when he had served as army chief, a minister of defense, and also prime minister (1938–44), Phibun promoted policies and even made films that portrayed Thailand as a homeland in danger of being, as he put it, “effaced from the world” unless defended by “the army as its fence.”⁴⁹ He also continued to adhere to a concept of Thainess that had been developing since the late nineteenth century, in which the ethnic Thai were imagined to be “a race with martial characteristics, threatened by bad neighbours and great powers, rescued by unifying around a strong leader, and dedicated to the pursuit of progress.”⁵⁰ After the “fall” of China to the communists in 1949, Phibun offered token support for US Cold War policies in Asia in return for US military assistance. When the Thai Chinese community reacted positively to the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the need to control Thailand’s own Chinese population and a “crackdown on communism” became “interlocked” in the minds of those who ruled Thailand.⁵¹

Phibun amplified the anti-communist propaganda communicated to Thai audiences through imported Hollywood movies, which dominated the Thai market. His relaxation of restrictions on leftists and Chinese in 1955, however, allowed a stream of pro-PRC, anti-American sentiment to pour forth in the press. On October 20, 1958, army field marshal Sarit Thanarat seized power (for the second time in a year), cracked down on anti-American dissent, and was awarded US\$20 million for economic development by the US.⁵² At last the Americans had secured their “gigantic immobile aircraft carrier”⁵³ for pursuing a land- and air-war against communism in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

Harrison’s discussion focuses on Thai films made from the late 1950s, as American influence was growing, to the late 1970s, as the Americans were withdrawing in defeat from mainland Southeast Asia and large numbers of Thais educated during the heady years of American-funded economic expansion began to react to the dawning uncertainties of a Thai future no longer dominated by the West. The films of this period were influenced by Hollywood “red scare” movies from the 1950s and 60s that sounded the alarm about communist “enemies within.” In the Thai versions of such films, although the plot follows the binary logic of the American prototype—us versus them, virtuous village versus immoral city, family versus individual, good Thai Buddhist versus bad foreign communist—the identity of the “enemy within” is more multiform than is the American one, a composite threat

⁴⁹ Quoted in Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 125.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁵³ This is Benedict Anderson’s well-known metaphor, cited by Harrison, for Thailand when the Americans used the country as their primary base for waging war against communism in Indochina.

that encompasses all the negative forces perceived during the Thai “American era”—communist Chinese and Western capitalist all wrapped up into one,

The popular Thai movie actor Mit Chaibancha mimicked the leading rightwing Hollywood proponent of America’s Cold War, movie star John “Duke” Wayne,⁵⁴ to play the role of a Thai national hero battling “communism” on the silver screen. Mit exemplified Phibun’s definition of the ideal ethnic Thai male. But the question Harrison asks is, What did “communism” mean, exactly, in Mit’s Red and Golden Eagle films? In her close reading of Mit’s final movie, “The Golden Eagle” (1970), in which the actor lost his life doing his own helicopter stunt, Harrison shows that the plot was influenced less by American Cold War films and their obsessive anti-communist message than by the “Yellow Peril” theme of the British classics authored by Sax Rohmer and featuring the “insidious Dr. Fu Manchu,” who made his first appearance in 1913 as a Chinese megalomaniac bent on world conquest. Fu Manchu’s fictional adventures were turned into films between 1965 and 1970, but Thai readers made a much earlier acquaintance with another one of Rohmer’s Chinese arch villains. King Rama VI (r. 1910–25), who called the Chinese the “Jews of the East” in a pamphlet written in 1913, translated Rohmer’s *The Golden Scorpion* (1919) into Thai during another period of ethnic Thai anxiety caused by Chinese economic dominance in Bangkok and Chinese political activism in Thailand just before and after the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty by Chinese nationalists in 1911.⁵⁵ It is implied that the Fu Manchu-like villain in “The Golden Eagle” also intends to overthrow a monarchy, until he is unmasked by Mit, acting as the Golden Eagle (i.e., the iconic symbol of the United States), whose sexiness draws on male Thai cultural stereotypes as well as the attributes of Hollywood’s Agent 007. Sinophobia is given an added gender twist in the film by the introduction of a transvestite character as an important member of the communist gang. “Her” presence in “The Golden Eagle” adds the fear of homosexuality to the list of ideological and racial anxieties served up to the audience.

Harrison suggests that by combining Hollywood Cold War action movie plots with American comic-book characters to make Thai films about a “peril” that was indistinguishably both “Red” and “Yellow,” Thai movie directors adopted fantasy, rather than realism, as the their filmic mode of addressing the question of Southeast Asian identity during the Cold War.⁵⁶ Thai movie “communists” were hybrid, “free-floating signifiers” of multiple imagined threats to Thai identity.

⁵⁴ For a good discussion of John Wayne as “America’s greatest Cold War screen propagandist,” see Tony Shaw, *Hollywood’s Cold War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), pp. 199–233.

⁵⁵ Baker and Pasuk, *A History*, p. 114.

⁵⁶ Even the most famous American Cold War military action movie of all time, John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* (1968), was popular because of its “very unrealism,” according to Tony Shaw, since many watched it as a rip-roaring “cowboys and Indians” movie (Shaw, *Hollywood’s Cold War*, p. 223). Shaw also cites a perceptive comment on *The Green Berets* by Gary Wills, which is worth quoting in full since it suggests parallels between Thai movie-goers entranced by the timeless Thai ethnic heroism of Mit Chaibancha, or Burman *tatmadaw* readers inspired by tales of ancient Burman heroes in *Myawaddy*, and American Cold War audiences turning to an imagined, more heroic past to quiet their anxieties about the present. “The picture is more absurd than *The Alamo*,” Wills writes. “Wayne is totally miscast as a tough combat leader rappelling down ropes with a rescued woman on his back. Yet ... [f]or Wayne fans, its very unrealism may have been its selling point. People who did not want to know about the actual Vietnam War could feel that the national unity and resolve of World War II might turn around

Jennifer Lindsay analyzes another striking example of Cold War cultural hybridization, a form of state and state-forming diplomacy, in her essay on the first South-East Asia Cultural Festival, held in Singapore in 1963. Lindsay frames the festival as an expression of the cosmopolitanism that was basic to Cold War culture throughout Southeast Asia. But her essay places more emphasis than the others in the collection on a Southeast Asian drive, different from nationalism but dependent on it, to establish transnational kinds of community. There were a number of transnational groupings to which Southeast Asian nations belonged in the 1950s and 1960s, Lindsay explains, which expressed either alliance with one of the Cold War blocs (i.e., the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization [SEATO], the Association of Southeast Asia [ASA]) or some other kind of transnational solidarity (i.e., the Non-Aligned Movement [NAM], the Afro-Asian Movement). One short-lived regional organization, Maphilindo (1963), brought the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaya together on the basis of a shared Malay cultural and racial heritage. Lindsay argues that the planners of the 1963 festival increasingly saw “culture” as a way of bridging the differences among these transnational groupings. But there was another state-forming political calculation at work in the way the festival organizers formulated their concept of multiculturalism. Lindsay quotes comments on the festival by S. Rajaratnam, one of the founders of the People’s Action Party (PAP), and points out that the “cultural commonalities” he ascribed to the participating countries from Cambodia, Hong Kong, Laos, Malaya, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand, South Vietnam, India, North Borneo, and the Philippines reflected those of the four racial groups of Singapore itself—Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Western. Since 1962, the PAP, led by Lee Kwan Yew, had been courting all the racial groups of Singapore to support a plan to allow Singapore to merge with the new Federation of Malaysia, scheduled to come into existence on August 31, 1963, a move that would insure Lee Kwan Yew’s own political future. Leftists in the PAP, most of whom were Chinese and only some of whom were communist sympathizers, opposed the merger plan out of a desire to protect Singapore Chinese interests and independence. Lee crushed this “communist” opposition in February 1963, just months before the festival took place.

When Lindsay writes that “the strongest cultural image projected at the festival had to do with multiracialism and harmony” and that “[t]he rhetoric here was of nation-building and the need to create a common Malaysian culture,” she points to the cultural work the festival was doing in support of the new Federation of Malaysia, which was about to be born. She also brings to mind the racialized cultural policy pursued by Lee Kwan Yew and the PAP after Singapore had been expelled from Malaysia in 1965. The 1963 festival clearly foreshadowed this policy by its “locking of national culture into a composite made of discrete racial components,” as Lindsay puts it. “Under the CMIO (Chinese Malay, Indian, Others) scheme, every Singaporean is officially racially typed at birth,” writes Chua Beng Huat in an analysis of state-run “multiculturalism” in contemporary Singapore. “Under the CMIO scheme, the languages, religions, and festivals of the three major groups

this strange new conflict in the far-off jungles of the East. Wayne was fighting World War II again, the only way he ever did, in make-believe; and that make-believe was a memory of American greatness that many still wanted to live by.” Gary Wills, *John Wayne’s America: The Politics of Celebrity* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 233.

receive formal equal treatment.”⁵⁷ “The Festival projected a vision of the nation made up of gathered races performing to and with each other, a vision that was extended to Southeast Asia as a whole,” Lindsay concludes. In the Singapore context of 1963, this was a vision, not just of Southeast Asian regional cooperation, but of how to build a strong state in which culture would be “locked” into place according to racial categories. In Singapore during the 1950s, these issues had been freely debated, for leftist internationalism was in the ascendancy and Malay proponents of Indonesian Generation 45-inspired “universal humanism” lived and wrote side by side with Chinese socialist realists, who read cheap translations of Chekhov, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Flaubert, and Zola from the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing.⁵⁸ But the debate was now being stifled. In this sense, the inflexible racial templates adopted by the first South-East Asia Cultural Festival, which would have lasting significance to the nation, were the antithesis of the ideologically pluralistic spirit of the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, although the feeling of an anticolonial “transnational racial solidarity challenging a white-dominated power structure” found in Singapore was also present in Bandung.⁵⁹

The last two essays in the collection shift the perspective on the Cold War issues refracted through culture that have been examined in earlier discussions—national and racial identity, state formation, cosmopolitanism, the shifting meanings of “communism”—from the time of the Cold War to the contemporary moment. A generation of Southeast Asians who have not experienced the wars, political upheavals, and cultural debates of that era are now reexamining the Cold War in search of new ways of thinking about national identity, cultural expression, and the future of the nation.

Gaik Cheng Khoo examines independent filmmakers in Malaysia who seek to reinvent the nation in terms of its true historical racial and political diversity, a diversity that was suppressed during the Cold War in the name of anticommunism and ethnic Malay political dominance. Khoo echoes Bo Bo, Harrison, and Lindsay in demonstrating the importance of race in the construction of both the nation and the state in Southeast Asia. Independent films such as *I Love Malaya* and *The Last Communist* combat the anti-Chinese racism inherited from the colonial period and reinforced during the Cold War, as well as the lingering yet powerful paranoia felt by an older generation about “insidious enemies at home and abroad” who still threaten them with annihilation.⁶⁰

Malaysians of filmmaker Amir Muhammad’s (b. 1972) generation, however, are both fearless and simply curious about Malaysia’s “communist” past. For them, the

⁵⁷ Chua Beng Huat, “Multiculturalism in Singapore: an Instrument of Social Control,” *Race and Class* 44,3 (2003): 60.

⁵⁸ Sunil S. Amrith, “Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore, 1950–1963,” in *Paths Not Taken*, ed. Barr and Trocki, p. 50.

⁵⁹ Matthew Jones, “A ‘Segregated’ Asia?: Race, the Bandung Conference, and Pan-Asianist Fears in American Thought and Policy, 1954–1955,” *Diplomatic History* 29,5 (November 2005): 865. Amrith (“Internationalism,” p. 40) quotes a speech by the Singapore leftist leader David Marshall, who grasped another commonality shared by the Asian–African states represented in Bandung. “I want you to try and understand,” he told a group of Chinese students, “it is not Singapore alone that allows arrests and detentions without trial, but free countries like the great Republic of India [and] the great socialist country of Burma [which] also find it necessary in these troubled times to have such powers.”

⁶⁰ See the full quote from Kuznick and Gilbert, *Rethinking*, p. 11, in footnote 13, above.

Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was part of “a world that was not so unilateral, not so dominated by US interests ... and communism provided an alternative way of living, if not a balance of global power.” Seen from the current era, dominated by only one global superpower, the Cold War looks appealingly pluralistic! In documentaries by Amir and Fahmi Reza, Malayan Chinese communists and others “are given room to speak back,” in more than one language, and so reveal themselves to the audience as patriotic nationalists, good Muslims, and cosmopolitan, multicultural Southeast Asians. In the words of octogenarian CPM member Pak Sukor, quoted by Khoo: “Our bodies in the wilderness ... Our hands embrace the motherland ... And our eyes see the whole world.” Pak Sukor’s sentiments would have been entirely shared by the leftist theater practitioners Michael Bodden interviewed for his study. Khoo makes the radicalizing potential of rediscovering such sentiments and making them part of current political discourse in Malaysia explicit and exciting. Documenting the past of the Left in Malaysia reconnects the past to the present, adding a new dimension to the living nation of today and another possibility for its future.

Finally, Barbara Hatley gives a carefully documented account of contemporary theater groups and filmmakers in the Central Javanese city of Yogyakarta who are reexamining the events of 1965, the year when an army coup brought General Suharto, who masterminded mass killings and imprisonment for thousands of suspected “communists,” to power. Hatley adds sexism to the list of forces shaping the meaning of “communism” in the Indonesian case. In one documentary, women describe being sexually violated because, they were told, their leftist political views made them no better than prostitutes. The documentaries, however, present the audience with “an ordinary person, not an alien monster, who is describing firsthand experiences of confusion and suffering with which viewers can readily empathize.” The viewer of such films thus becomes, as Karen Strassler has written about today’s young Indonesians when they look at photographs of young people from 1965–66, a “witness,” that is, someone acting “as agent who in the act of observing becomes charged with the authority and the obligation to bear witness to others.”⁶¹ Strassler singles out one picture in particular, of young men and women attending a Communist Party rally in 1965, which resonates with Hatley’s discussion. In this photograph, Strassler writes, the face of a woman leaps out at the viewer: “She is laughing. Her hair is well-combed, she is dressed stylishly and neatly. Her face is, in a word, lovely. ... There is nothing sinister in this photograph, nothing that would conform to the evil image of communists perpetrated by the New Order regime, nothing that would suggest the future that awaits them.”⁶² Strassler’s direct focus on an individual and on the openness of the future suggested by the photographic image recalls, once again, the analysis of Francisco Benitez in this volume, as Benitez suggests that Avellana’s movie characters, including the Huks, express a similar, non-ideological humanity and open-ended futurity, one that, in being universal, becomes the template for an all-inclusive and independent, postcolonial Filipino identity.

⁶¹ Karen Strassler, “Material Witnesses: Photographs and the Making of *Reformasi* History,” in *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, ed. Mary S. Zurbuchen (Singapore and Seattle, WA: Singapore University Press in association with University of Washington Press, 2005), p. 283.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 298.

Hatley provides telling commentary on audience reaction to some non-documentary movies about 1965 that she watched. A group of women who had been victimized in 1965 found one film made in 2007, which is set in a Javanese village and makes use of Javanese cultural stereotypes about the weakness of women for emotional effect, "quite at odds with their own experience." Hatley's discussion of a play performed by three hundred actors in front of an audience of a thousand people, in which the events of 1965 were presented in allegorical form as a story about a traditional Javanese kingdom, seems to provide support for Bodden's suggestion that modern theater and its message can be obfuscated when staged using the conventions of Javanese theatrical tradition. In other performances inflected in simpler ways by Javanese cultural forms, however, Hatley observed the violence of 1965 being reenacted with great power. In one such play, even orthodox Muslims, who were among those who took part in the killings of "communists" in 1965–66, were portrayed in a critical manner. Hatley argues that the very use of the traditional Javanese *ketoprak* theater form for contemporary plays and films about 1965 has been a way of memorializing the pre-1965 past, since this kind of theater was the favorite medium of leftist theater practitioners of that era. Yet the recovery of what was lost in 1965 by contemporary theater practitioners in Central Java, Hatley concludes, is limited. Performances about 1965 serve as "a warning against present-day social stereotyping ... [b]ut the issue of what the communist movement was and what it stood for remains unexplored."

The essays in this book make clear that further exploration of the Cold War past is both possible and imperative. They do more than simply provide important insights into cultural expression from and about the Cold War era of Southeast Asian history. The enormous, sometimes catastrophic, impact of the Cold War on Southeast Asian hearts, minds, and bodies is evident in the films, plays, paintings, theater performances, literary works, popular magazines, festivals, and sporting events that are examined here. But the cultural evidence presented in this collection is also unequivocal, more so than political and social events themselves, in demonstrating the resilient ability, manifest throughout many centuries, of Southeast Asians to make their own history. Contrary to George Orwell's prediction, the "exploited classes" of Southeast Asia rose in revolt, despite the Cold War, in the name of cultural and political freedom. The meanings of words like "communist," "cosmopolitan," "nationalistic," or "modern" that are now used to describe cultural processes during that time must be reconnected to the ways in which they were debated during the Cold War in Southeast Asia, when they were understood in terms of a cultural as well as a political struggle for independence and survival that was already underway when the Cold War arrived in the region. The Cold War made that struggle more violent and deadly, but it did not alter its trajectory. For each of the national cultures discussed in this book, the tendency toward anxiety and conformity in the face of outside forces, state absolutism, or ideological rigidity during the Cold War has given way to creative pluralism and innovative individuality, two age-old and seemingly inexhaustible sources of progressive change in Southeast Asia.

FILMING PHILIPPINE MODERNITY DURING THE COLD WAR: THE CASE OF LAMBERTO AVELLANA

Francisco Benitez

The Philippines gained its independence from the United States, its previous colonial ruler, in 1946, and served as an exemplary outpost of US liberal democracy in Southeast Asia during the Cold War.¹ Reflecting this colonial history and neocolonial relationship, the Philippine national bourgeoisie understood their postcolonial role assigned them to act as defenders of Western democracy against communism. The country served not only as a major base for US military operations in the region, but provided troops for the Vietnam and Korean Wars. The establishment of the Committee on Un-Filipino Activities (CUFA, later renamed the Committee on Anti-Filipino Activities [CAFA]) in the late 1940s mirrored US attempts to police its own population's infiltration by communism.² Unlike the United States, however, post-war Philippines was experiencing an actual armed peasant unrest known as the Huk Rebellion, an uprising led by a combination of peasant leaders, union organizers, socialists, and communists.³

¹ "Liberal democracy" here reflects that term's use in the Philippines in the 1950s and 60s for US-style democracy and capitalism in contrast to communism and socialism. See, for example, Petronilo Bn. Daroy, "The Failure of Liberalism," in *Against the National Grain* (Manila: Rem Printing Press, 1966). For a discussion of the general milieu of the Cold War in this period that compares the Philippine situation with that of China and Vietnam from the point of view of American and Soviet policymakers, see Michael Hunt and Steven Levine, "Revolutionary Movements in Asia and the Cold War," in *Origins of the Cold War: An International History*, ed. Melvyn Leffler and David Painter (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), pp. 251–64.

² For example, the United States' House Un-American Activities Committee (commonly HUAC, or, more properly, HCUA; 1938–75).

³ For a classic history of the rebellion, see Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977). Also see Eduardo Lachica, *HUK Philippine Agrarian Society in Revolt* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1971); Luis Taruc, *Born of the People* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973); Eduardo Lachica, *He Who Rides the Tiger* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1967); William J. Pomeroy, *The Philippines: Colonialism, Collaboration, and Resistance* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1992); and Vina Lanzona, *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

Huk units had fought as guerrillas against the Japanese during World War II, but US General MacArthur did not recognize the Huks as war veterans.⁴ Many Huks were forcibly disarmed, arrested, and charged with communist subversion as early as February 1945. As Vina Lanzona points out, the new Philippine Republic, “still under the colonial influence of the U.S. government, was determined not to let the Left establish a political power base and launched a series of actions aimed at delegitimizing the Huk leadership and undermining its popular support ... the peasant rebellion grew in size and organizational strength between 1946 and 1950, and the number of armed Huks increased to roughly twenty thousand. Supported by an even larger number of noncombatant peasant supporters, the Huks were able to capture villages, drive out landlords, and redistribute land among the tenants.”⁵ Critical of postcolonial Philippines’ continuation of oligarchic rule, the Huks provided a critique of modernization and an alternative understanding of modernity—one that argued for “revolutionary conditions” that made the state and nation open to armed communist takeover.⁶ The Huk rebellion, which gained momentum in 1946 after Huk leaders who were elected to congress were barred from taking their seats, required the attention of the Philippines and the United States in efforts to stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. The counter-insurgency techniques of the United States Information Service (USIS) and the Joint United States Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG), under then-secretary of defense and future Philippine president Ramon Magsaysay, and US “liaison officer” Edward Lansdale, included intense military operations, psychological warfare (psywar), and ubiquitous propaganda as part of the battle to win the hearts and minds of Huk supporters. The neutralization of the rebellion by the mid-1950s has been touted as a model of counterinsurgency and anti-communist tactics.

In the late-1940s and early '50s, Filipino cinema, as a manifestation of national culture, reflected the unsettled conditions present in the Philippines. That period of continuing war and rebellion also heralded the emergence of what has been called the Philippine film-studio system’s “Golden Age.” The images and narratives produced by this industry are not merely the purveyors of what a Marxist critic might call “false consciousness,” but, in fact, are themselves terrains of ideological struggle and production. In 1976, Lamberto Avellana, a theater and film director whose career spanned the 1930s to the 1980s, was the government’s first Philippine

⁴ “Huk” is the term for two distinct but connected peasant-based movements in the Philippines. The first led to the formation of the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon (Hukbalahap, or People’s Anti-Japanese Army), founded by leaders of peasant organizations and the Communist Party of the Philippines (Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas, or PKP) in 1942 to fight against the Japanese. During World War II, many of these units fought as guerillas allied to the United States. The period after independence—after 1946—saw the re-establishment and rise of the Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB, or People’s Liberation Army), and its members were also called the Huks.

⁵ Lanzona, *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion*, p. 7.

⁶ The Huks themselves were not monolithic but, rather, represented a coalition of peasants, socialists, and communists, some of whom were also union organizers. For an overview of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP or PKP) and its involvement with the Huk Movement before and after World War II, the movement’s own internal struggles (particularly over the existence of a “revolutionary condition”), and the responses of the Philippine central government to PKP challenges, both electoral and armed, see Alfredo Saulo, *Communism in the Philippines: An Introduction* (Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2002). See also Taruc, *Born of the People*, and Kerkvleit, *The Huk Rebellion*.

national artist for film. Film critic and historian Agustin Sotto cites him as the director who first understood the importance of *mise-en-scène* and the personality of the camera in Philippine cinema.⁷ Arguably, Avellana's cinema makes sense of the Cold War and the government's anti-Huk propaganda by recognizing them as elements in a continuing crisis of Filipino modernization and modernity. Post-World War II Filipino modernization can be seen in terms of the country's urban population displacements, neocolonial economic instability, and rural warfare. These national crises produced multiple, and often conflicting, narratives of modernization and modernity that responded to, and resolved, the anxieties about these conditions. Against communism's own narrative of modernity as a class struggle, and in the context of the Huk's challenge to the nation-state, Avellana's films project a nationalist, liberal ideology as a specifically Filipino filmic response to globalized modernization during the Cold War, modernization that can also be understood as a form of US imperialism.⁸

In this chapter I look at how three award-winning films by Lamberto Avellana used specific cinematic techniques, such as camera angles and music, to present Cold War tensions as a predicament of existential, subjective, and individual choices. Such choices required a coherent "self," an individual, struggling against the apprehension of the "experience of modernity as the immanence of disaster and disenchantment"⁹ as its suturing fantasy. By this I mean a fantasy that stitches together the split subject.¹⁰ At the same time, it sutures the viewer into the film's narration and into a particular ideology. It creates an illusion of coherence and unity in the face of modernity's crisis of disenchantment and disaster, and of Cold War modernization's continuing crisis of imperial competition and instability. Avellana, in fact, produces images and narratives of the "individual" struggling against the forces and constraints of Philippine modernization. While Philippine modernist visual art fragments points-of-view and foregrounds how visibility itself becomes a terrain of Cold War struggle so that the critique of modern fragmentation becomes one of its key functions,¹¹ Avellana responded to the Cold War with images of a coherent nationalist Filipino subjectivity appropriate to and adequate for living

⁷ See Agustin V. Sotto, "Lamberto V. Avellana," in *Focus on Filipino Films: A Sampling, 1951–1982* (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), p. 14.

⁸ For a discussion of specific, cultural forms for modernity, see Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Gaonkar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). For US imperialism and Philippine neocolonialism, see, for example, Paul Kramer, *Blood of Government* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); H. W. Brands, *Bound to Empire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992); Stephen Shalom, *The United States and the Philippines* (Philadelphia, PA: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981); and Renato Constantino, *Neo-colonial Identity and Counter-Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1978).

⁹ John Blanco, "Baroque Modernity and the Colonial World: Aesthetics and Catastrophe in Nick Joaquin's *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*," *Kritika Kultura* 4 (March 2004): 7.

¹⁰ For general discussions of suture, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI Publications, 2001), chapter 2. For Žižek, of course, suture is more than the "gaze" and is always attempting (and failing) to cover the subject's constitutive lack. One could read Avellana's films against the grain and highlight the failures in suture or the shifting camera positions, but I leave that for another essay.

¹¹ See Jonathan Beller, *Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle, and the World-Media System* (Quezon City: Ateneo University Press, 2006).

through Cold War conditions: his imagined subject is a loyal and productive citizen of the nation-state, a nation-state that, in turn, is shown to be in need of working towards the common good of its citizens and against older feudal structures of power. Envisioned as specifically national, Avellana's Filipino subject was loyal to the nation-state and the economic system inherited from (and some might argue continued) US rule, even as he often critiqued the underside of greed and a monetary system gone wild. Read contrapuntally to the Huk charge that Philippine electoral politics has not led to true national liberation, Avellana's films provide more than a means for cooptation into dominant ideology. More importantly, they fabricate, interpellate, and fix the audience as coherent, responsible, liberal, modern, nationalist citizens. His films posit a stable "standpoint" subject position and have a pedagogical function of *producing* the Filipino nationalist as liberal citizen subject.

The first Avellana film I will discuss is the US-government co-produced propaganda film *HUK sa Bagong Pamumuhay* (HUK in a New Life/Livelihood, 1953; henceforth *HBP*), which won national awards. After the capture of Huk's leader, Luis Taruc, in 1954, and the official end of the Huk movement, Avellana also directed the neo-realist *Anak Dalita* (literally, Child of Sorrow, 1956; the English title is *The Ruins*), about a Korean War veteran returning to and remaking a life for himself among the slums and in the shadow of the cathedral ruins of Post-World War II Manila. A year later came Avellana's ethnographic *Badjao* (1957), about the tensions between the settled Tausug and the Sea Gypsies of the Sulu Archipelago, the Badjao.¹² In the face of competing Cold War ideologies, these films produced, promoted, and cultivated a specifically Filipino, loyal, liberal, nationalist subject, even after the official end of the military's psychological warfare against the Huks.

During the Cold War, film not only registered cultural anxieties reflective of ideological desires: film was a means by which a particular vision of universal liberal ideology was turned into a nationalist narrative that produced a specific kind of subjectivity. Film was also a means by which this ideology could be disseminated among the general population. Philippine filmmakers understood the dual capacities of their industry to reflect the collective unconscious of the population, as well as its potential to transfix its audience into spectating consumers. Film's ideological value lies not only in its capacity to tap into popular anxieties, but also to provide answers or resolutions to the social contradictions that cause those anxieties (e.g., Cold War modernization).¹³ As examples of disciplinary technology, films coordinate images

¹² In 1964, Avellana and Rolf Bayer, credited as writers for all three films, also made *Scout Rangers*, which won a Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences (FAMAS) best-director award in 1965. The poster for *Scout Rangers* claims it is "the true story of the most decorated and 'fightingest' unit of the armed forces of the Philippines that broke the back of communism and proved that this country was an impregnable bastion of democracy in the Far East." Other Avellana films from the 1960s with Bayer involvement are *Cry Freedom*, *Destination Vietnam*, and *The Evil Within*. I think the poster and the titles' Cold War themes speak for themselves. Bayer also performs the "American" Huk in *HBP*, a role based on the historical American Huk, William Pomeroy.

¹³ Rafael Guerrero notes, "The Tagalog movie formulas that are resurrected time and again as box office demands reveal deep-rooted, tacit, and even covert aspirations, frustrations, and complexes of more pertinence to the national character than to the established genres of the cinema," in his *Readings in Philippine Cinema* (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), p. 109. We, of course, can question the changing historical conditions that shape the "national character" (and thus the changes *in* national character) to which these formulae are addressed.

and narratives of social reality to propose and produce a particular type of subjectivity. Furthermore, film must erase its own mediatory function in order to hide its task as a technology that purveys an ideology. Cinema provides scripts for the imaginary itself, even as it redirects the desires and fantasies of the social imaginary to assemble and produce its own consumers.¹⁴ The subjectivity proposed by the films must be apprehended by the audience as commonsensical: simultaneously culturally particular as well as normative, necessary, and natural. Objective social contradictions were in this way displaced and resolved by a subject that appears transcendental, universal, and ahistorical.

Caught in a predicament between what Teodoro Locsin in 1952 called the “tiger” of communism’s armed struggle and the “hyena” of capitalism’s alienating and unbridled lust for money,¹⁵ Avellana’s films sought to explore the ways in which the pressures of modernization, the neocolonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines, and the need for a national subject immanent to these conditions could be apprehended and negotiated. His films drew on structures of feeling and constraints that emerged out of Cold War material conditions, and stitched them into narratives that could produce a coherent Filipino citizen subject. These explorations in culture ideologically articulated, or linked, the postcolonial nationalist cultural identity of the Philippine nation-state to the larger ideologies of a liberal empire that the United States sought to maintain through its finance capital, covert operations, and continuing military presence in the country.

“I AM GOING TO MAKE THE HUK A CAPITALIST”¹⁶ AS COLD WAR RHETORIC

Like communist ideology, government propaganda also presented itself as a universal truth that the peasants simply needed to understand. For the communists, the reality of peasant dispossession ought to be sufficient to convince the poor to revolt. For the government, however, the peasants had to be inoculated from the contaminating disease of communist thought and shown the morality and common sense of the state’s position. Psychological warfare was understood by Magsaysay and Lansdale as a fight for the hearts and minds of the population, a way to shield peasant supporters from the bewitching and fascinating (but false and thus temporary) promises of communism. As Jose Crisol points out,

The weakness of enemy propaganda, however, is fundamental: it is on the wrong side. It has to sell a twisted truth, a warped idea. Its appeal may hold a temporary fascination, but it is vulnerable to counter measures. When a bewitched audience is freed from the temporary fascination, usually it is forever *immune* to further enemy propaganda. The weapon against falsehood is always truth. How to expose falsehood and how to clarify truth is the technique, not

¹⁴ For a discussion of Philippine fantasy production’s links to global capital, see Neferti Xina M. Tadiar, *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Teodoro Locsin, “The Tiger and the Hyena,” *Philippine Free Press*, August 2, 1952.

¹⁶ Quote from Ramon Magsaysay in “The Philippines: Clean Up Man,” *Time* LVIII,22 (November 26, 1951): 6. The issue had Ramon Magsaysay on the cover. See www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,821878,00.html, viewed on January 19, 2010.

always easy, of the informational and psychological warfare carried on by the Department of National Defense [emphasis added].¹⁷

Crisol's use of "immune" suggests a metaphorical comparison of communist ideology to a disease or a virus from which the population must be protected. Increasing immunity, however, did not require that the subjects first be infected by the communist virus. This bio-political metaphor and policy meant recognizing the validity of peasant concerns and providing a government response to them, or at least the appearance of one. Huk supporters had to be shown the "truth" of the government position, the emptiness of communism's promises, and the falsity of the Communist Party line and its analysis. Note that the government's position is assumed to be the "truth," a truth that simply has not been fully realized by the peasantry and becomes part of their "common sense." As Gramsci writes, "common sense is an ambiguous, contradictory, and multiform concept ... it is possible to state correctly that a certain truth has become part of common sense in order to indicate that it has spread beyond the confines of intellectual groups."¹⁸ Attention to anxieties over propaganda and ideology thus expose "universal truths" as contingent on hegemonic structures. These very anxieties in turn reveal a need or desire for bewitchment in a disenchanting world.¹⁹ In this context, the Huks and their sympathizers had to be re-converted from rebellious peasants to regain their (purported) natural, docile state of being loyal citizen-subjects of the nation-state. To this end, the military used a comprehensive campaign of mass media, including radio and films. The Philippine government, in association with the US military, "mounted a massive anti-Huk propaganda campaign, distributing in a two-year period over thirteen million leaflets and other materials and conducting over six thousand meetings."²⁰

Government propaganda flooded the field as part of its attempt to "sell" its truth. As a governmental technique, the ubiquitous dissemination of propaganda heightens media's capacity to totalize the population. Media, according to this view, seek to imagine, constitute, and enclose a "public" receptive to particular messages, and then to police it. Government propaganda sought to combat the fascinating allure of communism with the mesmerizing glamour of media and the omnipresence of the state in everyday village life. At the same time, the need to use propaganda at all highlights the government's anxiety over the fragmentation of the state's

¹⁷ Jose Crisol was head of the defense department's public affairs office that carried out psywar media activities and, later, was President Magsaysay's secretary of defense. See Jose Crisol, "Communist Propaganda in the Philippines (1950-1953)," *Philippine Studies* 1,3-4 (December 1953): 222.

¹⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971), p. 423.

¹⁹ For notions of hegemony and common sense, I borrow from Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Here I am suggesting that films themselves are a means of production of ideological structures as well as a means of ideological dissemination.

²⁰ Renato Constantino, quoted in Beller, *Acquiring Eyes*, p. 102. See also Pomeroy's discussion of the way in which the USIS used the Philippines as a base for propaganda activities throughout Asia, in *Colonialism, Collaboration, and Resistance*, pp. 170-74; and Alvin Scaff, *The Philippine Answer to Communism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1955). Benedict Anderson calls Scaff a "former CIA officer" and his book invaluable and "ingenious." See Benedict Anderson, "Cacique Democracy," in Anderson's *The Spectre of Comparison* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 207.

centralizing, absolute sovereign eye/I under modernization. The very need for propaganda on this scale suggests the extent of the government's insecurity over its control of citizens' opinions and sentiment, even as the government asserted its power legitimately to speak for the people.²¹ The actual content of the media can be analyzed as part of a disciplinary bio-politics that had the goal of constituting liberal subjects where they perhaps did not yet exist. The population had to be trained or coerced into believing that the crisis of modernity that they were experiencing could only be resolved by the liberal democratic ideology espoused by the nation-state.

To that end, Secretary of Defense Magsaysay sought to ensure that the population believed that the government worked in its interests, in order to guarantee that the people chose the government's position instead of that of the Huk ideologues. The appearance of a responsive government was crucial to Magsaysay and Lansdale's anti-communist campaign. Magsaysay argued:

Why is it that a foreign power has been able to trick some of our simple Filipino peasants into serving it? Let us be frank. It is because we have for too long turned our backs upon them while we satisfied our own selfish desires. However, when a persevering governmental program has been able to bridge the gap of misunderstanding and has succeeded in inspiring [the people's] confidence, and when they have become convinced that governmental authorities exercise their power as a means for their liberation, then they respond with unfailing enthusiasm and loyalty. Left to themselves, they were easy victims for the clever international swindlers who are buying men's souls with empty promises. Today ... your armed forces are proving this fact. They have said to the Huks, "As guardians of our nation's safety, it is our duty to hunt you down and kill you if you do not surrender. But, as fellow Filipinos, we would rather help you return to a happy Filipino way of life."

Many former Huks have accepted this offer of help and today are carving out a new and good life for themselves in the lands of Mindanao. In this same project another great lesson in democracy is being taught the little people of our land. Working with the new settlement in friendly cooperation are members of the armed forces, demonstrating by actual deed that a democratic army is a people's army—not a club to be held over their cowering heads, but a force dedicated to the protection and welfare of every decent citizen of our Republic. By this policy of all-out force and all-out fellowship we are making good progress; we are fighting a winning war.²²

²¹ The November 26, 1951, *Time* magazine cover featuring Magsaysay has eyes all over looking at him through the jungle. This contrasts with the "magic eye" technique of the military that anonymously surveys the people to uncover Huk sympathizers. For a discussion of the "magic eye," see Jonathan Beller, *Acquiring Eyes*, p. 103; and Lansdale, et al., *Counter-Guerrilla Operations in the Philippines, 1946-53* (Ft. Bragg, NC: US Army Special Forces Center and School, 15 June 1961).

²² Alvin Scaff, *The Philippine Answer to Communism*, p. vi. Scaff claims that this was a speech delivered during Bataan Day while Magsaysay was still secretary of defense. Given the general belief that Lansdale monitored and managed Magsaysay (and his public persona), it is not improbable that this speech was also Lansdale's idea. What interests me the most here is the government's rhetoric and the slippages between the "peasants" and the performative "we," "they," and "you," particularly considering Magsaysay's populist image.

Magsaysay first suggests that the Huks work for foreign interests rather than Filipino ones. By Magsaysay's logic, if left alone, Filipino peasants would become victims of "international swindlers" that sell them "empty promises." Therefore, the state has an obligation to protect citizens from untruth. Magsaysay's position blamed outside manipulators for agrarian unrest, on the one hand, while recognizing the need to make the elite-dominated state open and accessible to its people, on the other.²³ Magsaysay's speech quoted above outlines the government's response to the Huk situation: all-out force and all-out fellowship.²⁴ The apparent success of this campaign became a model for counterinsurgency and anti-communist campaigns for other countries in Southeast Asia.²⁵ After the defeat of the Huks in the mid-1950s, Lansdale took part in "psychological operations" (PsyOps) in Vietnam, and his team conducted seminars in counterinsurgency for South Vietnamese allies at the US Army's Fort Bragg.²⁶

To counter the Huk rallying cry of "land for the landless," Magsaysay and Lansdale created the Economic Development Corps (EDCOR): a resettlement program for landless peasants and Huk cadres who surrendered. The military was to aid and supervise the clearing of the forest and the establishment of homestead settlements in Mindanao. Such a policy put prospective settlers at odds with the local Muslim population, but projected the idea of Mindanao as an empty land full of possibilities. The idea of using land in Mindanao to ease tenancy issues in Luzon had been part of the Philippine government's programs for some time, but it was Magsaysay and his team who made it part of the military's and government's psychological-warfare arsenal against the Huks. Furthermore, EDCOR received funding from the US government to conduct the work of rehabilitating Huk supporters and turning them into idealized, small-scale landholding farmers and enterprising homesteaders. Though the number of Huks who took advantage of EDCOR's invitation to reform was quite small, the offer itself was an important weapon in the military's public relations campaign, and the communists appeared

²³ The extensive historical work on Magsaysay himself reflects the ambiguities and contradictions of the Cold War period. Was he a puppet of Lansdale? Was he genuinely populist? Many have argued that the dissemination/invention of Magsaysay's personal integrity was crucial for the success of psychological warfare. See, for example, Donn Hart, "Magsaysay: Philippine Candidate," *Far Eastern Survey* 22,6 (May 1953): 67-70; Nick Cullather, "America's Boy? Ramon Magsaysay and the Illusion of Influence," *Pacific Historical Review* 62,3 (August 1993): 305-38; and David Wurfel, "Philippine Agrarian Reform under Magsaysay," *Far Eastern Survey* 27,1 (January 1958): 7-15.

²⁴ This contradictory offer has Magsaysay "on the one hand providing promises of land reform as a signal of the state's goodwill, while suspending the writ of *habeas corpus* and solidifying relations with the US military and the CIA." See John D. Blanco, "Baroque Modernity and the Colonial World," p. 9.

²⁵ Lansdale argued, though, that the United States did not follow his advice in Viet Nam and that, after the Tet Offensive, the United States had lost any hope of winning the hearts of the people. For a sense of the regional awareness of psywar and resettlement, see Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of War* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1991). For military treatments, see Lawrence M. Greenberg, *The Hukbalahap Insurrection: A Case Study of a Successful Anti-Insurgency Operation in the Philippines, 1946-1955* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1995); Robert Ross Smith, *The Hukbalahap Insurgency: Economic, Political, and Military Factors* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1963); and Leo S. Comish, *The United States and the Philippine Hukbalahap Insurgency: 1946-1954. An Individual Study Project Report* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 1971).

²⁶ See Lansdale et al., *Counter-Guerrilla Operations in the Philippines, 1946-53*.

threatened by it. They responded by disseminating leaflets with images of EDCOR settlements as “concentration camps enclosed with barbed-wire fences, guarded by soldiers at sentry boxes, and inhabited by ex-HUKs in chains ... The whole project, they claimed, was an American idea to forestall a revolt against the weak and corrupt government.”²⁷ Film studio LVN (De Leon Villonco Nabao Studios) and USIS produced Avellana’s *HUK sa Bagong Pamumuhay*, with sequences filmed in an actual EDCOR village, in Lanao, perhaps to counter the communists’ charges.²⁸ *HUK sa Bagong Pamumuhay* follows Magsaysay’s speech in many ways. The film’s story was adapted to radio on DZFM, and the film swept the 1953 FAMAS awards, earning best picture, best director (Avellana), best actor (Jose Padilla, Jr.), and best supporting actor (Leroy Salvador) honors.²⁹



Figure 1. Poster for *HUK sa Bagong Pamumuhay*, 1953

²⁷ Scaff, *The Philippine Answer to Communism*, p. 112.

²⁸ Other films LVN produced with the aim of reinforcing government propaganda against the communists were *Korea* (1951), with Ninoy Aquino as scriptwriter, and *Kontrabando* (Contraband) (1952). Avellana’s official filmography contains five films listed as either produced or co-produced by LVN with USIS, all in 1953: *Yaman ng Dukha* (Wealth of the Poor), *Not by Bread Alone*, *Maginoong Mamamayan* (Noble/Honorable Citizen), *Sa Hirap ng Ginhawa* (In the Difficulty/Poverty of Prosperity), and *Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay* (Huk in the New Life/Livelihood). Avellana also co-produced films in the region, for example, *Sgt. Hassan*, co-produced with P. Ramlee, in Malaya. The titles indicate the probable compensatory thrust of the films ideological work. See Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), *Parangal Kay Avellana* (Manila: CCP Coordinating Center for Film, 1989); and <http://pelikulaatbp.blogspot.com/2008/08/focus-on-filipino-directors-lamberto-v.html> (accessible as of January 13, 2010).

²⁹ Avellana also directed documentary films for Lansdale and USIS in 1953 and continued to make Cold War-type films with Rolf Bayer in the 1960s. See his mention of the tension between him and LVN owner Doña Sisang de Leon, tensions caused by Lansdale’s USIS activities and pay, in an interview in *Doña Sisang and Filipino Movies*, ed. Monina Mercado (Manila: A. R. Mercado Management Inc., 1977), p. 82. Scaff mentions that an English version of this film played “in the theaters of America” (Scaff, *The Philippine Answer to Communism*, p. 128).

FROM FARMER TO REBEL TO FARMER

HBP portrays the post-World War II travails of Carding (Jose Padilla, Jr.), who fought as a guerrilla against the Japanese. Carding's love, Trining (Celia Flor), has waited patiently for him all through the war. Meanwhile, Carding's friend and guerrilla commander, Maxie (played by a character actor who often portrayed villains, Joseph or Jose de Cordova), is a communist taking orders from outside agitators. Unknown to Carding, Maxie cheats him out of his "back pay" for fighting during the war in order to deliberately increase Carding's dissatisfaction with the government—part of a communist plan to create revolutionary conditions that necessitate armed struggle. The movie's use of the issue of back pay brings immediately to mind the discrimination experienced by Filipino veterans of World War II who, having fought on the side of the United States, were nevertheless stripped of their GI Bill of Rights benefits as a result of the Rescission Act of February 20, 1946. In the movie, the Filipino veterans' fight for recognition from the United States is not discussed. Instead, it is communist interference that denies veterans their due from the Philippines and the United States. Carding is portrayed as a genuine war hero, for whom the overwhelming difficulties of creating a post-World War II life for himself and his family become the true cause for his joining the Huk movement.

In a *noir*-inspired sequence, Maxie receives orders from an American communist, Mac (Rolf Bayer, suggesting the historical figure of William Pomeroy), who informs him that, as true communists, they both have only one cause: the revolution. Revolution has no loyalty to any race, country, or religion, Mac reminds him. Mac tells Maxie their strategy in English: "Get enough men to lose faith in their government, get them fighting mad, and teach them the Party line because people are sick, confused. The time to strike is now." The film suggests that the confusion over post-war reconstruction and the options for Philippine modernization is the crisis within which communist ideology intervenes by introducing the "Party line," which provides an alternative narrative (albeit a false one) to that of the nation-state's. When Carding returns to civilian life, all he desires is to live a life of dignity and financial security on the family farm with the ever-supportive Trining. Self-sufficient, small family farms are presented as the basis of a Filipino democratic ideal: the means to a life of dignity, noble labor, and autonomy that allows the individual to avoid class oppression. In a pastoral sequence reminiscent of picturesque paintings by Fernando Amorsolo and accompanied by folk music, Carding, his brother, and his brother-in-law work the land together as a family. But sweat and labor, even of a united family working together, are not enough to realize the idyll of an almost Jeffersonian yeoman citizenry in the Philippines. The need for capital forces Carding and his brother to borrow against their land, with the understanding that either the harvest or Carding's back wages will pay for the mortgage. Carding's back pay never comes. When a storm wipes out their harvest the same night Carding's son is born, the family forfeits their only inheritance. When the moneylender comes to take possession of the land, Carding assaults him in an ensuing altercation and becomes wanted by the police. Maxie then invites Carding to go to the hills and join the Huks, presenting them first and foremost as nationalists fighting for the oppressed who have no other recourse within the system. Carding—a brave and honorable example of a Filipino peasant man of action who believes he is still at war—joins the Huks and quickly rises within their ranks, even as he becomes increasingly aware of their cruelty.

Each Huk encounter with government forces is shown to cause greater hardships for civilians. Images of suffering women and orphaned children end each exciting fight sequence. After Trining's innocent parents are killed in a Huk attack, Carding is finally captured through the actions of his brother-in-law and comrade-at-arms, Hesus (Leroy Salvador). Newspapers of the time were full of stories about Huk children abandoned by their parents, about soldiers caring for civilians, and about children and families suffering because of the rebellion.³⁰ Avellana is clear: the peace of civil society, the community created by religion, a "bourgeois" domesticity cast as autonomous from the state, and the lives of innocents—family members—are bound to be destroyed, for these are the costs of revolution. In accordance with Lansdale and Magsaysay's campaign, *HBP* portrays the state's relationship to the people positively, so that the "old army of persecution became the army with a social conscience; the government of the landed aristocracy became the government concerned with the welfare of the people."³¹ The film's subtext does not propose changing or addressing either the structural contradictions inherent within the capitalist system or the system's relationship to the maintenance of feudal-like relations. Rather, it advocates making the system work better, since it has not benefited those whom it was meant to help. It recognizes the Huk sympathizer's lament and puts the blame on interfering communists who make the already difficult situation of post-war rebuilding worse. The government here is shown to be responsive to the needs of its people, as EDCOR and Mindanao are offered as escape valves for the social issues of central Luzon (which the scene with the landowning class in the movie itself brings up).

In an interesting exchange with army officials conducted in English after his capture, Carding admits to fighting for the Huks, not because he believed in the Communist Manifesto, but only because they promised to give him the opportunities that he always desired. The military promises to give him what the Huks had promised but could not provide: land and the opportunity to start anew in peace. The military sends him to an EDCOR site, where Carding clears the forest, begins to make a life for his family and himself as a homesteader, and eventually gets elected mayor—finally able to realize his goals of dignity and agrarian self-sufficiency in a recognizably idealized Filipino community. The sequences that show Carding cutting down the forest are the counterpoint to the particularly dramatic sequence earlier of Carding's struggle to save his storm-ravaged crop at the precise moment his son is born. Here is what the liberal individual is meant to do: struggle against nature to better himself and the future of his children. The conquest or mastery of nature, however, requires capital and familial labor, which in turn requires the aid of the state and the community. Here, the individual has to be provided with equal opportunities to struggle in life in order to have dignity and hope. EDCOR seemingly provides an opportunity to realize the authentic individual self's quest for dignity, cleared of the baggage of social history. Out of this opening comes functioning local elections and Filipino bourgeois domesticity.

³⁰ See Vina Lanzona's *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion* for a discussion of anti-Huk government propaganda about family life in the newspapers and of gender relations within the movement itself. The film later on uses the very issue of gendered domesticity and family to combat the seductions of communist ideology. It is interesting to note that it is the male protagonist that is at the center of Avellana's exploration of a liberal ideology of citizenship. Alternative readings from the extremely important female characters is reserved for another time.

³¹ Scaff, *The Philippine Answer to Communism*, p. 129.

One day, Maxie arrives at Carding's EDCOR homestead as an agent provocateur and seeks Carding's help. Carding responds with: "This is real. Here I have rice, land, a house, a home, and, most importantly, the knowledge that I am now counted among the people with honor and dignity. Here I have a church in which to pray, and my son has a school."³² *HBP* thus stages the advantages enjoyed by citizens when the state recognizes civil society under a liberal democracy. In EDCOR settlements, citizens benefit from the peace and order of civic society, but the state benefits as well, for it is taught to be more responsive to its citizenry, a precondition of peace and order. In the film, EDCOR provides Carding, an ex-Huk, with food, property, domestic happiness, religion, education, a voice in government, and the honor and dignity of working to better himself: the basics of a bourgeois life in civil society—albeit a civil society not juxtaposed to but dependent on the state.³³ But Maxie is not impressed. Calling on their past friendship and camaraderie during the war, Maxie tries to convince Carding that it is all government propaganda. But Trining's demand for domestic happiness, for a family life—the requirements of sexual and social reproduction—convince Carding otherwise. The film ends with Carding, after Trining threatens to leave him should he return to communism, finally choosing the side of the government and capturing Maxie. The rehabilitated Huk is shown to be the best agent of the government; the "truth" of EDCOR, bolstered by the common-sense structures of Filipino social and sexual reproduction, has inoculated Carding from future contamination from Maxie's propaganda, as Crisol and Magsaysay would have wished.

From the very first shot, the film announces that both the site of struggle and the subject struggling in the film are embodied in Carding: the terrain of struggle is his inner world and the prize is his loyalty to the nation-state. The film's first diegetic image is that of a hand grenade about to be thrown. The camera follows the arc of the hand as it pulls back, the image transforming into a head shot of Carding from below as he exerts himself against a still unseen foe. It is only after this establishing shot that we see we are in an exciting action sequence, which portrays a guerrilla battle against the Japanese. With efficient narrative economy, Avellana references both the still deeply felt trauma of the guerrilla, as well as the valor and courage of the Huks. Carding is saved from a Japanese soldier by Maxie, and Carding receives a scar on his face that functions as a bodily reminder, not only of his suffering while fighting for the cause of freedom against Japanese fascism, but also of his camaraderie with and debt of gratitude to fellow guerrilla and commanding officer, Maxie. Huks who fought in World War II were considered nationalists, and the populace remembered their heroism against the Japanese. The film celebrates the courage of these Huks as Filipino men of action united in common cause and suggests that Filipinos who supported the Huk cause after the war did so because they were living desperate lives under hard conditions. Thus, whereas many communists at that time felt that these very circumstances made radical change imminent, and that the people's "common sense" would connect material conditions to a revolutionary situation that only needed a catalyst—the communists—to

³² The translation from Tagalog is mine: "Itô'y tunay. Dito, meron akong bigas, lupa, bahay, tahanan, at higit sa lahat ay ang kaalaman na ako'y nabibilang na ngayon sa mga taong may puri at dangal. Dito meron akong simbahang dalanganan. Meron isang paaralan para sa aking anak."

³³ The scene of the EDCOR local elections where Carding wins as mayor, with the army acting as vote counters, is significant in this regard.

explode, the film instead links the desire to escape the difficulties of modernization and post-war rebuilding with images of bourgeois civil and domestic life, suggesting that those could only be achieved under liberal democracy. Furthermore, the film makes this articulation appear as “common sense” bolstered by the wife and mother’s desire for peace.

It is, the film suggests, the “international swindle” by communists and the unresponsiveness of older feudal relations to the needs of reconstruction that turned those patriots into unwitting tools of a foreign power. The government, on the other hand, responds appropriately to patriots’ needs by providing EDCOR settlements as havens and an escape valve to social stresses. The film proposes the small family farm ideal, united by bonds of community and religion, as the basis of a democratic Filipino citizenry. The government’s responsiveness to the needs of the landless in the film provides them with an alternative to Locsin’s hyena and tiger: it turns them into a liberal agrarian bourgeoisie.³⁴ This is presented as the appropriate response to the convergence of conjunctural historical forces, triggered by “a few errant individuals, foreign agitators, and the laws of fate.”³⁵ According to this interpretation, *HBP* is not simply a USIS-funded propaganda film. It is an attempt by a major Filipino director to produce a filmic style that articulated Magsaysay’s challenge that the populace be immunized from future Huk infection and the nation-state saved from international communism.

Avellana’s masterful use of camera angles coupled with editing for continuity results in a Filipino naturalist/realist filmic aesthetic that borrowed from documentary techniques, creating what Jose Capino calls the “docudrama” of the Cold War period.³⁶ Capino argues that, like the other documentaries that USIS disseminated during this period, *HBP* combined the aesthetics of documentary with those of melodrama in order to graft a hybrid vision of the Cold War that was in accordance with the dominant anti-communist line of USIS. For Capino, the “combination of the melodramatic narrative’s stylistic excesses with the authoritative truth-telling apparatus of the documentary seems especially suited to the task of both staging and legitimizing the hyperbolized, totalizing rhetoric of the red scare.”³⁷ Such hybridity, Capino argues, is used by Avellana to peddle

a historically recognizable but insidiously perverted view of the rebellion. By placing the blame on a few errant individuals, foreign agitators, and the laws of fate, Avellana exonerates the oppressive tenancy system that engendered the insurgency ... It was not a matter of selling *fact* using the techniques of *fiction* but of selling the fiction of communist aggression using a fictive discourse fortified with the aura of facticity.³⁸

³⁴ This image has a long history in the Philippines, particularly under the US regime. It continued under such rural development projects as the Samaka Guide, for example.

³⁵ Jose Capino, “Prosthetic Hysteria: Staging the Cold War in Filipino/American Docudrama,” *Plaridel: A Journal of Philippine Communication, Media, and Society* 1,1 (2004): 13.

³⁶ Capino, “Prosthetic Hysteria,” pp. 1–14. Avellana also directed quite a few actual documentaries.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13. It is arguable, as Capino himself mentions, that the presence of the Huks made Cold War ideology far more palpable and pertinent in the Philippines than in the United States. The Huks’ armed struggle validated the fear of communist threat by its very successes. The Huks’ presence meant that Cold War “hysteria” did not need to be drummed up out of

The aura of facticity is also the aura of the film medium itself, as Avellana attempts to re-enchant the world with fantasies and narratives about the struggling individual. Indeed, Carding is not originally a landless peasant, but a small landholder. A guerrilla fighter during World War II, he was never a communist. The impression given by the film is that Carding's loss of land is a result primarily of money-hungry elites and communist manipulation that takes away the individual's capacity to struggle successfully against nature for survival. Individual Filipinos crave the peace and order of simple village life, a life that is now available to them in Mindanao—a space where older social structures can be bypassed and a functioning liberal democratic Filipino way of life can be created.

The film style in *HBP* situates the camera at a distance from the action, framed by objects in the *mise-en-scène*, or else shooting odd-angle, mid-level shots that provide the viewer with unusual points-of-view. Such shots layer the gaze of the spectator and disrupt any easy identification of the spectator with the actors. The consequence is that, while the audience is made aware of watching a scene unfolding, the position of the spectator is anchored spatially and solidified as if he or she were physically present within the shot, separated from the action. As Avellana explains, "I don't use camera effects to achieve my end. I hate camera effects. I make my camera as steady as possible. Because whenever it moves, it should always be meaningful."³⁹ His decision to choose his shots in the way is both economical, as it reduces the number of camera set-ups necessary, as well as a consequence of Avellana's theatrical training. He prefers the use of long-angle shots that constitute the gaze of a stationary voyeur spectator who can serve as witness to the film's narrative and ideological propositions. Because the audience serves as a witness to the man of action in the film, this technique confers on the hero an air of objectivity, as if he were a person in a documentary, rather than an actor. Avellana's filmic style then attempts to produce a stable and coherent standpoint or perspective. Ideologically, this standpoint is grafted onto a heroic narrative of a Filipino national citizen subject struggling against forces of modernization. Avellana's hero struggles against the forces of nature, revolutionary violence, and landowner greed in order to recreate a Filipino way of life after the trauma of the war. Rebuilding after the catastrophe of war and the search for authenticity are also the themes of Avellana's neo-realist classic, *Anak Dalita*.

NOBILITY IN THE RAW

Filmed against the wishes of LVN owner Doña Sisang, who generally preferred escapist fare, Avellana's *Anak Dalita* won the best-picture award at the 1956 Asia-Pacific Film Festival. The film, which is about post-war urban poverty and was shot on location in the ruins of an old church in an Intramuros flattened by US liberation forces, was marketed as "*makatotohanan, tulad ng buhay*" (realistic, like life). It was not meant to facilitate escape from the dilemmas of urban poverty, but to reference them directly. As Avellana admits, "I like reality in-depth. That's probably why I never

nonexistent threats. It could be given form and be comprehended as external communist intervention into Philippine life through the action of Huks rather than as a consequence of development policies and neocolonial structural inequalities.

³⁹ Avellana, "Portrait of a Director," in *Parangal Para Kay Avellana*, p. 52.

made a good Robinson Crusoe or a good Seven Dwarfs movie! I like to see dirt in nobility—in its rawest form.”⁴⁰ In this film, Avellana presents not dirt in nobility, but nobility in the slums. Here, too, one can read the struggle for models of exemplary behavior that reaffirm law-abiding and God-fearing citizens of the nation-state.



Figure 2. Poster for *Anak Dalita*, 1953

Anak Dalita explores the lives of Korean War hero and veteran Vic (Tony Santos, Sr.) and slum-dwelling prostitute Cita (Rosa Rosal) as they strive to maintain faith in the values of country and church, and struggle to rebuild in the aftermath of the trauma of war. Vic was severely injured during the war and received a medal for “bravery in the line of duty.” He returned from Korea just in time to see his mother before she died. Before the war, Vic was a sculptor, and his handicap becomes an obstacle in the broken man’s search for dignity, wholeness, and coherence in a profane world. Padre Fidel (Vic Silayan) gives Vic an opportunity to earn an honest livelihood by commissioning him to fix the church’s sacred statues damaged during the war. Fidel articulates the crisis of authenticity in modernity when he declares to Vic his desire that the people regain a wholeness (*mabuo ang looban*) that had been lost in the war so that they may recover a sense of a future.⁴¹ Vic struggles to

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

⁴¹ “Nais ko na mabuo ang katawan at looban ng mga taong nawasak nitong nakaraang digmaan upang mabalik sa kanilang pag-iisip na sila’y may hinaharap, may kinabukasan” (I

compensate for his loss of an arm, but slowly succeeds in repairing religious statues and his sense of dignity.

To supplement his income, however, Vic works at night for Cardo (once again played by Jose de Cordova), an army friend and now (significantly) a Chinatown nightclub owner with ties to the underworld.⁴² Cardo's aura as a character engaged in shady illegal deals and transgressions against the state (as well as the allusions to Chinatown activities) make him an analog for the fear of both communism (tiger) and uncontrollable monetary greed (hyena) that threaten the Filipino nation-state's normative order.⁴³ Cordova's Cardo represents pure greed as he convinces Vic that the world works only through money. Cardo tells Vic that money knows no morality. At one point, he hands Vic a bundle of cash and challenges him to identify which bills are clean and which ones are dirty. Money, Cardo argues, is only an instrument for one's desires, but one that provides status and mobility—both provide some sort of empowerment. The source of money is less relevant than the power it has to provide for survival. In the quest for survival, money's origins are bracketed out, and the market relations that organize social maps are not to be questioned or critiqued. Cita, too, works for Cardo, and knows that Cardo's world is immoral and illegal, and undermines the state. Her body, however, is the only resource she has for survival; she represents the fallen woman in need of salvation through the intervention of a noble man of action. She attaches herself to Vic as a man whose patriotism, integrity, and honor can serve as an anchor. She sees him and his love as her salvation, as her key to rising above her material struggles for survival. In *Anak Dalita*, it is unclear which war is being discussed during conversations about post-war reconstruction. Consequently, the metaphor of ruin merges World War II with the Korean War as one single battle. Suggesting that the Cold War is a condition of constant crisis and continuous war, the film foregrounds Philippine modernity and portrays Filipinos as a people searching for appropriate models of modernization in the face of a disastrous sort of modernity characterized by ruin, disaster, and crisis. The film proposes the value of "honest" and legal labor under the guidance of religion as the ideology of the dignified poor appropriate for these conditions.

John D. Blanco reads Nick Joaquin's drama *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* as an affirmation of free will in artistic practice that questions both American imperial discourse that defers modernization as well as nationalist reactions to neocolonial relations after independence.⁴⁴ *Anak Dalita* presents a similar situation of

wish that the people's bodies and inner spirits [*looban*] that were destroyed by the past war be made whole, in order to return to their thinking that they have something to look forward to, that they have a future). These lines are delivered significantly in an empty crypt of the church.

⁴² LVN's 1950 *Kontrabando*, for example, portrays communism as an ideology illegally smuggled into the islands by foreigners along networks much like those in Cardo's underworld. The film opens with a map of the world divided between communism and democracy, and its plot follows a secret agent infiltrating these smuggling networks.

⁴³ Teodoro Locsin's article begins with a discussion of Spengler, and the idea that unbridled commercialism, lust for money, and rampant materialism signal the beginning of democracy's decline. See his "The Tiger and the Hyena."

⁴⁴ See John Blanco, "Baroque Modernity and the Colonial World," pp. 6–33. Avellana made a film version of *Portrait* in 1966, with his wife, Daisy Hontiveros Avellana, in the starring role of Candida Marasigan.

disenchantment. It also asks: what from the past could be useful in responding to the needs of the present and the future? Unlike Joaquin's drama, however, the film returns the viewer to the values of the past that were lost during the war: the love of the heterosexual couple, the protection of religion and communal/national bonds, and the honor of the toiling individual as the basis for hope. Avellana makes the ruins of the Intramuros only tangentially about the struggle among the forces of fascism, communism, and liberalism. Instead, it is the field of suffering in postwar Manila on which Vic needs to survive and to choose his path. Can continuity of faith provide guidance in a shattered world that constitutes neocolonial Philippine modernity? As in *Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay*, the crucial struggle in *Anak Dalita* takes place within the individual and concerns his choice of nationalist or patriotic ethos. The film suggests that individuals must respond to the reification of life and the instrumentalization of labor and bodies that typify modernity by struggling for something beyond base material survival.

Anak Dalita opens with an image of the ruined belfry of the church that forms the setting for the film. As in the opening image of the grenade-toss in *HBP*, a long panning sequence guides the eye from the belfry to the people going about their morning business. We see the ordinary quotidian vitality of a neighborhood that is subsisting under the shadow of the church ruins. The milieu of the church itself, as a ruin filmed in Italian "neorealist" style, is the disenchanting space in need of hope. Religion reinforces a morality that lies within the confines of national custom and the law. The music of Francisco Santiago's 1916 *kundiman*,⁴⁵ "Anak Dalita," connects the vision of Intramuros' destruction with musical supplication that demands the viewer recognize the suffering poor's need for pity (*awa*), fellowship, and hope. The music's supplication supplements the documentary power of the neorealist sequences and fills it with an emotive charge that demands the recognition of the plight of the poor. The music, associated with suffering and resistance during the US colonial period, provides a certain authority to the construction of the urban poor as the "folk" whose lives have been a permanent struggle. It articulates long-standing structures of feelings about oppression, poverty, and continued survival and relates these feelings to the narrative of a Korean War veteran rebuilding a life amidst the disaster of Cold War Manila.

In the famous neorealist-inspired opening sequence, we see Cita returning from work in the early morning as she makes her way through the shantytown. Her black evening dress contrasts with the impoverished surroundings and what we imagine to be the lives of its residents, who are just awakening. The church is an empty shell, within which lives a community of squatters who have built their shanties against the remains and who struggle to find hope amidst the poverty. At one point in the film, Padre Fidel announces that the church is to be rebuilt and the community must be relocated as soon as funds are found. The Padre conjoins faith and hope that God will provide for the poor. In a twist of fate, Padre Fidel wishes to send Vic to Hong Kong with a statue of the virgin that Vic has refurbished. Cardo latches onto this plan as an opportunity to escape the country (and the state currency regulations) with his money. Like the ruins of the church within which the community has carved out its own public space, the statue is made hollow in order to hide Cardo's wealth and to let it escape the surveillance of the state. No one, he says, would suspect that a

⁴⁵ A *kundiman* is a musical style that has become closely associated with love ballads, Filipino music, and national resistance.

religious statue could be an instrument of evil desires, a vessel for amoral money. The conjunction of religion and money deploys the motif of a disjunction between appearance and essence, between inner truths and outer forms, caused by the disaster of modernization. The shells of the church, the statue, and the man parallel each other. The inner value and worth of each is juxtaposed with the question of money. The proffered value lies in choosing nobility and honor in the face of immorality and illegality, of choosing faithfulness to the law in the face of that which attempts to transgress the strictures of the nation-state. Revolutionary struggle is not an option here. Instead, the film proposes loyalty to the state and church as the path back to a decent, happy, communitarian, Filipino way of life. In the end, as the Padre suggests, God will provide.

Unknown to Vic and Cardo, Cita has taken Cardo's money and hidden it under another statue at the church. Again, as in *HBP*, the woman helps the man recognize the naturalness of social structures and bourgeois morality and to see them as the appropriate choices. In the film's dramatic conclusion, Cardo and Vic battle for the money while Vic strives to protect Cita and her brother. At the end, Cita's young brother is dead and Cardo is dying amidst the rubble of the church, with his money strewn among the debris. Cardo gives Padre Fidel the money as penance for his sins, and the Padre uses Cardo's money to buy land for the community—thereby, in fact, proving Cardo's point about money's function in the world. Money—capital, even if ill-gotten—is necessary and can provide the basis of a good life when used properly. The money must stay within the confines of the nation-state to benefit the many rather than the few, and radical social changes are not necessary if money can be redirected to satisfy the needs of the poor, who, in turn, remain nobly loyal to the state despite the demands of survival. The film ends as the people march out of the shadows of the church towards their new future, again to the affective music of "Anak Dalita." An aerial shot of the church as the people walk to their future homes finally provides us with a sense of the true scale of the church. The church's magnitude suggests that the hold of the religious past on the people is a grand and good thing. Although in ruins, the church prefigures the new cathedral that will rise in its place. It is significant that we do not see this new cathedral, empty of the people who once lived within the ruins of the former church, but simply anticipate its future existence.

SAGIPIN ANG BAGONG BADJAO! (SAVE THE NEW BADJAO)⁴⁶

While *HBP* and *Anak Dalita* clearly feature Cold War conflicts as part of their settings, Avellana's 1957 ethnic Romeo and Juliet romance, *Badjao*, would seem to be anything but a Cold War film. (Badjao, or *orang laut*, is a name for sea gypsies.) The story revolves around the love story of Hassan (Tony Santos), the son and heir of a Badjao chief, and Bala Amai (Rosa Rosal), the niece of the Tausug *datu* (chief), Tahil (again, Jose de Cordova). The Badjao, who are renowned for their pearl-diving, live in boats that ply the waters of the Sulu Sea. The Tausug are Muslim rulers of Sulu who claim suzerainty over the area and over the Badjao. In the film, the Tausug's

⁴⁶ Quoted from the opening and ending of *Badjao*: this is the cry sounded by members of the Badjao, calling on all villagers to save the infant who has been thrown into the ocean to initiate him into the community. Here the infant needs to be accepted and saved by the community's members, who will then bear responsibility for it.

social superiority over the Badjao means that Hassan's love for Bala Amai requires proof of his valor and skill as a pearl diver. Hassan must fetch rare blue pearls for Tahil and convert to Islam in order to marry Bala Amai. Hassan kills Jikiri (Vic Silayan), one of Tahil's lieutenants, who desires to know the secret location of the rare pearls. Hassan thereafter marries Bala Amai, leaves the nomadic life of the Badjao, and settles on land as a farmer. However, Ishmael, a pearl trader, comes and buys Hassan's pearls from Datu Tahil and challenges him to obtain more. Hyena-like greed spurs Tahil to pressure Hassan to return to the sea. When Hassan refuses, Tahil's men burn his farm the same night that Bala Amai gives birth to a son. After confronting and shaming Tahil, Hassan chooses to return to his tribe with Bala Amai and his newborn son.

It would seem from the plot summary that *Badjao* is an odd choice to explore the nuances of Cold War culture. The film is distinguished by an exotic and timeless aura, with its story apparently untouched by contemporary historical issues such as modernization and political ideology, and it implicitly claims to be occupied with universal and existential structures—issues of authenticity and freedom. But it is this ahistorical quality that makes the work more ideologically marked. Aileen Toohey argues that the visualization of ethnic difference in *Badjao* serves to convey a certain sense of nationality and nationalism.⁴⁷ These nationalist concerns are discernable in the framing of the film. The poster for the film indicates its documentary quality, and even Filipinos know very little about the southern tribes. The Tausug and the Badjao are narrated into the history of nation-formation by the film: foreigners get to view what even Filipinos themselves have never seen. A secret aspect of national identity is made into spectacle. With the help of ethnomusicologist consultants such as Francisca Reyes Aquino, the film presents dances and music that evoke an "accurate" ethnography of life in the southern Philippines. Paramount in the story, however, is sympathy for the downtrodden but brave and honorable Badjao. As Toohey points out, "Hassan epitomizes the new model of the ethical Man, who has the freedom to choose and the right to build a future."⁴⁸ She could have continued that the ethical man is also the liberal democratic man. Hassan's actions do not create revolutionary changes that erase social hierarchy; instead, the narrative's conflicts are addressed by a return to natural communities and the validation of the individual's choice to live life in concert with established (familiar) social structures.

The displacement of Cold War issues into the space of Sulu marks an attempt to construct a nationalist vision of "ethnic" and cultural difference,⁴⁹ and it also naturalizes the tensions over modernization that demand structural transformations.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of ethnic difference and its possible role in the nationalist imaginary in *Badjao*, see Aileen Toohey, "Badjao: Cinematic Representations of Difference in the Philippines," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36,2 (June 2005): 281–312.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁴⁹ Toohey argues that Filipino film "deployed the 'ethnic' as allegorical statements on societal concerns. As there were so few alternative representations of indigenous cultures during this era, films such as *Badjao* continue to be remembered more as authentic depictions rather than as stylized cinematic allegories of nationalistic concerns popularized by specific film directors and producers. The commercialization of 'ethnic' difference through cinema raises interesting issues, as the production of alterity in narratives of nationhood is often premised on the recognition of spatial and temporal ruptures, thus alerting the viewer to the politics of representations inherent in this medium and possible contestations in the readings of such films." *Ibid.*, p. 287.

What the film proposes is that the enduring and universal desire for freedom, dignity, rights, and national unity become the basis for a universal humanity—and by extension, a world system dependent on the recognition of the liberal subject's human rights based on a modern social imaginary of property. That such a desire, though still inchoate, is evident even among the "pure" Filipinos untouched by colonial and imperial history is further proof of its universality and timelessness. As the foreword that opens the film indicates, "This is a moment ... In the ever-changing present/An unchangeable moment/That today joins the past." The peculiar temporality indicated by the foreword stitches together the notion of a tribal past filled with differences and the hoped-for but deferred future of unity. As the film's postscript asks: "Is it one race/Or faith that divides us?/What can unite us?/The right to build a future/Free/Together/Whether Muslim, Christian/Brown, or White." Like the previous two films I have discussed here, *Badjao* is a hybrid that employs both realistic and melodramatic techniques in order to highlight and dramatize the existential moment of choice. *Badjao* is framed, not only by the English foreword and postscript, but by the ritual of infant immersion that denotes the acceptance of a new member of the community. Like the slum-dwellers leaving the cathedral at the end of *Anak Dalita*, the *Badjao* boats slowly move on towards a deferred future.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN THE HYENAS AND THE TIGERS

In his 1952 *Philippine Free Press* article, Teodoro Locsin compared the Philippines' money-hungry, corrupt government officials to hyenas, and the brave, somewhat heroic, but wrongheaded and vicious, Huks to tigers in the jungle. He asked: "On the one side, the hyena; on the other, the tiger. Have the people no other choice?"⁵⁰ Filipino liberal nationalist filmmakers like Avellana sought to provide an answer. In each of these three films, Avellana explored aspects of postcolonial national identity. I have argued that Avellana's style provided a filmic shape for a Filipino liberal ideology that proposed a Filipino way of life naturally attuned to peace and order, one that cultivated a normative citizen subject, loyal to the nation-state that, in turn, was loyal to the United States. This way of life was presented as patriarchal and based upon the self-determining man of action.

The meticulous construction of a milieu in these three films gives them an aura of objectivity, authenticity, and realism. Avellana's style articulates a nationalist subject position that corresponds to the pressures of a Cold War search for pathways of modernization. These films universalize the figure of a self-determining man of action as the exemplary citizen-subject of a liberal democracy characterized by law and order. This representative figure is given a particularly Filipino cast insofar as it celebrates familial, community, and religious bonds as anchors to the past and for the future. The films discussed here present the Filipino (heterosexual male) individual in his "strenuous life"⁵¹ as a person at liberty to pursue happiness in the name of the dignity of autonomous man, family, community, and religion, and as one who is tasked to make this effort. The existential choice turns the dilemma of modernity into a subjective predicament for the liberal subject, so that these films do

⁵⁰ Teodoro Locsin, "The Tiger and the Hyena," p. 3.

⁵¹ I borrow the term's masculine and militaristic nuances from Theodore Roosevelt.

not articulate the pressures of modernization as arising from an assembly of structural forces open to historical change and class struggle.

In the clearly propagandist film *HUK sa Bagong Pamumuhay*, Avellana portrays the Huks as heroic war veterans who, following the war, are duped by the external and destabilizing forces of communism, despite the government's attempts to alleviate the land-tenancy problem. In the neo-realist *Anak Dalita*, the protagonist stays true to the hope given by the church and refuses to play the role of a smuggler despite the difficulties he faces in making a life for himself in the ruins of post-war Philippines. He rebuilds his shattered life through honest work. *Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay* and *Anak Dalita* uphold patriotism and the nation-state as the attitude and institution best suited to address the crisis of modernity. In the ethnographic *Badjao*, the conflict between the sedentary Tausug and the nomadic Badjao is exacerbated not only by caste and ethnic hierarchies, but also by the greed of an outsider (who covets the rare pearls). The movie questions caste-based class structures and argues for the liberty and dignity of everyman. It ends, however, presupposing an endless clearing space open for nomadic mobility, just as *HBP* figures Mindanao as virgin land ripe for expansion. The films conclude with the image of an open-ended but potentially happy future.

Avellana's style of filmmaking creates a stable (stationary) point-of-view that appears objective rather than fictively generated. Avellana's camera situates the spectator much like a theatrical audience: present in the *mise-en-scène*, but slightly detached, like a voyeur rather than a participant. However, Avellana's adept use of the camera breaks the fourth wall by giving viewers the experience of being spatially proximate to the action.⁵² The stability of the spectator's gaze in filmic space imparts upon the film a semblance of naturalness, hybridizing "the transnational codes of melodrama with the discursive truth claims (i.e., evidentiary force) of documentary cinema."⁵³ In the context, then, of Cold War struggles over the "hearts and minds" of the population, Avellana's critically recognized films examined the needs for a national identity and produced specifically Filipino liberal subjects that upheld the status quo—even as they demanded hope and opportunities for the subaltern and demanded that the state to be responsive to the needs of the populace. His films sketched out Philippine modernity's terrain of struggle in the attempt to navigate between Cold War binaries, between the hyenas and the tigers. The fact that these films deferred any critiques of structural causes, however, suggests that they were palliative to and compensatory for the social contradictions they were addressing. The films stitch together the concerns of the US capitalist liberal empire with those of the neocolonial nation-state in their exploration of authentic national identity. This national identity, in turn, was produced through the films' rhetorical style. The structures of feeling that emerged out of the material conditions of the Cold War, a transitional era that was experienced as a continuing crisis by many Filipinos, are thus rhetorically addressed in the name of a universal liberal subject that can appear in a particularly Filipino guise. As Petronilo Bn. Daroy writes of the passage of the 1957 Anti-Subversion Act that outlawed the Communist Party of the Philippines:

⁵² In his 1966 version of Nick Joaquin's *Portrait of the Artist*, however, Avellana maintains the fourth wall that Joaquin's drama originally broke as one of its primary conceits.

⁵³ See his "Prosthetic Hysteria: Staging the Cold War in Filipino/American Docudrama," *Plaridel: A Journal of Philippine Communication, Media, and Society* 1,1 (2004): 1.

Since criticism of democratic institutions was readily submitted to the rigid terms of Cold War politics, liberalism became merely a commitment to ideas, in principle. A criticism here could be made of the liberal Filipino intellectual: He did not protest enough against the forces which tended to limit the freedom of expression and of thought in the national culture. Instead, he contented himself with the rhetorics [*sic*] of his own liberalism, which rhetoric, in turn, became expressive of his incapacity to manifest his commitments in action ... students were painted with the "Red smear," and universities were asked to submit to a congressional investigating body—the Filipino intellectual was restrained to protest against all these incursions into civil liberties in the fear that to come to the defense of these freedoms being threatened by bigotry and political neurosis may be interpreted as an expression of support for the subversive forces which the Cold War was trying to contain.⁵⁴

Among these rhetorical strategies by which certain Filipino nationalists addressed their inability to respond radically to social contradictions was the search for a national identity appropriate to postcolonial Philippines. Such a strategy allowed for a culturally specific version of modernity, but it did not necessarily constitute a different social imaginary from that powerfully promulgated by liberal capitalism.⁵⁵ This modern liberal subject is naturalized such that it hides its own function: that it helps organize our world in a specific (and possibly impermanent) manner in keeping with, and sympathetic to, hegemonic and normative forces. If visibility is a terrain of struggle employed as a pedagogical tool for or against hegemony, then the counterpoint to Jonathan Beller's look at Filipino modernist art as a leftist critique of imperialism is a look at the potential disciplining power of cinema as a liberal, nationalist, pedagogical machine.⁵⁶ According to this view, cinema is a factory system that *manufactures* its audience as liberal (and consuming) subjects.⁵⁷ Beller argues that Philippine modernist art fragments points-of-view and thereby interrogates capitalist imperialism. I suggest here that, in contrast to such modernist art, liberal nationalist Philippine art produces a particularly Filipino, autonomous, law-abiding citizen-subject whose reactions to the pressures of globalized modernization are identified as appropriate. Post-war postcolonial or neocolonial Filipino nationalists sought a way to understand modernity and modernization in the face of state-sponsored liberal capitalist democracy—and the

⁵⁴ Petronilo Bn. Daroy, "The Failure of Liberalism," pp. 82–83. Also partly quoted in Beller, *Acquiring Eyes*, p. 287. Daroy continues: "At a particular instance in culture, somewhere around the Fifties, [Philippine liberalism] was exclusively committed to the examination of what it fondly called 'culture,' ... the 'search for identity' engaged its energies and criticalness ... it made a cult of respectability ... [and] was, therefore, evasive all along; and its characteristic realism is nothing more than an expression of its opportunism." Petronilo Bn. Daroy, "The Failure of Liberalism," pp. 84–85.

⁵⁵ See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵⁶ When speaking of pedagogy here, I borrow from Homi Bhabha's notion of the performative and pedagogical in "Dissemination," *Nation and Narration* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291–323.

⁵⁷ See Beller, *Acquiring Eyes*. See also his "The Cinematic Mode of Production: Towards a Political Economy of the Postmodern," in *Culture, Theory & Critique* 44,1 (2003): 91–106; and his *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Towards a Political Economy of the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College/University Press of New England, 2006).

challenge to this engendered by longstanding Left-oriented critiques—in terms that were salient to the local conditions.

Despite the topical differences of the three films discussed above, in all of these works Avellana foregrounds the ideal of a coherent community set upon by alien forces, as well as the universal validity of the dignity of the autonomous “strenuous” man of action and virtue struggling for survival as a Filipino national subject. All three films critique the unbridled greed of a money economy in the interest of upholding the dignity of the poor who must struggle within the constraints of the market economy. Echoing early American colonial desires for a self-reliant peasantry, the films portray the suffering of peasants and workers at the hands of landowners and traders, but in the end these works propose the autonomous self-made family man of action, loyal to law and order and faithful to the church, as the best response to Philippine modernization. All three films have aspects of melodrama that establish gendered roles, uphold domestic heterosexual norms, and make revolutionary politics problematic. In the battle over hearts and minds carried out in the field of Cold War culture, Avellana combined the nobility of the self-determining (male) individual, the desires of whole communities for betterment and recognition, and images of ideal Filipino familial relationships, while bypassing the Communist Party’s structural critical analysis of imperialism. In these films, the search for cultural or national identity replaces an analysis of material conditions, structural inequalities, and internationalist solidarities. In his search for, and production of, national identity, a search carried out among competing narratives of liberation under Cold War conditions, Avellana constituted a liberal, nationalist spectator as the appropriate Filipino citizen-subject for Philippine modernity. This subject was his suturing fantasy, and by setting him in motion, Avellana joined in the nation-building exercise of shaping the seductive “necessary fictions” of the post-war Philippines.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See Caroline Hau, *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946–1980* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000) for discussions of the proliferation of and need for such fictions after independence.

MODERN DRAMA, POLITICS, AND THE POSTCOLONIAL AESTHETICS OF LEFT-NATIONALISM IN NORTH SUMATRA: THE FORGOTTEN THEATER OF INDONESIA'S LEKRA, 1955–65

Michael Bodden

A significant feature of the Cold War, as it took form in Indonesia, was the competition and, later, open clash, about how national culture should be constituted. The main antagonists in this conflict were the Communist Party-aligned Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, People's Cultural Institute) and other Left-nationalist party cultural organizations on the one hand, and members of several Muslim party-based cultural organizations and a number of "independent" intellectuals and artists¹ on the other. Much of the cultural production of the late 1950s and early 1960s

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offered evidence of an arts world divided into two potentially oppositional, Cold War-shaped camps, though actual tension among these contending groups really only peaked in the 1963–65 period. The resulting conflict is most often illustrated in accounts of the era by the fierce reaction of some leftists and leftist groups towards the Cultural Manifesto (*Manifes Kebudayaan*, derogatorily given the acronym, “Manikebu” [water buffalo sperm] by leftists) of late 1963–64. In this series of events, a number of cultural figures opposed to Lekra tried to stake out a position for the arts independent of political party direction.² The clash was brought to an end in late 1965 with the violent liquidation of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) and all affiliated left-wing organizations.

Equally significant, however, the New Order regime of President Suharto, which laid its foundation in part on the destruction of the PKI and slaughter or imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of its members and sympathizers, justified its actions and continued at times to bolster its legitimacy and its use of coercion against dissidents with a fierce anti-communist ideology. That ideology remained difficult to question until Suharto’s fall from power in 1998.³ This, too, was a legacy of the Cold War, which persisted long after the Cold War itself had ended in Asia. It should therefore come as no surprise that in the aftermath of the 1965–66 events in Indonesia, most left-wing cultural and artistic activity was strictly prohibited. Writers, artists, and actors associated with left-wing organizations such as Lekra, Sarbufis, and LKN,⁴ who fought in their respective media for a more socially committed culture that could further Indonesian nationalism and help create more equal economic and social conditions, were either killed, imprisoned, or stranded in exile with no legal passport.

The ensuing years of Suharto’s New Order and beyond have ensured the triumph of a very different kind of aesthetics and meaning in artistic activity. This brand of aesthetics was one long debated by Indonesian cultural workers and seen by leftists of the 1950–65 period as apolitical at best and politically rightist at worst. It was an aesthetics that promoted “universal humanism,” the idea that politics should not determine art (and often, that “politics” in the form of partisan political perspectives has no place at all in art), and that great art is marked by continual formal experiment and takes presumed universal human values as its prime material. The activities of Lekra and, in some cases, the Indonesian Nationalist Party’s (Partai Nasional Indonesia, PNI) own LKN cultural organization were consigned to the “dust-bin of history” in Indonesia, regarded as anathema. Those who participated in the work of Lekra, in particular, were painted as slavish creators

¹ It should be noted, however, that some of these “independent” figures had sympathies towards or connections with the PSI (Partai Sosialis Indonesia), the Indonesian Socialist Party.

² See below for a more sustained analysis of this incident. A number of the signatories, as well as some of their supporters, came under strong pressure from leftist organizations who saw this group’s stance as tied to military and anti-Left interests. As a result, some of the signatories and their supporters lost their jobs or became the targets of public campaigns of vilification.

³ See Rob Goodfellow, *Api Dalam Sekam: The New Order and the Ideology of Anti-Communism* (Clayton: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Working Paper No. 95, 1995).

⁴ Lekra was closely aligned with the Indonesian Communist Party. Sarbufis was the Sarekat Buruh Film dan Sandiwara (Indonesian Film and Stage Workers Union), also aligned with the Indonesian Communist Party. LKN was the Lembaga Kebudayaan Nasional (Institute of National Culture), closely aligned with the Left wing of the Indonesian Nationalist Party.

of an inferior, propagandistic art, and, in some cases, as vicious and disruptive cultural adversaries. Their work was pronounced uninteresting, and their behavior deemed anti-humanist, abusive, prone to witch-hunting, and terrorizing to literary opponents and Muslim religious scholars (*ulama*).⁵ The anti-communism of the Cold War-era New Order regime and the literary scholars and critics working in Indonesia

⁵ Some of the critics who characterized Lekra in this way were foreign academics sympathetic to non-communist and non-leftist figures from the Indonesian cultural world. For example, A. Teeuw, whose histories of modern Indonesian literature long occupied an authoritative position in much scholarly writing about Indonesian literature, had a personal association with H. B. Jassin, one of the signatories of the Cultural Manifesto of 1963 (see Keith Foulcher, *Social Commitment in Literature and the Arts: The Indonesian "Institute of People's Culture" 1950–1965* [Clayton: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986], pp. 2–3). In his history of modern Indonesian literature, Teeuw, though calling for more research into Lekra's work and history, once characterized the literature most representative of Lekra's ideals as something that could not arouse in him much enthusiasm. See A. Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, vol. 1 (Dordrecht: Foris, 1986), p. 137. Among the fiercest critics of Lekra are many non- and anti-communist Indonesian arts workers, some of whom were targets of angry leftist campaigns following the Cultural Manifesto incident. For example, the editors of the book *Prahara Budaya*, or Cultural Tempest (Bandung: Mizan and Harian Umum Republika, 1995), D. S. Moeljanto and Taufiq Ismail, both signatories to the *Manifes Kebudayaan*, while having assembled a great number of useful and important cultural documents from the media polemics of the first half of the 1960s, nonetheless continue the same kind of vilification discussed above, and even in one instance use a highly dubious interpretation of a Lekra poem to "prove" that Lekra and PKI members knew beforehand of the September 30, 1965, plot that led to the overthrow of Sukarno and the founding of the New Order (1965–98). Other critics are often equally dismissive. Ikranegara, for example, while describing something of the venues and conditions of production for some of Lekra's modern theater, does not mention the title of a single play written or performed by Lekra cultural workers, and, further, devotes much of what he writes about Lekra to decrying their supposed "anti-humanism," aggressive behavior towards and persecution of supporters of the *Manifes Kebudayaan*, "abuse" of human rights, and "witch hunting." See Ikranegara, "The Making of Indonesian Theater: From Globalization to Pluralistic Interaction," *Tenggara* 38 (1996): 1–21. Even a less polemical critic, such as Jakob Sumardjo, while noting several well-known plays written or adapted by Lekra writers, such as Bachtiar Siagian, Agam Wispi, and Bakri Siregar, nonetheless also focuses more attention on perceived "attacks" on *ulama* in plays such as Utuy Tatang Sontani's *Si Kampeng* or the dramatic adaptation of a Pramoedya Ananta Toer novel *Peristiwa Sekali di Banten Selatan (Orang-orang Baru dari Banten [Incident in South Banten/Newcomers from Banten])*. Sumardjo even titles one sub-chapter, which centers on a discussion of Lekra's purported attacks on religion and non-Left literary figures such as Hamka and H. B. Jassin, as: "Teror Lekra" (Lekra's Terrorism). See Jakob Sumardjo, *Perkembangan Teater Modern dan Sastra Drama Indonesia* [The Development of Modern Indonesian Theater and Drama] (Bandung: Citra Aditya Bakti, 1992), p. 171. Though such articles constitute the majority of scholarly and historical writing about Lekra since 1965, there are those who have taken a different point of view. Goenawan's Mohamad's slightly more balanced account of the *Manifes Kebudayaan* (Manikebu) affair, *The "Cultural Manifesto" Affair: Literature and Politics in Indonesia in the 1960s, A Signatory's View* (Clayton: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Working Paper No. 45, 1988), should be acknowledged as an early exception among those works by Indonesian writers who experienced the events of the early to mid-1960s. Foulcher's *Social Commitment in Literature and the Arts* stands as the most thoughtful and comprehensive attempt to assess Lekra's history and legacy, while Henk Maier has also written on Lekra's history with an eye towards the development of its theory and practice. See his "Chairil Anwar's Heritage: The Fear of Stultification—Another Side of Modern Indonesian Literature," *Indonesia* 43 (April 1987): 1–29. More recently, I Nyoman Darma Putra has written several articles on Lekra activities with a regional focus on Bali, and several younger Indonesian scholars have begun to reevaluate Lekra's activity.

during the New Order's long term of power have thus inculcated a particular set of memories and images of the cultural work of Lekra and other leftist cultural organizations.

This chapter's goal is thus two-fold: first, to examine the modern theatrical work of Lekra from the 1950s to 1965 with an eye towards the impact of the Cold War on such cultural efforts; and, second, to use this discussion of Lekra's modern theatrical activities to expand on possible alternatives to the anti-communist, Cold War-influenced histories of modern Indonesian culture that dominate the majority viewpoint. From the outset, it is necessary to state clearly that I have no desire to minimize any psychological, emotional, or economic suffering experienced by some of those who came under the intense public attacks that some members of Lekra and other left-wing organizations mounted against perceived opponents in the field of cultural production, particularly in the last two years of the Sukarno era—from late 1963 following the Cultural Manifesto affair to September 1965. However, I will argue that the view of Lekra's activity presented by a number of such writers, focusing as it does primarily on some Lekra members' polemics and public campaigns of vilification aimed at supporters of the Cultural Manifesto, is profoundly one-sided. It serves, in turn, to cast in a completely negative light large numbers of highly creative, patriotic, and committed Indonesian cultural workers whose only crime appears to have been to be members of, or sympathetic to, a cultural organization that was affiliated, though sometimes in great tension, with the Indonesian Communist Party. We may disagree with some of the tactics of Lekra, its members, or those from other leftist organizations who participated in the campaigns against various non-Lekra writers and intellectuals. Similarly, we can acknowledge that some of the highly negative assessments of Lekra's activity may be sincerely felt and flow from the deep and intense political and personal divisions that the final years of Sukarno's rule as president engendered. Ultimately, however, such one-sided representations became part of a fierce propagandistic campaign against communist and leftist thought and organization that can easily be seen as both a piece of the international Cold War and a key pillar in the consolidation and maintenance of power by Suharto's often ruthless and brutal New Order regime.

Nor do such blanket dismissals of Lekra help us understand the positive, utopian elements of its members' ideologies and aesthetics; the ways they were enmeshed with Indonesian nationalism; the activities of those who found in them some strands of hope for creating a better, more just, and economically equitable world; and the ways in which their visions may have been limited. This article argues for an alternative view of Lekra activity in the field of modern national-language theater, with a special focus on the Medan and Tanjung Balai areas of North Sumatra. It is intended as part of a larger project to examine the varied ways in which Lekra theater activists employed modern, national-language theater.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND TO INDONESIA'S CULTURAL COLD WAR

Politically, Indonesia was the scene of a very real Cold War conflict. From outside Indonesia, perhaps, this conflict may have been viewed as a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union (later to be replaced by China). In the immediate post-World War II period, when Indonesian nationalists launched a struggle for independence against the Dutch, the US government backed the reinstatement of Dutch power in the former Dutch East Indies. The United States

feared that the Netherlands' loss of its most lucrative colony would exacerbate the serious postwar economic difficulties facing the Dutch. That economic unsettledness, in turn, was seen by US policy makers as creating the potential for a rise in the power of radical and communist forces within the Netherlands. At the same time, US officials worried that support for Indonesian independence might also outrage Dutch anti-communist leaders and endanger the unity of a Western European alliance to contain communism. It was only after the young Indonesian republic's forces put down the communist-led Madiun uprising in late 1948, combined with the Dutch army's flouting of the fledgling United Nations' call to halt its attacks on the Republic in December 1948, that US policy changed and began to support Indonesian independence.⁶ In the 1950s, concerned about Indonesia's "nonaligned" international stance, anti-imperialism rhetoric, and leftward political tilt, the CIA became involved in efforts to support breakaway regions' struggles against the Indonesian central government. After it became apparent that the regional rebels had little hope of succeeding, that Indonesia's army was, in fact, a likely anti-communist ally, and that the US refusal to sell arms and equipment to the Indonesian armed forces had forced them to turn to the Soviet Bloc for such assistance, the US changed its policy, offering support to the Indonesian military.⁷ The US also sought more amicable relations with Jakarta and waged a cultural offensive, wooing Indonesian intellectuals with reading materials and scholarships to study in the US.⁸ In the 1960s, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations attempted to tie US economic assistance to the Indonesian government's acceptance of an IMF (International Monetary Fund) belt-tightening and economic liberalization program.⁹

On the other hand, the Indonesian Communist Party had fraternal ties with the Soviet Union and, after 1962, increasingly with China. When Washington proved unresponsive in supplying military aid during the late 1950s, since it was committed at the time to supporting regional rebels, the Indonesian military was able to get substantial military aid from the Soviet Union in its campaign to "liberate" West Papua.¹⁰ During the 1950s and early 1960s, moreover, the PKI helped organize a variety of cultural delegations to visit both the Soviet Union and China.

Yet Indonesia was not simply another battleground for the superpowers. Much of the Cold War in Indonesia was fought on the terrain of nationalism. Both the communists and their allies, and their enemies in the military, political, and intellectual elite within Indonesia, were intensely patriotic nationalists highly

⁶ Audrey R. and George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1995), pp. 29–33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60, 174–84, 190–95, and 206–11.

⁸ Adrian Vickers suggests this, without citing the source of his information in his *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 153. David Hill, in his short paper "Knowing Indonesia From Afar: Indonesian Exiles and Australian Academics," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 43,1 ((2009): 147–64, promises to discuss the relationship of the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom with Indonesian writers and arts figures of the 1950s and 1960s in his forthcoming critical biography of Mochtar Lubis: David Hill, *Journalism and Politics in Indonesia: A Critical Biography of Mochtar Lubis, 1922–2004* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

⁹ Olle Törnquist, *Dilemmas of Third World Communism* (London: Zed Press, 1984), p. 158.

¹⁰ Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959–1965* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 187. See also Törnquist, *Dilemmas of Third World Communism*, p. 157; and Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, pp. 205–6.

committed to the Indonesian nation and national identity. Furthermore, especially after the 1957–59 transition to Guided Democracy, in which President Sukarno and the military gained more power at the expense of parliament and the political parties, public political discourse became even more firmly bound to ideas of nationalism and national identity. Sukarno's strong belief in the importance of national unity, national character, and anti-imperialism, coupled with his great popular and political authority, made it inevitable that battles among the antagonistic camps within Indonesian politics were often contests to see who could proclaim their nationalist credentials most loudly and prove them most obviously. As a consequence, Cold War conflicts were often articulated in a language that attempted to use and interpret Sukarno's vision of nationalism to the benefit of the contending groups.¹¹

This particularly intense period of nationalism and nationalistic discourse in Indonesia began with many dissatisfied by the way in which parliamentary democracy seemed unable to advance the national economy or create political stability, mired as it was in corruption and the wrangling among the numerous parties.¹² In early 1957, Sukarno enunciated his "Conception" (*Konsepsi*), which included the formation of a Gotong-Royong Cabinet (Mutual Assistance, Working-Together Cabinet) that would include all political parties, and the establishment of a National Council whose members would be appointed rather than elected, and which would function by consensus rather than by voting. This Council would function as an advisory body, drawing appointed members from various social groups, such as workers, women, peasants, students, the military, businessmen, artists, and so on. By 1959, the framework of "Konsepsi" had been institutionalized into a system of "Guided Democracy," in which the president and the cabinet had increasing decision-making authority, with many issues discussed by the National Council in its advisory capacity.¹³

Another center of power was the military, and especially the army. The army's power was greatly increased by the declaration of martial law in response to the regional rebellions of 1957–59, and that power continued until 1963, during the campaign to wrest West Papua from the Dutch. During this period, military war administrators were hostile to most political party activity, but demonstrated especially strong intolerance towards the activities of the Communist Party and its allied groups. War administrators frequently banned communist and left-wing newspapers, occasionally placed a ban on PKI organizational activity, arrested and interrogated some PKI leaders, and at times banned poetry readings, modern theater performances, and other activities of Lekra activists.¹⁴

¹¹ On this point, see especially Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno*, pp. 77–140.

¹² See Daniel S. Lev, *The Transition to Guided Democracy: Indonesian Politics, 1957–59* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1966), pp. 11, 13. See also Herbert Feith, "The Dynamics of Guided Democracy," in *Indonesia*, ed. Ruth T. McVey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1963), pp. 322–25.

¹³ Lev, *The Transition to Guided Democracy*, Chapter 1; Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 538–42.

¹⁴ For accounts of the military's actions against the PKI, see Feith, "The Dynamics of Guided Democracy," pp. 326, 338–39; Törnquist, *Dilemmas of Third World Communism*, p. 121; and Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno*, p. 107. The dates that I have been able to find regarding the banning of the PKI newspaper, *Harian Rakjat*, and the leftist *Bintang Timur* are as follows: *Harian Rakjat*, October 10–23, 1959; December 9–12, 1959; March 20–April 29, 1960;

The PKI and its affiliated organizations regained some freedom of movement after the successful conclusion of the West Papua campaign, which resulted in the end of martial law in May 1963. The party took the offensive and used a heightened rhetoric of anti-imperialism and vocal support for Sukarno's idea of a *Nasakom*¹⁵ Cabinet in a bid to increase its own power within the political system and minimize the power of its rival, the army. The communists even succeeded in blocking a US aid package tied to an IMF-dictated economic belt-tightening project.¹⁶ Still, in this period the PKI had to fend off several attempts to limit its power or dissolve it altogether, the latter threat being from the rival left-wing Murba Party's "Body for the Promotion of Sukarnoism," which was formed in August 1964 in consort with a number of army officers and aimed at creating a one-party state.¹⁷ It was during the heightened tensions of these last years of the Sukarno era, 1963–65, when the sharpest conflict occurred in the cultural arena. The Cultural Manifesto affair of late 1963 and 1964, in which, as mentioned above, anti-Lekra and anti-Left figures tried to stake out a position for their artistic endeavors independent of party influence, occurred in the midst of this fierce period of political competition. Furthermore, one of the key authors of the Manifesto and its explanatory notes had ties to military intelligence at the time, and the All-Indonesian Writing Workers Conference (KKPs-I, Konferensi Karjawan Pengarang se-Indonesia) of March 1964, which groups associated with the Cultural Manifesto had helped organize, clearly had army backing.¹⁸ Seen in this context, the attacks made by some Lekra members and those from other leftist organizations on arts figures associated with the Cultural Manifesto, though regrettable, nonetheless can be viewed as part of the intense Cold War contention then rife throughout much of the political and social fabric of Indonesia. Still, the destruction of the Communist Party and its related organizations, from October 1965 to early 1966, allowed those who had suffered attacks either from Lekra figures or from other PKI-aligned organizations to be the

July 16–August 1, 1960; August 2–9, 1961; November 3–December 13, 1961; May 3–5, 1962; and December 4–9, 1962; for *Bintang Timur*, June 13–16, 1963, and November 13–16, 1964. A number of poems and stories by Lekra writers had also been banned by early 1963, including works by Agam Wispi, Amaran Ismail Hamid, Sobron Aidit, Klara Akustia, and S. Anantaguna ("Buku-Buku Sastra Indonesian Jg. Dilarang: Tapi bukan karena tjabul," *Bintang Timur*, December 2, 1962, p. 2). Even Pramoedya Ananta Toer, editor of *Bintang Timur*'s "Lentera" cultural page and probably Indonesia's most prominent prose writer at that time, had had a book banned in 1960, his book on Indonesian Chinese, *Hoakiau di Indonesia*, and he spent nine months in prison as well (Foulcher, *Social Commitment in Literature and the Arts*, p. 118). As late as August 1963, Z. Afif, writing in *Harian Rakjat*, also reported a banning in Klaten, Central Java, of *Api Di Pematang*, a pro-land reform play by Lekra writer Kusni Sulang. This was only months before the *Manifes Kebudayaan* incident began. See Z. Afif, "Lesdra Jogja dan kegiatannya" [Yogya Lesdra and Its Activities], *Harian Rakjat*, August 4, 1963, p. 3.

¹⁵ "Nasakom" was Sukarno's formulation for combining *Nasionalis*, *Agama*, and *Komunis*—or nationalism, religion, and communism. The formulation was indicative of Sukarno's desire to unite what he perceived to be the three major currents within Indonesian society so that they might work together for Indonesian progress and prosperity.

¹⁶ Törnquist, *Dilemmas of Third World Communism*, pp. 53 and 157–58.

¹⁷ Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno*, p. 113.

¹⁸ In fact, as Foulcher has noted in *Social Commitment*, p. 125, Wiratmo Sukito has admitted he was voluntarily serving as a military intelligence operative at the time of the *Manifes Kebudayaan* events in 1963 and 1964. See Sukito's own "Satyagraha Hoerip atau Apologia Pro Vita LEKRA" [Satyagraha Hoerip or an Apologia for the Career of Lekra], *Horison XXVII* (November 1982), p. 346. On the KKPs-I, see Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, p. 126.

chief authors of much of Indonesian cultural history and writing about that history from 1966 till the end of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998 and beyond. This has made it difficult until quite recently, especially for Indonesians, to assess Lekra's accomplishments in a more balanced manner.

THROWING OUT THE STEREOTYPES

In what follows, I want to make a number of key points in offering an alternative history of Lekra activity in theater. First, rather than focusing chiefly on Jakarta, I will spend much of my time looking at Lekra theater activities that took place far from what many observers consider to be the center of Indonesian political and cultural affairs. By looking not just at the Indonesian capital, or even at activities in Central or East Java, we may gain a rather different picture of a part of what Lekra was about. Second, we will also see that Lekra's relations with other cultural groups in North Sumatra tended to look somewhat different, certainly more complicated, than we are usually given to understand through the lens of the dominant, anti-Left accounts of many previous commentators and scholars. A third key point is that, in contrast to those views that see Lekra's theater activity as only concerned with socialist realism, I will discuss the ways in which Lekra writers and performers also developed several other theatrical styles, genres, and techniques. Those included, most importantly, attempts to create a new kind of hybrid modern theater performance that, while distinctively modern in its stagecraft, approach to acting, and choice of scripts and theme, also sought to borrow elements from traditional culture and performance styles. As such, these efforts show the diversity and dynamism of Lekra's modern theater work. Its members' attempts to create hybrid forms of modern national theater, even in some of the most clearly "revolutionary realist" style plays, deserve recognition as contributing to a decades-long continuity in Indonesian experiments with indigenized postcolonial theater forms at a time when most Indonesian theater workers were preoccupied chiefly with a Western style of modern realist/naturalist theater. Fourth, I'll argue against that popular point of view that insists Lekra writers created no works of any value. I contend that a fair number of plays written by Lekra members or fellow-travelers of Lekra were by no means less interesting thematically than those written by non-Lekra members, which were often valorized as the key dramatic texts of the Sukarno era.¹⁹ Furthermore, I will argue that a number of the plays written for specific Lekra/PKI campaigns, though clearly having very pointed political agendas, were fascinating and skillfully written works that revealed much about the culture, issues, preoccupations of the times, and contradictions within which Lekra writers found themselves entangled. Finally, I will demonstrate that, although some dramatic works produced by Lekra-affiliated writers and performed by Lekra-affiliated groups advanced, glorified, or were sympathetic to communist heroes, viewpoints, and ideas, much of Lekra's dramatic work was just as vitally concerned with defending the nation, creating a specifically Indonesian national culture, or propagating ideas of democracy and rights not entirely unfamiliar to Western liberal democracies.

¹⁹ Among those non-Lekra works valorized are Misbach Yusa Biran's *Bung Besar* [Big Brother] and Motinggo Boesye's *Malam Djahanam* [Night of the Damned], both written in 1957.

NORTH SUMATRA AS A KEY SITE FOR LEKRA THEATER

Lekra's activities in modern theater have not been the object of much attention, aside from the mainly dismissive and condemnatory remarks cited earlier. Yet Lekra theater groups, and those affiliated with the organization, were active in at least fourteen of Indonesia's then twenty-one provinces, as well as in the capital city, Jakarta.²⁰ It is likely that one of the reasons that Lekra's modern national-language theater activities have received so little attention is the fact that such theater was relatively rare in Jakarta. Instead, its most active center was the province of North Sumatra, far from the capital and dominant population center of Java.²¹ The preeminence of North Sumatran theater groups is suggested by the greater frequency of reports in periodicals like *Zaman Baru* (New Age) and *Harian Rakjat* (The People's Daily) on the activities of groups from North Sumatran cities like Medan, Tanjung Balai, Rantauprapat, and Pematang Siantar compared with reports regarding other regions and cities in which Lekra had branches.²²

That Lekra's modern theater activity was most pronounced in North Sumatra was due to a number of factors. First, the region simply did not have the same rich variety of deeply rooted, local, traditional dramatic genres that could be found in places like Java or Bali.²³ Influenced by touring *Bangsawan* and *Komedie Stamboel*

²⁰ This and some of the other summary information in this essay were collected from left-wing periodicals of the time, such as *Harian Rakjat*, *Bintang Timur*, and *Zaman Baru*.

²¹ Another likely reason is that Lekra and the PKI in Java put considerable energy into promoting popular forms of folk theater such as *ketoprak* and *ludruk*, which were seen to attract larger audiences among ordinary Javanese and thus were liable to be more effective at promoting left-wing ideas and programs to a broader public.

²² Of roughly 225 performances of plays that I have cataloged from *Harian Rakjat*, *Bintang Timur*, and *Zaman Baru*, and which were written by writers affiliated with Lekra, written by non-Lekra writers but performed by Lekra groups, or written by Lekra writers before they became affiliated with Lekra, approximately ninety-six were held in North Sumatra or performed by North Sumatran groups. Thus, about 41 percent of all performances of modern theater reported in these periodicals were from North Sumatra. Of those, roughly thirty-four reported performances can be attributed to Medan's Lekra/Lesdra groups (Lesdra was the Lembaga Seni Drama, or Theater Art Institute, one of several institutes established by Lekra in its 1959 reorganization. Each institute focused on a specific branch of the arts and had regional branches, such as that in Medan) and its predecessors (though sometimes in collaboration with other groups), about nine more by other Medan groups, twelve by groups from Tanjung Balai, and ten by groups from Labuhan Batu. This accounts for about two-thirds of the reported performances in North Sumatra. Lesbi (Lembaga Seni Budaya Indonesia, or Indonesian Arts and Culture Institute, was affiliated with the leftist party, Partindo, whose membership was originally composed of breakaway members of the Left wing of the Indonesian Nationalist Party) groups were responsible for about eight reported performances of plays by Utuy Tatang Sontani and other Lekra writers in North Sumatra, while Rantauprapat and several other smaller cities all seem to have had active left-wing, modern-drama groups, each recording at least several performances.

²³ Cohen notes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Medan had developed a kind of cosmopolitan atmosphere heavily influenced by British culture, including British variety theater and operetta. See Matthew Isaac Cohen, *The Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theater in Colonial Indonesia, 1891–1903*, Southeast Asian Series, No. 112 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, Research in International Studies, 2006), pp. 263–64. This dramatic form would have been unlikely to have been popular for a number of reasons. For example, a major drawback was the difficulty of producing a performance in a language unfamiliar to most of the local population, in the post-independence era, particularly in the 1960s, when the British were perceived in Indonesia as neo-imperialists who were trying to create a malleable surrogate state with the construction of a Malayan Federation. This handicap would have been

troupes, North Sumatran ethnic Bataks did create a new genre in the 1920s and 1930s, *Opera Batak*, and this remained a popular form of ethnic regional theater into the 1950s, claiming a place in nationalist culture through its staging of plays about Singamangaraja XII, an ethnic Batak leader who resisted the Dutch in the nineteenth century.²⁴ Similarly, the Malay sultanates of the East Coast had frequently sponsored *Bangsawan* (a melodramatic theater form often emphasizing the fantastic and the lurid) troupes from the 1890s to the early decades of the twentieth century.²⁵ Yet by the 1950s, both *Bangsawan* and its closely related Indonesian genre, *Komedie Stamboel*, had lost much of their audience to modern media, regional popular theaters, and the more modernized drama forms associated with nationalist movements.²⁶

Second, the region was also much less ethnically homogenous than Java or Bali, and this fact meant that those few forms tied to local ethnic groups, such as *Opera Batak*, were less likely to have wide appeal outside their own specific ethnic audience. The potential for reaching a wider, heterogeneous “Indonesian” audience of Bataks, Javanese, Malays, Chinese, Minangkabau, and the many other ethnic groups mingling in North Sumatra made performances in the national language much more attractive for Lekra and other Left-nationalist cultural groups operating there.

Third, there was a strong desire to cultivate “modernity” in the region. This was prompted by both the nationalist aspiration to stand equal to other nations and so become “modern,” and the strong antipathy of a considerable segment of the local population, including migrants to the area as well as many ordinary “indigenous” Karo and Simalungan Bataks, to the Malay *rajas* (rulers), symbols of a conservative and exploitative “feudal” order that had colluded with the Dutch. Michael van Langenberg characterizes “opposition to ... aristocratic privilege,” along with opposition to colonial rule, as contributing to the growth of the radical nationalist movement under the leadership of Gerindo prior to 1942.²⁷ Parts of the Batak communities even rejected many Batak customary practices during the Sukarno era, feeling they were “feudal” and out of step with the times.²⁸ However, nationalism and anti-feudal sentiment were not the only attractions of modernity.

Individual members of Lekra branches and their Lesdra theater groups have stated that during the late 1950s, drama and poetry declamation were becoming

particularly troublesome in North Sumatra, where British companies still had interests in some plantations. For this, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870–1979* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 157–60.

²⁴ Rainer Carle, “Opera Batak: Theater on Regional Identity in National Context,” *Tenggara* 21/22 (1988): 131–39. Carle points out that this genre retained its popularity in the 1970s and ‘80s.

²⁵ Cohen, *The Komedie Stamboel*, pp. 263–64. See also Carle, “Opera Batak,” p. 131.

²⁶ Cohen, *The Komedie Stamboel*, Chapter 6. On *Bangsawan*, see Tan Sooi-Beng, *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 166–70.

²⁷ Michael van Langenberg, “East Sumatra: Accommodating an Indonesian Nation Within a Sumatran Residency,” in *Regional Dynamics of the Indonesian Revolution: Unity from Diversity*, ed. Audrey R. Kahin (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1985), pp. 114–18. See also Anthony Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier: Acehese and Other Histories of Sumatra* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2005), pp. 328–32.

²⁸ Susan Rogers, “The Ethnic Culture Page in Medan Journalism,” *Indonesia* 51 (April 1991), p. 88.

hugely popular and that these activities gave them opportunities for self-expression.²⁹ In this focus on “self-expression,” {quotes added} we can detect another lure of modernization and modernity in such cultural work much in the same way that Ruth McVey has described the appeal of “organization” that the PKI offered for those similarly attracted to ideas of a political modernity.³⁰ Drama, with its focus on “naturalistic” dialogue and its presentation of contemporary social issues and psychological dilemmas, certainly would have seemed attractively modern. Martin Aleida, a member of the Tanjung Balai Lesdra group in the early 1960s, has commented that, in Tanjung Balai, what drew young people to Lekra was its dynamism. In Aleida’s own words, Lekra was “active” and provided opportunities (“*mereka yang aktif, mereka yang memberikan kesempatan*”) for youth to become involved and express themselves. This was especially true for youth who were “*keras*” (strong, loud), suggesting that those with strong social ideals and who were vocal—in short, militant—were particularly attracted to Lekra.³¹

Lekra’s dynamism was produced by at least two factors. First, relatively new realist-oriented forms of theater such as the *sandiwara* (a generic term for stylistically more modern, Western-influenced plays) and the drama (drama, tragedy) were becoming associated with modernity and nationalism, and socially committed, politicized modern theater had a strong, recent history in the region. The radical nationalist and Gerindo activist Saleh Umar had organized a modern theater troupe, *Kinsei Gekidan*, under the aegis of the Japanese occupation that, according to H. Mohammed Said, widely propagated ideas of modernization.³² One of the members of this troupe was Bachtiar Siagian, later to become one of Lekra’s most prolific and popular playwrights as well as an important film director of the Sukarno era.³³ In the immediate postwar era following the Indonesian Declaration of Independence, many *sandiwara* troupes were formed in North Sumatra. A number of these companies, such as Ahmad C. B.’s troupe, *Asmara Dana*, were engaged in anti-Dutch theater, and their allure for audiences helped undermine the popularity of *Bangsawan*.³⁴ Similarly, during the war of independence, roving theater groups were organized to entertain republican troops in the field. Emha, the leader of the Tanjung Balai Lesdra theater group, came from this background.³⁵

²⁹ Chalik Hamid, personal communication June 27, 2009; and conversation with Martin Aleida, Jakarta, July 23, 2007.

³⁰ Ruth McVey, “Nationalism, Revolution, and Organization in Indonesian Communism,” in *Making Indonesia: Essays on Modern Indonesia in Honor of George McT. Kahin*, ed. Daniel S. Lev and Ruth McVey (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1996).

³¹ Conversation with Martin Aleida, July 23, 2007.

³² H. Mohammed Said, “What was the ‘Social Revolution of 1946’ in East Sumatra?,” *Indonesia* 15 (April 1973): 158.

³³ Bachtiar Siagian, audio recording from the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Taporal, BG GC 9/140.

³⁴ Tan, *Bangsawan*, p. 169. Interestingly, Ahmad C. B. and his group were among several troupes that crossed over to the Malay peninsula during the war of independence to avoid arrest by the Dutch. These groups toured peninsular Malaya and in so doing contributed to the development there of both *sandiwara* and Malay nationalism.

³⁵ Conversation with Amarzan Ismail Hamid, Jakarta, July 3, 2007.

The collaboration and networks of the PKI and its affiliated organizations, such as Lekra and Sobsi/Sarbupri,³⁶ were also key in fostering the dynamism of Lekra theater. Groups from Medan, Pematang Siantar, Tanjung Balai, Rantauprapat, the Labuhan Batu region, and elsewhere were frequently invited by ideologically like-minded organizations from other cities and agricultural estate areas to perform or to participate in drama weeks (*pekan drama*) and festivals.³⁷ This occurred regularly at least as early as 1957 and continued through the 1960s. In the late 1950s, according to Stoler, remnants of the rebel, strongly anti-communist PRRI (Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia, Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia) were still quite active in the Simalungan, Asahan Coast, and Labuhan Batu areas.³⁸ Thus, at some potential risk, members of Medan's Lekra/Lesdra and collaborating groups traveled extensively in the region from May to September of 1959, performing Bachtiar Siagian's anti-PRRI play, *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* (The Red Rock of Merapi Valley). Similarly, groups from other cities traveled to Medan to participate in drama weeks or all-North Sumatran theater festivals from 1957 on.

The branches in Medan and Tanjung Balai were by far the most active, each with a genesis and dynamic of its own. Yet another important reason for the success of Lekra's Medan theater group can be found in the presence of Bakri Siregar in Medan from 1951 till 1959, a term interrupted by a brief sojourn in Poland where he taught Indonesian language at the University of Warsaw (1956–57). Bakri Siregar joined Lekra as early as 1952–53, becoming the first Secretary of the North Sumatra branch in 1953. Working initially as a teacher in a secondary school in Medan, Siregar was well positioned to spot young, talented, potential actors. He appears to have trained a number of actors and directors who later became the key figures of Lekra Medan's Dinamo (Dynamo) theater group. After 1959, following Lekra's reorganization into several institutes, each concerned with a separate field of artistic endeavor, this group of artists was also prominent in the Medan Lesdra (*Lembaga Seni Drama*, Institute of Dramatic Art) performing group.³⁹ Siregar was apparently passionately

³⁶ Sobsi was Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia, or All-Indonesian Labor Unions Federation. Sarbupri was the Sarikat Buruh Perkebunan Republik Indonesia, or Union of Indonesian Plantation Workers.

³⁷ Chalik Hamid, personal communication, June 27, 2009.

³⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation*, pp. 149–53. The PRRI rebellion was one of the early regional rebellions against the central government. Centered chiefly in West Sumatra, though North and South Sumatra were also involved, the rebellion was linked to a similar revolt in North Sulawesi, the Perjuangan Semesta (Total Struggle), or "Permesta." These rebellions were spurred on by a number of political and economic grievances felt by the outer islands residents towards Java and the central government. Tension rose during 1956–57, and open rebellion broke out in early 1958, with guerrilla-style fighting continuing until 1961. It is germane to the Cold War theme of this paper to reiterate that the United States gave some initial support to the regional rebels, and this further encouraged anti-communist feelings already present amongst the PRRI/Permesta partisans. Outlawing communism became one of their demands. See Lev, *The Transition to Guided Democracy*, pp. 35–43; and Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, pp. 68–69, 120–142.

³⁹ This group included figures such as Sj. Anjasmara, Aziz Akbar, Kamaluddin Rangkuti, Chalik Hamid, Zoebier Lelo, Mariadi Ridwan, Mulkan AS Zed AV, Masrian Elsa, Duryani Siregar (néé Lonto), Sudarsiah, Nismah, Pilian Khoti, and Farida Rani; and stage crew such as Sulardjo. The first five and Sulardjo were Siregar's former students, while Duryani Siregar was also a former student who became his wife. This information was given to me in conversation with Chalik Hamid and Sulardjo, Duivendrecht, Netherlands, February 24, 2007.

interested in many areas of culture, including literature, drama,⁴⁰ film, and music, and seems to have inspired members of Medan Dinamo/Lesdra with a broad interest in culture and an enduring respect for him as a teacher and mentor.⁴¹

Siregar's success in creating a solid grounding for the Medan Lekra's Dinamo theater activities and, later, its Lesdra group can be easily seen in the number of plays those groups performed; in the number of times they mounted several of those plays; in their organizing of several *pekan drama* (drama weeks) in 1959, 1959–60, 1961, 1964, and 1965; and in their participation in two provincial theater festivals. Chalik Hamid, an actor in the Dinamo and Lesdra groups in Medan, recalls productions of at least twelve different plays by Lesdra or its predecessors. However, cross-checking with newspaper reports of drama activity, I have counted a total of twenty-one separate plays produced, at least fifteen of which were performed between 1957 and 1965, giving a clear indication of the peak of Lekra/Lesdra's theater activities in and around Medan. Some of the plays were extremely popular and were performed by Lesdra Medan or other local groups not only in Medan itself but all over North Sumatra, in Rantauprapat, Pematang Siantar, Tanjung Balai, Belawan, Binjai, Labuhan Batu, Kisaran, and many other places. For example, working with two other groups, Tjandradimuka (Volcanic Cauldron)⁴² and Prayatna (Vigilant), Lesdra Medan performed Bachtiar Siagian's *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* (The Red Rock of Merapi Valley) at least seventeen times between May and September 1959, with plans for at least six more performances in different towns.⁴³ By 1963, the caption for a picture of a performance of *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* featured in *Harian Rakjat*⁴⁴ claimed that the play had been performed over sixty times

⁴⁰ Siregar not only wrote a play early in his career (*Tugu Putih* [White Monument], 1950 or earlier), but he adapted several others as well, including *Saidjah and Adinda* (Jakarta: Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakjat, 1960), based on a subplot from Multatuli's famous anticolonial novel *Max Havelaar*; *Gadis Teratai* (Lotus Blossom Maiden), from a Korean folk tale (N.p.: Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakjat, n.d.); *Dosa dan Hukuman*, from Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment*; and *Tjinta dan Kebebasan* (Love and Freedom), from a Maxim Gorky short story (Medan: Program, Pekan Drama Medan, 1959). During the last months of 1963, he also published in serial form his translation of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* [*Persiapan Aktor*] in *Harian Rakjat*'s cultural pages.

⁴¹ Chalik Hamid and Sulardjo, two members of Lesdra Medan during the period in question, recalled Siregar's demeanor as director, which apparently set the tone that was conducive to good work patterns for the ensemble as a whole. He never became angry or shouted at his actors, only observing while they practiced or performed, then later discussing their performance with them and pointing out weaknesses. In addition, they saw his manner of encouraging students as more proof of his nurturing, "democratic" character. According to them, Siregar never told students what they should do or become, but rather encouraged them to choose whether they would continue schooling and to what end. Conversation with Chalik Hamid and Sulardjo, February 24, 2007.

⁴² Candradimuka was a volcanic cauldron shaped like a cow. A man thrown into it would be boiled but thereby acquire supernatural strength and powers.

⁴³ Bakri Siregar, "Laporan dari Sumatera Utara: 'Batu Merah Lembah Merapi' Dimana-mana," [Report from North Sumatra: "Batu Merah Lembah Merapi" Plays Everywhere], *Harian Rakjat*, September 19, 1959, p. 3.

⁴⁴ September 15, 1963.

in North Sumatra alone.⁴⁵ *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* thus has a strong claim to the title of Lekra's most successful and popular play.

Lekra/Lesdra groups from Medan and nearby cities also organized several *pekan drama* beginning with the first in 1959,⁴⁶ followed by a *pekan Utuy* (Utuy [Sontani] week) that most likely occurred in late 1959 or early 1960.⁴⁷ Lesdra Medan was involved in a third *pekan drama* in conjunction with the Indonesian Lesdra Conference held in North Sumatra from December 24–28, 1961.⁴⁸ That North Sumatra was chosen as the host region for this conference suggests the prominence of the regional Lekra's and Lesdra's leadership in the leftist theater world at the time. Lesdra Medan attempted to take its theater to the urban *kampung* (urban slum or lower/lower-middle class neighborhood) in its fourth *pekan drama* in March 1964. The group performed in a variety of *kampung* in and around Medan in an effort to help foster "people's culture" (*kebudajaan rakjat*).⁴⁹ A fifth *pekan drama* was held in Medan, probably in May of 1965, to celebrate the PKI's forty-fifth anniversary.⁵⁰ Tanjung Balai also held its own *pekan drama* in early 1960,⁵¹ as did Labuhan Batu during October 1964, with Lekra members there working together with several other groups—LKN, Lesbi, Okra, and Lesbumi—on the organizing committee.⁵² Lekra and Lesdra groups also participated in at least two All North Sumatra Drama Festivals. In the first, occurring in 1957, the Medan Lekra-affiliated group, Dinamo, presented Agam Wispi's *Gerbong* (Boxcar), managing to get at least as far as the finals of the prize competition.⁵³ After refusing to participate in a second festival because of what Lekra/Lesdra members saw as financial irregularities in the organization of that festival, several Lekra theater groups, now under the rubric of the Lesdra of their various cities, entered the 1962 competition, with Lesdra Tanjung Balai winning first

⁴⁵ This number may well be reasonable, though I have only been able to find published reports of thirty-seven performances throughout Indonesia. The vast majority of these, indeed, occurred in North Sumatra.

⁴⁶ *Program Pekan Drama* (Medan: Panitia Pekan Drama, 1959); "Pekan Drama Pertama di Medan" [First Drama Week in Medan], *Zaman Baru*, August 1, 1959, p. 2.

⁴⁷ "Pekan Utuy se-Sumatera Utara" [North Sumatra Utuy (Sontani) Drama Week], *Harian Rakjat*, December 5, 1959, pp. 3–4.

⁴⁸ "Berita Singkat Kebudayaan" [Cultural News Briefs], *Harian Rakjat*, December 23, 1961, p. 3. See also "Pekan Drama Ke-III di Sumatera Utara: Laporan dari Amarzan Ismail Hamid" [Third Drama Week in North Sumatra: Report from Amarzan Ismail Hamid], *Harian Rakjat*, January 20, 1962.

⁴⁹ "Pekan Drama Lekra di Kampung Kota Medan" [Lekra's Drama Week in Medan City Neighborhoods], *Harian Rakjat*, April 5, 1964, p. 2.

⁵⁰ "Pekan Drama Ultah ke-45 PKI Sukses di Medan" [PKI's Forty-Fifth Anniversary Drama Week Is a Success in Medan], *Harian Rakjat*, June 6, 1965, p. 1.

⁵¹ Amarzan Ismail Hamid, "Laporan Kegiatan Daerah Tg. Balai: Pekan Drama" [Report on Activities in the Tanjung Balai Region: Drama Week], *Zaman Baru*, January 30, 1960, p. 7.

⁵² The plans were announced in "Pekan Drama II di Labuhan Batu" [Labuhan Batu's Second Drama Week], *Harian Rakjat*, August 16, 1964, p. 2. Lesbumi [Lembaga Seniman dan Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia, or Indonesian Muslim Artists and Cultural Workers Institute] was affiliated with the traditionalist Muslim party, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Okra (Organisasi Kebudayaan Rakjat, or The People's Cultural Organization) was affiliated with the leftist Murba Party, founded by legendary communist and nationalist Tan Malaka.

⁵³ "Berita Kebudayaan: Festival Senidrama" [Cultural Report: Art Drama Festival], *Harian Rakjat*, May 18, 1957, p. 3.

prize with its staging of *Si Nandang*,⁵⁴ and Lesdra Medan winning second prize with its performance of Joebaar Ajob's *Siti Djamilah*.⁵⁵

Lesdra Medan also opened a drama school to train potential new actors and directors in the art of modern theater, with Bakri Siregar giving the opening address.⁵⁶ It was in the following months that Siregar's translation of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* was published in the pages of *Harian Rakjat*,⁵⁷ and this may have served the additional need of providing textual material for students in the course.

A second notable site for Lekra theater activity in North Sumatra was the city of Tanjung Balai, located farther south along the Asahan coast of North Sumatra. Here, the Lekra-affiliated group was Sandiwara Realis Gelanggang (Forum for Realist Theater), under the leadership of Ibrahim Hamid, whose pen name was Emha. According to Emha's nephew, Amarzan Ismail Hamid, who became involved in Sandiwara Realis Gelanggang while in secondary school, the group had its origins in the independence-struggle era as a theater troupe that entertained republican troops in the villages of the North Sumatran countryside. Following the end of the struggle and the achievement of independence, the group was reconstituted in Tanjung Balai with Emha as its leader.⁵⁸

Not only was this group active, but it also offered strong competition to the Medan Lekra group in local theater-festival competitions, often winning the top prizes. Sandiwara Realis Gelanggang, after 1959 known as Lesdra Tanjung Balai Branch, also first produced and became famous for a second popular Lekra play, Emha's *pantun*-based drama, *Si Nandang* (Nandang, 1961).⁵⁹ I will discuss this play in some detail later, but for now I wish to focus briefly on the play's performance history and reception. *Si Nandang* was first staged by the Tanjung Balai Lesdra group for Lesdra Medan's third *pekan drama* in 1961, then taken to the all-North Sumatra Drama Festival in 1962 for which Tanjung Balai's Lesdra group won first prize. Thereafter, it was frequently performed by various Lekra drama groups in North Sumatra, as well as in Palembang, in South Sumatra. One article in *Harian Rakjat*

⁵⁴ The title is the name of the play's protagonist; it is also identified with a song from the Asahan coast in North Sumatra.

⁵⁵ The title is the name of the play's protagonist, a woman abandoned by her husband. "Berita Budaja: Festival Senidrama Ke-III di Medan" [Cultural Report: Third Art Drama Festival in Medan], *Harian Rakjat*, September 22, 1962, p. 3; "Berita Festival Senidrama ke-III Sumut" [Report on the Third North Sumatran Art Drama Festival], *Harian Rakjat*, November 17, 1962.

⁵⁶ "Berita Budaja: Sekolah Drama di Medan" [Cultural Report: Drama School in Medan], *Harian Rakjat*, July 14, 1963, p. 2.

⁵⁷ September 1963–January 12, 1964.

⁵⁸ Conversation with Amarzan Ismail Hamid, July 3, 2007. From a conversation with Martin Aleida, July 23, 2007, I learned that the notable younger generation members of this group included Amarzan Ismail Hamid, Ahmadi Hamid, Martin Aleida, and Chong Kun Tat (Daniel Chong).

⁵⁹ From a conversation with Amarzan Ismail Hamid, July 3, 2007, I learned that this play was composed at the insistence of the *Bupati* of Asahan, Usman YS, who wanted to form an arts team for the Asahan district that could perform dance, music, and drama. He requested that a play with specific Asahan content be created, and Amarzan Ismail Hamid was originally given the task of writing the script. However, Amarzan was unable to devise a form for such a drama, and eventually Emha took up the work. Emha then wrote the play, starting from the idea of a traditional song, *sinandong*, and making extensive use of the traditional *pantun* poetic form for the play's dialogue. (*Pantun* is a traditional Malay quatrain whose first two lines contain a nature image that parallels the human situation in the second pair of lines.)

stated that *Si Nandang* had been performed tens of times in North Sumatra.⁶⁰ *Si Nandang* certainly caught the attention of Jakarta leftists as well, for the PKI's leading newspaper invited North Sumatra's Lesdra to come and perform the play in Jakarta's Gedung Kesenian (Arts Palace) on the occasion of *Harian Rakjat*'s fourteenth anniversary of publication in February 1964.⁶¹ The performances even garnered praise from PKI party leader D. N. Aidit, who spoke of the play as proof that Indonesian cultural resources could offer competition to American film and mass culture.⁶²

Aidit's attitude stood in contrast to the reaction to the play offered by one of Lekra's leading poets and critics, Hr. Bandaharo. In a series of three articles published about one year earlier, in 1963 in *Harian Rakjat*, Bandaharo (pen name of Banda Harahap), who was also originally from North Sumatra, analyzed Emha's attempt to create a new kind of modern drama performance using traditional Malay *pantun* as a key formal structuring device. Though quite critical (see below for more on Bandaharo's views), this series of articles may well have helped prompt *Harian Rakjat*'s leadership to sponsor bringing the North Sumatran group to Jakarta to stage the play for the publication's anniversary celebration one year later. It is also highly likely that, despite the more critical appraisal of some members of Lekra,⁶³ the way in which this play later caught the imagination of PKI leaders like Aidit encouraged Lekra to include research into regional art forms, notably North Sumatran Malay *pantun* songs, as one of the central themes of Lekra's planned Second National Congress, scheduled for December 1965 but never held.⁶⁴ In such a way, *Si Nandang* highlighted Lekra theater workers' attempts to formulate a new basis for a uniquely national culture, at the same time as it underscored a number of problems involved in these efforts.

COMPLEX RELATIONS BETWEEN LEKRA AND OTHER GROUPS

Much of the worst and most acrimonious fighting over cultural matters took place on Java and in Jakarta among the leaders of the respective cultural organizations and groups. However, some regional military and political authorities less than enamored with Lekra were also sometimes apt to prohibit specific works of art from being performed. Still, the tensions were not always high throughout Indonesia, and they seemed to peak only from 1963 to 1965.

⁶⁰ This number, which was stated in "Zaman Baru," *Harian Rakjat* February 2, 1964, p. 2, may be reasonable, as may also be the case with reports of the many performances of *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi*, though I was only able to find reports of eleven specific performances between 1961 and 1965, some of them in Jakarta and Palembang.

⁶¹ "'Si Nandang' dalam Ulang Tahun HR" ["'Si Nandang' at HR's Anniversary"], *Harian Rakjat*, February 9, 1964, p. 1.

⁶² "'Si Nandang' Pantas Mendjadi Kebanggaan Nasional" ["'Si Nandang' Deserves to Become an Object of National Pride"], *Harian Rakjat*, February 16, 1964, p. 1.

⁶³ Echoing Bandaharo's criticism of the play, Amaran Ismail Hamid related to me that he had not regarded *Si Nandang* as a particularly special drama from a literary point of view, though its theme and form did seem right for the time. Conversation with Amaran Ismail Hamid, July 3, 2007.

⁶⁴ This planned agenda is noted by Foulcher in "Politics and Literature in Independent Indonesia: The View From the Left," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 15,1 (1987): 85.

In North Sumatra, as noted above, Lesdra Medan and Lesdra Tanjung Balai entered general drama festivals that were open to all North Sumatran groups. Lesdra members in Medan and Labuhan Batu worked together with members of other groups, including LKN and Lesbumi, to ensure the success of such local festivals and drama weeks and provide representative panels of judges for evaluating the performances and selecting the winners.⁶⁵ The collaboration on the Labuhan Batu drama week was announced in August 1964, months after the Cultural Manifesto controversy had begun. Chalik Hamid and Sulardjo have argued that Lekra Medan worked together with the nationalist LKN and the NU-affiliated Lesbumi in what Lesdra members felt was the “spirit of *Nasakom*,” even inviting representatives from both groups to engage in “going down to the masses” (*turun ke bawah* or *turba*) field-study exercises⁶⁶ with them in the Karo Batak region, an invitation LKN members actually took up. Chalik Hamid recalls that, in North Sumatra, Lesdra’s relations with theater artists who performed works related to Islam, who were affiliated with the LKN and the Nationalist Party, and who associated with the Lesbi cultural organization, as well as with independent groups such as Actor’s Studio, were always respectful with regard to each other’s work in a spirit of healthy competition. Lesdra members were frequently invited to performances by rival groups and asked to give their reactions. Similarly, others would do the same for Lesdra’s productions. Reviews in newspapers tended to be critical, but Hamid suggests that this was normal, since all groups had their own points of view.⁶⁷

Yet beginning in at least early 1964, friction did increase in Medan in the aftermath of the Cultural Manifesto incident.⁶⁸ This was a period during which the Communist Party went on the offensive to secure a stronger position within the political system of Sukarno’s Guided Democracy. Taking advantage of the fact that military power had been diminished somewhat by the lifting of martial law in May 1963, the PKI began aggressively to attack those people and institutions it considered to be the anti-people elements within the Indonesian state, including “bureaucratic capitalists,” “counter revolutionaries,” and others viewed as supporting stronger ties with the “neo-imperialist” West. Given that the “*Pendjelasan*” (Explanation) attached to the *Manifes Kebudayaan* strongly criticized what it described as the “fetish of the protective spirit” (*fetisy djiwa-pelindung*) and the “fetish of the vengeful spirit” (*fetisy djiwa-pendendam*) as attitudes that could only lead to “false art” (*kesenian palsu*), it seems obvious that the *Manifes* was aimed squarely at Lekra’s socially engaged art, which strove to show how ordinary Indonesians were oppressed and how they might combat their oppressors. This is confirmed by a later passage in the *Pendjelasan* in which the authors discuss socialist realism, attempting to differentiate a Stalinist version from a more humanist version attributed to Maxim Gorky. Such a polemical attack on Lekra and its art was certain to elicit strong counter polemics, at the very least. Yet the matter became even more vexed since military connections with one of

⁶⁵ Conversation with Chalik Hamid and Sulardjo, February 24, 2007; “Pekan Drama II di Labuhan Batu,” p. 2.

⁶⁶ These going-down-to-the-masses exercises were suggested by Lekra to ensure that cultural workers were familiar with the lives, problems, and idioms of ordinary people. The hope was that these study visits could then inspire and infuse the works of Lekra writers with more realism and authenticity.

⁶⁷ Conversation with Chalik Hamid and Sulardjo, February 24, 2007.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

the key authors and signatories of the Cultural Manifesto, Wiratmo Sukito, and army support for the KKP-I conference, caused many in the PKI and Lekra rightly to view these attempts to combat and counter Lekra and leftist momentum in the cultural arena as part of a broader political and cultural struggle. In a number of articles in *Harian Rakjat*, Lekra members and branch groups, sometimes supported by a variety of other cultural organizations, accused the Cultural Manifesto signatories and the organizers of the KKP-I of, among other things, being counter-revolutionaries,⁶⁹ anti-*Nasakom*,⁷⁰ and supporting cultural imperialism.⁷¹

A number of Medan groups were quick to join the fray, with Lekra and six other cultural groups condemning the signatories of the Cultural Manifesto.⁷² In the prevailing atmosphere, some supporters of the Manifesto in Medan were subjected to public harassment. For example, Sori Siregar, an actor in the prominent unaffiliated theater group Actors' Studio, who had also signed a statement of support for the Manifesto, recalled being the target of catcalls by unknown parties on the streets and at theatrical performances. In addition, he and other supporters were labeled "counter-revolutionaries" (a potentially dangerous reputation to have at that time) and profiled in the local left-wing newspaper, *Harian Harapan*, as "spreading the poisonous opiate of 'Manikebu.'" ⁷³ As a result, Sori was dismissed from his position as a reporter for the nationalist-oriented newspaper *Waspada*. Yet the situation remained complicated, for Sori maintained that, though some members of Lekra began to regard him cynically after he had signed the statement of support for the Manifesto, he never had any problems with others, such as Chalik Hamid (of

⁶⁹ "Pramudya Ananta Tur: Konferensi Karjawan Pengarang berwatak kontra-revolusi," [Pramudya Ananta Tur: The Writing Workers' Conference has a Counter-Revolutionary Character], *Harian Rakjat*, January 5, 1964, p. 1; "'Manikebu' dan KK-PSI memusuhi revolusi dan persatuan bangsa: Pernyataan bersama LKN, Lesbi, Lekra, Lesbumi, OKRA dan HSBI Surabaya" ["Manikebu" and the KK-PSI Oppose the Revolution and National Unity: Joint Statement of LKN, Lesbi, Lekra, Lesbumi, Okra, and HSBI Surabaya], *Harian Rakjat*, February 20, 1964, p. 1.

⁷⁰ "Pramudya Ananta Tur: Konferensi Karjawan Pengarang"; "Watak Konferensi Karjawan Pengarang sudah djelas" [The Character of the Writing Workers' Conference is Clear], *Harian Rakjat*, January 19, 1964, p. 2; "'Manifes Kebudayaan' Selewengkan Pantjasila" ["The Cultural Manifesto" Misuses the National Ideology, Pancasila], *Harian Rakjat*, February 9, 1964, p. 1.

⁷¹ The Communist Party's Njoto, also a member of Lekra, was most visible in making this accusation. See "Manifes jang plungr-plungr harus diblejjet habis2an: Pidato Njoto Pada Penutupan Konfernas I LFI" [The Withered Old Manifesto Should Be Stripped Clean of Its Power: Njoto's Speech at Closing of the National Conference of the Indonesian Film Institute], *Harian Rakjat*, January 26, 1964, p. 1; and Iramani (pen name for Njoto), "Mengapa saja kembalikan undangan KK-PSI" [Why I Returned My Invitation to the KK-PSI], *Harian Rakjat*, February 16, 1964, p. 1. See also "S. Anantaguna: Manifes Politik Bangkrut" [S. Anantaguna: Manifesto of Bankrupt Politics], *Harian Rakjat*, February 20, 1964, p. 1.

⁷² "'Manifes Kebudayaan' Selewengkan Pantjasila" and "Komunike Bersama LKN-LEKRA SU" [Joint Communiqué of North Sumatran LKN and LEKRA], *Harian Rakjat*, May 17, 1964, p. 2.

⁷³ Though I have no reason to doubt Sori Siregar's account, I have not been able to confirm it with actual press articles from the time. However, *Prahara Budaya*, the volume edited by D. S. Moeljanto and Taufiq Ismail (see footnote 5, above), contains a brief article published in *Warta Bhakti* ("Terlibat Manikebu Lima Anggota PWI Medan Diskors") on May 31, 1964, which reports that the PWI Medan branch revoked the memberships of five other Medan area reporters seen as involved with the Cultural Manifesto. See D. S. Moeljanto and Taufiq Ismail, *Prahara Budaya*, pp. 373–74.

Lesdra Medan) or the leader of the well-known Medan left-wing chorus, Madju Tak Gentar (Fearless Advance).⁷⁴

At this time, although a clear polarization was occurring in Jakarta and elsewhere between left-wing cultural organizations such as Lekra, LKN, and Lesbi, on the one hand, and Islamic organizations like Lesbumi and HSBI (Himpunan Seniman Budajawan Islam, Association of Islamic Artists and Cultural Workers, aligned with modernist currents of Islam), on the other, in some regional centers the lines of division were not always as clearly drawn as they appeared to be at the national level. For example, in Medan, representatives of Lesbumi and the unaffiliated Actor's Studio were reported to have joined with LKN, Lekra, Lesbi, Okra, and LKM (Lembaga Kebudayaan Melayu, Malay Cultural Institute) in denouncing the Cultural Manifesto as dangerous, anti-revolutionary, and subversive of *Pancasila* (the official state ideology) and *Manipol*⁷⁵ (Sukarno's "Political Manifesto").⁷⁶ Such joint condemnations seem at odds with the stance of Usmar Ismail and the central leadership of Lesbumi who openly supported the 1964 KKPs-I conference and showed a much more neutral, and at times even supportive, attitude towards the signatories of the Cultural Manifesto.⁷⁷ Sori Siregar speculated that the local Medan Lesbumi branch might have felt compelled by the situation to sign such a statement.⁷⁸ Whether this was the case, the reports of the Medan meeting regarding the Cultural Manifesto were quite specific, citing at least one Lesbumi member,

⁷⁴ Conversation with Sori Siregar, Jakarta, July 29, 2007. According to Chalik Hamid (personal communication, September 25, 2008), the leader of Madju Tak Gentar referred to by Sori Siregar could have been one of three people: Kondar Sibarani, Oei Boe Thiam (Udin), or Luther Sihombing, all of whom were involved in the leadership of the group at one time or another.

⁷⁵ The main features of *Manipol* were that it advocated a return to the 1945 constitution, Indonesian Socialism, Guided Democracy, Guided Economy, and Indonesian Identity.

⁷⁶ "Manifes Kebudayaan Selewengkan Pantjasila." This was also possibly the case in Surabaya that was reported in "'Manikebu' dan KK-PSI memusuhi revolusi dan persatuan bangsa: pernyataan Bersama LKN, LESBI, LEKRA, LESBUMI, OKRA, dan HSBI." A later article, which omitted HSBI-Surabaya's name as a specified opponent of the *Manifes*, was "Prof. Bakri Siregar di Surabaya: Kita terlalu tjinta Manipol, karena itu kita gasak 'Manikebu'" [Professor Bakri Siregar: We Love the Political Manifesto Too Much, That's Why We'll Smash "Manikebu"], *Harian Rakjat*, April 5, 1964, p. 1. In Makassar, a discussion intended to gather support for the *Manifes Kebudayaan* ended with only six out of approximately thirty attendees signing a statement of support; those who signed were mostly members of HSBI, with members of Lekra, Lesbi, and Lesbumi refusing to sign. See "'Manifes Kebudayaan' Diganjang di Makassar: Kaum 'Manifes' mau revisi Manipol" ["The Cultural Manifesto" Crushed in Makassar: the Manifesto-ites Want to Revise the Political Manifesto], *Harian Rakjat*, January 26, 1964, p. 2. Rahman Arge, who reportedly refused to sign, and was said to have informed the organizers that he wouldn't take part if the *Manifes* was not the product of a *Nasakom* gathering of artists, was, according to Syariff, a member of Lesbumi at the time, though not identified as such in the *Harian Rakjat* article. See Fahmi Syariff, "Ekologi Teater di Sulawesi Selatan" [The Ecology of Theater in South Sulawesi], in *Perkembangan Kesenian di Sulawesi Selatan* [The Development of Art In South Sulawesi], ed. Ridwan Effendy and Abd. Rojak (Makassar: Dewan Kesenian Sulawesi Selatan, 1999), pp. 36–37. *Duta Masyarakat*, the Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama's newspaper, claimed that several assertions that some Islamic groups had condemned the KK-PI meeting were false. See "Pro Dan Kontra Konperensi Karyawan Pengarang se-Indonesia" [For and against the All-Indonesian Writing Workers Conference], *Duta Masyarakat*, March 1, 1964, p. 1.

⁷⁷ Moeljanto and Ismail, *Prahara Budaya*, esp. pp. 303–09.

⁷⁸ Conversation with Sori Siregar, July 29, 2007.

Darwis AR, as a signatory to the statement condemning the Manifesto. In addition, in the same report the Second Secretary of Lesbumi's North Sumatra branch, Yousy Riza Ananta, was quoted as denying that he supported the Cultural Manifesto, and, in fact, claimed that he could not support it.⁷⁹ Such incidents hint at the possibility that antagonism between the various *Nasakom* constituents may have played out in extremely complex ways in different locales that do not always map onto the clear ideological divisions that some commentators have suggested prevailed at the time.⁸⁰

THE DYNAMISM OF LEKRA'S MODERN NATIONAL THEATER

Ikranegara, one of the very few writers who has discussed Lekra's modern theater, has characterized it as using arena-style staging rather than a proscenium stage, and as being part of a package of cultural performances that included music, song, dance, and poetry declamation, which were presented at political meetings in which speeches were given before and after the theater performances. He further states that no sets or decoration were used, lighting was minimal, costumes were everyday dress, and the scene was a living room requiring only a table and some chairs.⁸¹

To be sure, many Lekra performances occurred in conjunction with political meetings and were part of a varied cultural package. Such performances were staged at least as early as October 1952, when *Harian Rakjat* reported a performance of Sanusi Pané's play about an industrial strike, *Manusia Baru* (The New Humanity, 1940), at a Sobsi (Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia, Central All-Indonesian Workers' Organization, largest Sukarno-era union and close to the Communist Party) conference.⁸² Furthermore, in a 1964 speech to the Conference of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (KSSR, Konferensi Sastrawan dan Seniman Revolusioner), PKI Chairman D. N. Aidit called for plays that could be easily

⁷⁹ "Manifes Kebudayaan Selewengkan Pantjasila."

⁸⁰ In Bali, a rather different configuration of organizations occurred, with Lekra and LKN, allies in most other regions and nationally, in severe conflict. Putra argues that, after giving initial support to the *Manifes Kebudayaan*, LKN activists in Bali were forced by Lekra to repudiate it and its supporters. However, after the elimination of Lekra in late 1965, LKN pursued a rather populist line towards literature and the arts, with slogans and principles quite similar to those of Lekra, thus blurring the ideological, if not practical, lines between the two groups. See I Ny. Darma Putra, "Reflections on Literature and Politics in Bali: The Development of Lekra, 1950–1966," in *Inequality, Crisis and Social Change in Indonesia: The Muted Worlds of Bali*, ed. Thomas Reuter (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 54–85. Putu Oka Sukanta also related to me (Jakarta, July 3, 2007) that, when he was organizing the Lekra-based drama group Kronik Gong (Gong Chronicle) in 1962, membership was open and included non-CGMI (Consentrasi Gerakan Mahasiswa Indonesia, or Concentration of Indonesian Student Movement, an organization close to the Indonesian Communist Party) students, including at least one from the rival nationalist organization, GMNI (Gerakan Mahasiswa Nasional Indonesia, or Indonesian National Students' Movement, a group based on the ideas of President Sukarno and close to the Nationalist Party). Thus, in Bali, too, the cultural alliances and interactions were not always strictly polarized or clearly demarcated.

⁸¹ Ikranegara, "The Making of Indonesian Theater," p. 7.

⁸² S. W. Kuntjahjo, "Pendapat tentang malam kebudayaan Konfernas SOBISI" [An Opinion Regarding the Cultural Night at the SOBISI National Conference], *Harian Rakjat*, October 25, 1952, p. 3.

performed in a variety of settings and venues, thus enabling them to be more quickly and easily taken to the masses.⁸³

Yet Ikranegara's description falls far short of capturing the varied kinds of performances and venues that Lekra modern theater groups developed and made use of from 1955 to 1965. These included variety-show-style performances on election campaign "open stages" (*panggung terbuka*); early realist dramas of disillusionment with the results of independence; plays campaigning against the PRRI rebellion, for land reform, or against capitalist bureaucrats; theater by and for workers and peasants; modern plays experimenting with traditional forms, fables, and historical events; and increasingly large-scale modern dance dramas (*sendratari*).

In sites such as Medan and Tanjung Balai, a dialogue-based Western-style naturalistic theater figured as the dominant modern theatrical mode. Contrary to Ikranegara's report of Lekra's modern theater style, performances of modern theater in Medan were most often held on a proscenium stage in the Gedung Kesenian Medan (Medan Arts Palace) near the Medan Central Station. Medan's Lekra/Lesdra groups also frequently used painted backdrops and complex sets, as in their June 1957 production of Agam Wispi's *Gerbong*, in which a boxcar-like set was erected on stage, or their 1959 productions of *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi*, in which jute ropes were tied so as to simulate the barbed-wire detention enclosure where the play's action takes place. Tanjung Balai's Lekra/Lesdra group similarly performed most often in a cinema, the Bioskop Garuda, which had a stage, or at times in a local school or the branch office of the PKI.⁸⁴ Pictures of its most famous production, *Si Nandang*, as staged in Jakarta in 1964, show both elaborate sets and period costumes, once again suggesting that Tanjung Balai's productions were a far cry from the nearly bare-stage performances cited by Ikranegara.⁸⁵

In particular, Lekra plays such as Emha's *Si Nandang*, based in part on traditional forms and story material, demonstrated continuity with other strands of postcolonial modern national theater in Indonesia insofar as they represented attempts to work out a particularly Indonesian style of modern theater. Such plays thus underscored Indonesian leftists' commitment to nationalism and to forging a uniquely indigenous form of national culture. Yet they also demonstrated the ambivalences and complexities of Lekra's position towards traditional culture, as I will indicate shortly in a discussion of *Si Nandang*.

⁸³ D. N. Aidit, *Tentang Sastra dan Seni* (Jakarta: Jajasan Pembaruan, 1964), pp. 34, 47.

⁸⁴ In both Medan and Tanjung Balai, however, proper equipment for performances was not always readily available, and groups wishing to perform in these venues often were forced to rely on their ingenuity. Sulardjo recalls rigging up a transformer for raising and lowering stage lights for Lekra plays in Medan by mixing a saline solution in a pan and attaching a cathode and an anode to opposite ends. These electrodes could then be moved closer or farther apart to brighten or dim the lights. Tin foil was used for light reflectors, and stage effects were often improvised: the sound of crickets was imitated by rubbing the teeth of a comb close to a microphone; thunder was evoked by shaking tin cans, and lightning by triggering a camera's flash unit just offstage. A prompter was often stationed behind one curtain to help actors recall their lines (conversation with Hamid and Sulardjo, February 24, 2007). In Tanjung Balai, the Bioskop Garuda had sufficient lighting equipment, but Martin Aleida recalls that the sound system was faulty and often broke down in the middle of a performance (conversation with Martin Aleida, July 23, 2007).

⁸⁵ These pictures can be found in *Harian Rakjat*, February 9, 1964, pp. 1, 3.



Figure 1. Photo of *Si Nandang* from *Harian Rakjat*, February 9, 1964, p. 3.

It is worth taking some time here to discuss the significance and difficulties of these attempts to produce an indigenous theater form since those efforts constitute a key marker of the complex intersection of nationalism, aesthetics, and the radical social aspirations of Indonesian leftists and communists of the Sukarno era. As noted above, many leftists and communists were also staunch nationalists. The strong commitment of President Sukarno to nationalism and anti-imperialism further bolstered this inclination. Accordingly, in the realm of culture, those things deemed “imperialist culture,” such as US film, rock-and-roll music, and Western dance (e.g., the “twist”), became frequent objects of attack from leftists in the name of defending and strengthening national culture. Increasingly, PKI leaders such as Aidit and Njoto, as well as some Lekra activists and PNI leaders, spoke of developing the “*kepribadian nasional*”⁸⁶ (national character or personality) or urged commitment to

⁸⁶ In fact, Aidit’s seminal speech to the Konferensi Sastrawan dan Seniman Revolusioner (KSSR), of August 28, 1964, was titled “Dengan Sastra dan Seni jang Berkepribadian Nasional Mengabdikan Buruh, Tani dan Pradjurit” [Serve the Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers with Literature and Art that have a National Character]. For the text of the speech, see *Harian Rakjat*, September 9, 1964, pp. 3–4; and *Harian Rakjat*, February 7, 1965. For another version of this speech, see D. N. Aidit, *Tentang Sastra dan Seni* (Jakarta: Jajasan “Pembinaan,” 1964), pp.

“cultural patriotism.”⁸⁷ Yet this call for supporting the national character and becoming patriotic cultural workers was hardly an attempt to create an essential notion of an eternal, unchanging Indonesian tradition. In fact, Lekra’s foundational principles, as expressed in both its 1950 *Mukadimah* (Introduction) and the 1955 revision of that document,⁸⁸ called for the critical study and selective appropriation of both local traditions and the culture of foreign nations in accordance with progressive goals and values, and to create a culture that was both national and scientific.⁸⁹ This principle was also echoed in the speeches of PKI leader Aidit on literature and art. In such a way, Lekra’s idea of national culture was more along the lines of what postcolonial critic Benita Parry has described as a critical, “imaginative rediscovery” of “nativism.” According to Parry’s argument, such a “nativism” is not simply a reversal of the colonizer’s racist categories, but may be subversive of those categories. Parry suggests that this kind of “nativism” does not simply or even necessarily create an oppressive essentialism, but, rather, if the imagined “native” identity is viewed as an historical and social construct, instead of as a “natural,” uniform identity, then it may positively empower nationalist movements of liberation.⁹⁰

To be sure, there were substantial difficulties in this project of “imaginative rediscovery” when it came to actually “refitting” selected forms for the goals of a modern, national, socialist project. As Ruth McVey has argued, in order to differentiate themselves in the cultural field from the other parties’ cultural organizations, as well as from the educated elites, and the new ruling class, all of whom also saw modernity as a national cultural goal), the PKI and Lekra attempted to construct a “socialist aesthetic modernity.” To ensure that this vision of political and aesthetic modernity reached the masses, its advocates undertook discussions and efforts to reshape extremely popular traditional forms such as *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theater) into vehicles that could convey left-nationalist and socialist messages as well as a “socialist aesthetic modernity.” Yet many PKI cadres, especially those of Javanese background, perceived their own ethnic culture to be the

5–68. See also D. N. Aidit, “Hajo, bersama2 Bung Karno kita bina kebudayaan jang berkepribadian nasional!” [Come on, Together with Comrade Karno Let’s Develop a Culture with National Character], *Harian Rakjat*, August 28, 1964, p. 1; “Pimpinan Pusat Lekra: dengan aksi ambil alih, tegakkan kepribadian Nasional!” [The Lekra Central Leadership: By Expropriation (of British companies) We Uphold National Character!], *Harian Rakjat*, January 26, 1964, p. 1; Bambang Sokawati I. D., “Dua konsep tentang kepribadian nasional” [Two Concepts of the National Character], *Harian Rakjat*, September 27, 1964, p. 3. Nationalist politicians of non-communist stripe also sometimes spoke of culture in the same terms. See Ali Sastroamidjojo, “Seni dan kebudayaan kita harus mempunyai tjiri Indonesia” [Our Art and Culture Must Have Indonesian Characteristics], *Harian Rakjat*, May 9, 1965, p. 1.

⁸⁷ See Zubir, “Bung Karno 64 Tahun: Djadilah Patriot Kebudayaan!” [Comrade Karno 64th Birthday: Be a Cultural Patriot!], *Harian Rakjat*, June 6, 1965, p. 1; Bakri Siregar, “Kobarkan patriotisme dalam kesusastraan” [Fan the Flames of Patriotism in Literature], *Harian Rakjat*, April 6, 1963; Njoto, “Galang persatuan semua sasterawan patriotik” [Support the Union of All Patriotic Writers], *Harian Rakjat*, April 6, 1963.

⁸⁸ See Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, for the original texts as well as their translations, pp. 209–22.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–30.

⁹⁰ Benita Parry, “Resistance Theory/Theorizing Resistance or Two Cheers for Nativism,” in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 172–93.

deepest emotional vehicle for expressing their nationalism. Many of these cadres felt a strong affection and loyalty towards the traditional theater forms as living parts of their own cultural background. Consequently, as McVey points out, a debate on the utility of *wayang* and the possibilities for reforming it took place between high-ranking members of the PKI and Lekra in the early 1960s. In the course of this debate, younger Javanese and Sundanese cadres and so-called “outer islanders” (those not from the island of Java), such as Joebaar Ajob and Aidit himself, argued for substantial reform, such as performing in Indonesian rather than Javanese. On the other hand, several high-ranking Javanese party members, including Sakirman and Sudisman (both leading members of the PKI’s Politburo), disputed the need for significant changes.

Another of the key tensions that McVey notes in PKI attempts to appropriate traditional theater forms such as *ludruk* and *ketoprak* for its own educational and propaganda campaigns was the sense of superiority many PKI cadres felt towards the ordinary people and the cultural forms addressed most directly to them. She recounts how the PKI endeavored to “sanitize” these forms, downplaying their scatological elements and emphasizing their didactic side. In so doing, the party was working to create more modern, refined (*halus*) forms of *ludruk* and *ketoprak* in order to elevate both the forms and the masses who enjoyed them. At the same time, the PKI did not dare go too far in such reforms, both for fear of losing their audience, a target populace that the PKI saw as its mainstay and base of power, and to avoid alienating powerful political allies.⁹¹

Though the fields of popular traditional theater were bound by certain conventions and loyalties with which the PKI and Lekra found it difficult to dispense completely, modern theater was relatively more open to experiment and remaking. Drama and “teater” were part of the new modernity, which was, in turn, tied intimately to Indonesia’s newly won independence and the desire of its elites to see their nation stand equal to others on the global stage. Furthermore, theater workers and audiences alike were still in the process of exploring and constructing such “modern” forms. This left the modern theater much more open to the extensive revision of traditional materials.

Though Lekra writers produced only a few plays that, through costume, sets, or traditional stories, emphasized in a highly obvious fashion their incorporation of formal elements of traditional theater, these plays are spread out over the 1956 to 1961 period—indicative of a persistent interest in experimenting with traditional culture within modern drama. Though such plays were few in number, two of these plays—Utuy Tatang Sontani’s *Si Kabayan* (1959) and Emha’s *Si Nandang* (1961) proved to be among Lekra’s most popular plays, suggesting the potential of such hybrid works to reach their target audiences successfully. Yet Lekra’s experiments with merging elements of traditional culture with modern drama did not end with these and a few other more obvious examples. The importance for Lekra playwrights of creating a modern theater with national characteristics is further underscored by the fact that a number of the seemingly most “revolutionary realist” works, works denouncing regional rebellions (by Bachtiar Siagian and Zubir A. A., both in 1959) or advocating land reform (by P. H. Muid, K. Sunarjo, or Bachtiar Siagian in 1964–65),

⁹¹ Ruth McVey, “The Wayang Controversy in Indonesian Communism,” in *Context, Meaning, and Power in Southeast Asia*, ed. Mark Hobart and Robert H. Taylor (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1986). See especially pp. 26–37.

to varying degrees incorporated basic patterns of characterization and other features of traditional theater or literature. These elements do not stand out in the way that colorful costumes, poetic speech, or reworked folk tales may, but it is highly likely that Indonesian audiences, conditioned by their acquaintance with a variety of traditional forms, would have found in these otherwise very new plays something quite familiar. When these works, less overt in their use of traditional elements, are added to the more obvious works mentioned above, Lekra's experiments of "imaginative rediscovery," of merging "positive traditions with the revolutionary present," can be recognized as widespread and sustained from the mid-1950s to the beginning of the national tragedy in September and October 1965. In order to understand how this process of "imaginative rediscovery" of tradition worked, I will now turn to an examination of two popular Lekra plays.

TWO LEKRA PLAYS: THE TENSIONS OF LEKRA'S VISIONS

Two of Lekra's most popular modern plays were written by North Sumatrans and most frequently performed in North Sumatra. I have already mentioned both of them, Emha's *Si Nandang*, one of the Lekra works that attempted in the most obvious manner to rediscover imaginatively traditional folk culture, as well as critique Indonesian feudalism; and Bachtiar Siagian's *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi*, an anti-PRRI "campaign" play that was less flamboyant in its appropriation of elements of tradition, though arguably more effective. These two plays can hardly give an adequate account of the scope of the many plays written by Lekra-associated writers, but they will at least serve to begin to acquaint us with this rich oeuvre.

Si Nandang (1961)⁹²

Si Nandang presents what was, by the 1960s, a quite clichéd story of star-crossed lovers who must go against the wishes of family to realize their love. It features the daughter of a king (*radja*), Putri, who falls in love with a fisherman, Nandang. Her kingly father rejects such a liaison.⁹³ The *Radja* orders Nandang's father arrested on the charge of inciting rebellion. When Nandang comes to demand his father's release, the *Radja* has his *dukun* (spiritual healer, shaman) engage Nandang in a fight to the death. The princess, Nandang's beloved, tries to intercede and stop the fight. Both sides reluctantly agree, but as Nandang walks away, the *Radja* has his henchman stab Nandang in the back, whereupon the princess kills herself.⁹⁴

As can be seen from this brief synopsis, on the symbolic level the play tackles the issue of the remnants of feudal culture in independent Indonesia. A key conflict is that of the familial and feudal-hierarchical desire for obedience versus the individualized choice of romantic love. This conflict echoes the themes of justice and

⁹² The dramatic text by Emha can be found in *Zaman Baru*, November 1963, pp. 1–23.

⁹³ The plot tension and theme of the story are heightened by the fact that *Si Nandang*, the beloved fisherman, is the son of Ulong Djantan, long considered by the king to be a source of rebellion against his authority. Thus, besides Nandang's inferior social class (making him unsuitable for a king's daughter), he is the son of a rebel and himself resistant to authority. The love story thus carries a double significance. Will the *Radja's* love of his daughter triumph over traditional social etiquette and hierarchy?

⁹⁴ Emha, "Si Nandang," *Zaman Baru*, November 1963, pp. 1–23.

individual freedom, which I will discuss shortly, and in so doing helps signal the playwright's commitment to modernity.

The play's formal resolution involves an inflexible, conservative, feudal-minded father who is arrogant, brutal, and willing to resort to underhanded tactics to achieve his ends. It also owes a great deal to the disastrous intervention of the daughter who, in trying to prevent bloodshed, assures her lover's doom. Putri's attempts to stop the masculinized violence of the two male protagonists and to resolve the conflict peacefully sets the stage for the final example of the *Radja's* perfidy. Such an ending was doubtlessly intended to reinforce the sense of injustice that the play attributes to feudal power relations as well as to send the audience home more committed than ever to opposing such social remnants in Indonesia.

This scene is crucial since it reveals a real tension in some of the projects that both the PKI and its allies in Lekra faced in their social and artistic agendas. A desperate Putri, who threatens to kill herself if Nandang and Alang Sakti do not call off their duel, and if her father does not free Nandang, manages to halt the fight momentarily. Nandang, fighting for his own honor, pleads with her to let the fight go to its conclusion. She persists, however, opposing both her father and Nandang, who desires to defend his honor by winning his own father's freedom. One might argue that Putri's obsession with Nandang to the exclusion of all other considerations—for example, the fate of the *Radja's* other prisoners—renders her a less admirable character. Yet seen from another angle, in an arena of male honor and machismo, she takes forceful action to prevent violence, proving her strength of conviction. Still, the play demands a tragic ending to underscore more forcefully for the audience the need to oppose arbitrary feudal authority. Thus, Putri becomes a source of disaster since, when Nandang finally accedes to her demand, his submission results in his death, as the *Radja* signals Alang Sakti to stab him in the back while he walks away. Putri's attempt to preempt masculinized violence, and the failure of the *Radja* to heed her wishes, while necessary for a particular dramatic resolution of the play's tensions, at the same time shows her to be misguided. For the play's logic, culminating in the treacherous murder of Nandang, suggests that only masculine force can bring about positive social change. Casting the woman as the innocent cause of the hero's demise and showing the naiveté of her desire for non-violence thereby, perhaps, inadvertently parallels the ways in which women's concerns were generally ignored or subordinated to more masculine-centered agendas not only by conservative groups within Indonesian society, but even by the PKI and their political allies.⁹⁵

At a second level, the play encompasses the grand thematic of justice—and thereby identifies one of its key problematics: the conflict between a modernizing intelligentsia (and, supposedly, the "ordinary" people) and a rigid feudal authority. This is most clearly seen in the fact that the arguments put forward in opposition to the *Radja's* autocratic and arbitrary rule center on notions of individual liberty, human rights, and freedom of expression, notions that could well be associated with Western liberal democracy and the post-World War II (1948) United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights. This problematic unfolds and achieves its

⁹⁵ That the PKI treated women's issues as of secondary importance has been convincingly argued in Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan and the Institute of Social Studies, 2002).

most direct representation in a series of debates between the *Radja* and his chief opponents, the father/son combination of Ulong Djantan/Nandang.

The *Radja*, on the one hand, is portrayed as “*gila kuasa*” (crazed with power), as expecting almost excessive respect and obedience based on his interpretation of traditional hierarchical court etiquette. He is rude to all who cross his path and is capricious and vengeful.⁹⁶ In contrast to this negative portrayal of a rigid, feudalistic ruler, in the play’s middle scenes when Ulong Djantan, Nandang’s father, is interrogated, a diametrically opposed world vision is represented, one that clashes head on with that of the *Radja*:

Radja: I rule in this land!
 U. Dj.: And I rule over myself.
Radja: Damn you! I give the orders.
 U. Dj.: It’s your right to give orders
 It’s my right to refuse them.⁹⁷

Similarly, in the course of the final confrontation between Nandang, who has come to demand the release of his father and the other fishermen whom the king is holding captive, the following exchange takes place:

Radja: Hey, hey, arrogant slave, damned slave
 You’re certainly bold to give me orders.
 Nandang: Your servant does not give you orders
 But has come to demand justice!
Radja: I am justice
 Because I am king here!
 Nandang: The king’s justice only robs the people of their freedom!⁹⁸

Eventually, Nandang asserts the individual right to free expression, mocking the *Radja*’s claim that he has absolute power over everything, even what people say.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ As additional evidence of his reactionary and “backward” feudalism, the play even ties the *Radja* to *ilmu gaib* (magic, occult power) and magical practice through the use of his *dukun* to find the source of his daughter’s unhappiness. Putri, however, considers these practices to be *kerdja dosa* (sinful ways), and the play’s stage directions seem mockingly to cast them as ridiculous forms of dancing and chanting, pp. 9–11.

⁹⁷ Emha, “Si Nandang,” p. 17. The Indonesian reads:

Radja: Aku berkuasa dinegeri ini!
 Ulong Djantan: Dan aku berkuasa di atas diriku.
Radja: Djahanam! Aku memerintah!
 Ulong Djantan: Hak Tuan memerintah
 hak hamba membantah.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 20. In Indonesian the lines read:

Radja: Eh, eh, budak sombong budak djahanam
 berani sungguh memerintah radja.
 Nandang: Hamba bukan memerintah radja
 tapi datang menuntut keadilan!
Radja: Aku adalah keadilan
 kerna aku radja di sini!
 Nandang: Keadilan radja hanja merampas kebebasan rakjat!

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

Thus, the two polar opposites seem irreconcilable, with one insisting on a ruler's arbitrary will as the source of justice and truth, the other basing its vision of a proper society on ideas of universal human freedoms and rights.

Still, there are moments in the play when the feudal system can be glimpsed as better than this, even tolerable. Nandang warns the *Radja* that "people will bow to a just king,"¹⁰⁰ suggesting that this particular ruler is the problem, not the system itself. In such a way, this "progressive" play seems to moderate its radical, democratic stance. Is this a hint of the role leftist cultural workers imagined, or hoped, President Sukarno was playing at the time of the play's creation and performance?

On a third level, that of mode of production, the play tries to blend realist debate on justice and individual rights with traditional forms, such as the *pantun* and traditional ideas such as that of the *raja adil*, or just king. In order to accomplish this blending, Emha concocted a "new legend" based on a simple folk song from the Asahan coast area, *sinandong*. In this "new legend," the *raja adil* has an evident foil in the play's *Radja*, emotionally uncontrolled and arrogant, much like the villains of traditional Malay *hikayat*. Another of the most striking aspects of this work is the fact that *Si Nandang* features a poetic structure based on the Malay poetic form, the *pantun*. Though "pure" *pantun* are only used in a few instances, much of the rest of the dialogue echoes the *pantun* rhythmic and rhyme pattern, though without following the conventions that dictate that the first two lines convey a nature metaphor that often offers a parallel to the human emotion or action which follows in the last two lines of the quatrain.

An example of a *pantun* comes in the script where Putri (Fatimah) and Nandang declare their love and decide it is impossible to consummate it in marriage, but nevertheless swear undying faithfulness to one another. At one point in this conversation, Nandang states:

Nandang: Do not eat the taro's root
Itchy your body will feel
Do not follow the whims of your heart
With them too your body must deal.¹⁰¹

Following two brief non-*pantun* verses, Putri replies in kind:

Putri: If I'd known it to be the taro's root
I wouldn't have carried it to and fro
If I'd known things would come to naught
Better to have died long ago.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 4. The Indonesian reads as follows:

Djangan dimakan buah keladi
terasa gatal sekudjur badan.
Djangan turutkan kata hati
Badan djuga jang menanggungkan.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 4. The Indonesian reads as follows:

Kalau kutahu buah keladi
Tidak kubawa mudik kehulu
Kalau kutahu djadi begini
Baik mati sedjak dahulu.

In keeping with the region of the story's origin, Emha has also carefully interwoven metaphors of the sea, sailing, rivers, and coast into his poetic dialogue—as might be expected from a story originating on the Asahan coast of North Sumatra. For example, in conveying a proverb to Putri, Nandang states:

Not forever does the river flow tranquilly
Not forever does the tide rise or ebb.¹⁰³



Figure 2. Si Nandang and Putri. Photo from *Harian Rakjat*, February 9, 1964, p. 1

The play also relies on a certain level of realism to convey its fullest effect. The stage instructions for the set call for a structure resembling a king's *balairung* (royal reception hall) to one side, with a river in the background, as well as giving a specific time of day for the action. The backdrop is painted with palm trees and sky as well as the waves of the river. The character motivations and dialogue, tied to the theme of freedom, rights, and authority, also add to the play's modern and realist elements, though the overall characterization is still somewhat one-dimensional.

Overall, the play demonstrates a basic problem for those Lekra writers wishing to build a modern Indonesian culture based on traditional cultural forms. One of Lekra's guiding ideas was that of building a national progressive culture through

¹⁰³ Ibid., The Indonesian reads as follows:

Tak selamanja air mengalir tenang
Tak selamanja air pasang surut.

combining “positive traditions with the revolutionary present.”¹⁰⁴ Still, in all but one of the plays Lekra writers devised in which traditional cultural elements played such an overt and obvious role as they did in *Si Nandang*, the action is set in the past, so that traditional cultural modes and genres become bound to bygone eras and frequently tied to representations of feudal or colonial culture that are highly negative. These representations thereby undermined the idea that such traditional cultural forms could be a part of a national, progressive modernity. Furthermore, an ambivalence about the use of traditional culture to express the kind of modern messages that many Lekra members sought to convey was even consciously articulated by some Lekra critics, such as H. R. Bandaharo.

Bandaharo argued it was important to provide forceful and nuanced representations of social differences and conflicts in traditional feudal society, much along the lines of several other Lekra critics who asserted the need for drama to treat the historical contexts of their material scientifically, that is, to represent accurately the social relations of the times in which the plays were set and to draw the material from people’s actual lives.¹⁰⁵ Bandaharo’s series of articles on *Si Nandang*, however, took a more critical stance toward the appropriation of the traditional *pantun* poetic form as the backbone of much of the play’s dialogue. For Bandaharo, the form seemed trapped in a limited range of clichéd images and a mood of resigned romanticism. He felt the *pantun* could not convey new comparisons beyond its standard nature imagery and that it limited emotional and intellectual expression. Furthermore, though acknowledging that the story was rather simple, based as it was on the milieu of fishermen of the North Sumatran Asahan coastal region, Bandaharo still felt Emha could have done more by using a form other than the *pantun* to portray the confrontation between the worldview of the palace and that of the fishermen. Thus, at least one Lekra critic did not agree with PKI leader D. N. Aidit’s warm praise for the drama.¹⁰⁶

Batu Merah Lembah Merapi (1959)¹⁰⁷

Of a piece with other anti-PRRI plays like Zubir A. A.’s *Lagu Subuh* (Dawn Song, 1959), Haznam Rachman’s *Sendja Di Kebun* (Twilight in the Fields, 1959) and *Tugas Hari Esok* (Tomorrow’s Task, 1962), or Marinas’s much later *Kamp Maut di Lembah Kerintji* (Death Camp in Kerinci Valley, 1964), *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* (The Red Rock of Merapi Valley) is a highly didactic, but also tension-filled, moving drama due to its mobilization of figures portraying human solidarity and sympathy and representations of a vicious villain, a courageous hero, and an exciting prison-escape plot. As such, it demonstrates that even a number of Lekra’s most specifically

¹⁰⁴ Keith Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, p. 110. This formulation, or a variation of it, also came up in conversations with Oei Hay Djoen (Jakarta, July 2, 2007) and Martin Aleida (Jakarta, July 23, 2007).

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of Lekra’s aesthetic stances along these lines, see Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, pp. 18–30. See also Samandjaja (Oei Hay Djoen), “Siti Djamilah,” *Zaman Baru* no. 1–2 (January 15–30), 1961, p. 7; and Bakri Siregar, “Drama bersadjak Siti Djamilah,” *Harian Rakjat*, January 7, 1961, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ H. R. Bandaharo, “Si Nandang,” parts I–III, *Harian Rakjat*, January 5, 12, and 19, 1963, each part on p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ For the dramatic text followed here, see Bachtiar Siagian, *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* (Jakarta: Jajasan Pembaruan, 1959).

campaign-oriented plays could be emotionally powerful and aesthetically effective works. In addition, it suggests a different, less obvious way in which Lekra writers might combine traditional elements with modern realism to create contemporary dramas.

Bachtiar's piece, like Zubir A. A.'s *Lagu Subuh*, was almost certainly inspired by and partially derived from some of the incidents in Zulkifli Suleiman's *Laporan Dari Kamp Maut* (Report from a Death Camp),¹⁰⁸ a survivor's account of a slaughter of communist and Left-nationalist prisoners by PRRI soldiers in the course of the PRRI rebellion during 1958–61. Briefly, *Batu Merah* tells the story of five prisoners being held in a barbed-wire-fence enclosure in the Merapi valley of West Sumatra. Among the five are a *buya* (*kyai*, Islamic scholar), a communist, an expectant father, a veteran of the war of independence, and a fifth man named Samadan. Much of the first half of the play is devoted to exposition of the various characters' states of mind, their ideas of how to cope with the situation, and to showing the brutality of their captors. Against the advice of the others, one prisoner cannot withstand the temptation to try to make a run for it when the guards intentionally leave the enclosure's gate open. He is instantly shot by the guards, who had hidden themselves in hopes of just such an escape attempt. The rest of the prisoners try to steal away when a concealing evening fog rolls off the nearby Mount Merapi, with one prisoner, Mawardi (the communist), staying behind to sing in the hopes of preventing the guards from realizing the others have left. In the end, Mawardi is summarily executed by the angry rebel commander, but Mawardi's calm conviction, coupled with the commandant's ugly brutality, make the rebel soldiers realize that their leader has deceived them about the nature of the prisoners, and they turn on him in anger. As the commander is executed, one of the soldiers finds a notebook on communist morality in Mawardi's pocket, linking his heroism to his political beliefs and affiliation.

On one level, the play is an attempt to give aesthetic shape to the growing crisis of disintegration that faced the young republic in the 1957–63 period. The drama was written in early 1959 while the PRRI/Permesta struggles were still ongoing in West Sumatra, North Sumatra, and Sulawesi, with the Darul Islam-armed insurgencies in Sulawesi, Aceh, and West Java also far from over, the state of the nation and its unity seemed quite precarious. This gives an extra sense of urgency to the play, while the accounts of massacres in West Sumatra, such as that by Zulkifli Suleiman, made sure this play resonated with the emotion of recent, shocking events.

Ideologically, the play attempts to show the *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) coalition of Sukarno's 1957 *konsepsi* (to be called *Nasakom* after 1961) as an effective embodiment of national unity, and it also represents regional rebellion as a kind of deception that has duped many otherwise loyal Indonesians. Formally, the play's aesthetic reimagining of actual historical circumstances relies on several key devices: 1) the tension and personal issues of the prisoners facing possible death and attempting to unite to formulate a strategy for escape; 2) the arbitrary brutality of the camp commander; and 3) the self-sacrifice of the communist hero, Mawardi. Together, these features construct a scenario that represents a moment of crisis for the prisoners themselves, given their growing (and justifiable) suspicions that they will soon be executed *en masse*—on an emotional level, this personal crisis which the characters face recalls and reinforces the crisis of possible national disintegration that

¹⁰⁸ Zulkifli Suleiman, *Laporan dari Kamp Maut* (Jakarta: Jajasan Pembaruan, 1958).

the play's audiences would have felt quite keenly at least during the first two years after it was written and when it was most frequently performed. This moment of crisis authorizes the play to simplify the ideological stakes and reduce the issues to a mostly black-and-white struggle of good versus evil, defending national unity or breaking it apart. The play also offers a solution to the crisis facing the prisoners (and the nation) in Mawardi's willingness to sacrifice himself for the goals of the group.

Here it is important to recognize that although real-life PRRI rebels, spurred on by their own antipathy to communism and by hopes of support from the United States, had adopted a firm anti-communist line and thereby attempted to position their struggle along Cold War lines,¹⁰⁹ Siagian's play does not focus on this issue. Instead, just as in the case of the attempt to maintain solidarity among the *Nasakom* cultural groups in Medan (as the joint statements suggest) after tensions increased in 1963 with the Cultural Manifesto incident, in this play the nation and nationalism override Cold War and other ideological considerations, although the main hero is clearly valorized because of his communist affiliation. In this way, communism is associated with patriotism and loyalty to nation, rather than to an international movement.

On another level, the play is about what the nation means to Indonesians, and it pits those who defend Indonesian unity and solidarity—there is no mistaking the proto-*Nasakom* composition of the prisoners, with a communist, a national independence fighter, and an Islamic scholar figuring prominently among them—against those siding with the rebellions. The heroes associate their struggle for a united Indonesia with notions of justice, truth, and a calm faith in God, and their salvation lies in collective action—those who give in to individual interests are sure to die. Meanwhile, their enemies, while also committed to some notion of the Indonesian nation, are less fully developed and seem to represent only a lack of self-control, arbitrariness, and a brutal, authoritarian bent. In part, this play seems to be presenting a conflict between the new intelligentsia as modernizing patriots on the one hand, and unspecified enemies of the nation who are not well fleshed out and who do not have much of a chance to present their own motivations for rebelling against the central government on the other.

What is most interesting about the *Nasakom*-like composition of the prisoners is the way that the Muslim, *Buya* Rasad, at first appearing to be the leader whom the others rely on for advice, quickly gives way to the communist, Mawardi, when it comes time to take action. Thus, the Muslim scholar is seen as a valued ally, but ultimately hesitant and unable to lead the group effectively when action is required. By the play's end, Mawardi has formulated the escape strategy and become the unofficial leader of the group. This, it seems to me, actually captures leftist and communist thinking about the relationship of the leftist parties and the PKI to those they imagined to be their historic allies, the so-called "national bourgeoisie,"¹¹⁰ at the same time that it tries to represent the possible reality of a national coalition between Muslims, communists, and nationalists. Islamic thinking about fate, putting one's faith in God, and belief also share center stage with the PKI's ideas, which would position *rakjat* (peasants and workers) as the *guru* (moral leader, master teacher),

¹⁰⁹ See Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, esp. pp. 68–69, 102–6.

¹¹⁰ See Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno*; and Olle Törnquist, *Dilemmas of Third World Communism*.

who can be trusted to side with justice and demonstrate the true spirit of devotion to the nation.



Figure 3. A scene from *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* in which one prisoner makes an impulsive, individual, and doomed escape attempt. Photo from *Harian Rakjat*, September 15, 1963

On a third level, the play presents a combination of “socialist realism” and traditional aesthetics. The work’s realistic elements can be seen in the stage directions that call for the sounds of dogs barking in the distance, in the emotional dilemmas of individual characters, in the pacing of the action to correspond to “real time,” and in the presentation of material based on events still fresh in people’s minds. This realism is supplemented by the romantic valorization of the communist hero, Mawardi, who does not survive the ordeal. His self-sacrifice, with its attendant valorization of communism, demonstrates the play’s aspirations towards a germinal form of “socialist realism.” Simultaneously, the play also encompasses an older system of artistic and dramatic representation of conflict, that found in the traditional courts of the Malay–Javanese world. In this set of aesthetic forms, heroes are *satria*, knights, which means they are courageous, not fearing danger or death, calm and in control of their emotions, and they fight to preserve the kingdom against ogres or villains who are cowardly, quick to anger, and slaves to their passions and to their own self-interest.¹¹¹ In *Batu Merah*, Mawardi corresponds roughly but clearly to this *satria* type of character. His calmness is stressed on nearly every page after he first appears, he sacrifices himself nobly and bravely to give the others a better chance of escaping, and he is steadfastly loyal to his ruler—the nation—even singing “Indonesia Raya,” the national anthem, as he faces imminent execution, an act that

¹¹¹ Such recourse to traditional literary forms and elements has also been noted in the genesis of Soviet socialist realism. See Katerina Clark’s masterful account of the origins and development of socialist realism in *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), especially pp. 46–67, 136–52.

impresses the rebel soldiers and shakes their faith in their commander, causing them to acknowledge that Mawardi sang the “sacred song” and didn’t seem to be the traitor the commander had claimed him to be. The commander, on the other hand, is brutal, arbitrary, flies off the handle at the slightest sign of resistance from the prisoners, and is a traitor to the nation. He is even described as being *kalap* (mad, crazy, possessed, berserk) in the play’s penultimate scene, showing him to be the antithesis of the *satria*, indeed, and, like the *Radja* in *Si Nandang*, similar to the villains of traditional stories and plays.

Given the emphasis placed on the communist Mawardi’s calm demeanor nearly every time he speaks, it is likely Siagian was consciously endeavoring to combine traditional modes of identifying heroes and villains with contemporary realism. Still, by focusing solely on traditional representations of character, rather than combining such representations with stylized delivery of poetic dialogue and seemingly traditional sets and costumes, Siagian appeared to have found a more seamless blending of the two modes. Yet it is, in large part, the crisis nature of the play that allows the older aesthetic of feudal heroes/villains to be more easily incorporated into a more modern, realist work. Once authorized to provide the coding for good and bad, and given the vague formulation of the enemies’ motivations and goals—seen only as traitors to the nation—the feudal hero aesthetic commandeers the play’s form to a large extent, ultimately overriding the earlier realist sections in which the characters’ psychological motivations were partially established. It thereby endows the conflict with a kind of traditional cultural afterlife—as a thinner, less fleshed out version of *wayang* or *hikayat* (historical narrative). Yet *Batu Merah*’s historical content and tightly constructed, tension-filled plot give the play a new dynamism and intensity that compensate for the loss of depth that traditional characters could on occasion exhibit. Thus, *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* remains an effective, moving, well-constructed play full of dramatic tension and excitement, a work that was capable of attracting audiences, as well as finding many groups eager to perform it and make it the most popular play of the Lekra oeuvre, especially from 1959 through the first years of the 1960s.

CONCLUSION

In the previous pages I have demonstrated the dynamism of Lekra’s activities in modern theater, especially in North Sumatran locations such as Medan and Tanjung Balai, where local theater could at times attract national attention. This dynamism encompassed a great many theatrical styles, forms, and venues, and included a number of plays and discussions about how an authentic, modern Indonesian culture could be constructed in relation to local cultural traditions.

I have argued that there are indications that the cultural politics of the era were more complex, less black-and-white, than many anti-Lekra commentators have been able to acknowledge up till now. This was especially true in some regional centers like Medan. In such regional centers, nationalism, as formulated by President Sukarno, but readily affirmed by leftists of the PKI and Lekra alike, came in the form of a commitment to the *Nasakom* alliance of nationalists, religious groups, and communists that Sukarno sought to advance and that leftists saw as a promise they would be admitted into the center of state power. Such a commitment revealed itself both in plays like Bachtiar Siagian’s *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi* and in the joint statements designed to show *Nasakom* solidarity in the face of the Cultural Manifesto

incident of 1963–64. Commitment to the nation and debates about how to recognize that stance thus became the key terrain, politically and discursively, in which Cold War allegiances were played out and to which they were most often subordinated.

I have also shown how two well-known and popular Lekra plays illustrate some of the key themes and complex aesthetic constructions of Lekra's modern dramas. Examined together, the two plays offer an alternative picture of Lekra's dramatic oeuvre. Thematically, *Si Nandang* presents a struggle for individual liberty, human rights, an egalitarian society, and justice against an arbitrary and arrogant authoritarianism. As such, it suggests, ironically, that some Lekra writers articulated visions of their struggle that included goals not too dissimilar, although perhaps with a more radically egalitarian edge, from some of the key goals of modern Western liberal democracies, goals to this day not completely realized or finally secured even in Europe or North America, as recent events have demonstrated.¹¹² Another interesting tension within the play revolves around its handling of gender issues, in this case, the subordination of women's voices to those of men within the political arena of strategy and action. It thereby points out the generally masculine slant and domination of much of the Indonesian arts and political world at the time. For not only did the PKI subordinate women's concerns to its immediate tactical and strategic needs, but, as the New Order's handling of women's issues and the women's movement demonstrated, the anti-communist camp, too, was strongly masculinist in cast, perhaps much more so than their leftist rivals to the point of misogyny.¹¹³

Finally, disagreements within Lekra and the Indonesian Left in general about the suitability of the play's form, imbued as it was with a number of obvious traditional elements, demonstrate the difficulty of creatively reconstructing traditional culture to

¹¹² One could cite here several examples of the egregious abrogation of civil and political rights by Western liberal democracies that claim to uphold just these rights. Most recent are the United States's Guantanamo Bay detention facility, the harassing and firing of several North American academics for voicing dissenting opinions surround the events of September 11, 2001, and the "extraordinary renditions" arranged by the United States in cooperation with several European countries to abduct and convey people suspected of links to terrorist groups to Middle Eastern countries' prisons for "interrogation." Britain's handling of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland is another glaring example, given its implementation of the 1973 Emergency Provisions Act and the 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act, which were designed to obtain confessions during extended periods of detention without criminal charges or access to legal counsel. Italy's imprisoning of intellectual Antonio Negri in 1979 for supposedly "masterminding" the Aldo Moro kidnapping and murder, with all charges later dropped, and the 1980 mass arrests of leftists in response to the Red Brigade's activities provide still more instances.

¹¹³ For the New Order's handling of women's issues and women's organizations, see Julia Suryakusuma, "The State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia," in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 92–119. See also Saskia E. Wieringa, "Two Indonesian Women's Organizations: Gerwani and PKK," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 25,2: 17–31. For an overview of Indonesian gender politics in the armed forces from the independence struggle to the New Order that shows the continuity of women's subordination over several decades, see Saraswati Sunindyo, "When the Earth is Female and the Nation is Mother: Gender, the Armed Forces and Nationalism in Indonesia," *Feminist Review* 58 (Spring 1998): 1–21. For the way in which the New Order misogynistically used gender issues to create a hysterical public mood supportive of the mass slaughter of leftists in 1965 and 1966, see Saskia Wieringa, "Sexual Metaphors in the Change from Sukarno's Old Order to Soeharto's New Order in Indonesia," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 32,2 (Summer 1998): 143–78.

serve modernizing ends. These disagreements centered on the issue of whether such traditional forms as the *pantun* could effectively show “scientifically” the actual historical conditions of the play’s setting and probe deeply the existing social relations of that time. Here, nationalism was not something chauvinistically built from essentialized traditional forms, but rather it involved a critical “imaginative rediscovery” of tradition that might serve a national culture centered on a “socialist aesthetic modernity,” to use Ruth McVey’s term.

Bachtiar Siagian’s *Batu Merah Lembah Merapi*, on the other hand, shows how some specific and scaled-down aspects of traditional cultural forms, particularly the representation of heroes and villains, could be more readily adapted to a modern play. In *Batu Merah*, “socialist realism” and a plot built upon crisis merge with the *satria*-villain themes of much traditional literature and theater to drive the work to its conclusion. Still, *Batu Merah* shows much more as well. Contrasting starkly with a common perception that Lekra was anti-*ulama* and anti-Islam, *Batu Merah* attempts to imagine a proto-*Nasakom* alliance of communists, Muslims, and nationalists, with *Buya* Rasad, the Islamic scholar, and Mawardi, the communist, both valorized figures. Furthermore, the play gives form to the emotional sense of crisis faced by many patriotic Indonesians in a newly independent country confronted with several regional rebellions and separatist movements.

These plays and most of the other efforts and creations of Lekra’s modern theater workers have nearly been forgotten, chiefly because of the way in which the Cold War played itself out within Indonesia after September 30, 1965. As the foregoing has shown, however, Lekra’s activities in modern theater offer a rich body of material, the analysis of which has already begun to yield an alternative, complex, multi-layered account of this postcolonial, Left-nationalist movement. This essay is but an initial step in sketching the outlines of that alternative history.

SAIGONESE ART DURING THE WAR: MODERNITY VERSUS IDEOLOGY¹

Boitran Huynh-Beattie

The fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, brought to an end the Republic of Vietnam and spelled doom for the cultural history of a former state, now vanquished and condemned by the new regime as “decadent and foreign-infected,” if not “reactionary.” This essay will argue that political ideology played a minor role in the art practice of the Republic of Vietnam (or South Vietnam, 1954–75) compared to ideology’s influence on the arts in the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Southern artists were more driven by a search for modernity than by proselytizing. Furthermore, their progress into formalism during this period smoothed a way for artistic innovations after *Đổi mới* (renovation, begun in 1986). The paper also discusses the evolution of cultural history during wartime in the southern Republic. The term “Saigonese art” is used to refer to a cultural identity rather than geographic location.

Evolving modernity has undergone a complex journey in Vietnam, as Professor John Clark, a passionate advocate for modernity in Asian art, reveals:

Because many parts of Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were forced to redefine themselves via their reaction to contact with, and often depredation at the hands of an “other,” the forms of modernity its cultures adopted seemed to many Euramericans to be derivative, secondary, disingenuous, and inauthentic. The zone of autonomous cultural energy which drove their adaptations was ignored; their own developments and repositionings of “other” forms were forcibly concealed beneath the iron mask of Euramerican ignorance.²

¹ This essay is based on the author’s dissertation, “Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards” (The University of Sydney, 2005), and related to a published article, “Saigonese Aesthetics: Modernity versus Tradition,” in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, ed. Sarah Lee and Nguyen Nhu Huy (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009), pp. 124–40.

² John Clark, “Open and Closed Discourse of Modernity in Asian Art,” in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993), p. 2.

This statement introduces two features of Asian modernity: Western influences and the energies of the local culture. In Vietnam, the pursuit of modernity was tinged by a love-hate relationship, a conflicted response that resulted from Vietnamese attempts to play “catch-up” with the West while aspiring to evade its shadow, particularly in South Vietnam. Ironically, due to colonialism and the two Indochina Wars, this pursuit turned out to be outdated even before it was born. In 1925, through the foundation of L'École des Beaux Arts de L'Indochine and the recruitment of its French teaching staff, a modern art practice was established in Vietnam, invested with the authority of Neoclassicism and a blend of Impressionism.³ By that time in the West, both Neoclassicism and Impressionism had reached their highpoints and become movements belonging to the past. This paper will therefore address “modernity in Vietnam,” focusing on local adaptation and manipulation.

A YOUNG STATE AT WAR

The period 1954 to 1975 saw the “two” Vietnams yield to international manipulation, a result of the Cold War “domino theory,” communism, and national liberation movements. In this global context, the Vietnam War (or the American War, from Vietnamese communists’ perspectives, who deem it a national fight against American neo-imperialism) was inevitable. Whether the conflict is perceived as a civil war, an ideological war, or a patriotic war, Vietnam was clearly an intense and significant battlefield for the opposing international powers and their armaments—Russian missiles against American B-52s, and Chinese AK 47s against American M16s.

The Republic of Vietnam emerged in 1954, with support from the United States and its allies. By the late 1950s, it had gained international recognition, full diplomatic relations with many countries, and been granted full membership in every UN agency. According to one historian, “South Vietnam had a greater claim on statehood than the North.”⁴ The formation of a new state, the reconstruction of a post-war society, and a patriotic people’s readiness to defend their country led to the notion of “South Vietnam as a nation,” a creation to be guarded and sustained by southerners.

From 1954 to 1975, South Vietnam underwent turbulent changes. The Geneva Agreement arranged three hundred days of grace (ending on May 18, 1955) to allow nearly a million refugees to pour in from the communist North to the South, and around 50,000 Việt Minh soldiers to move to and regroup in the North. As noted by Neil Jamieson, this political polarization created two Vietnamese states, a division that initiated twenty years of segregation and resistance.⁵ The schism between communism and Western imperialism led to a subsequent rupture in the recording of Vietnamese art history. Vietnam’s Communist Party only refers to “revolutionary art” in its official history and not to art of the “other side.” As recently as 2005, in the

³ Neoclassicism and Impressionism were both taught and practiced by Victor Tardieu, Joseph Inguimberty, and other French teachers/artists when they were teaching in Vietnam. See *Paris, Hanoi, Saigon: L'Aventure de l'Art Moderne au Viet Nam* (catalogue) (Paris: Paris-Museés, 1998).

⁴ Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publisher, 2007), p. 54.

⁵ Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 232.

publication of *Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Hiện Đại* (Vietnamese Modern Art), Southern art is referred to as “fine art of the temporarily occupied land”;⁶ the former Republic of Vietnam is not recognized as having existed.

There were many social differences between the First and Second Republics,⁷ due to the rising momentum of the war and mounting international involvement. In 1955–56, the new government, led by Ngô Đình Diệm, succeeded in eliminating several dissenting sects’ armed forces, including those led by Bình Xuyên, Cao Đài, and Hoà Hảo.⁸ American aid no longer passed through Paris but went directly to Saigon, and was aimed toward cultivating the emergence of a model democracy, with flourishing schools, universities, hospitals, and industries. With dogged determination, the North persisted with its drive toward national unification, and, in 1959, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was set up to dispatch communist revolutionaries to the South. With Hanoi’s support, the National Liberation Front (NLF) was established in 1960, leading to the formation of the People’s Liberation Army, best known in the West as the *Việt Cộng* (Vietnamese communist guerrillas). Adept at insurrectionary tactics and supported by an influx of Northern regular soldiers, the *Việt Cộng* effectively escalated the conflict and stirred up the rural areas of the Republic of Vietnam. Southern farmers found themselves sandwiched between two sides, often subjected to double taxes, one set exacted by the Southern government and the other by the *Việt Cộng*.

The Second Republic was born after the staging of several *coups d’état*, orchestrated between 1963 and 1967 by various high-ranking generals in South Vietnam’s army. The United States government viewed these internal quests for power as threats that jeopardized the fight against communism and therefore dispatched combat units to South Vietnam. Though the United States began its involvement with a force of just a few thousand advisers in the early 1960s, by 1968 more than half a million American soldiers were stationed in South Vietnam, accompanied by sixty thousand combined allied troops from Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines. This presence of foreign military forces posed a threat to South Vietnamese society:

The appearance of Americans in South Vietnam is serious; everyone is concerned about a cultural invasion. People do not like Communism, but they

⁶ Bùi Như Hương and Phạm Trung, *Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Hiện Đại* [Vietnamese Modern Art] (Hà Nội: The Fine Art Institute of Hà Nội and the University of Fine Arts of Hà Nội, 2005), p. 146.

⁷ The First Republic spanned the period from 1955 to 1963. The Second Republic extended from 1967 to 1975. The years between the two Republics were ones of turmoil caused by successive *coups d’état*.

⁸ Bình Xuyên was a criminal gang, with its own armed forces, that had a monopoly in controlling gambling, opium traffic, and prostitution in the Saigon-Cholon area in the 1940s and early 1950s. Its leader was Lê Văn Viễn (aka Bảy Viễn). Cao Đài (or Caodaism) is a religious sect, established in 1919, by Ngô Văn Chiêu. It formed its militia in 1943, with Japanese assistance. Trình Minh Thế became Cao Đài’s military leader in the late 1940s, and then officially merged his troops into the South Vietnamese Army in February 1955. Hoà Hảo is a Buddhist sect, established in 1939, by Huỳnh Phú Sổ, who later formed a political party, *Việt Nam Dân Chủ Xã Hội Đảng* and its force, in 1946.

do not like American culture either, in particular they do not want American life entering into Vietnamese society.⁹

The 1968 Tết offensive marked a turning point in the war, when, for a brief period, cities and towns were engulfed in fierce battles, leaving a dark scar in the domestic and international psyche. Atrocities were committed by all sides, and it became apparent to those on both the Left and the Right that the war was an absurd waste of human resources. On the domestic front, Vietnamese student and neutralist anti-war movements began developing the concept of a “civil war,” most notably through the anti-war songs composed by Trịnh Công Sơn (1939–2001), regarded by many as a Vietnamese Bob Dylan.¹⁰ Globally, anti-war movements in the United States and growing opposition throughout Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos pressured the United States to withdraw some of its troops. Meanwhile, South Vietnam was fully immersed in war, militarily in the battlefields against its opponents, socially against cultural corrosion, and internally by means of the politics that pitted “hawks” against “doves.” Ultimately, South Vietnam became so destabilized that it bowed to communist control on April 30, 1975, with the “Fall of Saigon.”

SOCIAL MILIEU

The Second Republic of Vietnam was founded on a nationalist ideal of developing a democratic alternative to the communist North. While communism was denounced at every opportunity, the arts were not exploited to convey this message, and despite censorship, dissenting voices persisted. The concept of censorship in South Vietnam manifested itself differently than in the North. Invoking the dark consequences of the “Nhân Văn—Giai Phẩm” scandal (1956–58), the communist administration forged the thoughts of writers and artists into one dimension: the artists had no choice but to create works the government would approve.¹¹ Susan Sontag, in her 1968 study, *Trip to Ha Noi*, made this observation: “What makes it especially hard to see people as individuals is that everybody here seems to talk in the same style and to have the same things to say.”¹²

In South Vietnam, the government might block a few phrases in a newspaper article or completely prohibit its publication, if its views were considered “dangerous” in the context of the war. Occasionally, an entire edition’s press run might be confiscated, but this would only happen after some eager newspaper boys

⁹ Pham Duy, *Hồi Ký Phạm Duy, Thời Phân Chia Quốc Cộng* [Diary of the Nationalist-Communist Divided Time] (Midway City, CA: n.p. [published by Pham Duy], 1990), p. 276.

¹⁰ Joan Baez, an American folk singer, suggested this comparison when she was introduced to Trịnh Công Sơn. For more about Trịnh Công Sơn, see Murray Hiebert, “Trinh Cong Son—Popular Writer-Singer is Vietnam’s Bob Dylan,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 156,18 (May 6, 1993): 62. Another good essay worth mentioning is John C. Schafer, “The Trịnh Công Sơn Phenomenon,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66,3 (2007): 597–643.

¹¹ *Nhân Văn* and *Giai Phẩm* were two periodicals established by a group of intellectuals, writers, and artists that voiced the request for democracy and freedom in artistic creativity in North Vietnam in 1955. This request was totally suppressed by the authorities in 1958, and the participants in this group were imprisoned or exiled. The *Nhân Văn*–*Giai Phẩm* affair was the most political controversy in North Vietnam. For more on the *Nhân Văn*–*Giai Phẩm* affair, see Kim N. B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 121–63.

¹² Susan Sontag, *Trip to Ha Noi* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 22.

had sold hundreds or thousands of copies, in a race against the police.¹³ Lý Quý Chung, an editor of a few newspapers, most of them opposing the Saigon government, often exploited this tactic to “bypass” anticipated censorship.¹⁴ The more often a newspaper or journal got censored or confiscated, the more popular and respected it became. In response to the 007/72 law imposing media censorship, Saigon’s journalists held a “Journalists go begging” demonstration on October 10, 1974. The war was escalating during this time, and the government tried to control dissident voices with increasing frequency.

During the entire twenty years between 1954 and 1975, there had never been any writing whose purpose was to glorify the leadership or the people at the centre of power. On the contrary, criticizing and mocking them at times became a movement, a fashion.¹⁵

Bách Khoa, the longest surviving journal of the era (1957–75), printed literature by anti-communist writers such as Võ Phiến and Vũ Hoàng Chương, as well as pro-communist writers such as Vũ Hạnh¹⁶ and Lữ Phương,¹⁷ because publishers wanted to “broadly reconcile many diverse tendencies.”¹⁸ Such displays of diversity were nonexistent in the communist North. South Vietnam also offered individual artists enough freedom to enable some of them to earn fame as critics of the regime. The renowned Saigonese cartoonist Nguyễn Hải Chí (pen name Chóe) constantly mocked Saigon’s officials and American politicians in newspapers such as *Trắng Đen* (White Black), *Đại Dân Tộc* (Great Nation), and *Điện Tín* (Telegraph), and some of his cartoons were reprinted in the *New York Times*.¹⁹ Chóe’s cartoons persistently ridiculed presidents Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Richard Nixon, and were frequently printed on the first page of *Điện Tín*. It was not surprising that, shortly before the fall of Saigon, his mocking pen earned him a spell in jail. Another influential dissenting voice was that of Bửu Chỉ, a member of the Nguyễn royal family, who studied law in Saigon in the late 1960s, then took up art as a hobby. His sense of social justice led him to participate in the 1970s student demonstrations in Saigon, and after several arrests he spent three years in jail. His (fountain pen) ink drawings are among the harshest criticisms of Saigon’s regime. His drawing, *From the Inside* (1974), portrays an emaciated prisoner in the notorious Côn Đảo prison “tiger cages,” looking

¹³ My father worked as a news agent in Biên Hòa from 1960 to 1975; he had established himself as a newspaper boy in the 1950s. He had to show up at the newspaper distribution headquarters in Saigon half an hour before the day’s papers were distributed to vendors, and he witnessed many of these scenes.

¹⁴ Lý Quý Chung, *Lý Quý Chung—Chánh Trình, Hồi Ký Không Tên* [Lý Quý Chung—Chánh Trình, A Memoir Without Name] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2004), pp. 209, 246.

¹⁵ Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam 1954–1975* (Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1992), p. 20.

¹⁶ Vũ Hạnh was a communist cadre installed in the South. He later published *Tin Văn* (Literature News), advocating pro-communist views. See Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam*, pp. 215–39.

¹⁷ Lữ Phương was a teacher by training. He helped establish the review *Tin Văn*. He left Saigon and joined the communists after the 1968 Tết offensive.

¹⁸ Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam*, p. 119.

¹⁹ David K. Shipler, “A Sad Young Saigon Cartoonist Wields an Angry Pen,” *The New York Times*, November, 20, 1973, p. 14.

through a ceiling window crossed with three bars (symbolizing the Republic of Vietnam's national flag). This image corresponds to the views of the NLF²⁰ and records the most negative aspects of Southern society.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Southern society was still "half-colonial" insofar as the entrenched elite held authority. Tertiary education was conducted in French in South Vietnam until the mid-1960s, and the first-choice destination for students seeking an overseas education remained France, especially for those interested in the arts.²¹ At the same time, Southern intellectuals, including migrants from the North who brought with them a spirit of rebellion, were attempting to make a clean break with colonialism in order to build a new national culture. This was most apparent in literature, for instance through the establishment in 1956 of the journal *Sáng Tạo* (Creation), which announced a literary revolution by declaring the demise of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliance Literary Group)²² and the birth of "a new literature as today's literature."

In 1963, to meet the growth of interest in journalism and literature, there were forty-four daily newspapers published in Saigon,²³ and before the Republic's collapse in 1975, the city encompassed about a thousand printing establishments and 150 publishing houses.²⁴ Many of the book covers featured by presses such as Cảo Thơm, An Tiêm, Quan Điểm, Thời Mới, Lá Bối, and Sáng Tạo were designed by artists such as Thái Tuấn, Duy Thanh, Ngọc Dũng, Tạ Tỵ, Nguyễn Trung, and Đinh Cường.²⁵ This gave books of the era a sophisticated appearance and generated another source of income for artists, particularly in the last ten years before 1975. Southern intellectual life was notably diverse, enriched through the introduction of translated Western classics and contemporary novels, such as those by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ernest Hemingway, Hermann Hesse, Erich Remarque, Françoise Sagan, Leo Tolstoy, Boris Pasternak, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, to mention a few. Philosophical writings by Jean Paul Sartre, Karl Jasper, Albert Camus, and Friedrich Nietzsche were also translated and quoted in countless articles, as was Surrealist literature, while Surrealist art was often featured. The doctrine of socialist realism in the North had no comparable canon in the South, where plurality was the rule and the public was receptive to diverse theories and philosophies. In this milieu, Saigonese art was inclined toward new horizons, without promoting a particular "Vietnamese" direction.

²⁰ Bửu Chỉ revealed that he was supported by "brothers of the other side." Personal interview, January 29, 2002. He was confined in the Saigon jail for six months, an experience that gave him the insight and inspiration to illustrate *From the Inside*.

²¹ Lê Văn Đệ, Ngô Viết Thụ, Văn Đen, Đào Sĩ Chu, Nguyễn Văn Thế, and Lê Ngọc Huệ are a few of the Vietnamese artists who studied the visual arts in France and earned degrees.

²² Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliance Literary Group) was established in 1932–33 to advocate modernity and individual freedom, including women's rights in colonial Vietnam. As it included writers like Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, Thạch Lam, Hoàng Đạo, and others, this literary group left an impressive mark on modern Vietnamese literature.

²³ Đoàn Thêm, *1945–1964 Việc từng ngày—Hai Mươi Năm Qua* [1945–1964 Everyday Affairs—Twenty Years] (Saigon: Phạm Quang Khải, 1968–71; republished in Los Alamitos, CA: Xuan Thu, 1986–89), p. 373.

²⁴ Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, *Những Ngày Cuối Cùng của Việt Nam Cộng Hoà* [The Last Days of the Republic of Vietnam], cited in Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam*, p. 50.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

VISUAL ARTS

Ideology in Vietnam was a crucial issue in the context of the Cold War, and the two Vietnams followed their disparate paths when engaging with ideology. Established artists in the North, such as Tô Ngọc Vân, Mai Văn Hiến, Trần Văn Cẩn, Huỳnh Phương Đông, Phạm Thanh Tâm, and Lương Xuân Nhị, created propaganda posters and artworks portraying a collective cultural identity, described by Nora Taylor:

The propaganda campaigns borrowed heavily from the Soviet and Maoist tradition of socialist realism that enforced positive views of labor and industrialization. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, the Hanoi government projected the socialist realist view of society onto the fight for national liberation and unification. Soldiers were glorified, women combat fighters were made goddesses, and defence tactics were equated with freedom and happiness.²⁶

Artists in South Vietnam were immersed in a very different discourse; unlike their Northern partners, they were not constrained by the agenda of psychological warfare. Saigonese artists could survive in a market-driven environment, selling their works to local clients but more frequently to overseas art lovers, whereas the state was the only patron that Northern artists could rely on. Southern intellectuals preferred this independence from the state and international powers and were glad “not to follow America or Russia.”²⁷ Last but not least, in the relatively free South of Vietnam, the concept of “art for art’s sake” steadily took hold as a way to oppose the concept of “art for the people’s sake” sanctioned by the communist government in the North. The influences of the United States on everyday Southern life grew through the late 1960s but were excluded from cultural deliberations because of the convictions held by Saigonese artists in the war-torn region. Another key factor in maintaining this independent stance among artists was the foundation of several art schools.

In 1954, the National College of Fine Arts of Saigon was established on the model of L’École des Beaux-Arts de L’Indochine (EBAI) and L’École des Beaux-Arts de Paris (EBAP). The founding director was Lê Văn Đệ, who, after graduating from EBAI, continued his studies at EBAP, and in 1936–37 was granted a commission from the Vatican. However, his *St. Madeleine under the Cross* (date unknown) is a romanticized Vietnamese image of a Christian saint, reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite portrayal of women. Despite his extensive experience in Europe, Lê Văn Đệ remained quite conservative. Neoclassicism was the canon at the college; abstract art was deemed nonsense and considered a fad that was “not going to have much promise.”²⁸ This fairly restrictive approach to modern art built up a strong desire in students to explore what was available “out there” in the world; this curiosity was

²⁶ Nora Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press), p. 60.

²⁷ Nguyễn Hiến Lê, *Hồi Ký Nguyễn Hiến Lê* [The Diary of Nguyễn Hiến Lê] (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Văn Học, 2006), p. 561.

²⁸ Lê Văn Đệ interviewed by Nguyễn Ngũ Í, “Quan Niệm Hội Họa” [Views on Painting], *Bách Khoa Khoa* 144 (1962), p. 86.

especially marked among those graduates who later formed the Society of Saigonese Young Artists.

The Fine Arts College of Hue was established in 1957 and provided art education in Vietnam's central provinces. Hue's significant cultural and literary history enriched the milieu, and the region produced no less talented artists than did Saigon. The curriculum in both art schools followed the EBAI model, and yet despite the similarities in their schools' curricula, art education in South Vietnam produced surprisingly different outcomes than in the North, particularly from the late 1960s onwards, when Southern artists began to rebel against the comparatively conservative institutions that had trained them and embrace modernism.

South Vietnam also inherited three schools of applied arts from the colonial era: L'École Professionel de Thu Dau Mot (The Applied Arts School of Thu Dau Mot), established in 1901; L'École Professionel de Bien Hoa (Applied Arts School of Bien Hoa), established in 1903; and the École de Dessin of Gia Dinh (Drawing School of Gia Dinh), established in 1913. These schools provided skilled workers for the flourishing publishing and light manufacturing industries in South Vietnam.

The established traditions of EBAI prevailed through the late 1950s to early 1960s, and the generation of Hanoi artists who migrated to the South (but did not necessarily participate in the 1954 exodus), who were deeply rooted traditionalists, included artists such as Tú Duyên, Nguyễn Anh, Nguyễn Siên, and Lưu Đình Khải, as well as graduates from France like Nguyễn Khoa Toàn, Đào Sĩ Chu, Văn Đen, Nguyễn Sao, and Trần Quang Hiếu, to mention a few. Typically, their paintings represented pre-1954 old-school themes that were extraneous to a nation at war, featuring romantic young women in atmospheric bliss and serene landscapes. A 1959 color calendar sponsored by the United States Information Service in Saigon confirms the prevailing taste. It has been illustrated with *Summer Light*, by Lê Văn Đệ (figure 1, below); *Kiều Playing a Zither*, by Trần Dzụ Hồng; *Landscape at Thủ Đức*, by Đào Sĩ Chu; *After Work*, by Hà Văn, and so on.²⁹ These artists were nostalgic for their North Vietnam homeland, but they opposed communist expansion to the South. The calendar's brochure states that *Summer Light* was created in North Vietnam in 1954 and that Pham Huy Tường's *Poor Village* was painted in 1957, in the Saigon suburb of Thị Nghè, "in memory of Hanoi autumn and his lost homeland."³⁰

Nostalgia for a lost homeland figures in much Southern literature and the arts of this period. Anh Bằng's song "Sentiments of Expatriates" deliberately reflects on yearning for a Northern homeland. Nguyễn Sa's poem, "Hà Đông Silk Dress," compares Saigon's sunlight to the silk dresses made in Hà Đông, a town fifteen kilometers southwest of Hanoi. Vũ Bằng's books, *Good Dishes from Hà Nội*, and *Nostalgia Twelfth*,³¹ pay tribute to the superlative cultural characteristics of Hanoi.

²⁹ This calendar for 1959, sponsored by USIS, included paintings by the following artists, listed here according to the month-by-month sequence of their paintings in the calendar: Lê Văn Đệ, Trần Dzụ Hồng, Đào Sĩ Chu, Hà Văn, Duy Thanh, Vĩ Ý, Thuận Hồ, Trần Đắc, Huy Tường, Bé Ký, Tú Duyên, and Nguyễn Cường.

³⁰ This quote is taken from the "September" page of the brochure that accompanied the 1959 color calendar published by USIS in Saigon in 1959. The brochure is not conventionally paginated; instead, each page is marked by the month and presents a photograph of the artist, his or her short biography, and a paragraph about the painting that represents that particular calendar month.

³¹ *Miếng Ngon Hà Nội* [Good Dishes from Hà Nội] (Saigon: Nam Chi Tùng Thư, 1960); and *Thương Nhớ Mười Hai* [Nostalgia Twelfth] (Saigon: Nguyễn Đình Vương, 1972).



Figure 1. *Summer Light*, by Lê Văn Đệ



Figure 2. Nguyễn Gia Trí, *Bạch Đằng Battle*

Phạm Duy's epic song, "Mandarin Road," is a masterpiece that took six years (1954–60) to write and portrays the geographical characteristics of the three regions, North, Central, and South Vietnam, in the hope that they will be reunited. The lacquer paintings by Nguyễn Gia Trí—*Trung Sisters* and *Bạch Đằng Battle* (figure 2, above)—created around 1958–59, focused on the nation's history. The Bạch Đằng River was the scene of two triumphs in Vietnam's history—in 938 CE, when the Vietnamese triumphed over the Southern Han's forces, and then in 1228 CE, with a victory over the Mongolian army. This huge lacquer painting (2.2 x 0.75 meters x four pieces)³² offers a panoramic view of the victory over the Mongolian army that includes more than a hundred fighting figures. The painting is full of movement bound within a rigid compositional structure, revealing pride and confidence in Vietnam's past.

The painter Văn Đen emerged as a bridge between relatively conventional and more liberal styles of art. After studying in France from 1950 to 1953, he returned to Saigon and painted in an impressionistic style. Văn Đen won a gold medal in the 1960 Spring Award of Painting contest with his work *Two Medical Pots*, a painting that, in the words of one art critic, "definitely stopped the domination of academic art."³³ He ventured into pure abstract art in a few paintings, but then returned to Impressionism. Văn Đen was born in 1919 and grew up in Cần Thơ, "the capital of Mekong Delta." His works are permeated with sweet memories of rural areas in the South; this is true, for instance, in paintings such as *The Barn*, *Grandpa and Grandson*, *The Pond in the Village*, *Return from the Field after Work*, and *Rice Harvest*. Some of these works are close to being abstract renderings of the scenes pictured. Văn Đen and many Saigoneses artists were well aware of the Western origin of modern painting. He once said: "Wearing Western clothes does not mean that the person turns into a Westerner; it is a matter of adapting others' materials so that they become his/her own."³⁴ The very different social conditions that distinguish advanced nations from a war-torn Third World state made this a difficult task, however, particularly since Vietnam during the second half of the twentieth century was still an agricultural society. In the late 1950s, with American aid, South Vietnam had been modernized to an extent, but the escalating war, political instability, and corruption could only mean that further moderate progress had to be attained through industrialization, which had long been the driving force for modernism in the West. In 1967, the art critic Thái Tuấn wrote: "In our time, this generation of Vietnamese artists lives in an ironic situation. Our contact with nature is half way, and our acquaintance with machinery is not yet complete."³⁵ This might explain why some contemporary art movements that emerged in the West in the 1960s, such as pop art and "happenings," were not practiced by Saigoneses artists. Instead, these individuals were driven to abstract art, which was considered as "the confluence of Eastern and Western conscience in which Eastern philosophy plays a great part."³⁶

³² One piece went missing during the fall of Saigon.

³³ Trịnh Cung, *Văn Đen, 1919–1988* (Ho Chi Minh City: The Fine Arts Museum of Ho Chi Minh City, 1995), p. 5.

³⁴ Văn Đen, "Cuộc phỏng vấn về quan niệm hội họa" [Interview about my opinion on painting], recorded by Nguyễn Ngũ Í, *Bách Khoa* 128 (1962): 105.

³⁵ Thái Tuấn, *Câu Chuyện Hội Họa* [Stories of Painting] (Saigon: Cảo Thơm, 1967), p. 120.

³⁶ Trịnh Cung, interviewed by Huỳnh Hữu Ủy, in "Một Số Vấn Đề chung quanh Giá Vẽ với Họa Sĩ Trịnh Cung" [Issues Concerning the Easels, with artist Trinh Cung], *Mấy Nẻo Đường của Nghệ Thuật và Chữ Nghĩa* [Some Paths in Art and Literature] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1999), p. 210.

Two artists belonging to a relatively older generation, who progressed into modernism and embraced less conventional styles of painting, were Nguyễn Gia Trí (fifty-two years old in 1960) and Tạ Ty (forty years old in 1960). Nguyễn Gia Trí was the most prominent painter living south of the seventeenth parallel after 1954 and was held in high esteem during and after the war because of his achievements in lacquer painting during the colonial era and his serious commitment to the medium under the Saigon regime. Nguyễn Gia Trí produced large lacquer paintings for Southern institutions such as the Independence Palace and the State Library, as well as for wealthy overseas collectors. Furthermore, he was one of the few artists who created both figurative and abstract lacquer paintings and recognized abstraction as a new artistic language that enabled him to incorporate his Asian orientation into his work.³⁷ Two of his abstract paintings hang in the National Library of Saigon, now Library of General Sciences, and his massive work *Spring Garden: Central, South, and North* (2 x 5.40 meters, consisting of nine panels) was sold to the Fine Arts Museum of Ho Chi Minh City in 1991, at the unprecedented price of US\$100,000. The work was originally commissioned in 1970 by a well-known Saigon medical practitioner, Dr. Bùi Kiến Tín,³⁸ who graduated from France in the 1950s and, after returning to Saigon, patented a eucalyptus product in his name with which many South Vietnamese are familiar. This significant lacquer painting reveals the scale of the artist's vision and the traditional taste of the Saigonese elite during the era.

Tạ Ty (1922–2004) studied with Nguyễn Sáng and Bùi Xuân Phái and was the first serious Vietnamese abstractionist.³⁹ When the three painters lived in colonial Hanoi, Tạ Ty often shared with friends his excitement upon completing a painting;⁴⁰ this circle of artists might well have established a school of Vietnamese abstraction had the war not dispersed them. Tạ Ty completed an EBAl education but also learned much from the French magazine *L'Illustration* through its reproductions of paintings by Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cézanne, and other European modernists. His first solo exhibition, *Modern Art*, was held in Hanoi in 1951, and his Cubist painting *Woman*,⁴¹ dated 1950, was auctioned at Sotheby's in 2000 for 19,550 Singapore dollars.

Tạ Ty was conscripted into the army by Bảo Đại's government (1949–55) and transferred to the South in 1953. However, he continued painting throughout his military service and held solo exhibitions in Saigon in 1956, 1961, 1966, and 1971. Tạ Ty committed himself to Cubism for a brief period before venturing into abstract art, a style he strongly defended. In his catalogue of the 1966 exhibition, he stated:

Art appears without disguise, without an object as a reference, without approval to dexterity and falsification. The *raison d'être* for progress and

³⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Việt, *Hoạ Sĩ Nguyễn Gia Trí nói về Sáng Tạo* [Artist Nguyễn Gia Trí Talks about Creativity] (n.p.: Văn Học Publishing House, 1998), p. 22.

³⁸ See more in the article "Doanh Nhân Saigon tiêu biểu" [Representative Businessmen in Saigon], *Saigon Giai Phong* online: <http://www.saigon-gpdaily.com.vn/Lifestyle/2006/7/50022/>, accessed February 7, 2010.

³⁹ Bội Trân, "Tạ Ty, Người Tiên Phong trong Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam" [Tạ Ty, A Pioneer in Vietnamese Art], at: www.tienve.org/home/visualarts/viewVisualArts.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=2641, last accessed January 7, 2010.

⁴⁰ Personal correspondence between the artist, Tạ Ty, and the author.

⁴¹ Sold by Sotheby's, *Catalogue 2 April 2000*, lot 171, at the price of 19,550 Singapore dollars.

proliferation is that art has to abort the restraint of unreasonable ties between Creativity and Rules.⁴²

Later, Tạ Ty became a lieutenant colonel in the Psychological Warfare Department of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). He was also a poet and writer, whose political convictions were more complex than one would expect from a high-ranking officer.⁴³ The complexity of his political outlook is revealed in his 1964 painting, the *Portrait of Hồ Hữu Tường* (1910–80) (figure 3, below). Hồ Hữu Tường was a prominent member of the Fourth International, who later denounced communism

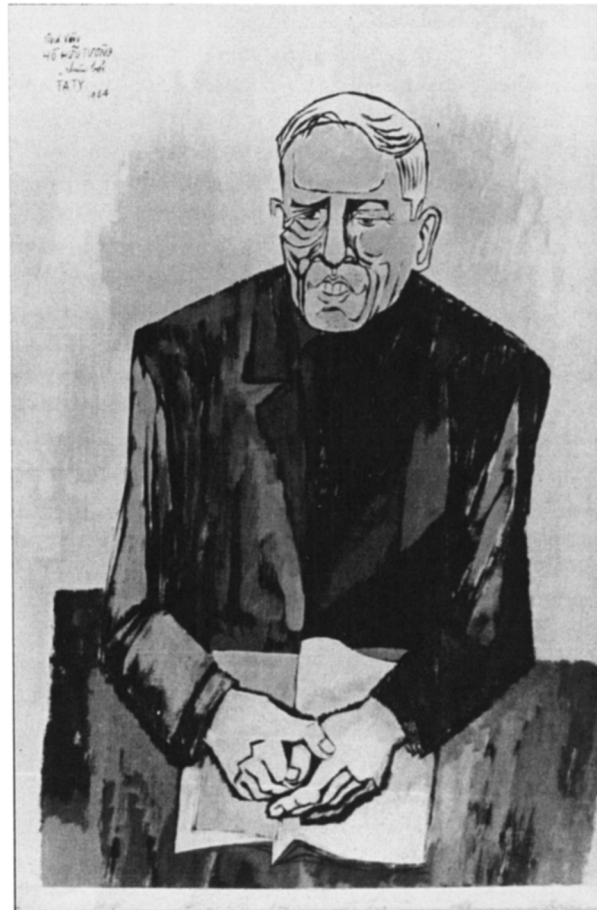


Figure 3. Tạ Ty, *Portrait of Hồ Hữu Tường*

⁴² Tạ Ty, *Catalogue Exposition Des Œuvres Récentes de Tạ Ty*, 1965. Emphasis on the words “Creativity and Rules” in this quote are Tạ Ty’s.

⁴³ Although Tạ Ty is well-known for his abstract art, which he began to produce in the 1960s, this essay focuses on his portrait of Hồ Hữu Tường, a painting that reveals the artist’s dual personality. Note that Hồ Hữu Tường was trying to search for a third road while being pressured from two sides. Tạ Ty might not have agreed with Tường’s beliefs, but surely he felt empathy with Tường’s predicament.

and advocated, instead, a policy of neutrality, believing that Vietnam would benefit. Hồ Hữu Tường even presented his theory to Hồ Chí Minh, but it was rejected.⁴⁴ His association with the Hoà Hảo and Cao Đài sects in 1955 earned him a death sentence from Ngô Đình Diệm's government, but international appeals (including a letter from Albert Camus) got it commuted to a life sentence. Following Ngô Đình Diệm's assassination in 1963, Hồ Hữu Tường was released; by this time, he had spent five years in Côn Đảo prison. Tạ Ty's portrait of Hồ Hữu Tường portrays a man recovering from an illness contracted in prison;⁴⁵ the subject is emaciated and wearing a grayish blue suit hanging off his shoulders, with his hands folded in front of an open blank book and his lined face marked by a suspicious and uncertain grin. The painting is from a series, *Fifty Figures of Writers and Artists*, that Tạ Ty created for an exhibition in 1965.⁴⁶ Significantly, his paintings reveal no hints of political partiality throughout this divisive period, 1954 to 1975. Tạ Ty the artist seems to have been divorced from his alter ego, Tạ Ty the military officer, and never strayed from the path of pursuing and practicing "art for art's sake."

Another assiduous practitioner of abstraction was Ngô Viết Thụ, who became a self-taught painter after establishing an international reputation as an architect. He won the Grand Prize of Rome for his architecture in 1955 and was the first Asian architect to become an Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. Ngô Viết Thụ designed many prominent buildings, including Independence Palace, the Saigon regime's Presidential Palace (now Reunification Palace), and the pavilion (later demolished) in Tao Đàn Park, built for the 1962 Saigon International Exhibition, in which he also participated as a painter. One of his works, *Fête Foraine* (1959) (figure 4, below), shows architectural influences in the use of vibrant lines and colors used to express the liveliness of a joyful, itinerant festival; the image is distinguished by a strong sense of abstraction.⁴⁷ *Fête Foraine* was exhibited in a touring exhibition in 1961, organized by the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, DC, and the Smithsonian Institution. It now resides in a private collection of a Vietnamese family in Sydney, Australia.

Vietnamese artists' aspirations to create work they considered contemporary, rather than dated and conventional, persisted throughout this era, as young Southern artists endeavored to be innovative. In 1956, the Sáng Tạo (Creation Group) established a magazine of the same name, whose influence initiated a campaign in 1960 for a new creative movement:

Cross out the old academic style, catch new tendencies in world art, do not stop at the decorative or objectively record matters, but mix up all the orders, forms, and colors residing in nature in order to create new forms of objects and life and so spear a new avant-garde movement, a new language for Vietnamese art; to

⁴⁴ Thụy Khuê, "Hồ Hữu Tường (1910–1980)," *Thế Kỷ* 21,170 (June 2003): 10–17.

⁴⁵ Thụy Khuê mentions in her writing that it took Hồ Hữu Tường six months to recover and to resume writing after being released from jail. See *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ The title for the cover for the catalogue of this exhibition is written in three languages: *Tạ Ty's New Style of Paintings, An Exhibition Including 50 Portraits of The Artist's Friends; Triển lãm Tạ Ty với 50 khuôn mặt văn nghệ; Exposition des œuvres récentes de Tạ Ty, comprenant notamment 50 portraits "visionnés" des personnalités du monde littéraire et artistique.*

⁴⁷ *Fête Foraine* is included in the catalogue *Art and Archaeology of Vietnam, Asian Crossroad of Cultures* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1961).

raise our young visual arts to the level of a Grand Art utilizing painting as an artistic means to express the inner world and life—all in record time.⁴⁸

This excerpt reveals the Creation Group's anxiety to catch up with the modern world. Their advocate was the artistic trio made up of Duy Thanh, Ngọc Dũng, and Thái Tuấn, whose main inspiration came from influential European modernists of the day: Chagall, Modigliani, Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and so on. Reproductions in imported publications and seminars presented by the cultural departments of several foreign embassies in Saigon were instrumental in providing this inspiration.



Figure 4. Ngô Viết Thụ, *Fête Foraine*

Duy Thanh is considered the first Vietnamese Fauve artist and appears to have been influenced by the work of Matisse, while the work of Cézanne, Picasso, and Modigliani influenced many Saigonese artists, including Ngọc Dũng and Thái Tuấn, who together created and cultivated the image of a stylized female figure that became prevalent in Saigonese art, so that representations of young women resembling the subjects in Modigliani's portraits, with long necks, slender bodies, and melancholy expressions, proliferated. Ngọc Dũng's *Young Girl*, created in 1962, is an example.

⁴⁸ Duy Thanh, Huỳnh Văn Phẩm, Mai Thảo, Ngọc Dũng, Nguyễn Sỹ Tế, Thái Tuấn, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Tô Thủy Yên, and Trần Thanh Hiệp, "Ngôn Ngữ Mới trong Hội Họa" [New Language in Painting], *Sáng Tạo* (September 1960): 21; emphasis as in the original.

It seems that this female imagery has been generated from a common model: oval faces, quite long, sometimes too long; big, gloomy, dreamy, and perplexing eyes; a long, extremely long, neck; a small mouth like a petite rose bud. Going down are sloping shoulders, then a slender, crane-like, and fragile body that looks as if it could bear no more than a misty dress.⁴⁹

This style was perpetuated by the subsequent era of artists, and although each had an individual approach to portraying the female figure, the subject was always unmistakably a fashionable Southern beauty, with elegant characteristics and a refined demeanor. This model stood in sharp contrast to representations of women in the socialist realist art of the North, which typically applied solid volumes to the subject to represent a body built for labor.

The passion of the Creation Group was adopted and preserved by Hội Họa Sĩ Trẻ Saigon (The Society of Saigonese Young Artists), which formed in the early 1960s and also advocated a new art, whose manifesto was:

Follow modern art movements closest to the tendencies that reside in the hearts of our Vietnamese audience.

Bring art to the masses, and devote art to them so that it is not a luxury in society but something necessary, a flame fostering life and humanity.

Bring a positive atmosphere to criticism, and exclude hypocritical diplomacy.⁵⁰

Members of Hội Họa Sĩ Trẻ Saigon ventured into styles more Symbolist and Expressionist than narrative. One distinctive trait they all shared was a commitment to being apolitical, which meant that typical Cold War politics, pitting North against South or Russia against the United States, were excluded from their art. They maintained this stand over the years, in the face of direct and indirect invitations from Saigon authorities and the National Liberation Front.⁵¹ Of the same generation as the anti-war composer Trịnh Công Sơn, many members of the Society of Saigonese Young Artists viewed the conflict in Vietnam during the 1960s as a civil war. They thought that the true destiny of Vietnam was curbed by the intervention of international powers: China, Russia, and the United States. This group thought that the United States' military presence in South Vietnam posed a threat by introducing the "other," an alien force that was more powerful and arrogant, and apparently less cultured, than the former "other"—the French. Furthermore, the US administration turned Vietnam into a "hot" battlefield through strategies that clearly differed from its more constructive interventions in Europe a decade before.

The American abstract expressionism movement was not used by the United States for political propaganda and had little influence on Vietnamese artists in South Vietnam, and many members of the Society of Saigonese Young Artists declared an indifference to American painting in those days, when they flicked

⁴⁹ Võ Đình, *Sao Có Tiếng Sóng* [Why The Sound of Waves] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ), pp. 199–200.

⁵⁰ *Manifesto of the Society of Young Saigonese Artists*, published November 10, 1973.

⁵¹ This was revealed to the author by Nguyễn Trung and Nguyễn Lâm in interviews in Ho Chi Minh City in January 2003; by Dương Văn Hùng and Nguyễn Khai in California in May 2003; and by Đình Cường in Virginia in May 2003.

through *Art in America* magazines.⁵² Modern American music was much more successful in influencing Vietnamese music composed during this era. *Nhạc trẻ* (young music), which developed in Vietnam during the period 1968–75, was spurred on by the introduction of American pop music. The Twist pervaded dancing clubs, and many Vietnamese singers adopted Western names—Elvis Phương (after Elvis Presley), Carol Kim, Julie Quang, Pauline Ngọc—and performed their songs in English or French. Well-known composers like Phạm Duy transferred Euro-American songs into Vietnamese. This was also the time when the Vietnamese *áo dài*, a traditional outfit for women, tended to be cut shorter, as if to contend with the miniskirt.

The work of these artists, which eschewed all references to war, expressed an ascetic longing for love and peace. Trịnh Cung's painting *Autumn of Childhood* (1962) expresses a dreamy world craving for peace. It was displayed at the First International Exhibition in 1962 in Saigon and awarded an Honor Certificate by the judging panel. Nguyễn Trung's work *By the Ocean* (1974) (figure 5, below) is an exceptionally romantic painting portraying a young lady merging into the seascape, an image of ultimate tranquility. Nguyễn Trung painted this work while hiding as a draft dodger: "I activated my imagination toward sky and ocean, to offset the limited space I had to comply with."⁵³ (Nguyễn Trung managed to avoid conscription until the end of the war.) Nguyễn Khai (real name: Bửu Khải) avoided conscription by enlisting in the Countryside Construction Force, an informally organized militia that operated to thwart the communist insurgency.⁵⁴ Nguyễn Khai shared with some other members of the group a Modigliani-like style resembling the style cultivated earlier by Thái Tuấn. In later works, he modified his shapes and colors in a manner reminiscent of Paul Klee, as seen in *Statue Debout* (1970) (figure 6, below).

Members of The Society of Saigonese Young Artists first gained recognition while still at art school, as award winners in the annual Spring Painting Awards, with the exception of the 1960 winner Văn Đen, a member of the Society, who studied in Paris and did not enroll in a school there. Other award winners were: Cù Nguyễn (gold 1961), Lâm Triết (gold 1962), Nguyễn Trung (silver 1960 and gold 1963), Đinh Cường (silver 1962), Nguyễn Lâm (silver 1962), and Trịnh Cung (gold 1964). For Saigonese artists, the 1960s annual Spring Painting Awards and the First International Exhibition in 1962 constituted a "Golden Age." The Spring Painting Awards were organized and judged during the period 1959–64 by the Department of Culture (Văn Hóa Vụ) and were considered "very important, not because of [their] scope, but [because of their] effect on the development of art in South Vietnam."⁵⁵ By

⁵² Interviews with Trịnh Cung, Hồ Hữu Thủ, Nguyễn Lâm, and Nguyễn Trung in Ho Chi Minh City in January 2003; Dương Văn Hùng and Nguyễn Khai in California in May 2003; and Đinh Cường in Virginia in May 2003.

⁵³ Nguyễn Trung, interview with the author on June 26, 2008, in Ho Chi Minh City, at the artist's studio.

⁵⁴ Cán Bộ Xây Dựng Nông Thôn (Countryside Construction Force) was founded on June 1, 1966, by the South's authorities in order to bring better living standards to the countryside. Cadres in this force were armed with knowledge in agriculture, health, and culture, and were expected to use that knowledge to serve their people.

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Trung, "Mỹ thuật Saigon 1954–1975" [Saigonese Art 1954–1975], in n.a., *Kỷ Yếu Hội Thảo Mỹ thuật Việt Nam thế kỷ 20* [Anthology of Vietnamese Art in the Twentieth Century] (Hà Nội: Fine Arts University of Hà Nội, 2000), p. 67. This anthology is a compilation of forty-two papers presented at the Conference of Vietnamese Art in the Twentieth Century, organized by the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội and held on March 30, 2000.

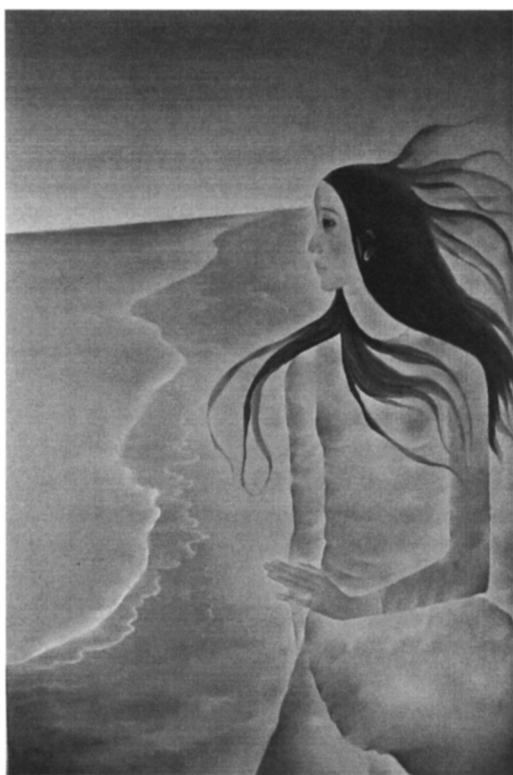


Figure 5. Nguyễn Trung, *By the Ocean*



Figure 6. Nguyễn Khai, *Statue Debout*

1963, the reporter Nguyễn Ngu Í described this annual event by saying that, “like in the last two years, most of the paintings belong to new art.”⁵⁶ The contest must have promoted something new:

The artists in South Vietnam today seem to be experimenting, and a visit to the exhibitions often held in major cities may bring some surprising results. Painting is very popular among the Vietnamese, and thousands of people turn out for exhibitions held almost weekly in Saigon.⁵⁷

Regrettably, the government of South Vietnam never financed a national fine arts museum, a failure that proved to be a major impediment to the maturation of Saigonese art. Many paintings purchased by the Saigon government were stored in the National History Museum, but they disappeared after the fall of Saigon. Through fear, many were burnt by artists themselves or by the owners during the 1976–79 “bourgeoisie reform” campaigns. As a result, systematic documentation of Saigonese art is fraught with complications and heavily reliant on overseas private collections.

The degree to which American culture influenced Saigonese art during this period is debatable, but United States citizens and other expatriates contributed considerably by purchasing paintings for their private collections. Marinka and John Bennett, from Virginia, probably own the largest Vietnamese art collection of works from this era outside Vietnam. John Bennett worked twice in Vietnam, first in 1963–65 as an economic advisor, then as economic counselor in the American Embassy, and again in 1972–75 as deputy director of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Vietnam. During her husband’s assignment in Saigon, Marinka Bennett worked as a volunteer English teacher in Saigonese high schools and pursued an interest in Vietnamese art. Marinka and John Bennett attended countless exhibitions in Saigon, and over the years got to know many artists, some of whom remain their friends. To celebrate the 1974 launch of the Agricultural Bank in Saigon, Marinka was asked to organize an exhibition, and throughout the 1970s she invited artists, particularly members of The Society of Saigonese Young Artists, to display paintings in her home in Saigon, events that sometimes inspired visitors to purchase artworks by these painters.

The intrusion of war influenced everything, including visual arts. Among artists, the inclination to adopt and help forge a collective regional identity competed with Western individualism because of the need to band together to defend the South’s independence against communist invasion. With the establishment in the 1960s of a defense force for the Republic of Vietnam, many public monuments were erected in Saigon to represent the various units of the armed forces. The statue of the hero General Trần Hưng Đạo,⁵⁸ situated on the banks of the Saigon River, represented the navy. The statue of the adolescent hero Phù Đổng Thiên Vương,⁵⁹ located at

⁵⁶ Nguyễn Ngu Í, “Tin Sinh Hoạt” [General News], *Bách Khoa* 154 (1963): 112.

⁵⁷ Ann Caddell Crawford, *Customs and Culture of Vietnam* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1966), p. 133.

⁵⁸ Trần Hưng Đạo (1228–1300), the general who defeated the Mongols three times in the fourteenth century.

⁵⁹ A legendary adolescent hero who defeated the Chinese before 500 BCE and then, according to legend, flew up into the sky. See Trần Quốc Vương, “The Legend of Ông Gióng from the Text to the Field,” in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. K. W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995), pp. 13–41.

intersection number six in Saigon, represented the Armored Corps. The statue of the hero General Trần Nguyên Hãn,⁶⁰ set in front of Bến Thành market, symbolizing communication during wartime, represented the Signals Corps. The statue shows Trần Nguyên Hãn, on his horse, about to release a pigeon, a hopeful, anticipatory action that makes this the most expressive monument left intact in Saigon after 1975.⁶¹

The monuments of the Republic of Vietnam acknowledged great historical narratives that could stir the pride of every Vietnamese citizen. By contrast, during the period when Hanoi was receiving military aid from China, it exercised cautious diplomacy by not publicly acknowledging the nation's complex past interactions with its northern neighbor. References to ancient battles against Chinese invaders were also absent in paintings from North Vietnam during this time.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, public monuments in the South became even more vulnerable. A bronze monument, sixteen meters tall, representing a bunch of rice, which had been erected in 1972 in Long Xuyên⁶² to symbolize the agrarian culture of the Mekong Delta, was razed. The sculpture had been commissioned by Việt Nam Thương Tín Bank (Vietnam Commerce Bank), which planned to invest in modernizing agriculture in the Mekong Delta. The sculptor was Mai Chửng, a former captain in the Southern army and a product of the Saigon regime, whose work was influenced by Henry Moore and Zoltán Kemeny. However, his use of materials was quite extraordinary. *The Rice* monument (1970) was cast in bronze from melted bullet shells and discarded bronze fragments. In many of this artist's "assembled" works, this recycled military detritus was crushed rather than melted. *The War* (1968) (figure 7, below), a monument displayed at the Crystal Palace Shopping Center in downtown Saigon, clearly showed the process of its fabrication; sadly, this extraordinary work was destroyed after 1975. The expressiveness of Mai Chửng's work, with its poignant clarity, effectively conveys the brutality of war. This sort of forthright expression was totally absent in the socialist art practice prevailing in the North.

Another public monument that refers to Southern nationalism and is still standing is the bronze bust of Phan Bội Châu (figure 8, below), a Vietnamese hero who fought against French colonialism. Completed in 1974, it remains the largest bronze bust in Vietnam, standing 2.5 meters tall and weighing eight tons. It was installed beside the tomb of Phan Bội Châu, who died under house arrest in Hue, a victim of the French colonial regime. The bust suggests a distinctive grandeur typical of the French sculptor Rodin's work. It is accompanied by images evoking historical themes, displayed in bas-relief, which embody the agony of Phan Bội Châu's people and convey the hero's strong-minded patriotism. The sculptor was Lê Thành Nhơn, who graduated from the Fine Arts College of Saigon in 1964.⁶³ Due to a battle injury, he was discharged from the army and resumed his art practice while teaching at the

⁶⁰ Trần Nguyên Hãn (? – 1429) was an aristocrat of the Trần Dynasty, but then became a general in Lê Lợi's army, which was sent to fight and defeat the Ming invasion. Trần Nguyên Hãn, therefore, contributed to the founding of the Lê Dynasty, which was started by Lê Lợi (1384–1433).

⁶¹ In the old times, carrier pigeons were trained to deliver mail, especially during wartime.

⁶² A city on the Mekong Delta, 120 kilometers southwest of Saigon.

⁶³ For more about Lê Thành Nhơn, read Huynh Boi Tran, "Le Thanh Nhon: Portrait of an Émigré," *TAASA Review* 11,4 (December 2002): 12–13.

Fine Arts College of Saigon, the Fine Arts College of Hue, and the Community University of Nha Trang.

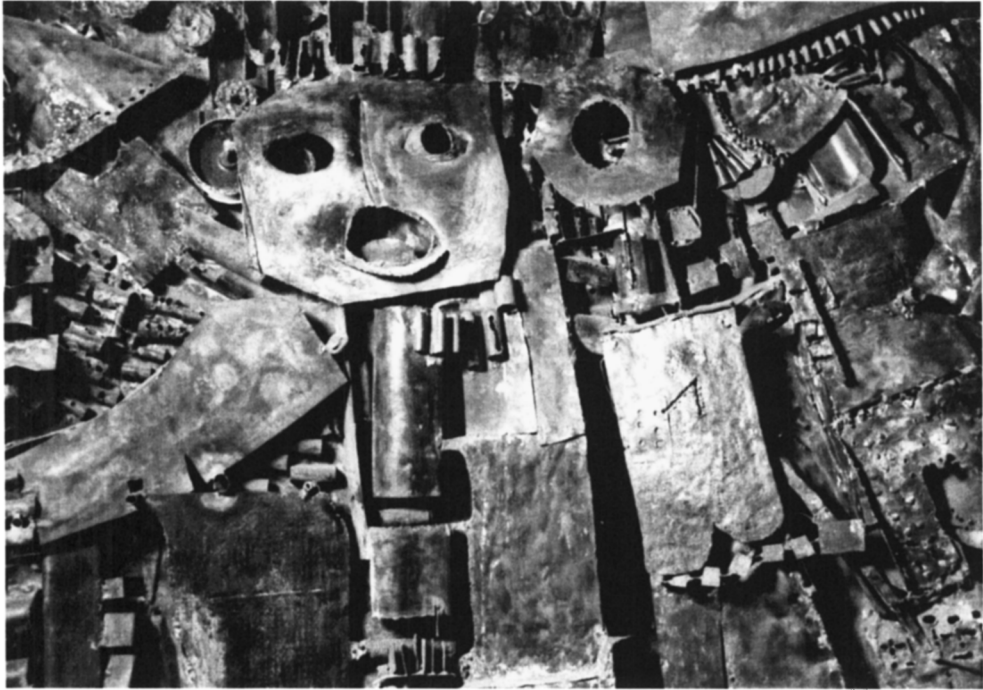


Figure 7. Mai Chửng, *The War*



Figure 8. Lê Thành Nhơn, bust of Phan Bội Châu

As portrayed in this work, the spirit of Phan Bội Châu signifies Vietnamese nationalism and the nation's desire for modernization. Similarly, Lê Thành Nhơn's process of creating the bust represents an unwavering determination that should be recorded in Vietnam's official art history. When the clay bust was completed in 1972, many people in Hue were delighted, and some Americans offered Nhơn financial support for the casting, but he declined those funds. Friends in Hue initiated an alternative fund-raising plan, the "drop of bronze" campaign, which asked people to collect and donate bronze bullet shells. The influential composer Trịnh Công Sơn became involved in the campaign, and his plea to university students was met with a very positive response, because to them Phan Bội Châu's spirit meant Hue and vice versa. South Vietnam's student movement in the early 1970s was a significant political force, particularly in Hue, where an emerging Buddhist-led protest movement was most active. Eventually, the "drop of bronze" campaign was embraced by a Vietnamese military officer, who organized the collecting of tons of spent bullet shells for the casting. In both representation and process, Lê Thành Nhơn's monument project was consistent with a strong community identity.

The war recruited many talented artists into its ruthless machine against their will. Lê Thành Nhơn, Dương Văn Hùng, Hiếu Đệ, Mai Chứng, Ngy Cao Nguyên, Trịnh Cung, and Đinh Cường, to mention a few, were recruited into the army. Others, such as Nguyễn Trung, Nguyễn Khai, and Đỗ Quang Em, avoided conscription. However, all of these individuals, despite their different backgrounds, had a similar mind-set. Any one of them might have stated: "The war is not the place where we want to be." Nguyễn Khai explained: "Art for art's sake is our thinking; we stayed out of the army in order to make art."⁶⁴

No matter how war-weary Vietnamese Southerners became, everyone had to bear the harsh reality of a mounting death toll. In 1965, an ARVN cemetery was established along the Bien Hoa–Saigon Highway. A commission was granted to Nguyễn Thanh Thu, enabling him to conceive his four-meter bronze memorial to fallen Southern soldiers. At the front gate of the cemetery in 1966, this commemorative monument, *Lamentation*, was installed, depicting a seated ARVN soldier with a rifle resting on his lap, pondering his colleagues who had not survived.⁶⁵ *Lamentation* is a monument with a serene reflective spirit, representing an inwardly expressed loss. However, after 1975, the new socialist society did not stand for "individualistic art" or commemorative memorials by the vanquished, and *Lamentation* was demolished, leaving a void of unmourned death.

CONCLUSION

Art practice in the Republic of Vietnam was obviously carried out under the burden of war. However, Saigonese artists enjoyed greater freedom to follow their artistic interests than did their Northern counterparts, and this freedom benefited them. While socialist realism, taught by Russian lecturers, was the only canon that prevailed in Northern Vietnamese art schools,⁶⁶ South Vietnam retained complete

⁶⁴ Nguyễn Khai, interview by the author, June 2008.

⁶⁵ See more in "The Wandering Statue," unknown author, online at <http://www.vietquoc.com/thngtiec.htm>, last accessed January 7, 2010.

⁶⁶ Thái Bá Vân mentioned names of Russian teachers at the Vietnam Fine Art College in Hanoi in his article "Nguyễn Phan Chánh và Chơi Ô Ăn Quan" [Nguyễn Phan Chánh and Girls Playing with Game of Pebbles], *Mỹ Thuật TP Hồ Chí Minh* 6,12 (1992): 11.

autonomy in art education and practice. The marked independence and vitality of the artistic developments in South Vietnam during this era are not documented in the official Vietnamese art history of today's Vietnam.

Representations of peace, hope, and love are the major themes in Southern art, reflecting the desperation of a generation caught between both sides of the war. Influenced by the anti-war movement and ideas about neutrality, Southern artists refused to commit to being "artist-soldiers/soldier-artists," the role adopted by their Northern colleagues, when they commenced searching for ways out of socialist realism.

While this essay compares some features of the visual arts practiced in the former states of North and South Vietnam, it is not meant as a judgment of which was more significant. Rather, it aims to point out some of their major differences and to reveal part of a hidden or lost cultural heritage that should be acknowledged in official Vietnamese histories.

Sadly, the former Republic of South Vietnam's failure to construct a fine arts museum and the destruction of significant Southern monuments after the fall of Saigon have created a momentous gap in Vietnam's national art history. Due to war and migration, most surviving artworks from the Republic of Vietnam are scattered throughout the world, and a complete history of Vietnamese art produced during the Vietnam/American war remains to be written.

COLD WAR RHETORIC AND THE BODY: PHYSICAL CULTURES IN EARLY SOCIALIST LAOS

Simon Creak¹

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) took power in Laos in December 1975, ending the thirty-year "revolutionary struggle" and ushering in an authoritarian one-party state. While the rise of the socialists ended one battle framed by the Cold War, it heralded another, as the new regime turned its attention to the political, economic, and cultural/ideological spheres. The last of these—the "revolution in culture and ideology"—aimed to build a "new socialist person" as "prerequisite" for the construction of socialism. Strong and healthy, the new socialist person was defined by physical as well as behavioral and moral characteristics, and a mass sport and physical culture movement was instituted to build the new person. The socialist concern with physicality also had an impact on the country in more profound and unexpected ways, first by privileging the corporeal over the intellectual, and, second, by constructing a cosmology of socialist change expressed in physical metaphors and idiom. On various levels of practice and understanding, post-1975 Laos was a physical culture framed by a Cold War mentality that posited the superiority of the socialist person.

Socialist physical culture was by no means the first in Laos to link the physical form to concern with progress and identity. The French introduced widespread "physical instruction and military preparation" movements to Indochina in the 1920s, in response to perceived "physical deficiencies" in the colonies. While Laos saw less development than other parts of Indochina, basic sport and physical education programs emerged in the major towns along the Mekong River. These stemmed from an understanding that, as distinct from existing notions of physicality, perceived physical health and fitness as a crucial tenet of colonial development.²

¹ The author acknowledges the generous comments and suggestions of Tony Day, Craig Reynolds, Philip Taylor, and an anonymous reviewer.

² For more on this period in Laos, see Simon Creak, "'Body Work': A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Colonial and Postcolonial Laos" (PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 2010). For Indochina more generally, see A. Larcher-Goscha, "Sport, colonialisme, et identités nationales: Premières approches du 'corps à corps colonial' en Indochine (1918–

Colonial efforts intensified in the sport and youth programs of Vichy Indochina (1941–45), which adapted Pétainist ideas linking body and empire. These ideas and practices were further adapted to the purpose of nation-building in the postcolonial Kingdom of Laos (1949–75), especially in the 1960s when the National Games were founded and Laos competed regularly in the South-East Asian Peninsula (SEAP) Games.³ While both men and women were involved, pre-socialist programs were heavily gendered. In the 1940s, women’s exercises and training regimes were modified considerably to fit with the Vichy French Empire’s gender essentialism, particularly the obsession with protecting the reproductive system. Postcolonial physical cultures were also gendered. If the strength of human bodies emerged as a metaphor for national strength, it was the male body that counted. Women’s bodies stood for tradition.

Far from rejecting these programs as a colonial imposition, Lao populations embraced physical culture and physical training—known in Lao as *kainyakam* and *kainyaborihan*—as the fields became established as important elements of the formal education system, military training, and specialized youth cadre schools. While the nature of these institutions meant physical culture was stronger in Laos’s expanding towns and cities than in rural areas, this focus on developing the body was much more than a narrow concern for local elites. Socialist physical culture derived, at least in part, from these foundations. The glorifying of physical labor, for instance, had precursors in Vichy discourses on work, and there was nothing original in the idea of cultivating bodies to build the nation. Nevertheless, the party projected the physical dimensions of building the socialist person as wholly and virtuously novel, as indicated by the ubiquitous use of the modifier “new” (*mai*). Despite the continuities, the Marxist-Leninist roots of socialist physical culture as it emerged in Laos demonstrated a degree of truth to this claim.

SOCIALIST PHYSICAL CULTURE AND RHETORIC

While communist sport is often remembered for Cold War Olympic rivalries between East and West, a more significant dimension was the evolution of what historian James Riordan has called a “model of sport or ‘physical culture’ for a modernizing community.”⁴ This paradigm sought to boost labor productivity, national defense, health and hygiene, female emancipation, integration of minorities, and foreign relations. In other words, socialist sport was characterized by an instrumental logic concerned with nation-building; it was “an agent of social change

1945),” in *De l’Indochine à l’Algérie: La Jeunesse en Mouvements des Deux Côtés du Miroir Colonial*, ed. Nicolas Bancel and Denis Y. Fates (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 2003).

³ For Vichy Indochina, see Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940–1944* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); and A. Raffin, *Youth Mobilization in Vichy Indochina and Its Legacies, 1940 to 1970* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005). For postcolonial Laos, see Simon Creak, “Sport and the Theatrics of Power in a Postcolonial State: The National Games of 1960s Laos,” *Asian Studies Review* 34,2 (2010): 191–210; and Simon Creak, “Representing True Laos in Postcolonial Southeast Asia: Regional Perspectives on Lao Sport,” in *Sport across Asia: Politics, Cultures, and Identities*, ed. Katrin Bromber, Birgit Krawietz, and Joseph Maguire (New York, NY: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁴ J. Riordan, “The Impact of Communism on Sport,” in *The International Politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*, ed. J. Riordan and A. Krüger (London and New York, NY: E&FN Spon, Taylor, and Francis, 1999), p. 48.

with the state as pilot.”⁵ Despite anticolonial and anticapitalist critiques raised earlier in the twentieth century, this was not so very different from the nation-building impulses of “bourgeois” sport in the West, though the level of utilitarianism was perhaps greater.

The increased instrumentality of socialist sport derived in part from the theoretical foundations of “physical culture” in Marxist and Leninist thought. Soviet socialism viewed physical culture as an inherent part of the cultural sphere, itself a component of superstructure. Specifically, “physical culture”—of which sport was one part—combined with “mental culture” to form “creative culture” (an element of “ideology”).⁶ This view of culture emanated from Marxian materialism, which rejected the sharp dualism of mind and matter and, in particular, stressed the importance of the latter vis-à-vis the former.⁷ Though Marx had had little to say about sport or physical culture, he advocated physical education and, most of all, work, which he viewed as a site where people, as physical beings, “start, regulate, and control the material reactions between themselves and nature.”⁸ Lenin wrote more than Marx about sport and physical education, especially its role in the “all-round development of all members of society.”⁹ He also added an emphasis on building character and the human spirit, highlighting advantages similar to those espoused in nineteenth-century muscular Christianity in England, which helps to account for similarities in the instrumental aspects of socialist and “bourgeois” sport.¹⁰

These Marxist–Leninist theoretical foundations provided a philosophical and historical basis for sport and physical culture throughout the modernizing socialist world. In Laos, however, while signs of these roots were evident, physical culture was never promoted in such a structured fashion. Rather, the key to understanding physical culture in the country emerged in post-liberation notions of the “new socialist person” (*khon mai sangkhomninyom*) and the related field of “upgrading culture” (*bamlung vatthannatham*), both of which were informed by a visceral ideological backlash against the previous “capitalist” society.

Grant Evans critiques the notion of the “new socialist man” in Laos, a figure that I will call the “new socialist person,” in keeping with the Lao term.¹¹ “Adaptions and change,” Evans writes, “have a logic that is too complex to be prefigured in teleological ideas like new socialist man.” In particular, Evans finds no evidence of spontaneous peasant cooperation in socialist Laos, an attribute of the new socialist person that the party–state presented as evidence of the possibility of collectivizing

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶ Other elements of physical culture included physical education, “active leisure pursuits,” and “playful activities.” For a schematic of the Soviet Marxist view of sport in society, see James Riordan, *Sport, Politics, and Communism* (Manchester and New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), p. 177. Cited in Riordan, *Sport, Politics, and Communism*, p. 21.

⁹ V. I. Lenin, *Polnoye sobranie sochineni*, vol. 6 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1968), p. 232. Cited in Riordan, *Sport, Politics, and Communism*, p. 25. Original emphasis.

¹⁰ Riordan, *Sport, Politics, and Communism*, p. 25.

¹¹ As *khon* is usually ungendered in Lao, “person” seems a more accurate translation of *khon* as it would have been understood, even if “man” has been used to translate the term elsewhere. Most importantly, women as well as men were part of the ideal, as discussed below.

agriculture. Instead, he finds the agency ascribed to the new socialist person legitimated social transformation under the guiding hand of “a vanguard party that claims to be the source of truth and wisdom.” Evans does not pursue the latter point in any detail, but he proposes that the ideology of the new socialist person, above all, provided “a rationalization for the leading role of the party.”¹² This was no doubt true, but Evans, whose interests lie in explaining the failure of collectivization, does not take the next step of exploring what the resulting rhetoric accomplished. Here I undertake a different kind of analysis of the new socialist person, one that explores the historical and cultural impact of the notion.

As French revolutionary historian Lynn Hunt has argued, the “rhetoric of revolution” provides “a way of reconstituting the social and political world”; language does not merely reflect change but is an “instrument” of it.¹³ In other words, Hunt views the language and representation of rhetoric as cultural ephemera with productive potential. Despite the vast differences between eighteenth-century France and twentieth-century Laos, Lao revolutionary rhetoric possessed a similar capacity to effect change. This impact is overlooked by earlier analyses of socialist education and culture that emphasize affective barriers to their success.¹⁴ I also take the examination of rhetoric a step further than Hunt, elucidating a dialogue between the rhetorical and the physical realms. Ignoring the physical not only overlooks tangible manifestations of rhetoric, it just as importantly fails to register how the concern with physicality shaped rhetorical idiom and understanding.

Of course, it is possible to debate the extent to which the reproduction of revolutionary rhetoric in Laos was simply performed as opposed to absorbed. But even where subjects chose quiescence due to fear, ambition, or apathy, the reiteration of the revolutionary line—what James Scott might call the “public script”—had very real social significance.¹⁵ It not only produced a Foucauldian regime of truth, which dictated the proper way to speak and behave; it also provided the basis for concrete changes in state policy and practice. In addition to being buttressed by the micro-capillaries of power associated with Foucault’s formulation of power/knowledge, the Lao regime was bolstered by the force of an authoritarian, coercive state, including disciplinary macro-tendrils such as prison camps, which call to mind Foucault’s work on the prison.¹⁶ Despite certain limits to the reach of the socialist Lao state, the new ideology (*neokhit mai*) could be implemented and policed with crushing effectiveness, a grim reality reflected in the flight of 10 percent of the

¹² Grant Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 6–7.

¹³ Lynn Avery Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), p. 24. If this now seems characteristic of the linguistic or cultural turn in the humanities, it is because Hunt contributed to it.

¹⁴ Compare to MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), pp. 231–40.

¹⁵ J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1990). Of course, the reference to Scott raises the prospect of non-hegemonic “hidden transcripts” coexisting with the public. But while alternative perspectives no doubt existed, they require study elsewhere.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977).

population by 1980, and more thereafter.¹⁷ In light of these observations, studying revolutionary rhetoric represents an opportunity to examine how socialist ideas, vernaculars, and practices came to Laos, to consider their reproduction in the local milieu, including their constitution in language, and to weigh their impact in terms of policy, practice, and cultural change.

The question that remains is how to study state rhetoric, especially when it was produced by a communist system as a means of not just reporting, but of creating truth—that is, what detractors would call “propaganda.”¹⁸ But historians have been wrestling with this important issue since the cultural turn redefined all historical sources—long held to be repositories of empirical truth—as mere “representations.” In other words, the question is less whether we use “propaganda” as a source than how we use any source. Without resorting to outright relativism, historians must always exercise judgment when utilizing sources, including consideration of how a source’s own history affects the history they write. “History is historiography,” as history theorist Alan Munslow puts it.¹⁹ A brief discussion of propaganda and rhetoric in Laos is illustrative.

If propaganda is “the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people’s thinking, emotions, and thereby behavior,” the post-1975 regime in Laos used it widely (as do all states).²⁰ Like communist governments elsewhere, the Lao party–state did not shy away from employing propaganda (*khosana*). Together with information (*thalaeng khao*) and culture (*vatthanatham*), *khosana* was commonly discussed as a strategy for promoting party–state doctrine and policy. In general, propaganda did not have negative associations akin to those that clustered around “brainwashing,” for instance, except when applied to the propaganda broadcast and printed by enemies; for such messages, the term *khosana suanseua* was sometimes used (“false propaganda,” or literally “propaganda to make believe”). In fact, the basic form *khosana* is very broad, referring in different contexts to “information,” “promotion,” and “advertising.” Unlike in China, moreover, in Laos there is no clear distinction between the medium and the content; *khosana* can refer to both.²¹ Identifying *khosana* as an objective category is unhelpful; the Lao term is simply too broad and indeterminate. If, on the other hand, we dismiss government language production as worthless “propaganda,” based on our accustomed response to and use of the pejorative English term, we judge its quality (bad) and analytical

¹⁷ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2002), p. 178.

¹⁸ The dismissal of socialist rhetoric is not confined to Westerners. Whenever I wanted to discuss socialism with friends in Laos during research for my thesis, its terminology was dismissed as “old language” (*phasa kao*) of the “old period” (*lainya kao*), which in itself is ironic, since not so long ago the socialist era was the new era! Warren Mayes explores the disconnect between the revolutionary generation and their children, the first to grow up since 1975, in his recent dissertation: Warren P. Mayes, “Urban Cosmonauts: The Global Explorations of the New Generation from Post-Revolutionary Laos” (PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 2007).

¹⁹ Alan Munslow, *The New History* (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2003), p. 157.

²⁰ The definition is from P. Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilisation, 1917–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 4.

²¹ Compare to A. M. Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 7, n. 6.

value (nil) without considering the diversity and nuance of state representation.²² For these reasons, the term “rhetoric” better encapsulates the complexities of state production of language.²³

In this essay, I employ three main rhetorical sources to explore notions of the new socialist person: speeches, administrative reports, and the press. First, while the oratory of Kaysone Phomvihane, general secretary of the LPRP and prime minister of the Lao PDR, was peppered with tirades against “American imperialists” (*chakaphat amelika*) and the “old regime” (*labop kao*), it also articulated a vision for Lao society, illuminating how language ordered the socialist cosmos. Second, reports of the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs (MESRA), usually signed by the minister, Phoumi Vongvichit, regurgitated similar anti-imperial diatribes and probably propagated dubious statistics. By cataloguing departmental “achievements” and “shortcomings,” however, they also revealed policy priorities and the language used to express them, providing a unique insight into socialist administrative culture. Finally, while little is known about the formal press industry in Laos, state-regulated newspapers such as *Vientiane Mai* (New Vientiane), mostly aimed at state officials, obviously sought to further the interests of the party–state leadership. Yet as repositories of the party line and records of official events, they, too, remain useful sources of party rhetoric, especially the language used to construct moral correctness. Most important here, all three sources reveal the dialogue between the rhetorical and physical realms. Only if we move beyond simplistic concerns with propaganda and truth do these possibilities become manifest.

THE NEW SOCIALIST PERSON AND UPGRADING CULTURE

In 1971 the Central Committee of the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) defined its “educational direction” (*thitthang seuksa*) as follows:

... to build a new generation of person, one that will become a new type of person: one with great physical strength, with strong health, with knowledge and ability in various subjects, with revolutionary ideology and qualities, with a resolute spirit—brave ... prepared together to serve the nation in the future.²⁴

Four years before the party came to power, the party’s objectives of building a new generation (*lun mai*) or new type (*baep mai*) of person were clear, as were the characteristics this ideal subject possessed. Most important for our purposes, the “new person” would possess great physical strength (*mi kamlangkai khaeng haeng*) and strong health (*mi sukhaphap khemkhaeng*). Together with the right knowledge (*khvam hu*), abilities (*khvam samat*), ideology (*neokhit*), qualities (*khunsombat*), and

²² For similar comments on dismissing “propaganda” in socialist Vietnam, see: K. Maclean, “Manifest Socialism: The Labor of Representation in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1956–1959),” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2,1 (2007): 64.

²³ Another possible term would be “discourse,” and I have already stated my belief that state rhetoric functioned in a Foucauldian manner to produce truth. However, I choose not to use the term, as its ubiquity in recent scholarship has weakened its explanatory value.

²⁴ Ministry of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs [MESRA], *Kila kainyakam: san pathom labop saman seuksa (khumeu khu)* [Sport and Physical Culture: Primary Level, General Education System (teachers’ handbook)] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs Publishing House, 1976), p. ko. Ellipses in original.

spirit (*namchai*), physical characteristics were essential to equip this person to serve the nation (*hapsai pathetsat*).

These objectives may have seemed fanciful when they were first enunciated in 1971. The LPF was still based in caves in Huaphanh province in the far northeast of Laos, the Lao People's Party was still clandestine, and even the Third Coalition Government was still two years away. In 1976, however, when the party was securely in power, building the new socialist person became national policy. The above excerpt comes from *Kila kainyakam* (Sport and Physical Culture), a teacher handbook published by the new Ministry of Education, which reveals the determinism of the "new person" ideology and, as part of this, the priority placed on propagating physical culture throughout society. While the "new person" motif emerged in Laos before 1975, it changed after the party's rise to power. Most importantly, the importance placed on ideology increased as the "new person" became the "new socialist person" and state rhetoric embraced physicality in more far-reaching ways as a defining feature of the new regime.

The party's general rhetoric concerning the "new type of person" developed into a more structured theoretical framework between late 1975 and early 1977. The blueprint emerged at the Third and, especially, the Fourth Plenum Sessions of the Party Central Committee, respectively in October 1975 and February 1977, as the party sought to bolster the theoretical rigor of the revolution. The end product, passed at the Fourth Plenum, was the theory of the "three revolutions": the *revolution in relations of production, the revolution in science and technology, and the revolution in ideology and culture*.²⁵ From the inner sanctum of the party, the theory spread to the party-state apparatus and beyond. Later in February, for instance, Kaysone explained the three revolutions to a combined meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) and the Council of Ministers.²⁶ Two months later, the party newspaper *Siang Pasason* (The People's Voice) carried a story on the third revolution, which was later broadcast on radio.²⁷

The LPF's theoretical model was undoubtedly borrowed from the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which announced the same three revolutions at its Fourth Congress in December 1976.²⁸ Without close comparative analysis, it is not possible to know how much the CPV version was modified in Laos, but it was probably not much. Vietnamese communism was critical in shaping Lao socialist thought, far more so than Soviet or, certainly, Chinese socialism. While claims that Laos was a

²⁵ Kaysone Phomvihane, *Revolution in Laos: Practice and Prospects* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), p. 181. Doré puts the Fourth Congress at December 1976, the same month as the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, but this is not Kaysone's recollection. Kaysone Phomvihane, *Revolution in Laos*, p. 227. A. Doré, "The Three Revolutions in Laos," in *Contemporary Laos*, ed. Martin Stuart-Fox (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982), p. 101.

²⁶ Reprinted as Kaysone Phomvihane, "Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha pheunthan pheua happakan saisana khong sangkhomninyom [New Era, New Direction, New Tasks, and Some Basics for Guaranteeing the Victory of Socialism]," in *Niphon leuak fen 2: kiaokap kansang setthakit nai samai khamphan kaokheun sangkhomninyom* [Selected Writings: Volume 2: Concerning Economic Construction in the Period of Transition to Socialism], ed. Kaysone Phomvihane (Vientiane: Lao PDR Publishing Office, 1977). This speech is cited extensively below.

²⁷ Cited in Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, pp. 234; 418 n. 40.

²⁸ Doré, "The Three Revolutions in Laos," p. 101.

“colony” of Hanoi are exaggerated, the influence of the larger country was vast.²⁹ Between five and six thousand Vietnamese political advisors were reportedly stationed in Laos after 1975, and officials at all levels engaged in meetings and exchanges, formal and informal.³⁰ Most senior Lao party officials studied Marxist-Leninist theory at the Nguyen Ai Quoc School in Hanoi, while Vietnamese instructors helped develop courses for the Party and State School for Political Theory in Vientiane, and “political tracts” were translated into Lao from Vietnamese “with minimal modification.”³¹ Given this context, we can surmise that the Lao officials adopted the Vietnamese blueprint for the three revolutions with few significant revisions, even if the act of translation itself offered scope for fine-tuning to match the local context.³²

Our concern here is limited to the revolution in ideology and culture (*kanpativat vatthanatham lae neokhit*), the central conceit of which focused on building the “new socialist person.” As the name indicated, the project of building the new socialist person was heavily ideological. Fostering revolutionary ideology (*naeokhit pativat*) throughout the party, the military, and the people—starting with civil servants—was a principle objective of the party. The Lao term for ideology, *naeokhit*—literally, “way of thinking”—betrayed this aspect very clearly. In his speech to the SP and Council of Ministers, Kaysone explained that the party’s goal was “lifting the level of socialist revolutionary awareness, of knowledge of Marxism-Leninism, in order to grasp and support the policy of the party–state.”³³

The objective of building the new socialist person was also instrumental, a “prerequisite” (*patchai*) for the construction of socialism, which had to come “before the first step.”³⁴ This was because, in the dialectical relationship between base and superstructure, new relations of production could only be built by people with a new consciousness (*sati mai*). Kaysone declared:

The construction of socialism does not only require building new relations of production, nor just new forces of production, but also a new superstructure

²⁹ The “colony” proposition is from Arthur J. Dommen, “Laos: Vietnam’s Satellite,” *Current History* 77,452 (December 1979). But I agree with Evans and Rowley, who counter that this proposition conflates uneven relations between Laos and Vietnam with colonialism. Not only is it true that Laos retained formal independence as a sovereign nation; in addition, there is no evidence of “the allegedly malevolent nature of Vietnamese power.” Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos since 1975*, 2nd ed. (London and New York, NY: Verso, 1990), p. 60.

³⁰ By contrast, Soviet advisors were mostly employed in technical areas. Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, pp. 209–12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176. Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 188. See also Martin Stuart-Fox, “Foreign Policy in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic,” in *Laos: Beyond the Revolution*, ed. Joseph J. Zasloff and Leonard Unger (Houndsmill and London: MacMillan, 1991), pp. 191–92.

³² For a discussion of translation and ideology, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 36.

³³ Kaysone Phomvihane, “Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha,” p. 59.

³⁴ Kaysone Phomvihane, “Chut phiset khong saphapkan lae nathi nai sapho na [Particular Points Concerning the Situation and Tasks in the Coming Period],” in *Niphon leuak fen 2: kiaokap kansang setthakit nai samai khamphan kaokheun sangkhomninyom*, ed. Kaysone Phomvihane (Vientiane: Lao PDR Publishing Office, 1975), p. 30.

[*khongbon*]. Much more than that, if one wants to construct new relations of production and new forces of production, there must be a new socialist person.³⁵

More particularly, “a high level of alertness in respect to politics” and “a high cultural and technical–scientific level” would enable the new socialist person to “oversee the state, the economy, and society.”³⁶ That is, training in ideology and culture would create the socialist person who would act as agent in producing the new society.

Such sentiments were short on detail but clear enough to demonstrate that the socialist theory of social transformation in Laos was based on the potential—and the necessity—of human intervention. Most importantly, the endeavor also indicated the party’s totalitarian ambition, its commitment to wholesale social transformation. As Evans has shown, these objectives were rarely achieved in the field of economics—i.e., the revolution in relations of production—to say nothing of development in the fields of science and technology, which remained hopelessly inadequate in Laos to transform society.³⁷ However, the third revolution was manifestly different, since, unlike these others, it did not promise specific reforms or technical advances, but aimed for the construction of an abstract ideal, the new socialist person. How could such a nebulous objective be a success or failure? This is why ten years later Kaysone had no trouble declaring that “the new socialist man has emerged.”³⁸ The task here is to examine what policies and practices were carried out in pursuit of the third revolution, particularly with respect to physical culture, and to assess the impact of these efforts and the associated rhetoric.

As determined before 1975, the fields that would foster the new consciousness in Laos were education and culture. The main focus of education policy was eradicating illiteracy and replacing French as a medium of instruction with Lao. Content was also important, particularly the emphasis on “all-round education” (*kanseuksa hopdan*), an explicit aspect of which was “political education” (*kanseuksa kanmeuang*). Rather in the manner of the ideology training given to party–state cadres, political education involved teaching the citizen to love the nation and socialism and to recognize that these affinities were one and the same thing. The overall objective of the education system was to build a “new generation of people to become socialist laborers [*phu ok haeng ngan sangkohmninyom*] possessing culture, revolutionary attributes [*khunsombat pativat*], a technical level, and hardworking discipline [*labiap vinai ok haeng ngan*].”³⁹ The objective of training a capable workforce was not so different from the modernizing and nation-building aims of educational systems elsewhere, in Asia and the West. However, socialist terminology demonstrated a particular concern with the physical, especially in its motifs concerning workers and “hard-working discipline,” even though the Lao working class was, in practice, “nonexistent.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Kaysone Phomvihane, “Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha,” p. 58.

³⁶ Kaysone Phomvihane, “Chut phiset khong saphapkan lae nathi nai sapho na,” pp. 30–31.

³⁷ Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism*.

³⁸ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁹ Kaysone Phomvihane, “Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha,” p. 61.

⁴⁰ Many have pointed this out. One of the first was Doré, “The Three Revolutions in Laos,” p. 104.

Much broader than rhetoric focused on education, state rhetoric on “culture” encompassed both negative and positive dimensions. Notoriously, the party attacked the cultural legacies of the previous regime, particularly American influences.⁴¹ In his 1977 speech to the SPA and Council of Ministers, Kaysone declared:

First and foremost, we must fight steadfastly, permanently, and resolutely to abolish the remaining vestiges of feudal and especially colonial ideology and culture; in particular, [we] must extract the wicked poison of the ideology and culture of neocolonialism that the American imperialists and reactionaries introduced and propagated throughout our country.⁴²

The party determined that remnants of American culture would inhibit progress under socialism. Behind the strident language lay disapproval of perceived social ills that reflected the party’s social conservatism.⁴³ The most notorious expressions of this conservatism were party edicts “to destroy all fiction books, magazines, and photographs which are erotic and sexy, the photos of imperialist cow-boys, to completely destroy social hazards such as gambling, hippies, prostitutes, [and] bars.”⁴⁴ The other main targets for abolition were “backward customs” (*hitkhong an lalang*), which were said to “obstruct the production and livelihoods of the people.”⁴⁵

Kaysone’s cultural crusade was notable for its strident language, much of which was newly translated into Lao or, at the very least, gave old words new connotations and contexts. The key verbal metaphor used to communicate the negative aspect of culture and ideology was *loplang*, meaning “to abolish,” a compound of two verbs: *lop*, which means erase or rub out, and *lang*, a common verb meaning to wash, clean, or cleanse. As the derivation suggests, the term could also carry connotations of moral cleansing. The unrelenting use of strong adverbs such as “steadfastly” (*manniao*) and “resolutely” (*detdiao*) reinforced the fervor of the public mission to clean up society. Meanwhile, the object of the cleansing—the remaining vestiges (*honghoi setleua*) of colonial culture—was conflated with “poison” (*phit*), a metaphor that conveyed toxicity.⁴⁶

The critique of the old society pervaded every aspect of administration, and sport was no exception. Criticism was leveled at “pre-liberation” sport on the grounds of “ideology,” “politics,” and “administration.” Concerning ideology, it was said that “the capitalist system” (*labop nai theun*) had not recognized sport’s “mass

⁴¹ Scholars of socialist Laos mention the anti-American tirades without fail, for they were polemical and sensationalist. But while many of these scholars note the rounding up of prostitutes and other undesirables, few if any consider the broader ramifications of how the rhetoric shaped the Lao world view and policy. I hope this essay goes some way towards correcting this omission.

⁴² Kaysone Phomvihane, “Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha,” pp. 62–63.

⁴³ Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Documents of National Congress of the People’s Representatives of Laos* [from the National Congress that met in Vientiane, Laos, December 1–2, 1975] (Delhi, India: The Embassy of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic), reprinted as Appendix A5 in Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, pp. 300–9.

⁴⁵ Kaysone Phomvihane, “Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha,” p. 63.

⁴⁶ The same metaphor was used in South Vietnam after 1975. See Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam’s South* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2001), p. 32.

characteristics." Nor had it understood that "sport was the right of all people and a means of building the new person physically and mentally [*dan hangkai chitchai*], of building the body [*sang kato*—laborers must be completely healthy [*mi sukkhaphap sombun*]." Sport had been "separated from the matter of politics and foreign affairs," and, finally, "absolute" power (*atnyasit*) had been centralized in the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Youth, which depended upon the ability of "capital" and "rich people" to provide patronage for sport. This last point, in particular, was cited as evidence that the old regime had not fostered expansion in the "mass movement" (*khabuan mahason*).⁴⁷

Somewhat repetitively, the condition of sports activities was further critiqued for reflecting the ideological, political, and administrative characteristics of the old regime (*labob kao*). These included: (1) unawareness (*theu bao*) of the mass movement, which restricted involvement in sports to "those with vehicles" (*phu mi phahana*), i.e., the wealthy, who could drive to sports events; (2) unawareness of politics; (3) authoritarian (*phadet sit*) organization, with the centralization of "absolute power" in the ministry and regionalism (*anathipatai*) in the countryside; and (4) the professional nature of sport (*kila asip*), "meaning the selling of brilliant athletes' bodies."⁴⁸ Though not possible to confirm, this final criticism may have been a reference to professional boxing, which had been embraced as a gambling sport in the 1960s.⁴⁹ In any case, the critique of "old regime" sport demonstrated how the template defining the old/bad culture was affixed to every social institution, including those of sport and physical culture. Of course, such polemics constituted propaganda in the fullest sense of the word, yet in doing so, the rhetoric that constructed the polemics laid narrative foundations for the establishment of an enlightened "new" (*mai*) sporting culture to replace the darkness of the "old" (*kao*). In other words, such rhetoric structured notions of time and progress, which explains the frequent use of these temporal markers, as well as the moral significance that lay behind them.

Given the manic rhetoric that proposed wiping out vestiges of colonialism and neocolonialism, it is not surprising that these aspects of the party's cultural critique have attracted the most attention. But this was just one side of the party's program of cultural reform. Another dimension, just as important, was couched in positive metaphors evoking the themes of construction and growth. In his February 1977 speech to the SPA and Council of Ministers, Kaysone emphasized that "we must build a new culture that has the substance of socialism, which truly demonstrates revolutionary characteristics, national characteristics, and popular characteristics."⁵⁰ This second component—which amounted to the light generated by the "new

⁴⁷ Department of Archives, Prime Minister's Office, Collection [*fong*] no. 08, File [*samnuan*] no. 43 (hereafter PMO DA, followed by collection/file). PMO DA no. 41/*Khana kammakan kila olaempic haeng so po po lo: ko o lo* [National Olympic Committee of the LPDR: LOC]/86. *Salup sangluam kankheuanvai khong ko or lo phan lainya 1978–1986* [Overall Summary of LOC Activities, 1978–1986], May 31, 1986, p. 3. The LOC (Lao Olympic Committee) was formed in 1978 to oversee preparation and participation in the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, an event that highlighted the junction of Cold War politics, culture, and sport in Laos. See Creak, "Body Work."

⁴⁸ LOC [Overall Summary, 1978–86], p. 4. It should be noted that the socialists embraced professional sport, but only when it followed the model of worker athletes (*nak kila asip*) promoted in the Soviet Union.

⁴⁹ For example, see *Sat Lao*, March 6, 1964, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Kaysone Phomvihane, "Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha," p. 63.

society”—occupied the party leadership as much as metaphors suggesting eradication.

Behind the didactic phrasing, socialist culture essentially contained two objectives.⁵¹ The first was a program of nationalist cultural revival. This involved “reinforcing [*soem khanyai tua*] the priceless cultural heritage of the nation,” “expanding [*khanyai tua*] the cultural capital” amassed during the revolution, and “selectively embracing the fruits of civilization of all mankind [*phon khong muanmanutsat*].” By “reinforcing patriotic foundations [*munseua haksat*],” these strategies would make Lao culture “rich and abundant [*udom hangmi*].” Having said this, Kaysone, who was aware of orthodox Marxist antipathy towards nationalism, also called on the population to build a “socialist patriotic spirit” (*chitchai hak sat hak sangkhomninyom*) together with an “international proletarian spirit” (*chitchai sakon kammasip*).⁵² To encompass both concerns, Kaysone declared the new culture was to be “socialist in content and national in form,” though it is hard to see what this would have meant in practice.⁵³

These objectives were reflected in the party’s development of sport and physical culture. “Traditional” sports, such as Lao boxing (*muai lao*) and *sepak takraw* (*kato*), were emphasized more than before, showing a heightened concern for national heritage. In 1976, the sports department announced it was conducting research into “traditional Lao boxing,” and socialist sports historiography presented the party as the savior of indigenous sports.⁵⁴ *Muai lao* was also distinguished more discretely from its closely related Thai variant, *muai thai*. Whereas the terms *muai thai* and *muai lao* had previously been used somewhat interchangeably, the nomenclature was nationalized, so that after 1975 *muai lao* was used exclusively in Laos. In addition, the widespread promotion of certain socialist ideas and practices—particularly of physical culture (*kainyakam*) and calisthenics (*kainyaborihan*)—constituted “fruits of civilization.”⁵⁵ These were especially relevant to the mass sport and physical culture movement, discussed below. Finally, sporting relationships with the “extended

⁵¹ Both Brown and Zasloff and Evans make similar points. However, neither considers the Lao terms, which are important in the discussion of rhetoric and physicality that follows below. See Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, pp. 234–37, and Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism*, pp. 1–7.

⁵² Kaysone Phomvihane, “Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha,” p. 63.

⁵³ Kaysone Phomvihane, *Revolution in Laos*, p. 194.

⁵⁴ PMO DA 08/14, Kasuang seuksa kila lae thammakan [MESRA], *Salup viakngan seksa kila lae thammakan sokhian 1975-1976* [Summary of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs Work, 1975–1976], no date [1976], p. 14; for socialist boxing historiography, see *Seuksa Mai*, September 1984, p. 15; for more recent historiography, see S. Thipthiangchan, “Pavatkhwampenma khong kila lao [History of Lao Sport],” in *Somsoei vankamnoet kila lao khophop 35 pi* [Rejoice for the 35th Anniversary of the Birth of Lao Sport], ed. National Sports Committee (Vientiane: Lao National Sports Committee, 2001).

⁵⁵ Having said this, I should add that the vast majority of sports played in socialist Laos remained the same as before 1975, the most popular being those introduced during colonialism (football, basketball, volleyball, athletics, and so forth). This reflected the inescapable fact that most modern sports are neither purely nationalist nor socialist, but are global phenomena. Not surprisingly, however, there was no move to eliminate these particular “vestiges” of colonialism. For the most part, they were easily transformed from colonial into national and then socialist institutions, although tennis was singled out for criticism as an elite sport.

socialist family" (*khananyat sangkhomninyom*), advocated by the regime, sought to foster an international proletarian spirit.⁵⁶

The second objective of socialist culture pertained to the character of the new socialist person. Kaysone urged the Lao people to "build a new life, a life of working hard, and fighting for the nation and for socialism" on foundations of "industrious, diligent, and audacious hard work [*okhaeng'ngan khanyan manphian ong'atkahan*]."⁵⁷ Kaysone and others returned to the theme of hard work time and again. In the same speech, Kaysone beseeched:

[We] must foster an effervescent and hard-working spirit, a spirit of determination to serve production and people's livelihoods ... [We must] resist the illnesses of laziness [*khikhan*], parasitism [*kokin*], extortion [*khut'hin*], greed and covetousness [*lopmak lopha*], and extravagance [*fumfeuai*].⁵⁸

These virtues and vices are somewhat universal, especially in modernizing regimes, but here the motifs of work and austerity were attached to the ideal of the new socialist person. He or she would be hard working and self-sufficient, a person who was not a burden on others but could lift him/herself, and Lao society, higher. Lao more than most people had long been characterized—and characterized themselves—as easy-going, playful, or downright lazy.⁵⁹ Kaysone's critique played off these images, as well as the deposed Royal Lao Government's dependence on US assistance.

Mass sport and physical culture were thought to have a crucial role to play in fostering the positive characteristics of the new socialist person, as the textbook *Kila-Kainyakam* (Sport and Physical Culture) demonstrated. The party-state consciously promoted sport and physical culture as "a means of building the strength and purity of laborers."⁶⁰ The field was also embraced for its potential to build *khunsombat*, or qualities, especially those involving diligence and discipline, which, again, related to labor. Later in this essay, I turn in detail to the policies and practices that sought to realize these objectives.

Beyond its implications for physical culture institutions, the theme of "labor" connected the rhetoric of revolution with the human body. Following the dictum of Marx and, perhaps more famously, Mao, officials emphasized the need to nurture both mental and physical attributes in the new socialist person.⁶¹ In 1977, Phoumi

⁵⁶ I discuss international socialist sports relations in the Lao context, particularly Laos's involvement in the 1980 Moscow Olympics, in Chapter 7 of my PhD dissertation, *Creak*, "Body Work."

⁵⁷ Kaysone Phomvihane, "Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha," p. 63.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

⁵⁹ The French certainly criticized the Lao as indolent and lazy. See Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 41–42; 210, n. 18. In a similar vein, the joint French–Lao Lao Renovation Movement (1941–45) criticized Lao for being *seu-seu* (unconcerned, complacent), and blamed this propensity for various problems that had troubled the Lao kingdoms of the past. Søren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), pp. 168–69.

⁶⁰ LOC [Overall Summary, 1978–1986], p. 5.

⁶¹ For Marx, see the discussion above; for Mao, see Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 56–58.

Vongvichit stressed that both “mental and physical labor” were necessary to build the new society, and a decade later Kaysone iterated the need to build a “socialist intelligentsia class” (*san khon panyason sangkhomninyom*).⁶² But like other socialist regimes, the Lao party overwhelmingly privileged the physical over the intellectual, the practical over the abstract. Though never as extreme as the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, party resolutions in 1976 and 1978 captured the practical intent in the mantra “learning goes with doing” (*hian pai kap het*).⁶³ Those who could claim to be exempt from this dictum, of course, were leaders (*phunam*) of the revolution, who were responsible for devising its theoretical direction, and civil servants, who studied the direction in order to implement it. But for the remainder of the population, physical toil was given top priority.⁶⁴

Labor figured centrally in the party discussions of the new socialist person. In 1977, *Siang Pasason* explained that new socialist people “consider engaging in labor a matter of honor, happiness, and part of earning a living” and “willingly sympathize with fellow laboring people.”⁶⁵ Together with peasants (*sao na*) and soldiers (*thahan*), workers (*kamakon*) and laborers (*phu ok haeng’ngan*)—the “non-existent proletariat”⁶⁶—were also glorified in state representations of revolution (figure 1, below). All of these were physical vocations, and referencing them underscored how the body was a critical site for articulating the values of socialist society. As in socialist regimes elsewhere, socialist realist art reinforced this message in Laos. The worker, the soldier, and the peasant were the key figures in revolutionary representation, and the juxtaposition of the three images provided visual shorthand defining the physical nature and appearance of the new socialist person.⁶⁷

We can also note from figure 1 (below) that women were part of the representational ideal of the “new socialist person.” In contrast with the domestic sphere advocated by the Women’s Union, which promoted the much ridiculed “three goods”—“good wife,” “good mother,” and “good citizen”—the field of physical culture at least partly reflected party–state policy and rhetoric concerning

⁶² Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, p. 178. Kaysone Phomvihane, *Ekasan khong kongpasumnyai khangthi IV khong phak pasason pativat lao* [Documents of the IVth Congress of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party] (Vientiane: n.p., 1986), p. 66.

⁶³ PMO DA 08/34, no. 945/MESRA/86. *Bot laingan kiaokap kansalup viakngan seuksa nai lainya 10 pi (1975–1985)* [Report Concerning Summary of Education Work in Ten-year Period (1975–1985)], June 17, 1986, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁴ Perversely, the emphasis on the physical over the intellectual undermined the country far more than it helped. As the party monopolized the cerebral sphere, the educated fled as refugees in disproportionate numbers, leading to a chronic shortage of skilled workers over the following years. Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 178.

⁶⁵ Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, p. 234.

⁶⁶ Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos since 1975* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), p. 18.

⁶⁷ For a brief discussion of socialist realist art in Laos, including a slideshow of examples, see Andrew Forbes and CPA Media, *Socialist Realism in Laos* (2002 [cited March 31, 2009]); available from http://www.cpamedia.com/articles/20021125_01/. Brownell discusses the shift away from the glorification of manual workers and peasants in late-1980s China in Brownell, *Training the Body for China*, pp. 186–97. Judging from the inclusion of bureaucrats (and monks) on more recent party billboards, a similar phenomenon occurred from the 1990s in Laos (see slide 5 and article in Forbes and CPA Media 2002, *Socialist Realism in Laos*).

“equality between women and men” (*samoephap lavang nying kap sai*).⁶⁸ The marking of Women’s Day (March 8) with sporting events provided one poignant example of this official attitude, while state publications emphasized the involvement of both male and female youth (*sai num nying sao*) in voluntary labor movements meant to beautify the urban environment.⁶⁹ While the notorious banning of jeans and make-up demonstrated the conservative tendencies of the party–state in matters affecting women, other cultural changes indicated a broader understanding of “women’s work” and “women’s activities” than before 1975.⁷⁰



Figure 1: Statue of the peasant, the soldier, and the worker, in the forecourt of the original Lao People’s Army Museum (opened 1976). (photo: David Henley, CPA Media, www.cpamedia.com, reproduced with permission, undated)

The ideological and instrumental importance of labor was further reflected in its role in “reeducation,” or prison, camps. The understandable abhorrence felt by detainees and observers towards these camps, which were referred to euphemistically as *sammama* (seminar), obscures the fact that they served two distinct functions: punishment and reform. Physical labor was a key aspect of both, as Phoumi explained in January 1977: “Why are these people attending seminars? They are doing so to study new things ... Those power bosses who never worked with their hands must learn to do so because under the socialist system everyone must engage in both mental and physical labor.”⁷¹ The recent memoir by a former

⁶⁸ Kaysone Phomvihane, “Lainya mai, thitthang mai, nathi mai lae bang banha,” p. 60. For the “three goods,” see Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 187.

⁶⁹ For example, *Viangchan Mai*, March 20, 1984, and January 4, 1976.

⁷⁰ While there was women’s sport before 1975, the more dominant images of femininity produced in women’s magazines such as *Nang* (Woman) were concerned with beauty and proper deportment. More research is required in this field.

⁷¹ Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, p. 178.

prisoner, Bounsang Khamkeo, demonstrates the harsh reality of hard labor in the camps.⁷²

Amphay Doré has recognized and addressed the importance of physical labor in his pyramid model of the “socio-political structure” of socialist Laos.⁷³ From its base, according to Doré, society consisted of five groups or levels: (1) those undergoing social and political reeducation; (2) the mass of the population; (3) bureaucrats, police, and soldiers; (4) party members, who “approximate to the socialist ideal”; and (5) the “New Lao Man” (i.e., new socialist person): “The model and goal towards which the social edifice converges is the ‘new man,’ who stands at its theoretical apex.”⁷⁴ “The relationship between physical labor and political education,” Doré explains, “varies inversely as one moves between the base and apex of the pyramid.”⁷⁵ For the vast majority of the population and recalcitrants at the bottom, physical labor is the source of social mobility; at its upper reaches, it is political education that matters: “Superior cadres of the state and Party do no physical labor at all.”⁷⁶

Doré is certainly right to argue that physical labor was glorified for the mass of the population, but his appraisal contains one major flaw. As an ideal, the new socialist person encompassed all positive traits as defined by the party, including physical ones. In fact, while party leaders indeed reveled in doing the “mental work” of the revolution, they were also glorified for their physical attributes. A photograph of Kaysone exercising, with a caption endorsing the benefits of sport for the spirit and for health (see figure 2, below), has been featured ubiquitously at sports exhibitions in the country.⁷⁷ Another picture, on display at the NSC Museum in Vientiane, shows him playing table tennis, with the caption explaining that he “exercised every day at the Kilometre 6 dormitory,” where he lived after 1975. Thus Kaysone, the nearest embodiment of the new socialist person, is represented as not only a patriot, a “man of the people,” and an intellectual, but also as a physical man.⁷⁸ The new socialist person was not just a telos at the pyramid’s apex and the end of time, but an ideal intended to permeate every level of Lao society. For most of the population, however, for whom the all-roundedness of Kaysone was but an ideal, the most pertinent and perhaps the only achievable characteristic of the new socialist person was hard work.

As will now be clear, “culture” in the rhetoric of the Lao PDR encompassed much more than might usually be ascribed to the term. Given that socialist culture could allegedly produce a new type of person and, through him/her, a new society, the term had a productive and even ameliorative quality. Reflecting this aspect,

⁷² Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave: A Prison Memoir from Communist Laos* (Spokane, WA: Eastern Washington University Press, 2006).

⁷³ Doré, “The Three Revolutions in Laos,” pp. 111.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁷⁷ The picture of Kaysone was displayed at the NSC stand at an exhibition in November–December 2005 celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the revolution at Lao ITECC. It was also displayed at the seventh National Games exhibition at the Savannakhet stadium later that December on the occasion of the seventh National Games.

⁷⁸ Compare to Evans, *Ritual and Remembrance*, pp. 32–33.



Figure 2: Kaysone Phomvihane: a physical man and the nearest embodiment of the new socialist person (photo: copied by author with permission).

political speeches and administrative reports were peppered with the goal of *bamlung vatthanatham*, a phrase that connotes upgrading, fostering, or simply improving culture.⁷⁹ Culture was not merely abstract or decorative, nor was it naturalized as an essential or innate quality; it was a mutable category to be upgraded for the purpose of producing new socialist people and socialist transformation. The sport and physical culture movement was a critical element of this notion of socialist culture, for it would boost physical strength and health. In an instrumental sense, this would build strong, healthy, and hard-working laborers to aid national construction. In addition, and more generally, the emphasis on physical characteristics betrayed the party's contempt for the intellectual and its glorification of the physical. Thus, the benefits of the sport and physical culture movement transcended the instrumental, reflecting broader party ideology.

Above and beyond these aspects of "culture" as they were conceived and understood, culture was also characteristic of what we might call the cosmology of socialist Laos, a profoundly positivist vision of total social transformation

⁷⁹ In certain cases, *bamlung vatthanatham* also referred to political training. According to Ministry of Education reports and plans, success in *bamlung vatthanatham* work could be measured by the percentage of government and party officials at various levels who had completed prescribed levels of political training. The term was used alongside, and apparently interchangeably with, a phrase meaning "people's education" (*seuksa pasason*), which referred to general education (*saman seuksa*) for adults. DA 08/14, MESRA, *Phaenkan seuksa 2 pi (naptae sokhian 1979–80 theung sokhian 1980–81)* [Two-year Education Plan (Academic Years 1979–80 to 1980–81)] July 31, 1979, pp. 4–6.

accomplished under the leadership and auspices of the party. In this worldview, the party would lead (*nampha*) the transformation of Lao society by identifying problems (*banha*) or difficulties (*khwam nyung'nyak*), producing strategies (*nyutthasat*), and implementing plans (*phaenkan*). The linguistic motifs of administration reflected this view of social progress. Progress (*khwam kaona*) towards objectives (*chutpasong*) was evaluated (*tilakha*) in terms of work carried out (*viakngan*), good points (*chut di*), and achievements (*phon'ngan*). Conversely, obstacles (*uppasak*) and shortcomings or weak points (*chut on*) were identified, and further plans created in order for these obstacles to be overcome (*phanpha*). Identifying negatives was an explicit dimension of Kaysone's theory of social progress: "It is essential for us to point out our difficulties, weaknesses, and shortcomings frankly in order to overcome and rectify them, then to proceed."⁸⁰ There was nothing that could not be achieved, or at least conceived, in this positivist world view.

This cosmology pervaded the party-state at all levels. Party cadres carried out self-assessments by recording curriculum vitae with their achievements and weak points.⁸¹ Three decades later, this was the format followed in the résumés of senior civil servants who had cut their teeth in the early years of the revolution.⁸² Administrative reports followed a similar structure: listing work, good points, weak points, and remaining issues (*kho khongkhang*).⁸³ The conceit of reeducation was based on doing the same to human beings. Prisoners undertook self-criticism and, as discussed, labored their way to redemption. Clearly, the strident positivism of this worldview was based on an unrealistically simple idea of society and social change. But this model of social change and its accompanying rhetoric pervaded society and shaped the administration of all cultural fields, including that of sport and physical culture. As labor would redeem the individual, so culture, according to this worldview, would effect social progress.

The socialist cosmology was comprehensible as a physical metaphor in which society—like the reeducation inmate—was a weak, ill, or otherwise substandard body that could be healed with the right attention. The physical idiom began with "vestiges" of the old regime: poison, for instance, brings on physical sickness or even death, while cleansing (*lang*), applied to social ills through the verb *loplang* (abolish), is usually performed on hands and bodies; cleaning one's hands (*lang meu*), as we all know, is essential for ridding oneself of germs and bacteria. The socialist message equated this kind of physical washing with the cleansing of society. Even more evocative of physicality were the positive terms applied to the culture of the new regime. The most common verbal metaphor, *kosang* (to build or construct), was applied with equal consistency to bodies, people, and society. *Kosang* has a material connotation relating it to the construction of roads, buildings, and other objects. Construction implied substantial size, both of effort and results, and size implied progress. The same themes of physicality and size were emphasized in verbs such as

⁸⁰ Kaysone Phomvihane, *Ekasan khong kongpasumnyai khangthi IV*, p. 26.

⁸¹ Doré, "The Three Revolutions in Laos," p. 112.

⁸² In 2006, I was asked to translate a bureaucrat's CV from Lao to English, a difficult task given that "weak points" is not something one would usually include if seeking a job in an international organization (as this man was).

⁸³ This observation is based on Ministry of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs reports, some of which are cited in this chapter, but reports of other ministries and departments would reveal the same.

“increasing” (*nyaikheun, poemthavi*), “expanding” (*kha'nyai*), “reinforcing” (*soem kha'nyai*), or “raising the level” (*nyok ladap*). Many of these compounds are constructed around the adjective *nyai*, meaning “big” or “large” in common usage, but also “great.” Other components implied moving upwards, for example, *nyok* (lift) or *kheun* (rise, up), while the phrase for overcoming obstacles (*phanpha upasak*) also invoked the physical, meaning, more precisely, to traverse or pass by a barrier. As these physical actions were applied to the body of society, this body—the nation—would improve (*papping*) or be upgraded (*bamlung*). This positivist cosmology of social progress was based almost entirely on physical metaphor and the awareness of physicality that lay beneath it.

These verbs permeated administrative reports, including those concerning the sport and physical culture movement. A typical one boasted that the movement had “reinforced successes in the construction of socialism, expanding the health and hygiene of the masses.”⁸⁴ In one short sentence, sport “reinforced,” “expanded,” and “constructed,” and did so with the result of improving the health of the masses and therefore of the nation. The idiom of improvement was also closely related to the underlying *raison d'être* of sport: the aim of reaching higher, going farther, being stronger, and breaking records. The parallel positivism that referred to socialist transformation, the body, and sport showed how physical culture—the culture of all things physical—resonated in socialist rhetoric for cosmological as well as instrumental and ideological reasons.

Sport and physical culture resided at the junction of several different currents in party rhetoric on culture. Most obviously, these fields were embraced for their potential to improve the people’s physical strength and health and, therefore, to contribute to the building of a new socialist person to “serve the nation.” But beneath this straightforward instrumentalism there were two more profound connections. First, socialist culture privileged physical attributes, especially labor, as well as condemning laziness, extravagance, and other negative attributes. This theme connected the abstractness of socialist rhetoric—words—to the body, emphasizing the body’s centrality in the ideology of socialist Laos. Second, the Lao socialist worldview of positivist transformation—the cosmology of socialist Laos—was bound up in a physical idiom. Like an inept human body, society awaited physical amelioration through building, improving, and strengthening. These ideological and cosmological juxtapositions of language and physical culture reinforced the importance of the physical in Lao socialist society.

THE POLITICAL SPORTS MOVEMENT

While this consciousness of the physical emerged on a number of levels, it was, of course, characterized by the deep paradox that it was a rhetorical construction. Transforming the rhetoric into practice would require policies, programs, and resources, and sport and physical culture were uniquely placed to help accomplish this transformation. Upon coming to power, the party asserted its goal of promoting a movement in these fields throughout society. Its Program of Action of December 1975 included the need “to stimulate, maintain, and develop sports activities and physical education amongst the people, particularly amongst the youth, in the army,

⁸⁴ DA 08/14, MESRA, *Salup pi seuksa 1977–1978* [Summary 1977–78 Academic Year], no date [1978], p. 21.

and in the administrative departments and primary schools.”⁸⁵ The remainder of the essay will appraise these efforts, providing a critical case study of the relationship between socialist rhetoric, policy, and practice.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the new sporting culture was the goal of developing a mass sports movement of a political nature. In the past, terms like “sports circles” (*vongkan kila*) and “sports movement/activities” (*kankheuanvai kila*) had been used to refer to organized sport in Laos. While these quite neutral terms continued to be used, a newly adopted term, *khabuan*, connoted a political movement. Use of this term betrayed the political purpose of whatever it was applied to, and the newly tagged “sport and physical culture movement” (*kankhabuan kila kainyakam*) was one such example. Departmental reports referred constantly to the role of the movement in “serving the political tasks of the party–state” (*hapsai nathi kanmeuang khong phak lae lat*), often criticizing officials for failing to realize this core concern. Though this movement was not represented by an official administrative body, as were the party’s formally constituted mass organizations (of youth, women, and so forth), references to the sport and physical culture movement were soon peppered throughout press and administrative reports, showing how rapidly the nomenclature of the new regime became standardized.

The political nature of socialist sport was also captured in the word *kainyakam* (physical culture), which, like *khabuan*, was unusual before 1975. The word mirrored terms in other socialist countries, where “physical culture” was a critical element of “creative culture.” Though never properly defined in the Lao context, the compound *kila kainyakam* (sport and physical culture) could be taken to encompass sportive physical activities organized by the state, the totality of which had political objectives. These would include official sport, physical education, and calisthenics, for instance, but not the national circus or dance.⁸⁶

The political nature of the sports movement was reinforced by its location in the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs (MESRA), one of the two ministries responsible for building the new socialist person.⁸⁷ MESRA was founded under the tutelage of Deputy Prime Minister and fourth-ranked Politburo member Phoumi Vongvichit. Meanwhile, the previous regime’s Department of Youth and Sport was replaced by the Department of Sport, Physical Education, and Educational Arts (*kom kila kainyaseuksa lae sinlapaseuksa*).⁸⁸ This led to the curious situation of sport being grouped in state administration and discourse with art and sometimes literature, a rather unusual association of disciplines that was explained by the department’s overriding goal of building the new socialist person.⁸⁹

Despite the rapid lexical and institutional changes, there was little evidence of MESRA activity at first. But from late 1976, Ministry of Education reports declared that the sports department was “paying attention to building, mobilizing, and

⁸⁵ *Documents of National Congress of the People’s Representatives of Laos*, in Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, p. 308.

⁸⁶ *Kainyakam* could also refer more specifically to gymnastics, although this usage was rarer.

⁸⁷ The other ministry charged with this task was the Ministry of Information, Propaganda, Culture, and Tourism.

⁸⁸ Youth was also a key field in socialist Laos, becoming one of the mass organizations under the Lao Front for National Construction (as the LPF was renamed in 1979).

⁸⁹ In practice, however, MESRA tended to deal with sport and physical education separately from the arts.

pushing the sports movement far and wide among the masses."⁹⁰ The achievements, weak points, and remaining issues mentioned in reports created a picture of the department's priorities: expanding domestic competitions; holding special sports events on days of national and socialist significance; hosting "friendship" competitions with other countries and sending teams abroad; improving infrastructure and equipment; and increasing sport and physical culture facilities and activities for the masses. While some priorities were typical of those that predominated before 1975, the strength and unity of the party's underlying rhetoric of building the nation and socialism represented a strong point of departure. For instance, friendship competitions with foreign teams were, by and large, organized with "fraternal socialist countries," especially the Soviet Union, China (until 1979), and Vietnam, and sporting festivals celebrated occasions noted on the new ritual calendar, such as December 2 (National Day), May Day, Women's Day, and Army Day (January 20). Similar Cold War polemics were evident in mass sport.

SPORT AND PHYSICAL CULTURE FOR THE MASSES

As we have seen, the masses (*mahason*) or the people (*pasason*) were defining motifs in party-state rhetoric. Unlike the situation under the previous regime, which was attacked for having favored *phu nyai* (big people), the masses would now be masters (*pen chao*) of the country's destiny. The party-state sought to enact this theme in sport and physical culture by imbuing the movement with "mass characteristics," a phrase that was scattered throughout departmental reports. A few years after the party's ascendancy, Phoumi launched a two-year plan reinforcing the objective of "pushing and strengthening sport and physical culture among the people, first and foremost among youth, among students in the schools and the army, among civil servants, workers, and laborers," as well as in factories and "units of basic production." Focusing on the mass level, Phoumi argued, would "connect sport and physical culture with—and serve the political tasks of—the party, construct socialism, and protect the nation."⁹¹

Many of the "political objectives" of mass sport will already be clear. In terms of ideology, the masses were said to have a right (*sit*) to participate in sport and physical culture. A mass sports movement would thus embody the egalitarianism through which the party-state legitimized its rule. Second, the mass sports movement would build a "joyous" or "effervescent atmosphere" (*banyakat muan seun beuk ban/banyakat fot feun*) among the people. This would not only encourage the construction of socialism, but improve the image of the new regime. Related to this objective were further benefits, such as building solidarity (*samakkhi*) and friendship (*mittaphap*) among the masses. Finally, sport and physical culture would benefit health and hygiene, an objective usually condensed in the claim that sport and physical culture made one strong and healthy (e.g., *mi sukkhaphap khem khaeng/khaeng haeng, mi phalanamai*). Strong and healthy bodies would serve the party by increasing the strength of laborers, thus increasing productivity, and improve national security by providing a large pool of healthy recruits from which defense forces could draw

⁹⁰ MESRA, Summary, 1975–1976, p. 15.

⁹¹ MESRA, Plan 1979–80 to 1980–88, pp. 2, 30.

(the perception of military threats, particularly from Thailand, was ever present in early socialist Laos).⁹²

Corporeal health was not only advocated for its instrumental potential, but also viewed as a barometer of national strength; the human body stood as a metaphor for the nation. Other benefits, such as “solidarity” and “friendship,” were also promoted for national reasons, particularly because of their implications of “national unity.” Apposite here is Susan Brownell’s concept of “somatization,” which she uses to describe the way in which, in socialist China, “social tensions are expressed in bodily idiom, so that calls for their resolution often center on healing and strengthening the body.” In response to the “devastating encounters” with Western imperialism, Brownell recounts, the strengthening of individual bodies “was linked to the salvation of the nation.”⁹³ Though the scale was different in Laos, a similar association of body and nation could be observed there. Despite criticisms of nationalism in “bourgeois” sport, then, the nationalist function of sport was perhaps even stronger in modernizing socialist countries than in the non-socialist world. Despite its promotion of international socialism in conjunction with national concerns, Laos was no exception to this pattern. The “new socialist person” and the “mass sports movement” of Laos were very much nationalist motifs, as well as socialist ones.

While the nationalist and socialist benefits of mass physical culture were fairly clear, the task of promoting sport for the people was more complicated. One of the most important means of promoting popular physical culture was through mass calisthenics or gymnastics (*kainyaborihan*), physical exercises performed with large numbers of participants in formation. Although this type of physical exercise had been part of the Lao sporting scene since the 1940s, its importance increased tremendously under socialism, probably as a result of its popularity in other socialist countries. Besides the socialist connection, calisthenics had obvious ideological and practical appeal. It ordered large numbers of bodies in collective synergy, reflecting the party–state desire to discipline the population at both local/micro and national/macro levels. In addition, it required a small ratio of trainers to participants and no special equipment.

The party–state’s vision for organizing calisthenics was ambitious in its reach and rationale. The sports department anticipated that regular calisthenics would be adopted “throughout the country,” especially at schools, government offices, and other work places such as factories. Sessions were to take place in the morning or at lunchtime or during other breaks. It was also hoped that “radio calisthenics” programs would be broadcast from public address speakers erected in urban areas. The envisaged ubiquity of calisthenics was the key to its appeal. By delivering the benefits of healthful exercise to the widest possible number of people, it was anticipated that calisthenics would imbue the sport and physical culture movement with “mass characteristics” (*laksana mahason*).

However, the sports department encountered many difficulties in propagating calisthenics; indeed, early reports usually discussed the discipline in the context of “weaknesses.” Understandably, Phoumi reported the year immediately following the revolution that the “morning gymnastics movement” was “not yet in order.”⁹⁴

⁹² This summary collates details in the MESRA and LOC reports cited throughout the essay.

⁹³ Brownell, *Training the Body for China*, p. 22.

⁹⁴ MESRA, Summary, 1975–1976, p. 15.

But the same complaint was echoed the following year, and criticism was sharper still in 1977–78.⁹⁵ The inadequate “propagation and instigation of calisthenics among the people,” Phoumi reported, was evidence of sport and physical culture’s lack of “widespread mass characteristics,” as well as of the failure to recognize that work in this field was to “serve the political tasks of the party–state.”⁹⁶ By the end of the decade, reports of morning and lunchtime calisthenics sessions were more positive, but only when describing activities in the towns and cities. In more remote areas, where villagers’ participation was key if the state hoped to implement “mass sport,” results remained disappointing.⁹⁷

Another means of expanding the mass sports movement was physical education (*kainyaseuksa*) in the schools.⁹⁸ We have already seen that, soon after the party came to power, MESRA published a primary school teachers’ handbook, *Sport and Physical Culture*, an extraordinary 50,000 copies of which were printed.⁹⁹ According to the ministry’s statistics for 1976–77, this supply would have been sufficient to provide more than ten books for each primary school (of which there were 4,395), just under four for each class (13,830) or one for every eight students (414,423).¹⁰⁰ More likely, many thousands were never distributed. Nonetheless, the large print run indicated the party–state’s ambitious plans to push sport and physical culture in the expanding school system, and thousands of books presumably did make it into the schools.

The handbook presented lessons in five areas: (1) drill (*kanchattheo*), (2) physical exercises (*baephatkai*), (3) walking and running (*yang lae laen*), (4) skipping (*baeptenseuak*), and (5) games (*baeplin*). These were divided into five grade levels, with around thirty lessons at each level, although each chapter made the point that teachers should only select exercises of a level that was manageable for pupils. Exercises reinforced the virtue of physicality, especially its ameliorative value vis-à-vis intellectual work. A characteristic exercise was done to the chant:

⁹⁵ POM DA 08/14, MESRA, *Salup pi seuksa 1976–1977* [Summary for academic year 1976–1977], September 5, 1977, p. 11.

⁹⁶ DA 08/14, MESRA, *Salup pi 1977 khong kasuang seuksa kila lae thammakan* [Summary of the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs, 1977], December 16, 1977, p. 22.

⁹⁷ PMO DA 08/22, MESRA, *Kansangket tilakha viak ngan seuksa kila lae thammakan ton sok hian 1979–80* [Assessment of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs Work for Academic Year 1979–80], May 30, 1980, pp. 17–19; PMO DA 08/15, MESRA, *Salup viakngan seuksa kila lae thammakan 5 pi tae 1975 thoeng 1980* [Summary of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs Work for the Five Years from 1975 to 1980], December 19, 1980, pp. 19–22.

⁹⁸ It can be noted that a different term, *phalaseuksa*, was used for physical education in the Kingdom of Laos. The reason for the change is not known, though it may have been to distinguish the Lao term from the Thai. Phoumi Vongvichit, who led the party’s nationalist language reforms, adopted several distinctive terms for those cases where the Lao was the same as the Thai. See N. J. Enfield, “Lao as a National Language,” in *Laos: Culture and Society*, ed. Grant Evans (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999).

⁹⁹ The size of the print run was noted in the book itself and confirmed in a ministerial report. There is some doubt regarding its publication date. While the book gave 1976, publication was not noted in the ministerial report until October 1977. MESRA, *Kila kainyakam*, front cover; PMO DA 08/13. MESRA, *Salup viakngan deuan 10 khong kasuang seuksathikan kila lae thammakan* [Summary of Ministry of Education, Sport, and Religious Affairs Work October], October 28, 1977, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ MESRA (Summary 1976–77), p. 2.

Stoop a lot, tired back,
Write a lot, tired arms,
Train like this, feel better.¹⁰¹

In addition, the book urged teachers to foster traits such as “demonstrating loyalty [*khwam satseu*] towards classmates and teachers” and “increasing the spirit of mutual mastery [*chitchai pen chao kan*] in disciplined conduct [*malanyat labiap vinai*], in exercising and playing with alertness and rigor [*khwam tontua lae khemnguat*].”¹⁰² It is hard to know to what extent these incantations were applied in teaching practice, though one informant of the right age recalled her teachers urging “*ot thon, ot thon*” (keep going, keep going) in physical education class.¹⁰³ To some extent, at least, physical education put the policies of the party–state into practice.

But while many incantations had a socialist ring to them, games were also to be played with solidarity (*samakkhi*), principles (*kotlabiap*), and grace (*malanyat an dingam*), motifs attached to physical training since French colonial times and throughout the postcolonial period.¹⁰⁴ The recycling of existing themes showed not only how universal these were in sport and in Lao culture—this was especially true of *samakkhi*—but also how such benefits were appropriated by each of the state ideologies that prospered in twentieth-century Laos. If these themes sounded very serious, the handbook insisted above all that games must be played “with fun and enjoyment” (*duai khwam boekban muanseun*).¹⁰⁵ Despite the apparent contradiction, enjoyment was a key objective of the socialist sport and physical culture movement, though always for the instrumentalist reason of bolstering support for socialism, rather than for its inherent value.

Teacher training was another measure implemented to expand physical education, though details of the program are slightly unclear. In 1976, the sports department conducted research into a curriculum for a physical education school, and a PE teacher-training school appears to have been established in 1978, probably in Thongpong, on the outskirts of Vientiane.¹⁰⁶ The following year, however, Phoumi’s two-year education plan demanded that a location be identified for a physical education and arts teacher-training school.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps the demand was for a new location for a school that combined the disciplines. Whatever the case, twenty-two trainees passed at the “first level” of PE training in 1978–79, and an additional

¹⁰¹ The Lao original was *kom lai meuai aeo/khian lai meuai khaen/hat kai baep ni cheung hai itmaeuai*. MESRA, *Kila kainyakam*, p. 37.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁰³ Interview with an informant who was a primary school student in Laos in the 1980s.

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion of the late-colonial (Vichy-period) sport and youth movements in Indochina, see the work of Eric Jennings and Anne Raffin (though neither has a great deal to say on Laos specifically): Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940–1944*. Anne Raffin, *Youth Mobilization in Vichy Indochina and its Legacies, 1940 to 1970*. For the postcolonial period, see Simon Creak, “Sport and the Theatrics of Power in a Postcolonial State”; and Simon Creak, “Representing True Laos in Postcolonial Southeast Asia.”

¹⁰⁵ MESRA, *Kila kainyakam*, p. 105.

¹⁰⁶ MESRA, Summary, 1975–1976, p. 14; Summary, Five Years from 1975 to 1980, p. 20. It seems probable that the school in question was the same one that still exists at Thongpong, on Route 13 (North) heading out of Vientiane, though this is not confirmed in the sources.

¹⁰⁷ MESRA, Plan 1979–80 to 1980–81, p. 31.

thirty were newly admitted at the “middle level.”¹⁰⁸ By 1980, the school had apparently produced a total of fifty-one graduates and expected to receive another twenty-nine trainees by the year’s end.¹⁰⁹ In 1983, the school was reported to have twenty-six teachers and 135 students, and to have matriculated fifty-three graduates at the middle level, though it was unclear to which period this report applied.¹¹⁰ These were not especially large numbers, but they demonstrated recognition that expanding physical education in the schools would require the development of human resources.

Yet despite the handbook and modest advances in teacher training, physical education was, like calisthenics, more often than not a disappointment. While it was not surprising that the number of PE teachers was “very lacking” in 1976, the same problem was reported a year later and again in 1978.¹¹¹ Even after the PE teacher-training school was opened, the shortage of teachers remained a perennial problem, mentioned in virtually every report. The lack of teachers was symptomatic of wider failures in the national physical education program. Despite the claim that “schools of every level” had “considered the important matter” of “educating and building the new person with strong health and complete energy” (*mi sukkaphap khemkheng mi phalanamai sombun*), the department regretted that “teachers of sport and physical education have not answered the call in some localities.” These areas “lacked leaders” and “played their own way.” Most worrying of all, schools in some areas offered no sports or physical education whatsoever.¹¹²

A further problem faced by schools and the mass sports movement in general concerned equipment and infrastructure. Receipts from the national stadium and swimming pool allow us to track some of the funds that supported the sports department, but there is no other information to show how the department was funded.¹¹³ Most likely it received its budgetary funds through general revenues, and, no doubt owing to the economic difficulties of the period, these resources appear to have been woefully insufficient. Lack of equipment (*uppakon*) and material scarcities (*kankhat vathu*) were commented upon constantly.¹¹⁴ In the face of state shortfalls, a spirit of self-sufficiency was encouraged, in keeping with Kaysone’s austerity calls for self-reliance. By way of example, the department reported in one month in 1977 that it had produced fourteen rattan balls for *sepak takraw*!¹¹⁵ In this spirit, it was expected that schools, offices, and districts would construct their own sports infrastructure, including courts, fields, and other paraphernalia.

In reality, however, the promotion of self-sufficiency simply transferred blame for the lack of resources from the department to other institutions. Characteristically,

¹⁰⁸ PMO DA 08/14, MESRA, *Salup pi hian 1978–79*, Summary of Academic Year 1978–79, July (n.d.) 1979, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ MESRA, Summary, Five Years from 1975 to 1980, p. 20; MESRA, Assessment 1979–80, p. 17.

¹¹⁰ DA 08/34, MESRA, *Botlaingan saphap kanseuksa 6 deuan ton pi 1983* [Report on the State of Education, First Six Months of 1983], July 1983, p. 4.

¹¹¹ MESRA, Summary 1975–76, p. 14; Summary 1976–77, p. 12; Summary 1977–78, p. 22.

¹¹² MESRA, Summary, Five Years from 1975 to 1980, pp. 20–21; MESRA, Assessment 1979–80.

¹¹³ For instance, the department received 200,000 *kip* in receipts from the swimming pool in 1977.

¹¹⁴ MESRA, Summary, Five Years from 1975 to 1980, p. 20; for criticism of facilities and equipment, see MESRA reports, *passim*.

¹¹⁵ MESRA, Summary, October 1977.

the department reported in 1978 that “districts, offices, [and] organizations are yet to develop and innovate in order to build a sufficient material basis for sport and physical education: e.g., parallel bars and high bars, fields for long jump, high jump, *sepak takraw*.”¹¹⁶ Of course, passing the buck to other bodies was further tacit admission of the party–state’s failure to develop sport and physical culture with “mass” characteristics. This failure was usually cloaked in terms of growth in sport and physical culture in various localities being “commensurate with actual conditions” (*mosom kap saphap tua ching*).¹¹⁷

Overall, the new regime’s development of a mass sport and physical culture movement failed to realize fully its objectives. A damning catalogue of “weak points” in a departmental report captured many of the relevant issues. The sport and physical culture movement was not “effervescent” (*fot deuat*, lit. boil) or “even” (*samam samoe*). While development was satisfactory in certain urban areas, especially the districts of Vientiane prefecture, it remained poor in the countryside. The morning and midday calisthenics movement was “still small,” creating a vicious circle in which physical training methods did not “conform to principles,” which further restricted the expansion and popularity of the exercise regimen. Relations between the ministry and sports departments in the provinces were poor, and there was, as yet, no understanding of how “sport and physical culture work could serve the political tasks of the party.” Indeed, the movement was characterized as *tam pen tam koet* (what will be will be). The fault lay with the failure to seek out ways to press the movement forward and to give it “revolutionary effervescence” (*fotfeun pativat*). Like others, this report reiterated the finding that there was too little sport and too few PE teachers in the schools, as well as noting the inadequacy of available equipment and sporting venues. School councils failed to recognize clearly the importance of work in sport and physical culture and tended to observe these activities half-heartedly (*bao*). In summary, the movement was stymied by a culture of reliance upon “upper levels.”¹¹⁸ The irony that the centralized transformation of society was exactly what the party prescribed was not commented upon, if, indeed, it occurred to anyone.

Such reports demonstrated the failure to establish a mass sport and physical movement outside of the main cities. While by 1980 the department boasted of sport and physical culture movements in many provincial centers, “rural and mountainous areas” were another matter, remaining hopelessly “undeveloped” (*nyang bo mi khwan kaona*). For this reason, the sport and physical culture movement was “not yet a true movement of the masses” (*nyang bo than khabuan khong mahason yang thae ching*), according to the ministry.¹¹⁹ It was notable that reports, in this context, used the phrase “not yet” (*nyang bo than*), for this implied improvement was imminent. But the failure was significant, since spreading sport “from the center to the grassroots” was a principal goal of the department, just as the “grassroots” was a defining motif of party discourse more generally. Several years later, the Lao Olympic Committee wrote that the department had failed during this earlier period “to expand the right

¹¹⁶ MESRA, Summary 1977–78, p. 22.

¹¹⁷ MESRA, Summary, Five Years from 1975 to 1980, p. 20.

¹¹⁸ PMO DA 08/13, MESRA, *Salup phon khong kankuatka lae kepkam saphap kanseksa khweng kamphaeng viangchan* [Summarized Results of Inspection of Educational Conditions, Vientiane Prefecture] [no date, 1980?], pp. 15–16.

¹¹⁹ MESRA, Summary, Five Years from 1975 to 1980, pp. 21–22.

of the masses to be masters of socialist sport."¹²⁰ The other major criticism of mass sport, linked to the first, was its failure in political and ideological terms. As we have seen, reports regularly criticized sport and physical culture's failure to serve the "political tasks of the party," which meant it was not bolstering the revolution adequately. Another criticism, presented in a report summarizing the first ten years of socialist sport, noted the failure to link mass sport to productivity and national defense.¹²¹ In sum, the same criticisms of pre-1975 sport continued to be leveled at the new sporting structure promoted by the party-state.

Ironically, given the name and mission of the "people's party," the people themselves were conspicuously absent from explanations of the program's failure. Reports never suggested that the general population might have rejected the programs, along with other socialist projects, as an unwelcome imposition on their already difficult lives.¹²² This was not particularly surprising. Admitting lack of popular interest would have undermined the legitimacy of the party, whereas faceless and nameless cadres were an easy target of criticism. But, in all likelihood, farmers and workers had enough physical exertion in their lives already. The decade after 1975 was characterized by drought, restrictions on trade, and general austerity. While Kaysone publically celebrated embracing austerity to forge a stronger will, these were hardly ideal conditions to foster the physical transformation of society. Nevertheless, popular reception of the party's program lies outside the main concerns of this essay. The point to emphasize here is that the project to promote mass physical culture in Laos failed to get off the ground, undermining a central tenet of the party's plans for physical renovation.

COLD WAR PHYSICAL CULTURES IN LAOS

Just as the socialist person in Laos was a physical person, socialist culture was, in many ways, a physical culture. Not only was the new socialist person to acquire physical strength and health, but, more broadly, physical values were privileged above mental ones during this era in Laos, and, more broadly again, the entire project of socialist transformation was couched in a physical idiom. Yet these cultures were characterized by a series of paradoxes arising from their location at the intersection of rhetoric and practice. The first paradox arose from the party-state's inability to realize fully its vision of a mass sport and physical culture movement, which in obvious ways was the most concrete dimension of the new physical society.

Yet, more broadly, socialist culture had a momentous impact on physicality, and vice versa, through the rhetoric, ideas, and ideology of socialism. This proposition argues for a wider definition of physical culture than one limited to physical practices; physical culture, in this sense, refers to the concern with physicality, which emerges at the junction between culture, particularly ideas and language, and the body. One of the most defining features of the new society—far more successful than even the party could have envisaged—was the violent condemnation of independent

¹²⁰ To some extent, this critique was probably based on the fact the LOC was not founded until the end of 1978. But the statistics, such as they exist, support the proposition. LOC, Overall summary, 1978–86, p. 3.

¹²¹ MESRA, Report of ten-year period (1975–1985).

¹²² The obvious parallel here is agricultural collectivization. See Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism*.

thought, as the party became thinker for the nation. In place of thought, the physical realm was glorified through motifs of labor. In addition, notions of social progress were expressed in a corporeal idiom, placing the metaphorical body at the center of contemporary history.

While this awareness—even obsession—with physicality was produced and reproduced in speeches, reports, and the press, it was never restricted to words. It resulted in the mass physical traumas of imprisonment, reeducation, and relocation. In particular, the party's anti-intellectualism explains why teachers and other educated people left the country in such disproportionately large numbers. Even though the mass sport and physical culture movement failed, the physical culture of socialist Laos—embedded in the rhetoric of the party–state—had a drastic impact on Lao culture and society, fundamentally changing the relationship between the body and the state.

Cold War ideological sensibilities, expressed in Laos in the idioms “new socialist culture” and “new socialist person,” intensified the awareness of, and concern with, physicality. This is to say, notions of the physical emerged from the mental and rhetorical realms, the opposite of the physical in the ideology of the Lao party–state. This final paradox resides at the heart of all renderings and analysis of the physical: how, considering what poststructural approaches have taught us, can meaning be formed and mediated, if not through language and representation? However, this paradox is not sufficiently recognized in studies of the body and physicality, and, when it is commented upon, it is usually raised as a methodological, rather than epistemological, issue.¹²³ The cultural and ideological battles of the Cold War, fought at the intersection of rhetoric and physicality, provide particularly fertile ground for exploring the production of physical realities in linguistic and cultural representations.

¹²³ See, for example, Kathleen Canning, “The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History,” *Gender & History* 11,3 (1999); and V. Mackie and C. S. Stevens, “Globalisation and Body Politics,” *Asian Studies Review* 33,3 (2009).

STILL STUCK IN THE MUD: IMAGINING WORLD LITERATURE DURING THE COLD WAR IN INDONESIA AND VIETNAM

Tony Day

1924 ... Finished the poem *Lenin*. Read it at many workers' gatherings. I've been very much afraid of that poem, since it would have been easy to descend to the level of the simple political tale. The reaction of the working class audience delighted me and strengthened my confidence in the poem's topicality. I travel abroad a great deal. European technology, industrialism, attempt to combine them with the still stuck-in-the-mud former Russia—the eternal ideal of the LEF futurist.

Valdimir Mayakovsky, from *I Myself* (1928)¹

Though little translated into other languages and scarcely marketed or noticed in Europe, the Americas, Africa, or China, the modern literatures of Southeast Asia express “world” culture, the product of global, cross-cultural interactions extending over continents and seas for centuries. But how should we describe the discursive world(s), the global cultural spaces, which have shaped, and been shaped by, the arts of Southeast Asia in specific, world-historical terms? There are a number of approaches to this question from which we can choose.² In the discussion that follows, I want to engage with two important models for studying “world literature” in order to gain a better understanding of the forces shaping the writing of Southeast Asian literature during the Cold War, particularly during the mid-1950s.

My thanks to Keith Foulcher and the readers for SEAP Publications for their incisive criticisms and suggestions to an earlier version of this essay.

¹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Works in Three Volumes. 1. Selected Verse* (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1985), p. 42. Mayakovsky, about whom more below, was the legendary poet of the Russian Revolution, a member of the Russian avant-garde literary movement known as Futurism, and one of the editors of the journal *LEF* (“Left Front of the Arts,” 1923–25).

² For a discussion of some of these approaches, see Tony Day, “Locating Indonesian Literature in the World,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 68, 2 (June 2007): 173–93.

WORLD REPUBLIC OF LETTERS OR WRITERS' INTERNATIONAL?

Drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein's "world-systems" model of the modern capitalist global economy, which posits an unequal relationship between a dominant "core" and subservient "peripheries," comparative literature scholar Pascale Casanova defines what she calls "world literary space" of the mid-nineteenth to late twentieth centuries. According to Casanova, this space is

... organized in terms of the opposition between, on the one hand, an autonomous pole composed of those spaces that are most endowed in literary resources, which serves as a model and a recourse for writers claiming a position of independence in newly formed spaces (with the result that Paris emerged as a "denationalized" universal capital and a specific measure of literary time was established); and, on the other, a heteronymous pole composed of relatively deprived literary spaces at early stages of development that are dependent on political—typically national—authorities.³

This bipolar global world of literary activity is reproduced within each "national space," where "national" and "international writers" compete with one another. Such literary antagonisms are homologous to the tug and pull between "the autonomous and unifying pole of world literary space," centered in a cosmopolitan center like Paris, and "the inertial forces that work to divide and particularize by essentializing differences, reproducing outmoded models, and nationalizing and commercializing literary life" at home in a writer's "national space."⁴ Mediating in a crucial way between the cosmopolitan literary center and the "relatively deprived literary spaces" of the peripheries is translation. Translated works from the center introduce writers to the latest modern trends; translations of writers on the periphery help to "denationalize" them and provide them with global "recognition," even "consecration" in the form of international audiences and literary prizes.⁵

Casanova lays primary emphasis on "modernism"⁶ and its influence, via the translations of the work of such leading innovators of literary form as James Joyce and William Faulkner, on the development of literature in so-called peripheral regions around the world. If "modernism" is a keyword for conceptualizing world literature in one way, some kind of "realism," whether "socialist" or "magical," is

³ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 133–37 and *passim*.

⁶ Quoting from Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991 [1976], p. 27), Keith Foulcher characterizes modernism as "a specific response to the conditions of early twentieth-century European history. It was an art 'consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions.'" See Keith Foulcher's excellent "Rivai Apin and the Modernist Aesthetic in Indonesian Poetry," *BKI* [Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde] 157,4 (2001): 782 and *passim*.

another.⁷ Michael Denning argues that “the international of writers” who shared the African-American writer Richard Wright’s (1908–60) perception of “‘the similarity of the experience of workers in other lands ... [and of the possibility] of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole’”⁸ began to take shape even before the October Revolution of 1917, as exemplified by the writings of the Russian Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), whose 1907 novel *Mother* and early short stories were quickly translated into European languages.⁹ According to Denning, “proletarian literary movements,” which dealt variously with workers’ movements, subaltern living conditions, or the migration of workers from the countryside to the city, developed in four different situations: countries with communist movements and regimes; nations with repressive authoritarian governments; the creole countries of the Americas; and “the colonized regions of Asia and Africa.”¹⁰

Indonesia and Vietnam share some of the characteristics of all four contexts in which proletarian literary movements developed. Their modern literatures also display many of the forms and themes of European modernism. The mid-1950s, in particular, are an important liminal period in the cultural history of both countries, a period when not only literature and the writer’s role in society but also the very nature of the national community were being hotly debated and violently contested.¹¹ Notwithstanding the Cold War rivalries among and interventions in Southeast Asia by the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, which shaped the ways in which both modernism and realism were understood as aesthetic concepts in the context of the struggle to define the nation, it was Southeast Asian writers themselves who gave these critical terms their local meanings, which did not always conform to, and, indeed, often conflated, Cold War ideological categories.¹² Odd Westad writes that “the most important aspects of the Cold War were neither

⁷ Michael Denning, “The Novelists’ International,” in *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 703–25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 703–4. Denning is quoting from Wright’s memoir, *Black Boy*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 706–7. Denning mentions several other European, North American, and South Asian writers born in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, as well as the Chinese short-story writer and essayist Lu Xun (1881–1936), as major pre-1917 socialist realist authors. Lu Xun’s first short story, “A Madman’s Diary,” which was influenced by Gogol’s “Diary of a Madman” (1834), was published in 1918 (Lu Xun mentions Gogol in essays he wrote in 1907 while he was studying medicine in Japan). The first Chinese translation of Gogol’s story appeared in 1921. See Wong Yoon Wah, *Essays on Chinese Literature: A Comparative Approach* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1988), p. 55.

¹⁰ Denning, “International,” pp. 711–12.

¹¹ My thought here is based on Shawn McHale’s comment that in 1958, the philosopher Trần Đức Thảo’s Vietnam was still a “... ‘community’ under negotiation” (see Shawn McHale, “Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946–1993,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61,1 [2002]: 21), and on my own discussion of the mid-1950s as a fluid and formative period in cultural relations between newly independent Indonesia and the United States, “Honoured Guests: Indonesian-American Cultural Traffic, 1953–57,” to appear in a collection of essays edited by Maya Liem and Jennifer Lindsay.

¹² Denning reinforces this point when he observes: “[T]he two leading transnational terms [in mainstream literary criticism]—realism and modernism—were so embedded in the cultural cold war that they became mere honorifics, with little actual meaning. In the communist world, favored writers were proclaimed realists; in the capitalist world, they were deemed modernists.” See Denning, “International,” p. 705. Denning points out that works of writers on the Left like Brecht and Lu Xun fit into both categories.

military nor strategic, nor Europe-centered, but connected to political and social development in the Third World.”¹³ One of the premises of this essay is that, while military violence in Southeast Asia during the Cold War should not be downplayed, cultural expression should be added to Westad’s list of “important aspects” of the Cold War in Southeast Asia that deserve to be investigated.

In order to do so, it makes sense to draw on and combine critical ideas and approaches from both Casanova and Denning. In the discussion that follows, Denning’s idea of an “international” of realist writers helps us understand why Southeast Asian writers adopted certain styles and read certain authors and not others in the quest for modernity in the context of a struggle for postcolonial national independence and identity. Notwithstanding her great interest in Third World authors who achieved international recognition through translation, Casanova’s model of the “world republic of letters” is so explicit in its reliance on Wallerstein’s Eurocentric model of the world system that it, in fact, brings into sharp relief the variety of global orientations to be found among Southeast Asian intellectuals and artists. While she is too critical of nationalism to be helpful with developing an approach to Southeast Asian writers who were cosmopolitan in outlook, yet also intensely committed to participating in the development of their national communities, her insights into the key role played by translation in creating world literature are important for encouraging an examination of the way translation shaped literary imaginations in Southeast Asia during the Cold War.

THE COLD WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia was one of the hottest Third World battlegrounds engaged in the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Sino-Soviet bloc. Westad’s observation that “Cold War ideologies and superpower interventions ... helped put a number of Third World countries in a state of semi-permanent civil war”¹⁴ certainly applies to the process by which the new nation-states in Indonesia and Vietnam came into existence during the 1950s and 1960s. Indonesia, established after five years of revolutionary struggle as a nonaligned, unitary republic in 1950, underwent CIA-backed regional rebellions, fierce ideological polarization (intensified by US, Soviet, and PRC [People’s Republic of China] interventions), and a civil conflict in which hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives.¹⁵ Proclaimed in September 1945 by Hồ Chí Minh, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam expelled the French from Vietnam in 1954, but failed to bring about free elections and the reunification of the country as stipulated by the Geneva Accords. The United States refused to agree to elections scheduled for 1956, helped transport 860,000 Catholic refugees to the South, and set about building an anti-communist state based in Saigon headed by the Hue Catholic Ngô Đình Diệm. Diệm impressed the initially skeptical Eisenhower government with his fierce suppression of communists and religious sectarian

¹³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 396.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

¹⁵ See M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1300* (Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993), pp. 237–83; Audrey R. Kahin and George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (Seattle, WA, and London: University of Washington Press, 1997); and Westad, *The Global Cold War*, pp. 185–88.

armies. Diệm's "democratic one-man rule"¹⁶ created social and political chaos, however, and he was assassinated by an American-backed military coup in 1963, two years before the Americans helped another army to power in Indonesia. By 1955, the threat posed to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by the growing United States intervention led to a policy of political consolidation first, national reunification second: "Build the North, look to the South" went the slogan. In the cities, private enterprise and "bourgeois experts" were supported in the interest of economic development. A Fatherland Front was established to elicit the participation of all patriots in the national effort. But the influence of China and of Mao Zedong's ideas, which had been steadily growing since 1948, stimulated class warfare and land reform in the countryside.¹⁷ Launched in 1954 and brought to a halt in September 1956, the land-reform campaign caused the deaths of more than 15,000 people, tore apart the fabric of village life, and generated bitter anger and resentment, forcing the Vietnamese Workers' Party and Hồ Chí Minh to admit that "serious mistakes" had been committed. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the "cult of personality" at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in Moscow in February 1956 may also have played a role in encouraging the Vietnamese leadership to reevaluate its policies. In other important areas, however, such as the decision in the North to support communist insurrection in the South from 1960 onward, Northern leaders ignored Chinese and Soviet policy positions, neither of which supported Southeast Asian insurgency in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁸ Diệm and his family "violated every article" of the US Cold War agenda for the South, except the violent suppression of communism.¹⁹

The historical sketch above suggests a shared pattern of Cold War experience in Southeast Asia. Different parts of the region were in historical sync with one another, their destinies shaped and drawn toward parallel trajectories by the policies of the competing superpowers and by postcolonial forms of Southeast Asian resistance to those policies. Before 1965, broadly speaking, political forces on the Left and Right in Indonesia fought it out until a strong centralized state, aligned with the Right and the West, emerged. In Vietnam over roughly the same period, a struggle between Left and Right occurred, resulting in a Cold War division of the country into two parts; a united Vietnamese nation-state aligned with the Left became the eventual victor in 1975. It is reasonable to say, adapting Benedict Anderson's label for and comment on the "American Era" in Thailand during the period between 1958 and 1973, that Indonesia and Vietnam were in many ways all "profoundly influenced," if not transformed, by the "Cold War Era" from 1945 to 1975 in Southeast Asian history.²⁰

¹⁶ Wesley R. Fishel, "Vietnam's Democratic One-Man Rule," *New Leader*, November 2, 1959, pp. 10–13, quoted in Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 119.

¹⁷ McHale, "Vietnamese Marxism," p. 11.

¹⁸ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, pp. 181–82; William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York, NY: Theia, 2000), pp. 462–514; and Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, pp. 96–184.

¹⁹ Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 119.

²⁰ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, eds., *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1985), p. 19.

FOUR COLD WAR WRITERS

If we turn our attention to Southeast Asian literary history in the same period, the transformative effect of the Cold War, which is so clearly evident in the violent political shifts that occurred, is more ambiguous. One complicating factor is the lack of continuity between pre- and postcolonial imperial "literature-worlds," as Casanova calls the enduring "linguistic-cultural areas" formed by Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanic imperial and post-imperial formations.²¹ While London and Paris continued to serve as centers of literary recognition for postcolonial authors "writing back" in imperial languages from post-colonies in India and Africa throughout the Cold War, the same cannot be said of the former cultural capitals of American and European empire in Southeast Asia: New York, London, Amsterdam, and Paris have little significance in the literary history of Southeast Asia and were visited by only a few literary sojourners from the region, most of whom continued to write in their own native and/or national languages rather than in the languages of the former colonialists. As a result, the cosmopolitanism of Southeast Asian Cold War writers never developed in or was oriented toward a single Western or Asian literary post-imperial center. Southeast Asian literature-worlds became visible instead on polycentric maps that included the major cities of Southeast Asia, former capitals of defunct precolonial kingdoms, villages, and regions where authors were born and raised speaking regional languages or dialects, and the distant places of origin for imported literary models from Europe, America, the Soviet Union, or China.

To form a clearer picture of what Southeast Asian literature-worlds looked like during the Cold War, I want to discuss four Southeast Asian authors and critics from Indonesia and Vietnam. H. B. Jassin (a literary critic), Asrul Sani (an essayist and poet), Pramoedya Ananta Toer (a short-story writer and novelist), and Trần Dần (a poet, novelist, and painter) lived and traveled in different parts of Southeast Asia during the 1950s and 1960s, wrote in different genres, and embraced different ideological positions during the Cold War. Although my discussion of them will be uneven in terms of detail and insight (with my research on Trần Dần at the most elementary stage), I cover enough ground to suggest that, if we consider the work of these writers as an intellectual ensemble, certain patterns of experience and thinking about literature emerge that suggest fundamental commonalities connecting them to one another. These men grew up in different colonial environments and were personally committed to politics in different ways, but they gave expression to "world literary spaces" that were not confined to the national, political, or ideological boundaries within which each writer lived. Southeast Asian Cold War spaces, these examples suggest, extended across the globe according to different coordinates, ones that corresponded more closely to the nonaligned cultural locations of the Africans and Asians who met in Bandung in 1955 than to the Cold War boundaries decreed by American or Soviet ideologues.

These coordinates began to come into view at the first international conference on Indonesian literature held in Amsterdam on June 26, 1953.²² The meeting was

²¹ Casanova, *The World Republic*, p. 117.

²² See Keith Foulcher, "On a Roll: Pramoedya and the Postcolonial Transition," *Indonesian Studies Working Papers* No. 4, The University of Sydney, January 2008, pp. 3 and 7–9. Foulcher's essay can be accessed online at: www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/indonesian/series/papers.shtml.

sponsored by Sticusa, the Foundation for Cultural Cooperation that had been established as a result of the Cultural Accord between the Netherlands and Indonesia in 1949.²³ This agreement guaranteed a Dutch cultural presence in post-independence Indonesia; continuing Dutch economic dominance was already a source of friction and national debate. In a congress (*kongres*) on the “national culture” held in Jakarta in August 1950 to discuss the implications of the Cultural Accord, the pre-war “great debate”²⁴ about how to create a “modern” Indonesian culture resurfaced. On the one hand, the Indonesian Minister for Education, Training, and Culture, Ki Hadjar Dewantara (1889–1959), who had founded a school system before the war that drew on traditional Javanese as well as avant-garde Western concepts, rejected a Dutch- and Western-centric notion of modernity, declared that the Cultural Accord with the Netherlands was a diplomatic defeat for Indonesia, and urged that Indonesia independently seek closer cultural ties with Asia.²⁵ As he had during the 1930s, on the other hand, the Sumatran writer and editor Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (1908–94) argued that Indonesians should embrace Western culture and continue to seek access to it by cementing close, postcolonial cultural relations with the Netherlands. Most of the other speakers and discussants at the conference attacked the neocolonial nature of the Cultural Accord and criticized Western European and American cultural influences on the developing national culture of Indonesia.²⁶ Notwithstanding what appears to have been a consensus among participants on the negative features of the 1949 cultural agreement with the Dutch, the conference resolved to support it in principle.

Three concerns that emerged from the August 1950 conference came to form the principal leitmotif of literary debates in Indonesia in later years: what to do about regional and Asian cultures in the pursuit of modernity?; what to do about postcolonial cultural influences from Europe and the United States in independent Indonesia?; and, finally, notwithstanding both these concerns, participants expressed a strong desire for cultural dialogue with the rest of the world. These issues were immediately addressed in two important cultural manifestos that were published that same year, one issued by the liberal *Gelombang* (Arena) group founded by a

²³ For a discussion of the history of Indonesian cultural policy, see Tod Jones, “Indonesian Cultural Policy, 1950–2003: Culture, Institutions, Government” (PhD dissertation, Curtin University of Technology, 2005). Jones’s thesis is available online at: <http://espace.library.curtin.edu.au/R?func=search-simple-go&ADJACENT=Y&REQUEST=adt-WCU20061128.113236>.

²⁴ The phrase is one coined by Claire Holt to characterize the “polemics on culture” that took place among Indonesian writers, artists, and intellectuals in the colonial 1930s. Holt’s discussion is still the best general treatment of the “great debate” and the contribution of Indonesia’s modern painters to it. See her *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 211–54.

²⁵ Keith Foulcher, *Social Commitment in Literature and the Arts: The Indonesian “Institute of People’s Culture” 1950–1965* (Clayton: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), p. 16. I have looked at Dutch versions of the speeches by Dewantara, Takdir, and the other presenters, as well as Indonesian press reactions to the congress published in the first number of Sticusa’s monthly publication, *Cultureel Nieuws Indonesië 1950* [Cultural News Indonesia 1950] 1 (October 1950): 2–46. Dewantara’s “Asianism” expressed a cultural orientation strongly present in the writings of other major pre-war Indonesian intellectuals, one that was reinforced by Japanese policies during the occupation (1942–45). See Ethan Mark, “Asia’s’ Transwar Lineage: Nationalism, Marxism, and ‘Greater Asia’ in an Indonesian Inflection,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65,3 (2006): 461–93.

²⁶ See *Cultureel Nieuws Indonesië 1950* 1 (October 1950): 1–31.

number of writers and painters in 1946 and associated with the weekly journal *Siasat* (Strategy),²⁷ the other from the Marxist cultural organization Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, Institute of People's Culture), which was founded on August 17, 1950, in response to the failure of the congress on national culture a week earlier to repudiate the Cultural Accord.²⁸ Despite their divergent politics, both manifestos used similar language to claim the whole world, and not just the positive aspects of past or future cultural relations with the Netherlands, as a source for the development of modern Indonesian culture.²⁹

From late 1950 onward, literary debate in Indonesia took place in an atmosphere of intensifying crisis affecting every aspect of daily life. Merle Ricklefs provides a vivid and succinct overview of the conditions affecting intellectual life during the period between 1950 and 1953.³⁰ Those conditions included: an expanding population; continuing foreign control of the economy, which was subjected to steadily rising prices and the rapid fall of export revenue with the end of the Korean War export boom; instability in the government and corruption among the political parties; and unrest within the armed forces, as the central command came into conflict with regional commanders over the demobilization of troops at the end of the revolution. In the February 1953 issue of one of the several liberal cultural journals he helped edit, the critic H. B. Jassin (1917–2000) offered an assessment of the literary achievements of the previous ten years, one that reveals some of the significant literary effects of the crisis but, interestingly, makes no explicit mention of the Cold War.³¹

²⁷ On Gelanggang and the writers associated with it, see A. Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, vol. I (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994), pp. 115, 126–34; and Martina Heinschke, "Between Gelanggang and Lekra: Pramoedya's Developing Literary Concepts," *Indonesia* 61 (April 1996): 145–69.

²⁸ The best history and analysis of Lekra, including translations of writings by the major Lekra writers, is still Foulcher, *Social Commitment*.

²⁹ "We are the legitimate heirs of world culture, and we pursue this culture in our own way" (Kami adalah ahli waris yang sah dari kebudayaan dunia dan kebudayaan ini kami teruskan dengan cara kami sendiri), in the opening words of the "Gelanggang Testament," published in *Siasat* on February 18, 1950; for the full text in English, see Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, I, p. 127; for the Indonesian text, see Asrul Sani, *Surat-surat Kepercayaan* (Testaments), ed. Ajip Rosidi (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1997), pp. 3–4. Asrul was one of the three founding editors of *Siasat* and a coauthor of the "Testament." The Lekra "Manifesto" of August 17, 1950, emphasizes the needs of the "people" and explicitly attacks colonialism in ways that the "Gelanggang Testament" does not, but it offers a nearly identical perspective on world culture: "The attitude of a People's Culture to foreign cultures is in no way one of enmity. The essence of progressive foreign cultures will be drawn on as much as possible in furthering the development of an Indonesian people's culture. However, in drawing on that essence, we will not slavishly copy anything." See Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, p. 217; for the entire Indonesian text and the rest of Foulcher's translation of it, see *Social Commitment*, pp. 209–17.

³⁰ Ricklefs, *A History*, pp. 237–46.

³¹ "Selamat Tinggal Tahun '52" [Farewell to '52], *Zenith* 3,2 (Februari 1953): 66–77. This essay has been republished as "Perhitungan 1952" [Assessment 1952] in the third printing of Jassin's collected essays, *Kesusasteraan Indonesia Modern dalam Kritik dan Esei* [Modern Indonesian Literature in Criticism and Essay], I (Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1962), pp. 113–20 and in his published letters as "Kepada M. Balfas, Jakarta, 31 Desember 1952" [To M. Balfas, Jakarta, 31 December 1952], in *Surat-surat 1943–1983* [Letters, 1943–1983], ed. Pamusuk Eneste (Gramedia: Jakarta, 1984), pp. 102–14. My comments are based on the version in Jassin, *Surat-surat*. For a discussion of Jassin and his role in the development of modern Indonesian literature, see Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, I, pp. 120–22. Teeuw calls Jassin a major "stimulator,

Jassin begins by alluding to the writings of the “Generation 45,” authors whose work Jassin had selected and anthologized in 1948 to represent the innovations in literary style and form that had occurred during the Japanese Occupation and the war for independence from the Dutch. Jassin’s canonization of certain authors and exclusion of others rankled many in the Indonesian literary world over the years, but it was his take on the *kelesuan*—exhaustion, lack of creative inspiration—of contemporary writers in the Indonesia of the early 1950s, a topic that generated an extensive debate among Indonesia’s writers and artists at the time,³² that got him into the most trouble with some of his contemporaries.

Jassin wrote, and I paraphrase: There is no denying that social conditions are highly disturbed at the moment, but peace of mind does not produce great works of art, rather the opposite is true. A society enjoying tranquility may well “paralyze” (*melumpuhkan*) an artist’s powers of creativity. It all comes down to what is going on inside the creative person him- and herself. A writer like Pramoedya Ananta Toer, for example, can write great works while he is in prison,³³ yet fail to do so again once he has returned to live in normal society. This is not society’s fault. The writer has a duty to protect the “purity” (*kejernihhan*) of his thought and feeling from being “clouded” (*buram*) by his social environment if he wants to produce great art. Can such art be found in Indonesia? Even the work of the great revolutionary poet Chairil Anwar “reveals the shortcomings of a young spirit living at a time of *Sturm und Drang*.”³⁴ In his analysis, Jassin finds flaws in the poetry of Asrul Sani, Rivai Apin, and in the work of a number of other well-known contemporary writers, for reasons that have to do with their own shortcomings, not with the social conditions in which they lived.

What Jassin finds most lacking in the writers he surveys is their ability to draw on the full breadth of human experience and knowledge in order to develop new possibilities of expression in the Indonesian language. Indonesian writers don’t have to look to Europe to know how to do this, he argues. Taking up the “essay” as a literary form, Jassin says that, for him, an essay “is a work that discusses the problems of human beings and life, enlivened by the subjectivity of the author.”³⁵ Whether an essay should take the form of a poem, as in the work of Asrul Sani, or of a novel, as in the manner of the French writer Camus, should not be a fraught issue in contemporary Indonesia. Returning to the theme of the relationship between artistic creativity and the social conditions in which artists live, and making

custodian, and whetstone in the formation of ideas and development of Indonesian literature” (p. 120), but also alludes to his widespread unpopularity among Indonesia’s major writers. His extensive personal library and documentation of modern Indonesian literature is now the Pusat Dokumentasi Sastra H. B. Jassin (The H.B. Jassin Documentation Center), located on the grounds of Jakarta’s downtown performing arts complex, Taman Ismail Marzuki.

³² See Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, I, pp. 139–42.

³³ Captured by the Dutch police in occupied Jakarta in 1947, Pramoedya was imprisoned until 1949, during which time he read John Steinbeck, William Saroyan, and (the Flemish writer) Lode Zielens and wrote many of his most famous short stories, as well as two novels. See Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, I, p. 165, and A. Teeuw, *Pramoedya Ananta Toer: De Verbeelding van Indonesië* [Pramoedya Ananta Toer: The Representation of Indonesia] (Breda: De Geus, 1993), pp. 22–24.

³⁴ Jassin, *Surat-surat*, p. 104. Chairil was commonly thought to epitomize the revolutionary qualities associated with the “Generation 45.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

reference, by using the word *lesu* (exhaustion), to the issue of postrevolutionary loss of inspiration and direction, Jassin asserts: "We don't have to accept the weary claim [*pengakuan yang lesu*]: 'I can't write because my room is too small,' or 'I don't have time to paint because I have too many other jobs.'"³⁶ The only thing that matters is the final artwork that has been produced. In any case, as far as literature is concerned, all one needs to get started is a pen and a piece of paper. In conclusion, he writes, when all is said and done concerning labels like "Generation 45," a term that nobody wants to wear, which only grow old and are then discarded, only to be replaced by new labels, it's 1953, a new year: time to begin life anew!

In his essay, Jassin ignores the issue of historical or social causation and emphasizes the fact that Indonesian artists must take responsibility for the process and products of their own creativity. Without analyzing the current "crisis" in Indonesia as such, Jassin insists that writers simply get on with their job, which is to create great art! As he made clear elsewhere, Jassin disagreed with those who wanted to inject "*isme-isme*," ideological "isms," into critical debate over the nature and function of Indonesian art.³⁷ Questions as to whether "art for art's sake" versus "art for the people," "individualism," or "Marxism," among other "isms," were useful criteria for evaluating or labeling literature could not be answered in a generalized, a priori way.

Apakah revolusi 45 revolusi komunisme? Lebih khusus lagi: Apakah kesusasteraan 45 kesusasteraan komunisme? Saja tidak menolak anasir-anasir komunisme dalam sastra, seperti djuga saja tidak keberatan terhadap anasir-anasir isme jang lain, jang bagi saja toh tidak soal lagi apabila hasil tjiptaan siap sempurna. Itulah sebabnja maka saja katakan bahwa seni 45 ialah seni universal, dasar-dasarnja tempat mentjipta boleh berlain-lain, tapi dalam keseluruhannja sebagai hasil tjiptaan, ia harus mentjapai ke-universilan.³⁸

Is the revolution of '45 a communist revolution? More particularly: Is the literature of '45 communist? I don't reject communist elements in literature, just as I don't have a problem with elements of any other "ism," as long as the creative result is at the point of perfection. This is the reason why I say that the art of '45 is universal art, because however diverse the sources of inspiration, taken as whole the final artistic product [of the "Generation 45" school] is meant to achieve universality.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See the letter he wrote to his friend, the poet and essayist Aoh K. Hadimadja, on November 22, 1951, in Jassin, *Surat-surat*, pp. 77–84, also published as "Kesusasteraan dan Politik" [Literature and Politics] in Jassin, *Kesusasteraan Indonesia Modern*, I, pp. 62–67. At the end of this letter, Jassin tells a story about a journalist friend of his who received a foundation grant to travel to America, where he was astonished by American organization and the independent thinking of American students. "Don't forget, his friend told Jassin: 'America is destined to be the leader of the world'" (English in the original). Jassin commented: "Poor us! Everywhere we go we immediately lose our identity [*kehilangan pribadi*]." Jassin was being ironic, scornful of those who allowed their commitment to building an independent, modern Indonesian culture to waver in the face of foreign influences.

³⁸ Jassin, *Kesusasteraan Indonesia Modern*, I, p. 65.

Jassin first identified the concept, “humanism,” as a characteristic of Generation 45 writers in the introduction to his 1948 anthology of poetry and prose, *Gema Tanah Air* (Echo of the Homeland). Humanism was an expression, he later wrote, of a desire felt by writers like Asrul Sani, Chairil Anwar, Rivai Apin, and others to “open wide the mind to all of the most progressive ideas in the world, ideas that refuse to be walled in by narrow-mindedness and that advance brotherhood with all of humanity.”³⁹ This is the humanism of the “Gelanggang Testament,” Jassin pointed out, but he also made explicit an important caveat that is only implied in the opening sentence of the “Testament”: “Human beings make ‘isms,’ ‘isms’ do not make human beings.”⁴⁰ Even human-“ism,” a concept meant to promote universally shared human values, can be used as an ideological weapon, as, indeed, was the case, Jassin made clear, in the late 1940s when the Dutch appealed to the concept of humanism in order to manipulate members of the Gelanggang group in their effort to retain cultural control in postwar Indonesia.⁴¹

In his critical writings from the 1950s, Jassin contributed to the “great debate” by addressing questions about individual responsibility, cosmopolitanism, and artistic quality. His criteria for assessing the value of works of art seem eclectic and non-ideological in Cold War terms, one critic’s expression of the many kinds of individuality and freedom that Indonesians claimed when they achieved independence from the Netherlands in 1950. While Jassin shared Casanova’s belief in the importance of artistic autonomy, his definition of autonomy required the Indonesian writer to make a commitment to Indonesia, as the necessary place from which, in terms of Indonesian experience and by means of the Indonesian language, an Indonesian writer should make “universal” sense of the widest possible world of mankind. As a committed Indonesian nationalist with a cosmopolitan outlook, Jassin was well aware of the possibilities that critical concepts taken from the West would come to dominate postcolonial Indonesian discourse and art. He felt strongly, however, that Indonesians could decide for themselves how each “ism” should be defined and put to use.⁴²

The fact that the first international conference on Indonesian literature was held in Amsterdam on June 26, 1953, may be interpreted as an expression of the center-periphery world literary structure later outlined by Casanova. Although he was already widely recognized as Indonesian’s greatest writer, the young Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006) was not one of the featured speakers (by his own choice, perhaps⁴³), but he was in the audience, since he and his family were spending several months in the Netherlands under the auspices of Sticusa. The morning proceedings of the conference were opened by the young Dutch professor of linguistics and authority on Old Javanese and Indonesian literatures, A. Teeuw, and it was not until

³⁹ See “Humanisme Universal,” in *ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴² Thus, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe’s statement that “I should like to see the word ‘universal’ banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe” (quoted in Casanova, *The World Republic*, p. 156) would have made little sense to Jassin, who thought that Indonesian writers should take the initiative in seizing the “universal” for themselves.

⁴³ Foulcher, “On a Roll,” p. 8, footnote 12 cites Pramoedya’s recollection in his memoirs that he remained silent throughout the seminar.

the afternoon that the two important Indonesian participants and invited speakers at the conference, Takdir Alisjahbana and Asrul Sani (1926–2004), had a chance to speak. Takdir, the more senior, was a strong supporter of the Cultural Accord with the Netherlands and an advocate for the Westernization of Indonesia on the Dutch model. In his remarks, Takdir traced his familiar themes—the coming of Western modernity to Indonesia via Dutch colonialism, and the social disruptions caused by the process of modernization and the resultant rise of individualism.

Asrul Sani spoke next. Dutch-educated, a poet, short-story writer, essayist, and editor of several important literary journals, Asrul had been already living in Amsterdam for several years with his wife, Siti Nuraini, a noted poet and translator of Dutch, German, and French literature. Since 1948, Asrul had been publishing sophisticated critical essays on Western literature, film, and cultural affairs.⁴⁴ In one piece for the journal *Siasat* in October 1950, he compared the Spanish poet Garcia Lorca to Indonesia's lyric genius Chairil Anwar.⁴⁵ In another essay, Asrul bemoaned the fact that he could not buy copies of *Horizon*, *Partisan Review*, or *Les Temps Modernes* in the bookstores of Jakarta, while the latest editions of American movie magazines with their "pictures of half-naked, pretty girls" were everywhere to be found.⁴⁶ Asrul was comfortable discussing Italian realism or the postwar *Gruppe* (Group) 47,⁴⁷ an association of contemporary German writers whom he traveled to meet at one of their periodic gatherings in Munich. Asrul compared the Group 47 and the meeting in which he participated to the literary discussions of Generation 45 writers that Takdir had been holding recently in his house at Tugu, in the mountains south of Jakarta. Asrul was impressed by the greater professionalism of the German writers, for whom social questions were only relevant to the extent that they were also literary ones. Asrul also learned that, like their Indonesian counterparts, the members of Group 47 were worried about sinking into provincialism and losing contact with the wider world. Asrul quoted the author Hans Werner Richter as saying:

We are going to promote new literature and will value it according to its just desserts, and we are going to behave as if Paris and Rome, New York and Munich occupy the same location, without boundaries of language or politics. For us, the literary life of Paris has the same importance as the literary life of Munich or Hamburg. Only in this way can we avoid feeling that we are leading a provincial kind of life.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Goenawan Mohamad gives a penetrating analysis of Asrul's poetry and postcolonial thinking in "Forgetting: Poetry and the Nation, a Motif in Indonesian Literary Modernism after 1945," in *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature*, ed. Keith Foulcher and Tony Day (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), pp. 183–211. For more discussion of Asrul's critical essays, see Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, I, pp. 129–32.

⁴⁵ See "... Una Conversa[c]ión con la Muerte" [A Conversation with Death], in Sani, *Surat-surat*, pp. 34–38.

⁴⁶ "Soal Bacaan" [The Question of Reading Matter], in Sani, *Surat-surat*, p. 47.

⁴⁷ "Angkatan '47 di Jerman" [Generation '47 in Germany], in Sani, *Surat-surat*, pp. 86–99. Gordon Craig describes Group 47 as "a loose association of writers who believed that social activism was a legitimate part of their calling and were generally critical of the values of their time." See Gordon A. Craig, "1958: Politics and Literature," in *A New History of German Literature*, ed. David E. Wellbery and Judith Ryan (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 872.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Asrul began his Sticusa talk⁴⁹ by quoting from an essay by a Jakarta intellectual named "Ida Anwar" who mocked the provincialism of the so-called "modern" Jakartan housewife.⁵⁰ In my paraphrase of the talk: This was amusing indeed, Asrul agreed, but it would be truer to say that the modern city person in Indonesia has a split identity, an inner and an outer self, partly traditional and partly Westernized. The Indonesian revolution was largely an urban occurrence, and although characterized by a certain degree of homogeneity, it lacked clear guidelines and left a feeling of impotence and confusion in its wake. The Indonesian countryside had always had its own culture, a different way of doing things from the city. Asrul gave an idyllic sketch of growing up in a village, a time for him that was characterized by social solidarity reinforced by ritual festivities. Most of Indonesia's artists come from villages, he explained. When they arrive in the city, their village culture collides with the culture that has been imported from the West. They quickly forget their origins and come under the strong influence of foreign thinkers and writers. "Their connection to the people is lost."⁵¹ They become swept up in the politics of the moment. Literary criticism is now dominated by political, rather than literary, forms of interpretation. "Terms like revolution and social responsibility appear frequently."⁵² There is confusion between the political and the cultural aspects of the revolution, so that some artists imagine that the revolution is synonymous with their own artistic ideals. Revolutionary poets once spoke of freedom; poetic form was not important. "The word had to have the punch of a fist."⁵³ But as the revolution faded, so did the rationale and the vibrancy of this kind of poetry. In the place of the revolutionary poet came "organizations and a large bureaucratic hierarchy" that regulated everyone, enabling artists to say: "We have been made legal!" Professional politicians were now corrupting their revolutionary and nationalistic ideals, he declared. "The artists had said: 'We are the legal heirs to world culture!' But their surroundings push them away and try to replace the idea of world culture with that of provincial culture."⁵⁴ Literature had become critical of political corruption, he said. The short-story form, far better than the novel, lends itself to a rapid and flexible response to such issues in the midst of a chaotic situation. This was what was happening in the cities, he explained. But, he said, it is time for Indonesian artists to reconsider the value of the city as well as the value of contact with the West. It is time for the urban artist to return to the countryside and rediscover his inner identity. Whatever else is true to say, the current emphasis on the individual in Indonesian literature has not enriched it. In Western literature, there is a constant search for new

⁴⁹ Asrul gave his talk, titled "Indonesian Literature as the Mirror of Society," in Dutch. The text can be found in *Cultureel Nieuws Indonesië* 1953, 30: 817–24.

⁵⁰ It would seem that "Ida Anwar" was none other than Asrul Sani himself, given the fact that Ida Anwar's "Letter from Jakarta," which Asrul refers to here, together with three others that appeared in *Zenith* in 1951, were all published under the same pseudonym (these last three letters are reprinted in Sani, *Surat-surat*, pp. 497–519). The "Ida" of the pen name comes from "Ida Nasution"—an intellectual, member of the inner core of the Gelanggang group, and sometime girlfriend of Chairil Anwar, who mysteriously disappeared in 1948—added to "Anwar," name of Indonesia's famous revolutionary poet.

⁵¹ Asrul, "Indonesian Literature as the Mirror of Society," p. 820.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 821.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

kinds of individual conflict and emotion, but in Indonesia it would be better, he said, if “we” continue to look for ways of describing the most ordinary daily emotions and conflicts. Indonesian literature has taken its literary form from the West; it must reject this form to be free. “Then a new relationship between Indonesian and Western culture will come into existence. Then we will be able to talk to one another again. And believe me, honored guests, the conversation will get better, better than we have ever experienced.”⁵⁵

Pramoedya Ananta Toer heard Asrul’s speech and reacted critically to it in an article he published in July 1953, accusing Asrul of being a “salon intellectual” and a spokesperson for, in the words of Keith Foulcher’s summary of Pramoedya’s argument, an “uprooted intelligentsia who have little to contribute to the condition they are identifying.”⁵⁶ Asrul would have agreed that the uprootedness of Indonesia’s writers was their key problem. In Pramoedya’s view, however, there was no conflict between East and West, as Asrul, Takdir, and Jassin all asserted. Pessimism and other expressions of postrevolutionary letdown in Indonesian culture and literature at the moment were not cultural diseases or Western imports, but simply byproducts of an ongoing creative process, which it would be pointless to criticize.

In a strongly worded essay published before his departure for the Netherlands, Pramoedya also criticized the concept of artistic purity and detachment that Jassin had foregrounded in his “Farewell to ‘52’” essay.⁵⁷ As Foulcher demonstrates, in these and other essays from the early 1950s, Pramoedya began making the case for a more socially engaged kind of Indonesian literature than could be found in the writings of the Generation 45. In 1963, he articulated a new canon for modern Indonesian literature based on socialist realism, one that made a radical departure from the canon Jassin had compiled from the “universal humanist” works of the Generation 45 authors such as Asrul Sani (and the youthful Pramoedya himself).⁵⁸

Yet Jassin’s essay and Asrul’s speech, for all their elitist focus on the humanistic *Sturm und Drang* of the individual Indonesian “artist” and his “art,” argued for a kind of Indonesia-based cosmopolitanism that resembled Pramoedya’s own. Like Pramoedya, Jassin and Asrul both advocated that Indonesian writers commit themselves to a national “process” of identity-formation, one that involved both engagement with the international world and rediscovery of the everyday realities of Indonesia itself.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 824.

⁵⁶ Foulcher, “On a Roll,” p. 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 11–12.

⁵⁸ Heinschke, “Between Gelanggang and Lekra,” pp. 167–68.

⁵⁹ Heinschke, “Between Gelanggang and Lekra,” pp. 151–52 draws a stark contrast between the modernism and “world literature” orientation of the Gelanggang “core group” and the position of writers, including Pramoedya, on the “fringe” who stressed commitment to Indonesian social realities and freedom from outside influences. But as Foulcher argues convincingly in “On a Roll,” pp. 13–14, during the early 1950s Pramoedya fully shared the modernist premise of a writer like Asrul that engaging with and learning from Western culture was a good thing. Foulcher writes: “It remains clear even amid the invective, however, that if the lines of a cultural politics between ‘left’ and ‘right’ are taking shape in the exchanges between Pramoedya and those he perceives as opponents, there is no sense in which the ‘left’ viewpoint is associating the ‘right’ with a negative ‘West.’ The association of the Left with anti-imperialism and anti-Westernism has become so pervasive since the era of the Cold War that it is important not to lose sight of the fact that in the Indonesian literary and cultural

The “great debate” about how to define a modern culture, and, by extension, the modern individual, began in Southeast Asia in the 1930s, before the end of colonial rule and the advent of the Cold War. In Indonesia the choice was posed: turn to the West, a boundless source of new ideas and energies, or rediscover, within indigenous traditions, the unique freedoms and modern potential offered by Indonesia’s own rich cultural heritage. The debate was resumed in 1950, but the argument no longer turned on a stark choice between polar opposites. Liberal artists in the Gelanggang group proclaimed their allegiance to both positions. The “Gelanggang Testament” attempted to articulate an artistic creed that supported all of the following: individualism; national independence and identity; cosmopolitanism; modernism; and cultural and political pluralism. The manifesto that leftist writers who formed Lekra published toward the end of the same year expressed a similar commitment to modernity (“Art, science and industry are the bases of culture”), but a narrower range of acceptable politics; more anxiety about the need for continuing struggling against “colonial culture”; and a more militant commitment to the “culture of the masses.” In the words of the Lekra manifesto: “The function of the People’s Culture at the present time is to be a weapon in the struggle to destroy imperialism and feudalism. It must be a stimulator of the Masses, a source of constant inspiration and an ever-burning revolutionary fire.”⁶⁰ Notwithstanding the political militancy of the Lekra declaration, a militancy that grew in intensity over time, Lekra writers and intellectuals shared many of the same cosmopolitan and aesthetic leanings of their Gelanggang interlocutors.⁶¹ Although critical of certain aspects of the content of work by the famous Generation 45 writers Chairil Anwar and Idrus, Lekra intellectuals joined Gelanggang authors in admiring the revolutionary literary forms pioneered by these two heroes of Generation 45. As Foulcher demonstrates, “LEKRA engaged with, rather than negated the bourgeois nationalist tradition, adopting some of its products and some of the tendencies within it, even as it condemned others.”⁶² The Lekra fascination with “states of mind” allowed some room for individual voices and emotions to be expressed. Even after 1959, when Lekra committed itself to supporting the state and Sukarno’s authoritarian policies under Guided Democracy (1957–65), Lekra literary practice

debates of the 1950s and 60s, there was a shared commitment to modernity along Western European lines that overrode the sharpening lines of political engagement and conflict of the period” (“On a Roll,” p. 14). Goenawan Mohamad links Pramoedya to Asrul Sani in another way, connecting Asrul’s “all-pervading sense of indeterminacy” to Pramoedya’s characterization of Nyai Ontosoroh, the hero of *This Earth of Mankind*, who lives “on the borders” between several worlds (“Forgetting,” pp. 207–8). Jassin’s self-confident, Indonesia-based “universal humanism” and insistence that critical attention should focus on the final artwork, not the daily trials and tribulations of the artist, can also be read, it seems to me, as variant strategies for addressing this same indeterminacy of an emerging modern Indonesian culture.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, p. 216.

⁶¹ “Across the whole range of LEKRA thought and activity, there is a restless urge, not unlike that characteristic of Takdir Alisjahbana, to understand the world and its culture, to make known the products of world culture, that progressive-minded Indonesians might be better equipped to judge, select, and build towards the future” (*ibid.*, p. 40). Within the top leadership of the Indonesian Communist Party itself, the person who exemplified this urge the best was Njoto, founder of Lekra and editor of the leading communist paper, *Harian Rakjat*. For a fascinating reevaluation of Njoto in English, see the special report on Njoto in the English-language edition of *Tempo*, October 6–12, 2009: 35–67.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

and criticism adhered “as a whole” to the same aesthetic concerns that engaged the Generation 45 and Gelanggang writers, whom it attacked with increasing vehemence. In Foulcher’s view, the most creative Lekra poetry imitated the innovations of liberal writers like W. S. Rendra, who began developing a distinctively Indonesian ballad style of narrative poetry based on regional literary and performance traditions in the mid-1950s.⁶³ Pramoedya Ananta Toer was widely acknowledged at home and abroad as Indonesia’s most important author, notwithstanding his growing pro-Sukarno militancy and ideological orthodoxy aligned with Lekra’s thinking in the 1960s. Pramoedya experimented with a variety of literary styles based on Soviet/Chinese realism, early twentieth-century Malay-language reportage, and contemporary Indonesian regional literature in his own work of that period.⁶⁴ In practice, Pramoedya was no more or less concerned than some of the writers he denounced with defining an identity for the Indonesian writer and a uniquely Indonesian style of writing about the reality of human beings in their daily struggles for freedom. Whatever his own strictures against freedoms that were not “regulated” or literature that was not firmly grounded in social, as opposed to subjective, reality may have been, the fact is that Pramoedya’s own writing, as art, took shape within an autonomous, Indonesian literary space, one that he, along with many other writers and critics, helped to define. This space was also a cosmopolitan one, expanded and shaped in a major way through translation.

THE QUESTION OF TRANSLATION

During the 1950s, Indonesian journals and newspapers were full of translations of short stories and poetry by foreign authors; novels and plays by an eclectic range of writers, modern and ancient, famous and less well known, also appeared in book form.⁶⁵ Translations of Western critical theory also made their way into print, especially in leftist newspapers and journals where “socialist realism” was much discussed.⁶⁶ In 1950, Pramoedya published translations of Steinbeck and Tolstoy. He

⁶³ Ibid., p. 139. See also Goenawan, “Forgetting,” p. 204.

⁶⁴ Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, pp. 120–23; Heinschke, “Between Gelanggang and Lekra,” p. 168.

⁶⁵ For an informative overview of the translation of foreign literature into Indonesian during this period, with a focus on the work of Trisno Sumardjo, who translated many of Shakespeare’s plays, and Koesalah Soebagyo Toer, Pramoedya’s younger brother, who specialized in works by Russian, Romanian, and Czech writers, see Maya Sutedja-Liem, “Menjembatani Indonesia dan Dunia Luar: Penerjemah di Indonesia 1950–1965” [A Bridge to the Outside World: Literary Translation in Indonesia, 1950–1965], to appear in a collection of essays edited by Maya Liem and Jennifer Lindsay.

⁶⁶ Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, pp. 37–39. In May 1954, Pramoedya published a translation of an article on the importance of the Soviet example for the development of socialist realism in China by a leading and rigidly doctrinaire Party literary theorist, Zhou Yang. See Tjau Jang [Zhou Yang], “Realisme Sosialis—Djalan Kemajuan bagi Kesusastraan Tionghua,” *Harian Rakjat*, May 8, 1954, cited in Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, p. 38, n. 74. An English version of this essay, which Pramoedya may have used for his translation, can be found in Chou Yang [Zhou Yang], *China’s New Literature and Art: Essays and Addresses* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1954), pp. 87–102. Later that same year, Zhou, described by C. T. Hsia as “a ruthlessly ambitious man, constantly exhorting writers to follow the Mao Tse-tung line in literature and periodically initiating attacks on unorthodox writings and writers,” led the assault on the “subjective idealist” critic Hu Feng, about whom more below. See C. T. Hsia, *A History of*

later commented that translating *Of Mice and Men* taught him about “[n]ot interfering in his protagonists’ affairs, and depicting the stirrings of their hearts only by the evidence of the senses: sight and sound.”⁶⁷ The style Pramoedya is alluding to here is that of documentary reportage, of which Steinbeck was a master.⁶⁸ During the years 1955–56, Pramoedya again published a number of translations, the most important of which was *Ibunda*, a translation of Gorky’s *Mother* (1907), a work that Katerina Clark, drawing on Pushkin’s definition of translators as “post-horses of civilization,” describes as “that post, or station, where Bolsheviks coming out of the old intelligentsia tradition were able to stop and take on fresh horses to bear them on into Socialist Realism itself.”⁶⁹ Since there is a lot to say about *Ibunda* and what it tells us about the translation of Russian socialist realism into modern Indonesian literature, I want to save a discussion of the novel for another essay. Three short translations of nonfictional works by Pramoedya will suffice here to suggest how translation served to connect him to the leftist “international” of world literature during the Cold War.⁷⁰

In late 1955 and the first half of 1956, Pramoedya published three translations in the Indonesian journal *Indonesia*, a major forum for critical thinking about Indonesian society and the arts that was edited at this time by Armijn Pané (a famous pre-war intellectual and writer), the legal authority Mr. St. Mohamad Sjah, and Boejoeng Saleh, a poet, prolific writer on cultural and sociological topics, and leftist polemicist. In the first of these translations, “Kesusasteraan dan Publik,”⁷¹ Pramoedya presents his readers with a discussion of the development of realism in late nineteenth-

Modern Chinese Fiction, 3rd ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 331 and passim.

⁶⁷ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, “Perburuan 1950 and Keluarga Gerilya 1950,” trans. Benedict Anderson, *Indonesia* 36 (October 1983): 37.

⁶⁸ Steinbeck worked as reporter for the *San Francisco News* and *The Nation*, writing about and living alongside California migrant farm workers in 1936, during which time he wrote *Of Mice and Men* (1937). See Morris Dickstein, “Steinbeck and the Great Depression,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, 1 (Winter 2004): 116. Two years later Steinbeck published *Grapes of Wrath*, about a family of sharecroppers during the Great Depression. According to William Stott, “No doubt the thirties’ novel most clearly related to the documentary is John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* ... Steinbeck actually started out to write not a novel but a ‘documentary book,’ text with pictures.” William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 121–22.

⁶⁹ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 52.

⁷⁰ There is no space here to examine the full significance of even these translations for understanding Pramoedya’s thinking during a major period of change in his career as a writer and critical thinker. The best studies of Pramoedya’s intellectual development during the mid-1950s are Heinschke, “Between Gelanggang and Lekra,” and Hong Liu, “Pramoedya Ananta Toer and China: The Transformation of a Cultural Intellectual,” *Indonesia* 61 (April 1996): 119–43.

⁷¹ L. L. Schücking, “Kesusasteraan dan Publik,” *Indonesia* VI, no. 10–12 (Oktober–November–Desember 1955): 384–92. The translation is of Chapter 4, “Literature and Public,” from E. W. Dicks’s English translation, published in 1944 as *The Sociology of Literary Taste* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd.) in the “International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction” series edited by Karl Mannheim, of Schücking’s *Die Soziologie der literarischen Geschmacksbildung*, first published in 1923. The Indonesian journal *Indonesia* was published between 1949 and 1965. The first issue of Cornell University’s journal *Indonesia* was published in 1966.

century Germany from a sociological study of literary taste written by a German professor of English literature, L. L. Schücking. A passage from the opening paragraphs of Schücking's chapter strongly suggests that there is a close historical parallel between the cultural world Schücking describes and the situation in mid-twentieth-century Indonesia, with its literary world dominated by middle-class urban intellectuals in an atmosphere of deepening political and economic crisis, a situation ripe for even a belated advent of revolutionary "realism:"

In Germany naturalism (or realism) came remarkably late. In France, its most eminent representative, Emile Zola, had written his famous novels in the 'seventies ... In Germany at that time the main buttress of art was a cultured middle class [*parapendukung seni adalah kelas pertengahan jang berbudaja*], largely made up of higher officials, which, mainly in consequence of the political stagnation that followed the victorious wars, restricted itself in every field to the careful guarding of traditions ... The sense of hollowness of the religious conceptions that continued to dominate the school and the life of the State ... the increasing hardness of the conditions of existence, due to growth of competition, as reflected in the growing importance of the women's question; the increase in the elements of conflict in social and political life ... the trivializing influence of the great cities [*pengaruh sehari-hari daripada kota-kota besar*]*—all these things combined to lead certain social groups into a passionate struggle [perjuangan jang bersemangat] in various fields of everyday life against what they felt to be empty phrases. Naturalism is the striving after truth at any price [Naturalisme adalah pendjedjakan kebenaran demi segala-galanja] ... The path of art is no Sunday stroll [pelantjongan dihari minggu] through pretty country with a young flock, but an everyday pilgrimage [perjalanan djemaah jang dilakukan tiap hari] that does not shirk the investigation of any site [penjelidikan atas tiap daerah].*⁷²

The suggestion in the last line above, that realist writers need to investigate "any" and every "site" of the everyday world, is one that Pramoedya returned to in the first of two translations that appeared in the March 1956 issue of *Indonesia*. On September 25, 1953, the Chinese author Ding Ling⁷³ gave a speech to the Second

⁷² The English translation is from Schücking, *Literary Taste* (1944), pp. 26–27; the Indonesian versions of selected passages are taken from Pramoedya's translation, "Kesusasteraan," pp. 384–85. A few lines below the passage I have just quoted, Schücking identifies those who led the early realist movement in Germany as "only small groups of journalists in the great cities that took up the cudgels for the new trend in art" (p. 27), a striking anticipation of, if not a direct stimulus to, Pramoedya's own investigations, lectures, and publications in 1962–63 on the history of an indigenous socialist realism that developed in early twentieth-century Netherlands Indies Malay literature. This realist style of fictionalized reportage drawn from newspaper stories was developed by multilingual, urban journalist-writers like Tirta Adhi Soerjo, the historical prototype for the main protagonist of Pramoedya's *Buru Tetralogy*, Minke.

⁷³ Ding Ling (1904–86) was a prominent writer and feminist. In 1951, she won the Stalin Prize for her novel *The Sun Shines over the Sangkan River*, a fact proudly noted by Zhou Yang in the essay translated by Pramoedya (*China's New Literature*, p. 93). But Zhou and Ding Ling, who was a strong supporter of Hu Feng and his defense of the writer's independence from the state, were bitter enemies. In 1957, Zhou and others accused Ding Ling of being "a thorough individualist, totally disloyal to the Party," and she was exiled to Manchuria. Ding Ling was rehabilitated in 1978 and returned to Beijing. For the best general introduction to Ding Ling's writing and ideas, see Tani E. Barlow and Gary J. Borge, eds., *I Myself Am a Woman: Selected*

Congress of Representatives of China's Literature Workers titled "Settling Down among the Masses," which was later translated into English and published in 1954 as "Life and Creative Writing" in *Chinese Literature*, a journal edited by the eminent novelist and PRC Minister of Culture from 1949 to 1965, Mao Dun; the journal featured essays and literary works from contemporary China published by the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing.⁷⁴ It is here that Pramoedya evidently found an essay by a leftist writer from the global "international" that helped articulate his own concerns about the need for Indonesian writers to engage with the everyday life of ordinary people.

Along with many other Indonesian cultural commentators, Pramoedya had already written about the need for urban artists to reorient themselves to the countryside where the mass of the Indonesian people lived. In January 1956, Pramoedya published an essay praising the "popular tendency" in a new generation of writers, even though they were still just cultural "tourists having an adventure in a new place" (*merupakan turis yang mengembarai daerah baru*) rather than serious investigators of real life.⁷⁵ Pramoedya's principal targets in this piece were the

Writings of Ding Ling (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989). For a good general discussion of the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–58, during which Ding Ling was attacked and sent into exile, see Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 203–42.

⁷⁴ Hong Liu, "Pramoedya," p. 125, note 24, identifies the text and provenance of the original speech but not the title and location of the English translation used by Pramoedya. See Ting Ling [Ding Ling], "Life and Creative Writing," *Chinese Literature* 3 (1954): 152–58. Pramoedya's translation appeared as Ting Ling, "Hidup dan Penulisan Kreatif," *Indonesia* VII, 3 (Maret 1956): 102–10. A list printed on the inside cover of the first issue of *Chinese Literature* for 1957, naming thirty countries around the world where the journal could be purchased locally, includes two from Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Burma. The outlet for Indonesia was Firma "Rada," Pintu Besar Selatan 3A, Djakarta-Kota. Single copies cost Rp. 6, while a year's subscription for four issues was Rp. 24. The costs of subscriptions to Indonesian literary magazines at that time were roughly comparable. A single copy of the literary journal *Kisah* (Story) in 1956, for example, cost Rp. 3 in Jakarta, while a year's subscription for twelve issues was Rp. 36, Rp. 42 if one lived outside Java.

⁷⁵ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Tendensi kerakyatan dalam kesusastraan Indonesia terbaru" [The Popular Tendency in the Latest Indonesian Literature], *Star Weekly* no. 525, January 21, 1956, reprinted in Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Menggelinding I* [On a Roll I] (Jakarta: Lentera Dipantara, 2004), p. 456. One of the writers praised by Pramoedya, the Jakarta short-story writer S. M. Ardan, who used Jakarta dialect in his stories about ordinary people, published a response to Pramoedya in April 1956, in which he rejected the injunction to "return to the village," citing Italian neo-realist films such as Vittorio de Sica's "The Bicycle Thief" (1948) as examples of powerful and important realist representations of the urban poor. See S. M. Ardan, "Kota dan desa dan penamaan-penamaan" [City and Country and Labels], *Siasat* 460 (April 4, 1956): 24–25, 28. Ardan ignored Pramoedya's telling observation, which strengthened his argument, that in Indonesia, unlike Europe, cities were really just "large conglomerations of villages" (*kelompokan besar desa*); see Pramoedya, "Tendensi," p. 459. Savitri Scherer has a good discussion comparing Ardan and Pramoedya's differing depictions of the Jakarta poor in her essay, "From Culture to Politics: The Development of Class Consciousness in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Writings," in *Society and the Writer: Essays on Literature in Modern Asia*, ed. Wang Gungwu, M. Guerrero, and D. Marr, (Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1981), pp. 244–46. For a powerful short story, in a vivid English translation by Julie Shackfird-Bradley and Brandon Spars, that examines the continuum between rural and urban poverty in 1950s Indonesia, see "Ketjapi," in Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Tales from Djakarta: Caricatures of Circumstances and their Human Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999), pp. 137–42. "Ketjapi" was first published in the February 1956 issue of the journal *Kisah*.

middle-class, Europeanized literary idealists like Asrul Sani, who had called for a "return to the village" in his 1953 Amsterdam address without ever enacting such a return himself.

Ding Ling opens her lecture by criticizing the very same sort of writers, those who "sit back in their arm chairs and indulge in idle talk, in the attempt to fill the emptiness of their life" (*duduk kembali dikursinja dan membiarkan diri dalam pergumulan soal-soal jang sia-sia, dalam usahnja untuk mengisi kekosongan hidupnja itu*).⁷⁶ What writers need to do, says Ding Ling, is "experience life," which Pramoedya translates as *merasumi hidup*, "penetrate" or "soak in" life, using a word for "experience" that connotes spirit possession or memorable food. "If we really wish to create new characters and produce good books, we must settle down among the masses [*mulai turun tangan ditengah-tengah rakjat*] and establish close and friendly relations with the people around us."⁷⁷ In China, at least, "the writer is provided with excellent conditions and a broad path to literary creation. Wherever he goes, he is welcome ... The masses around him, anxiously hoping that he will write a good book about them and for them, expect him to stay long with them and tell him everything he wants to know ..."⁷⁸

Ding Ling's essay forcefully expresses the same kind of artistic commitment to understand and serve the needs of ordinary people that Pramoedya could have found expressed by many other contributors to *Chinese Literature*. In contrast to the convoluted analysis of "The Life and Work of the Modern Indonesian Writer," a lecture Pramoedya delivered to the Faculty of Literature of the University of Indonesia in December 1954, in which, despite the similarity of the title to Ding Ling's "Life and Creative Writing," there is no trace of a Chinese model,⁷⁹ his essay "Literature as a Tool," published in March of 1953 in one of the several journals edited by H. B. Jassin,⁸⁰ has the stylistic clarity and polemical punch of the essay he translated by Ding Ling, or of others by Mao Tun [Mao Dun], Kuo Mo-Jo [Guo Moruo], and Chou Yang [Zhou Yang] that appeared in the first two issues of *Chinese Literature* in 1953.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Ding Ling, "Life," p. 153; Ting Ling, "Hidup," p. 103. Pramoedya's translation of "indulge in idle talk" adds a vulgar connotation that gives the phrase extra sting.

⁷⁷ Ding Ling, "Life," p. 155; Ting Ling, "Hidup," p. 106.

⁷⁸ Ding Ling, "Life," p. 157.

⁷⁹ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Hidup dan Kerdja Sasterawan Indonesia Modern," *Seni I* (Djaniari 1955): 22–36. Jassin was editor-in-chief of *Seni* (Art).

⁸⁰ "Kesusasteraan Sebagai Alat," *Mimbar Indonesia*, March 17, 1953, reprinted in Pramoedya, *Menggelinding*, pp. 222–31. Pramoedya engages with Soviet and Chinese ideas about the social function of literature in this essay, but in a critical fashion, arguing for a distinction between literature as a "tool" (*alat*) in the hands of the autonomous writer and literature as a "means to an end" (*diperalat*) at the service of someone else's cause. He argues that, when literature is employed as a tool and taken out of the hands of the author, that instrumentalization poses a danger to "the truth of creativity as a personal and intellectual necessity" (*membahayakan hakikat penciptaan sebagai keharusan pribadi dan keharusan budi*) (p. 230). Pramoedya's position on creativity and the inviolability of the writer's inner freedom is strikingly similar to Ding Ling's allegiance to her own "subjectivity," which was the cause of her downfall in 1958. It also resembles Jassin's position on the primacy of human agency in the construction of "isms," discussed above.

⁸¹ Mao Dun's "Remould Our Thought to Serve the Masses" (*Chinese Literature* 1, Spring 1953: 13–25) quotes Mao Zedong, who was the first to enunciate the idea in his "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" (1942, published in 1943), to argue, like Ding Ling, that

Near the end of her essay, Ding Ling touches on a subject that Pramoedya addressed in his December 1954 lecture and to which he returned several times in articles written after his visit to China in October 1956: that the economic well-being of the writer is a fundamental right and precondition for his/her ability to perform the job of being a creative artist.⁸² It is not surprising, therefore, that Pramoedya selected Chapter II, "The Life and Organization of Soviet Writers" from George Reavey's *Soviet Literature To-Day* for translation, the second work translated by Pramoedya to appear in the March 1956 issue of *Indonesia*.⁸³ Gorky's *Mother* must have been on his mind; his translation of the novel was probably intended for publication on a date as close as possible to planned celebrations for the twentieth anniversary of Gorky's death (June 18, 1936).⁸⁴ Reavey wastes no time in drawing attention to the fact that Soviet writers have access to state-subsidized housing, including country *dachas* where "writers may retire and isolate themselves either for work or when recovering from illness" (*dimana parapengarang boleh beristirahat atau*

writers should "penetrate deeply into the life and struggles of the masses" (p. 25). The same issue of *Chinese Literature* contains a complete English translation of Ding Ling's Stalin Prize-winning novel, *Sun Shines over the Sangkan River*, prefaced by a short sketch of the writer's life and her role as an "active fighter" in the revolutionary struggle. Pramoedya mentions Mao Dun in passing in "Literature as a Tool," along with Guo Moruo and Zhou Yang, who contributed essays to the second issue of *Chinese Literature* for 1953. That issue also contains an English translation of the modern Chinese opera play, *The White-Haired Girl*, which, along with Ding Ling's novel, won a Stalin Prize in 1951 and was translated into Indonesian by Pramoedya in 1958 as *Dewi Uban*. See Hong Liu's discussion of Pramoedya's encounter with Chinese writers and literary ideas in the mid-1950s, Hong Liu, "Pramoedya," pp. 124–25.

⁸² See Hong Liu, "Pramoedya," p. 130, on Pramoedya's observations about the economic security of contemporary Chinese writers.

⁸³ George Reavey, *Soviet Literature To-Day* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1947), pp. 30–44. Pramoedya's translation appears as: George Reavey, "Hidup dan organisasi pengarang Soviet," *Indonesia* VII, 3 (Maret 1956): 194–205. George Reavey (1907–76) was an Irish surrealist poet born in Russia, Samuel Beckett's first literary agent, and a prolific translator of twentieth-century Russian poetry, including that of Mayakovsky, into English. I do not know whether Pramoedya read any of Reavey's literary translations.

⁸⁴ Ads for *Ibunda* began appearing in the communist newspaper *Harian Rakjat* on March 27, 1956, with a feature article on *Ibunda*, including excerpts, published on April 7, where it is stated that the book would be available in a few weeks; see "Suatu Peristiwa Penting: *Ibunda* Gorki dalam Bahasa Indonesia" [Important Event: Gorky's *Mother* in Indonesian], *Harian Rakjat*, Sabtu (April 7, 1956): 3. There was considerable interest in Gorky in Indonesia at this time and a strong appreciation for the international stature of Russian writers generally. The indefatigable Boejoeng Saleh published a long essay on Gorky in 1954, accompanied by a three-page bibliography of Gorky's works in English, many of which were available for purchase from the leftist bookstore and publisher, *Pembaruan* (Reform), and in 1956 he produced an essay on *Ibunda*. See Boejoeng Saleh, "Tjataan Singkat Pada Hariwafatnja Gorky Ke-18" [Notes on the Eighteenth Anniversary of Gorky's Death], *Indonesia* V, 7 (Djuli 1954): 368–78 and Boejoeng Saleh, "Ibu jang Abadi" [The Eternal Mother], *Kisah* IV, 7/8 (Djuli-Agustus, 1956): 20–21, 28. The Musjawarat Kesusasteraan (literature discussion group) of Jogjakarta met on March 28, 1955, to discuss Gorky's life and work; see *Budaya* IV (1955): 245. Even the famous Islamic author Hamka read Gorky (in Arabic translation), as he noted in the published account of his trip to Egypt in 1950; see Hairus Salim, "Muslim Indonesia dan Jaringan Kebudayaan Tahun, 1950–1965" [Indonesian Muslims and Cultural Networks, 1950–65], to be published in a collection of essays edited by Maya Liem and Jennifer Lindsay, p. 7. A short article appearing in *Siasat* 514, April 4, 1957, noted that, according to the UNESCO index of world translations for 1955, in fifty-five countries around the world, the most translated author was Tolstoy, followed by Shakespeare, Hans Christian Anderson, Maxim Gorky, Anton Chekhov, Honoré de Balzac, and Jack London.

memisahkan diri sendiri baik untuk bekerdja ataupun beristirahat sewaktu baru baik dari sakit).⁸⁵ Soviet writers are prospering, he says, largely due to the huge expansion in the number of readers after the war, so that an “edition of 100,000 to 500,000 is more like the norm for more popular books,” compared to the 3,000 to 4,000 copies usually printed for literary works in Indonesia.⁸⁶ The standard serialization of novels in literary magazines and the Stalin Prize are also sources of income for the best authors.

But, according to Reavey, Soviet writers were not just exemplary because of their economic well-being. Reavey quotes from the wartime diary of the woman poet, journalist, and translator Vera Inber, where she explains the difference between being an independent writer and one who belongs to the Communist Party:

Formerly, it was like this: I would write, let us say, a successful thing [*karja-karja jang menghasilkan sukses*], and I was glad [*dan aku merasa gembira*]. Failure was bitter. But it was my personal sorrow and joy only [*Tetapi hal itu adalah kesedihan dan kegembiraanku seorang diri sadja*]. But now I think: *in what measure is that which I write useful for Soviet literature*, which in its turn, appears only as a part of the great thing—the flourishing of my country [*kesedjahteraan tanahairku*], the first Socialist country in the world? *Each literary work, if logically continued, must be transformed into action* [*Tiap karja sastera, bila diikuti setjara mantik, haruslah didjelmakan kedalam tindakan*].⁸⁷

Reavey discusses other matters in his chapter, such as Soviet writers’ unions and organization, that were of interest to Pramoedya, but the passage I have just cited would have been the most resonant for him. The declarations of Ding Ling, the Chinese writer, and Vera Inber, the Soviet poet, both women, expressed the same socialist ideals that gradually form in the mind of the illiterate mother and hero of Gorky’s novel, a character who would reappear in several guises in Pramoedya’s later writing.

The three translations by Pramoedya that appeared in *Indonesia* in 1955–56 served as windows onto non-Indonesian worlds, both past and contemporary, in a way that brought them closer to home. Schücking’s history of the formation of literary taste in late nineteenth-century Germany offered Pramoedya a case study that he could develop into an historical parallel; in later years, he traced an entire history of realist literature in Indonesia stretching back to the last part of the nineteenth century, which would come to include his greatest work. Ding Ling’s essay was a model of clear reasoning and an articulation of international socialist realist literary principles, but it also gave voice to a liberated female subjectivity, the ultimate symbol for Pramoedya of Indonesia’s emerging national identity in the postcolonial world. Finally, Reavey’s discourse on Russian writers and their

⁸⁵ Reavey, *Soviet Literature*, p. 31; Reavey, “Hidup,” p. 195.

⁸⁶ Reavey, *Soviet Literature*, p. 32. Pramoedya gives the Indonesian figures in a long article he published in February 1957, “Keadaan Sosial Parapengarang Indonesia” [The Social Situation of Indonesian Writers], *Star Weekly*, January 12, 1957, reprinted in Pramoedya, *Menggelinding*, p. 524. In another article published in *Siasat* a month later, Pramoedya cites the same figures from Reavey and adds further comparative material from France, Britain, Czechoslovakia, China, and Burma; see “Keadaan Sosial para Pengarang: Perbandingan Antarneegara” [The Social Situation of Writers: An International Comparison], *Siasat* 502, 20 (Februari 1957): 25–26.

⁸⁷ Reavey, *Soviet Literature*, p. 34; Reavey, “Hidup,” p. 197. Italics in English are in the original.

dedication to and support from the Soviet state established a benchmark for how to improve the working conditions of Indonesian writers so that they could escape their current poverty of body and mind, better serve the building of the Indonesian nation, and join an “international” of world literature on an equal footing with fellow writers overseas.

The three short translations we have been considering show us Pramoedya engaging with an “International” of realist writing from around the world, discovering parallels as well as differences with the situation of writers in Indonesia. The fact that these translations served to connect Indonesia to Europe, China, the Soviet Union, and to world history itself says something obvious but important about the global reach and coherence of the socialist realist “international.”⁸⁸ Greatly facilitating the creation of socialist internationalism was the availability of both contemporary and classical writings from China and the Soviet Union in well-distributed, state-sponsored translations into English and many other languages. Nothing like this kind of organized literary outreach was carried out by the noncommunist bloc during the Cold War.⁸⁹ By comparison, the propagation and local reception of liberal “modernism” in Southeast Asia was more uneven and more problematic. For all their commitment to a fully Indonesia-centric, yet cosmopolitan, kind of modernity, a critic like Jassin and a writer like Asrul Sani found it difficult to transpose “modernism” from Western Europe to Indonesia, let alone to find in Western European modernism a reason for imagining what modernity and its literary representations might be like in Russia, China, or other parts of the Third World. Jassin and Asrul failed to explore the non-Western world as a possible source of ideas and literary styles relevant to their own situation, but also found it difficult to adapt modernist “world” (read: European) literature to the needs of a modern

⁸⁸ For an excellent study of the process through which, by means of translations and other forms of cultural exchange, China became part of the international socialist world after 1949, see Nicolai Volland, “Translating the Socialist State: Cultural Exchange, National Identity, and the Socialist World in the Early PRC,” *Twentieth-Century China* 33, 2 (April 2008): 51–72. “The translation of a new breed of socialist literature,” Volland writes, “became an especially important factor in this process: the simultaneous consumption in a dozen countries of Soviet popular novels, and of representative literary works produced everywhere in the socialist world, could make a direct impact on local audiences, reaching more people than all other forms of cultural exchange.” *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸⁹ Hollywood movies could perhaps be regarded as the equivalent propaganda medium for the Western bloc, but their messages were varied and produced both positive and negative responses from Southeast Asian viewers—hardly a failsafe tool for achieving conversion to only one political ideology. This is not to say that film, as such, was or was perceived as being an ineffective means of spreading ideas to a mass audience. For a discussion of the issues and controversies regarding the showing of Hollywood films in Indonesia from the 1950s to the early 1960s, see Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (London and Highlands, NJ: Zed Books Ltd., 1994), pp. 24–49. Mark Bradley writes: “Even before US firms began to send representatives to Vietnam [in 1945], American films, which had been among the most popular and substantial US exports to Vietnam before World War II, were showing again in movie houses in major Vietnamese cities. One contemporary observer estimated that US releases accounted for 70 percent of the films shown in Vietnam in the immediate post war period.” Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 132–33. During the American War, Bradley notes elsewhere, “film was a particularly important means through which the [North Vietnamese] state imparted the meanings it accorded to the sacrifices of favoured social groups.” Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 133.

Indonesian literature because of their natural nationalist resistance to colonialism and capitalism. Modernist literary texts were, in any case, scattered across many different languages and across different media, especially if one includes Western film—which was avidly viewed and discussed in Southeast Asia during the Cold War—as a major vehicle for modernism. And almost none of the books Casanova considers central to the modernist canon, such as the novels of James Joyce or William Faulkner or the plays of Henrik Ibsen, were translated into Indonesian or Vietnamese in this period.⁹⁰ In the case of leftist “international” texts, on the other hand, not only were many of the most important works available in languages Southeast Asian writers could read, but the themes that most concerned these writers—anti-imperialism, populism, nationalism, the difficulty of being oneself as part of the collective effort to build a communist state—were all present in such works, facilitating the translation of socialist realist ideas and aesthetic forms into Southeast Asian literary practices.

MAYAKOVSKY IN HANOI

As in Indonesia, experimentation with literary forms that could express modern kinds of individuality and new kinds of national community, as well as vigorous debates that pitted advocates of “art for art’s sake” (*nghệ thuật vì nghệ thuật*) against proponents of “art for life’s sake” (*nghệ thuật vì nhân sinh*), were well underway in Vietnam by the mid-1930s.⁹¹ Hue Tam Ho Tai, who has studied these debates, stresses the lack of congruence at that time between aesthetic allegiances and political ones, with the “leading defender of pure art, Hoài Thanh ... already leaning toward communism at the time of the debate.” Hue Tam Ho Tai also establishes the

⁹⁰ According to Goenawan Mohamad, plays by Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg were frequently performed in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s (*Tempo* 24, August 2–14, 1997; accessed online, January 5, 2010, at: www.tempo.co.id/ang/min/02/24/kolom2.htm); Google Books provides sample pages from an Indonesian translation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* by Amir Sutaarga, first published in 1993, which is the only edition listed in the online catalog of the Indonesian National Library. A Vietnamese translation of the play did not appear until 1970; see n.a., *35 Năm Văn Học, 1948–1983* [Thirty-five Years of Literature, 1948–1983] (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 1983), p. 252. I do not know whether these are the earliest translations of Ibsen’s revolutionary play in Indonesia and Vietnam, or when and how frequently it has been performed in these countries, but there appears to be little comparison between its reception in either country and its huge success in China, where Ibsen’s heroine Nora was already a famous role model for aspiring Chinese modern individualists of both sexes at the time of the May 4 Movement of 1919.

⁹¹ See Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 100–75; and Hue Tam Ho Tai, “Literature for the People: From Soviet Policies to Vietnamese Polemics,” in *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture*, ed. Truong Buu Lam (Honolulu, HI: Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawai’i at Manoa, 1987), pp. 63–83. For a good discussion of the range (as limited as it was) and importance of translations of Western (almost entirely French) literary works into Vietnamese before 1945, see Tuan Ngoc Nguyen, “Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature: An Analysis of the Relationship between Literature and Politics” (PhD dissertation, Victoria University, 2004), pp. 35–53. Vietnamese writers were introduced to Soviet socialist realism through French translations in the 1930s. The first Soviet literary work translated into Vietnamese was part of Gorky’s *My Childhood*, which appeared in 1936; the first of four different translations of Gorky’s *Mother* was published in 1938; see “Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature,” pp. 72–84. Nguyen’s dissertation is available online at: <http://eprints.vu.edu.au/279/>.

international, world-literary orientation and content of the debates. Vietnamese intellectuals, who gained full access to newspapers in French when censorship was lifted in 1935, invoked “foreign critics and writers to support their particular views on the relationship between art and politics.”⁹² In the 1940s, particularly after the August Revolution of 1945 and the commencement of fighting against the French in December 1946, the fervor of commitment to revolution and the collective struggle for national independence caused a radical shift in perspectives on literature. According to Tuan Ngoc Nguyen, “Bích Khê, who had translated André Gide’s *Return from Russia*⁹³ a few years earlier, suffered severe illness when the Revolution erupted. He asked his family to carry him down to the street so that he could witness the boiling scenery of revolution.”⁹⁴ In a famous essay that renounces the past, “Vô đề” (Without title), published in 1945, the writer Nguyễn Tuân called his former habits and ideas “disconcerted old friends” and demanded of himself and his readers: “Kill, kill all of them. When any old friend appears and demands anything in your present soul, you must kill him immediately. You must destroy your old soul first. You must become a fire which burns all landscapes of your soul.”⁹⁵

Trường Chinh (“Long March,” real name Đặng Xuân Khu, 1907–88), who was appointed head of the Department of Propaganda and Training in 1941, as well as general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam from 1941 to 1956,⁹⁶ wrote a

⁹² Hue Tam Ho Tai, “Literature for the People,” p. 64. Tai points out that Vietnamese writers relied mainly on French sources and accounts of the Soviet literary debates of the 1930s, even though some of them had attended the Workers’ University of the East in Moscow: “The French critics who wrote for *l’Humanité* or *Monde* were ... more than transmitters, albeit selective, of a received line; they adapted it and even advanced their own interpretation of what was politically committed and proletarian literature” (p. 65). As in the case of the transmission of socialist realist literary concepts to Pramoedya, we are dealing here with a relay of translators, “post-horses of civilization,” reinterpreting and transmitting, from one to the next, modern ideas to Southeast Asia. Under the leadership of the well-known writer and communist Henri Barbusse (1873–1935), who became literary editor of *l’Humanité* in 1926 and editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Monde* in 1928, French leftist critics embraced flexible understandings of the definitions of “proletarian literature” and “socialist realism” emanating from the Soviet Union, which, as articulated by critics like Bukharin, were not uniformly or rigidly intolerant of multiple critical positions. For a sampling of the lively debate and range of critical views advanced at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934, chaired by Maxim Gorky and attended by some forty foreign authors, including André Malraux and Louis Aragon, see A. Zhdanov et al., *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers’ Congress* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1934), a book that Lu Xun translated into Chinese before his death in 1936. See Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1980), p. 48. The most admired leftist French writer in Vietnam at the time was André Gide (1869–1951). The objections he voiced to the subordination of art to politics, coupled with his disenchantment with the Soviet Union after his trip there from June to August 1936, during which time he was invited to give the eulogy at Gorky’s funeral, were particularly influential in literary debates in Vietnam. See Tai, “Literature for the People,” pp. 65–77.

⁹³ This was the book Gide published in 1936, two months after his return from the Soviet Union in which he voiced his criticisms of Stalin and the Revolution (Tai, “Literature for the People,” p. 77).

⁹⁴ Nguyen, “Socialist Realism,” p. 129.

⁹⁵ Discussed and quoted in *ibid.*, p. 133. See Nguyen’s fascinating and detailed discussion of the transformative effect on writers of the August Revolution and the war against the French from 1945 to 1948 in *ibid.*, pp. 125–52.

⁹⁶ For a succinct biography of Trường Chinh, see *ibid.*, pp. 153–54.

poem in 1942 that parodied a famous work of poetic romanticism by Xuân Diệu, declaring:

O poets, all spring to your feet, stand up!
 The time of wine and roses is past.
 No longer moan with winds and weep with clouds—
 along the road of progress take brisk steps.
 Make poems, and with poems shed cold light
 on social sores that fester everywhere.⁹⁷

In his important report *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*,⁹⁸ delivered to the Second National Conference on Culture held in Việt Bắc, July 16–20, 1948, Trường Chinh enunciated Maoist cultural doctrines,⁹⁹ and foreshadowed Lekra polemicists, in claiming that there was no such thing as “neutral culture” or “absolute freedom”: “only when the nation is liberated will it experience the condition for complete liberation.”¹⁰⁰ More than seems to have been the case for writers on the Left in Indonesia, many Vietnamese artists who were also committed to the communist cause wanted the freedom to explore their own “painful process of transformation of the self.”¹⁰¹ “I unsystematically record the often aching doubts of a shedding of the skin, the old body falling without fully separating, the newly grown young skin not yet strengthened, bleeding at the slightest touch,” wrote the poet Nguyễn Đình Thi in 1947.¹⁰² Literary practices that involved this kind of intertwining of self and literary form were bound to clash with the no-nonsense Party approach to literary production as stated by Trường Chinh in his 1948 report: “1. Find the topic; 2. Assess the audience; 3. Gather the means to carry out the task; 4. From the masses evaluate the creation.”¹⁰³ The four-day conference organized by the Party in September 1949 to

⁹⁷ Kim N. B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 37. The translation of the excerpt from Trường Chinh’s “To be a poet” is from *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems: From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries*, ed. and trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 304. A translation of Xuân Diệu’s “Feelings and Emotions” can be found in *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems*, pp. 297–98. In 1946, Xuân Diệu himself renounced French literature, declaring: “French poetry no longer has great and genuine poets who might water humanity’s soul.” Quoted in Nguyen, “Socialist Realism,” p. 134.

⁹⁸ The full text of *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* in English can be found in Truong-Chinh, *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1994), pp. 203–78.

⁹⁹ Trường Chinh’s ideological orientation is suggested by his pen name “Long March,” which refers to the famous retreat of the Chinese Red Army in 1934–36 that led to the ascendancy of Mao Zedong and the eventual triumph of the communists in 1949.

¹⁰⁰ Kim N. B. Ninh, *A World Transformed*, p. 40.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69. For an essay on the events leading up to the signing of the anti-leftist “Cultural Manifesto” in Indonesia in 1963, with some comments about the sorts of literary themes favored by the Left, see Goenawan Mohamad, “The ‘Cultural Manifesto’ Affair: Literature and Politics in Indonesia in the 1960s, a Signatory’s View,” Working Paper No. 45 (Clayton: The Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University).

¹⁰² Ninh, *A World Transformed*, p. 69.

¹⁰³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 79. In his report, Trường Chinh also asserted the subordination of the artist to the dictates of the Party, implying that “intellectuals could not take refuge in the excuses of lack of time or means” (*ibid.*). Recall Jassin’s impatience with Indonesian writers for complaining about their poor working conditions, an abiding concern of Pramoedya’s. Hong

debate literature and the arts on the eve of the fall–winter 1949 military campaign placed a strong emphasis on producing art for the “people” (*nhân dân*), who were now being defined in terms of their “class” rather than their “national” characteristics (i.e., as *dân tộc*).¹⁰⁴ Much discussion also focused on literary form, on the relationship between form and content, and on whether or not certain genres, like the *tùy bút* essay and non-rhyming poetry, gave too much expression to a subjectivity that posed a threat to the still weak and emergent state.¹⁰⁵ Referring to Nguyễn Đình Thi, the poet whose free verse was the main topic of the debate about literary form, foremost socialist realist poet Tố Hữu (1920–2002),¹⁰⁶ who emerged at the conference as the leading Party authority on literary matters, enunciated the view on poetry and subjectivity that became Party dogma in the 1950s:

When I am sad and fretful, tired or wistful, I like reading [Thi’s] poetry. Poetry is the melody of the soul, and similar spirits find their mates. But when I need to work, I very much hate Thi’s poetry because I hate the return of the self to me. Then I would warn myself. Often I see that a poem is good, but I am not sure that it is good. Then what can we use as criteria for good poetry?

I cannot use the “I” as a criteria [*sic*]. The artist must ask himself: How do the masses view this poem? Are they moved by it? Is the pain of the masses being represented here?

Liu explains that Pramoedya was invited to visit China in 1956 precisely because of his “frustration and aimlessness,” to quote from a Chinese commentary on the invitation, as a “petit bourgeois Centrist Writer” who was “dissatisfied with realities, corruption, and weakness of the capitalist regime, and ... wanted the *status quo* changed.” Hong Liu, “Pramoedya,” p. 126. The Chinese expectation was that such visitors, if they belonged to this class of writer, would be impressed by what they saw and write with praise about their experiences when they returned home (*ibid.*, p. 127).

¹⁰⁴ For a detailed analysis of this important conference, see Ninh, *A World Transformed*, pp. 88–102. Ninh succinctly states the purpose of the conference: “... the time had come to tighten control over intellectuals and their activities[,] not only to rein in discussions that might get out of hand but to make sure that the tools were available to inspire the people to the level of sacrifice necessary for the resistance” (*ibid.*, p. 89). As was the case in 1950s Indonesia, there was much discussion at the 1949 conference of the need for urban writers to return to the village and live with the masses. Ninh makes an observation that might also apply to Western-educated Indonesian writers like Asrul Sani who worried about this issue: “While it was true that many Vietnamese did manage to travel overseas or obtain some kind of education abroad in the 1930s, the bulk of Vietnamese intellectuals were schooled within the Franco-Vietnamese educational system. This system provided them with access to French literature and culture, but it could not obscure the village connections that played a dominant role in their development. Many Vietnamese intellectuals became disconnected from the countryside but never to the same degree that some intellectuals would posit and the Party would insist” (*ibid.*, p. 92).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–98. Ninh also points out that by 1955 there were seventeen private publishing firms in Hanoi that competed aggressively with state-run publishers. “If the authorities were troubled by the development,” she writes, “the state was still in the process of being formed and was ill-equipped to deal with the rapid growth in private publishing. The Ministry of Culture, for example, was not founded until February 1955.” *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁰⁶ For more on Tố Hữu, his work, and his role in the 1949 conference, see Nguyen, “Socialist Realism,” pp. 165–72.

If the work has not spoken or speaks in the opposite direction about the life of the masses, then we must consider it a bad work.¹⁰⁷

As the struggle to build not just a new nation, but a strong state based on a class-based social order and artistic forms that the masses could understand, intensified in the North during the early 1950s, many writers found that, in the words of the painter Tô Ngọc Vân, they had two selves, one that “serves the nation and the masses” and one “that serves art.”¹⁰⁸ The two selves collided in widespread conflict in intellectual circles in the North during the crisis years of land reform. The nature of the conflict is illustrated best in the controversy that erupted in literary journals and newspapers over the writing and opinions of a young army writer and painter named Trần Dần (1926–97).¹⁰⁹

Trần Dần began his literary career in 1946 as a poet interested in folk traditions. Joining the Party in 1948, he was one of the first cadres to be trained in Chinese rectification (i.e., forced public recantation) techniques that were introduced into Vietnam in 1951 to bring intellectuals into line with official programs and views.¹¹⁰ His experiences in the decisive Vietnamese victory over the French at Điện Biên Phủ led to the writing of a novel, one of the earliest fictional accounts of that famous battle and a huge success with the public. What distinguished Trần Dần’s novel from the many other accounts of the war was his attempt to represent soldiers and their subjective experiences in all their complexity, rather than resort to the prescribed formulas of what, according to one of his friends and later defenders, Trần Dần called “smoke-and-fire literature,” war novels full of guns, loud noise, exemplary heroes, but no people.¹¹¹ Trần Dần was sent to China between October 10 and

¹⁰⁷ Quoted and translated from an account of the 1949 conference published in that same year in *ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121–63; and Georges Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs Écloses dans la Nuit du Vietnam: Communisme et Dissidence 1954–1956* [A Hundred Blooming Flowers in the Night of Vietnam: Communism and Dissidence 1954–1956] (Paris: Jacques Bertoin, 1991).

¹¹⁰ Rectification was not the only revolutionary Chinese concept that gained currency in Vietnam starting in 1950. Mao’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” were translated into Vietnamese in 1949; the essay collection by Zhou Yang from which Pramoedya made a translation in 1954 appeared in Vietnamese as *Văn Nghệ Nhân Dân Mới* [The People’s New Literature and Art], also in 1954. For more on revolutionary Chinese literary and ideological influence on Vietnam in the 1950s, see Nguyen, “Socialist Realism,” pp. 173–83.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Ninh, *A World Transformed*, p. 128, from Hoàng Cầm’s biographical account of Trần Dần, published in the September 20, 1956 issue of *Nhân Văn* (Humanism), one of two literary journals started by dissidents in 1955. For a partial English translation of Hoàng Cầm’s biography, see Hoa Mai, ed., *The “Nhan-Van” Affair* (n.p.: The Vietnam Chapter of the Asian Peoples’ Anti-Communist League, n.d.), pp. 43–51. The complete biography in French translation appears in Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs*, pp. 26–46. In a diary entry written shortly before his trip to China in October 1954, Trần Dần said the following about the characters in his novel: “I want to describe soldiers who are very old and those who are very young; poor peasants and sons of landlords; sons of bourgeois and workers, students and illiterate men. [...] The heroes and the cowards. Those who arrived cowards but became heroes. Those who arrived heroes but became cowards. Those who used guns to fire at the enemy, and those who used guns to harm themselves. The quiet soldiers and the talkative soldiers. The gentle people and the reckless people. The docile people and the stubborn people. And most of them are reluctant to study (politics), to listen to the cadre talking over politics. Being reluctant to listen to cadres talking a lot. Being reluctant to see their thoughts controlled. Control, control my cock!” Quoted and translated in Nguyen, “Socialist Realism,” p. 26.

November 12, 1954, to work on the narrative script for a film about the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, just at the time that a well-known Chinese literary critic and CCP (Chinese Communist Party) member, Hu Feng, openly challenged the authority of the CPP to dictate how literature should be written.¹¹² On his return to Vietnam, Trần Dần became the spokesman for a group of army writers who demanded creative freedom and an outspoken critic of writers who conformed to Party dictates.¹¹³ Disciplined by the army and confined to quarters for three months after he asked to resign from both the army and the Party in May 1955, Trần Dần responded by writing a poem, “Nhất định thắng” (We must win), in which he mused:

Tôi ở phố Sinh Từ
 Những ngày ấy bao nhiêu thương xót
 Tôi bước đi
 không thấy phố
 không thấy nhà
 Chỉ thấy mưa sa
 trên màu cờ đỏ
 Gặp em trong mưa
 Em đi tìm việc
 Mỗi ngày đi lại cúi đầu về
 - Anh ạ!
 Họ vẫn bảo chờ ...
 Tôi không gặng hỏi, nói gì ư ?
 Trời mưa, trời mưa
 Ba tháng rồi
 Em đợi
 Sống bằng tương lai
 Ngày và đêm như lũ trẻ mò côi
 Lũ lướt dắt nhau đi buồn bã
 Em đi
 trong mưa

¹¹² According to Kirk Denton, in the 1930s Hu Feng had been a close associate of China's greatest writer, Lu Xun, and a noted literary critic who advocated “subjectivism” (*zhuguan zhuyi*), the “dynamic role for the subject in social transformation.” See Kirk A. Denton, “The Hu Feng Group: The Genealogy of a Literary School,” paper prepared for Urban Cultural Institutions of Early Twentieth Century China Symposium, The Ohio State University, April 13, 2002; accessible online at: <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/institutions/denton.htm> (accessed January 5, 2010). For another good discussion of Hu Feng and the official Party campaign to brand him as a counterrevolutionary in 1955, see Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 129–57. Hu Feng's thinking on the crucial role of the writer's subjectivity in its engagement with reality during the creative act dates back to the 1930s, when he dueled with Zhou Yang over the question of realism and character types. For Zhou Yang's essay “Thoughts on Realism,” published in 1936, and Hu Feng's response, “Realism: A ‘Correction,’” see Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature 1893–1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 335–55.

¹¹³ For a good discussion of the shifting relations between writers and the Vietnamese Workers' Party, and the intellectual and ideological issues involved, in 1956–58, see Hirohide Kurihara, “Changes in the Literary Policy of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, 1956–1958,” in *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. Takashi Shiraishi and Motoo Furuta (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1992), pp. 165–96.

cúi đầu
 ngiên vai
 Người con gái mới mười chín tuổi
 Khổ thân em mưa nắng đi về lủi thủi
 Bóng chúng
 đề lên
 số phận
 từng người
 Em cúi đầu đi mưa rơi
 Những ngày ấy bao nhiêu thương xót
 Tôi bước đi
 không thấy phố
 không thấy nhà
 Chỉ thấy mưa sa
 trên màu cờ đỏ.
 Đất nước khó khăn này
 sao không thấm được vào thơ ?
 Những tú kính tôi dừng chân dán mũi
 Các thứ hàng ế ẩm đợi người mua
 Nhưng mà sách—hình như khá chạy
 À quyển kia của bạn này - bạn ấy
 Quyển của tôi tư lự nét đăm đăm
 Nó đang mơ :—Nếu thêm cả miền Nam
 Số độc giả sẽ tăng dăm bảy triệu
 Tôi đã biến thành người định kiến
 Tôi ước ao tất cả mọi người ta
 Đòi thống nhất phải đòi từ việc nhỏ
 —Từ cái ăn
 cái ngủ
 chuyện riêng tư
 —Từ suy nghĩ
 nựng con
 và tán vợ.
 Trời mưa mãi lay rây đường phố
 Về Bắc Nam tôi chưa viết chút nào
 Tôi vẫn quyết Thơ phải khua bão gió
 Nhưng hôm nay
 tôi bỗng cúi đầu
 Thơ nó đi đâu ?
 Sao những vần thơ
 Chúng không chuyển, không xoay trời đất ?
 Sao chúng không chấp được cõi bờ ?
 Non nước sục sùi mưa
 Tôi muốn bỏ thơ
 làm việc khác
 Nhưng hôm nay tôi mê mải giữa trời mưa
 Chút tài mọn
 tôi làm thơ chính trị.
 Tôi bước đi

không thấy phố
 không thấy nhà
 Chỉ thấy mưa sa
 trên màu cờ đỏ.¹¹⁴

I lived on Sinh-Tu Street,
 through heartbreaking days.
 I walked and saw
 no streets
 no houses,
 only the raindrops
 on the red of red banners.
 Met my sweetheart¹¹⁵ in the rain,
 looking for work, everywhere,
 out in the morning, back in the evening—
 they told me to wait, she said.
 I asked no more. What for?
 It rained and rained
 for three months.
 She just waited
 living in the future
 like a lovely orphan,
 night and day.
 Clinging to other orphans
 she walked
 in the rain
 head low
 shoulders bent
 my nineteen-year-old girl!
 [How could she know
 what caused our misfortunes?
 How could she know what was America
 and what was Ngo?]¹¹⁶
 Sunny, rainy, she walked alone,

¹¹⁴ Excerpt taken from the version of “Nhất định thắng” found online at: <http://tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?sessionId=B264368EAEC10678E44A9D749A21099B?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=706> (accessed January 5, 2010).

¹¹⁵ According to Ninh, in early 1955, Trần Dần, who was then in the army, fell in love with a young Catholic orphan with capitalist tendencies from Hanoi. He left his barracks without permission to live with her in Sinh-Tu Street. The army disapproved of the union and refused to allow the couple to marry. Ninh, *A World Transformed*, pp. 132–33.

¹¹⁶ The bracketed lines do not appear in the online version of the Vietnamese poem I have excerpted above, and also not in a published version I have consulted, Trần Tuấn Kiệt, *Thi Ca Việt Nam Hiện Đại, 1880–1965* [Poetry of Contemporary Vietnam, 1880–1965] (Saigon: Khai Trí, 1968?), p. 660. In a section of the poem not excerpted here, Trần Dần criticizes the American presence in “our entire South.” Addressing those who are fleeing to the South from the North, he asks: “How can you mistake it to be American land,/ Where cabarets, wine and women,/ And freedom and liberty are yours for the asking,/ And dollars aplenty, simply by holding out your hand?” I am quoting from the English translation of the poem that appears in Hoa Mai, *The “Nhan-Van” Affair*, pp. 24–27.

unaware of their shadows over us
 head low in the rain she walked
 through heartbreaking days.
 And I saw no streets,
 no houses,
 only the raindrops
 on the red of red banners.
 Why shouldn't my poetry
 shout out our country's hardships?
 The shop windows go begging for customers
 but books are selling fast—books by my friends
 and me, on the shelves, staring and dreaming—
 if the South were ours we'd have five
 or seven million more readers.
 Now I'm obsessed with one thought:
 Making the country whole.
 If you want it
 Want it constantly
 eating
 sleeping
 making love
 thinking
 coaxing your child
 flattering your wife
 constantly.
 So far I've written nothing that counts
 about North and South.
 I know poetry should create hurricanes and tempests
 but today
 what bends my head so low
 where is the fervor
 why are my verses powerless
 to move Heaven and earth?
 Why can't they mend borders and nations?
 While hills and rivers overflow
 I want to renounce poetry
 to do more urgent work
 But the rain drums me on
 to use my small talent
 to write political poems.
 I walked and saw
 no streets
 no houses
 only the raindrops
 on the red of red banners.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ The translation (modified slightly) is taken from *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry*, ed. and trans. Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Burton Raffel, and W. S. Merwin (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), pp. 187–89.

Trần Dần's poem, with its "insistent, haunting rhythm [that] pulls the reader into the poet's heart"¹¹⁸ and its equally insistent negation of the chief symbol of the Vietnamese Workers' Party,¹¹⁹ ends, however, on a triumphal and loyal note, as the poet walks on, "seeing the streets and the houses/ Not the falling rain/ Only the sun rising/ upon the red flag."¹²⁰ "We must win" was published in February 1956 in the first issue of a literary magazine started by a group of young writers who expressed more zealous commitment to, than rebellious deviance from, the ideals of the revolution. But the authorities read "We must win" as an expression of Hu Feng-like "subjectivism" that threatened the authority of the state-sponsored Association of Art and Literature and the official aesthetic standards it sought to promote. Trần Dần was denounced as a reactionary and arrested. It took his attempted suicide, the news of the cultural effects of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, and the temporary relaxation of controls on intellectuals during the Hundred Flowers Movement in China (January 1956–June 1957) to rehabilitate Trần Dần and force a (short-lived) reexamination by the Party of its policies toward intellectuals and artists.¹²¹

Trần Dần's "We must win" explored the subjectivity and indeterminacy of living in newly independent, postrevolutionary North Vietnam, issues that H. B. Jassin, Asrul Sani, and Pramoedya Ananta Toer would have found entirely familiar. In its free-verse form, ragged typographic layout, fervent nationalism, and unabashed celebration of the defiantly lyrical "I," however, "We must win" is also powerfully reminiscent of the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), the famous poet of the Russian revolution whose work was available in Vietnamese translation by 1953, if not before, and well-known to Trần Dần.¹²² Mayakovsky's verse offered Trần Dần

¹¹⁸ Ninh, *A World Transformed*, pp. 139–40. According to Ninh, the "honest and raw" quality of the poem was due in part to the fact Trần Dần never planned to publish it. While Trần Dần was away in a village, working as part of a land reform team, the poet Hoàng Cầm, who wanted to include something from his friend in the first issue of the new literary journal *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* [Fine Works of Spring], went ahead without the author's permission and published it.

¹¹⁹ Nora A. Taylor, "Raindrops on Red Flags: Tran Trong Vu and the Roots of Vietnamese Painting Abroad," in *Of Vietnam: Identities in Dialogue*, ed. June Bradley Winston and Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), p. 120. Trần Trọng Vũ is Trần Dần's son and a highly successful painter based in Paris. In an installation exhibited in 1999, Vũ commented on and celebrated his father's famous poem.

¹²⁰ Quoted and translated in Ninh, *A World Transformed*, p. 139.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 140–41.

¹²² A collection of six poems by Mayakovsky, translated by the poet Hoàng Trung Thông (1925–93), was published in 1953 and again in 1954. In 1957, a volume titled *Thơ Mai-a-cốp-xki* [Poems by Mayakovsky] appeared, translated by Hoàng Trung Thông and Trần Dần, with an introduction by the poet Lê Đạt, who was himself the author of verse that recalled the spirit and typography of Mayakovsky's, in which he extolled the "New! New!/ Always new!/ Fly high/ Fly far/ Above the signs of the old/ Above the deteriorating sidewalks/ Surpassing today/ Surpassing tomorrow, the day after,/ Always surpassing." See *35 Năm Văn Học*, pp. 208–9 and 214; and Ninh, *A World Transformed*, pp. 137–38. In October 1956, another poet-friend of Trần Dần's, Hữu Loan, published a poem attacking Party hacks titled "Cũng những thằng nịnh hót (Sau khi đọc bài: 'Những thằng nịnh hót' của Maiakovski)" [The Same Sycophants (composed after reading "The Sycophants" by Mayakovsky)]. Compare the following passage describing sycophantic officials in the Vietnamese Democratic Republic—"Puffing out their cheeks/ And rolling their eyes,/ They breathe into their bosses navels/ Such phrases as:/ 'Yes, yes, Comrades .../'" —with Mayakovsky's caustic lines on Soviet officialdom from "The Toady" (1928): "With a smile/ and with a bow,/ licking finger, licking

and his friends a stirring example of cosmopolitan modernist poetry that was at once lyrical and realist, but also critical of the shortcomings of the communist revolution. Challenged by his friend Hoàng Cầm to explain why his poetry sounded so much like Mayakovsky's, Trần Dần reportedly replied: "A profound influence is only possible when there is a similarity of thought! It is true that I am influenced by Mayakovsky, but the most important influence is the impact that the Vietnamese revolution and its realities have had on me. It is thus that bit by bit I will become myself."¹²³ Indeed, Trần Dần's poetry expresses a nationalist sensibility and a commitment to the autonomy of the self that also seems entirely similar to that of Asrul or even Pramoedya in the 1950s: "A literary work can only be conceived in the mind," Trần Dần wrote in an essay for the literary journal *Nhân Văn* (Humanism) published on September 30, 1956, "and it can only be born from an emotion in the spirit of the writer. It only obeys the demands of the inner heart, and only becomes concrete when a fire breaks out in this inner heart."¹²⁴ The literary debates in North

toe,/ like a milk-calf/ licks a cow,/ like a piglet/ licks a sow/ ... Once he's started,/ he will praise/ all that comes/ into his mind:/ your catarrh,/ your rank,/ your age,/ or a wart/ on your behind." For the full English translation of "The Same Sycophants," cited here, see Hoang Van Chi [Hoàng Văn Chí], *The New Class in North Vietnam* (Saigon: Công Dân, 1958), pp. 34–36. The Vietnamese poem can be found in the same author's *Trăm Hoa Dưa Nở Trên Đất Bắc* [A Hundred Flowers Blossom in the North], published originally in Saigon in 1959 and available online at: www.talawas.org. The passage from Mayakovsky's "The Toady" is taken from Mayakovsky, *Selected Verse*, pp. 227–29. It is likely that Hoàng Trung Thông and Trần Dần based their versions of Mayakovsky's poems on French translations of his work; Elsa Triolet (1896–1970), friend of Mayakovsky and younger sister to one of his lovers, Russian emigrée to Paris in 1918, writer, and earliest translator of Mayakovsky into French, published a volume titled *Maïakovski: Vers et Prose* (Paris: Editeurs français réunis), in 1957. But Mayakovsky's poetry was also available in Chinese by 1929. A collection of twenty poems was translated into Chinese and published in 1937, and between 1957 and 1961, "China's most prestigious publisher, People's Press, published the five-volume *Selections of Mayakovsky's Poetry*. Many revolutionaries, literary or nonliterary, were passionately inspired by his 'powerful' poetry." Sun Yifeng, "Opening the Cultural Mind: Translation and the Modern Chinese Literary Canon," *Modern Language Quarterly* 69,1 (March 2008): 20–21.

¹²³ Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs*, p. 30. Like Mayakovsky, Trần Dần was both a poet and a visual artist. Both poets were also fervent supporters of the communist movement. Mayakovsky's homage to Lenin, written in the year of Lenin's death (1924), celebrates the "Party's/ ... million-fingered hand/ clenched/ into a fist/ of shattering might./ What's an individual?/ No earthly good." See "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin" in Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Works in Three Volumes. 2 Longer Poems* (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1986), p. 169. Yet like Trần Dần, Mayakovsky was vilified for being an "anarcho-individualist." See Christophert Edgar, "Mayakovsky on the Road: Travels to North America," in *Night Wraps the Sky: Writings by and about Mayakovsky*, ed. Michael Almercyda (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), p. 215. Mayakovsky took his own life on April 14, 1930. Trần Dần's suicide attempt failed, but he, too, experienced the destruction of personal dreams during the collective struggle to build a new socialist state. As Mayakovsky put it for them both in the hauntingly beautiful poem "Past One O'Clock ...," written in 1930 and discovered in a notebook after his death: "Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind." See Vladimir Mayakovsky, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, ed. and intro. Patricia Blake (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 237. The translation of this line and of the poem from which it comes is by George Reavey.

¹²⁴ Trần Dần, "Let Us Struggle for the One Hundred Flowers Blooming Policy," in Hoa Mai, *The "Nhan-Van" Affair*, pp. 59–64. Teeuw, in *Modern Indonesian Literature*, I, p. 131, quotes Asrul as writing somewhere: "For me the ego in literature is the restoration of a value to mankind which has almost been devoured by machines, by routine, and by politicians who recognize merely generalities and not the variation ... " Of his creative process in 1950, Pramoedya wrote: "The creative process is utterly individual in character, and can occur only after

Vietnam in 1955–56 also examined *kelesuan* (exhaustion, lack of creativity), the bureaucratization of artistic practice, ideological conformism, social disorder, and the corruption of the ideals of the revolution, issues that were central to similar discussions among intellectuals and writers in Indonesia, particularly after the introduction of Guided Democracy in 1957 and the politicization of literary debates that led to attacks by Pramoedya and writers of the Left on Jassin and the “universal humanist” writers associated with him. It is perhaps not surprising, given what his politics had become, that in his 1963 treatise on socialist realism, in which he offered a critique of bourgeois humanism and subjectivism, Pramoedya cites with approval quotations from two of the most prominent opponents of literary freedom in north Vietnam in 1955–56: Tố Hữu, the revolutionary poet and member of the Executive Committee of the Association of Art and Literature, and Hồ Chí Minh (1890–1969) himself, the president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.¹²⁵ But, in fact, as the *Buru Tetralogy* written during his exile and imprisonment between 1965 and 1979 demonstrates, Pramoedya himself never ceased to engage in the humanist “inner quest for subjective truth and the outer commitment to the nation,” to borrow Keith Foulcher’s eloquent characterization of the 1950s Indonesian poet Rivai Apin.¹²⁶ It is this duality within the individual, who is “still stuck in the mud” of a titanic postcolonial effort to attain freedom both personal and national, rather than the center/periphery structure of literary production described by Casanova, that governed the artistic struggles of the Southeast Asian writers I have been considering in this essay. The subjective realm of the “inner quest” is the place where these writers, often by means of reading or making translations rather than through actual travel to different parts of the world, encountered the cosmopolitan “literature-worlds” that came to inform their writing.¹²⁷

One can conclude, therefore, that Casanova’s bipolar model for explaining the structure of power and influence in the “world republic of letters” places too much emphasis on the power of static, literally geographic, Western imperial centers and literary standards, and not enough on the shifting polarities and imagined nature of an “international” interplay between commitments to individual subjectivity, the

formation of the mysticum as a *conditio sine qua non*. This mysticum, a condensed personal freedom, which liberates the I from the world outside it, and which places the I beyond reach of the power of Time—a condition in which there is only the I in its servant relationship to the Lord, with all the evidences of His lordship—it is here that the [artistic] creator manifests himself with the Creator by means of his [artistic] statements. And, if you’ll forgive me for saying so, precisely because this experience is so individual in character, it needs no validation by anyone else.” Pramoedya, “*Perburuan 1950*,” p. 28.

¹²⁵ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Realisme-Sosialis dan Sastra Indonesia* [Social Realism and Indonesian Literature] (Jakarta: Lentera Dipantara, 2003), pp. 21, 36–37. For a discussion of Tố Hữu’s role in the persecution of Trần Dần and the suppression of literary dissent in North Vietnam, see Ninh, *A World Transformed*, pp. 84–85, 131, 134, and 148. Trần Dần mocked Tố Hữu’s poetry in Franco-Vietnamese: “*tí ti la haine, tí ti l’amour*” (a teensy bit of hate, a teensy bit of love), quoted in Ninh, *ibid.*, p. 131.

¹²⁶ Foulcher, “Rivai Apin,” p. 784.

¹²⁷ Casanova writes (*The World Republic*, p. 154): “Translation ... stands revealed as an ambiguous enterprise as well: on the one hand, it is a means of obtaining official entry to the republic of letters; and, on the other, it is a way of systematically imposing the categories of the center upon works from the periphery” As suggested by Trần Dần’s comment about his affinity for and gradual localization of the poetry of Mayakovsky quoted above, the center did not necessarily maintain its control over meaning once that meaning had arrived in the peripheries.

nation, and shared postcolonial social realities from around the world that we find in the literatures of Southeast Asia. The criteria that, for Casanova, make literatures “small,” “impoverished,” “deprived,” to name just some of the terms Casanova employs to describe the “peripheral” regions of her world republic, do not account for the cosmopolitan energies and ideological complexities at play in the work we have been examining. Eventually, over the period we have been examining, which stretches between, roughly, 1950 and 1965, Cold War categories wielded by literary elites committed to building strong states became dominant and did, in fact, stifle those energies and simplify those complexities, “essentializing differences,” as Casanova would say, in Indonesia and Vietnam.¹²⁸ But the suppression of either modernism or realism in both countries was only partial and temporary. It was in both cases crucial for the eventual defeat of outside Cold War cultural forces that most writers and other artists maintained their commitment both to themselves and to their nations by staying home in order to wage battle and suffer persecution on behalf of their own languages and expressions of modernity and/or realism rather than seek individual artistic “freedom” in Amsterdam or Paris. Southeast Asia itself is where, to quote Casanova’s own words, “the only genuine history of literature” for the region has ever been enacted, “one that describes the revolts, the assaults upon authority, manifestos, inventions of new forms and languages—all the subversions of the traditional order that, little by little, work to create literature and the literary world.”¹²⁹

THE PROMISE OF BANDUNG

If Cold War Southeast Asian “literature worlds” had their centers in Southeast Asia itself during the 1950s and 1960s, while their peripheries, from which flowed ideas and literary forms expressive of future artistic possibilities, were located in late-nineteenth-century Germany, 1920s Soviet Union, or 1950s China, in what new directions might the boundaries of those worlds have been extended? In April 1955, some might have said that the contours of a new world literary space were becoming visible from the Indonesian city of Bandung, the site of the Afro-Asian conference organized by Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka and attended by representatives from twenty-nine Third World countries.¹³⁰ One of the observers at this conference was the African-American writer Richard Wright (1908–60), who had been living as an expatriate in Paris since 1946.¹³¹ Wright published a book about his

¹²⁸ This is not to say that Cold War categories prevailed in the same manner and to the same degree everywhere in Southeast Asia during this period. The literary histories of Malaysia and South Vietnam, for example, followed different trajectories, although many of the literary issues in question were similar to the ones we have been examining. For Malaysia, see Virginia Matheson Hooker, *Writing a New Society: Social Change through the Novel in Malay* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000). For South Vietnam, see Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam 1954–1975* (Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1992), as well as John Schafer’s study of Võ Phiến, a leading essayist, short-story writer, and editor in the South before he fled to the United States in 1975: John Schafer, *Võ Phiến and the Sadness of Exile* (DeKalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2006).

¹²⁹ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 175.

¹³⁰ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, pp. 99–109.

¹³¹ Both Pramoedya and Asrul Sani knew Richard Wright’s work. In an essay published in 1953, Pramoedya praised the “bitter realism” (*realisme pahit*) of Wright’s *Black Boy*. Asrul

experiences and impressions during his trip to Indonesia. Mochtar Lubis, Sjahrir, and Natsir were some of the prominent Indonesians he spoke to at length about communism, race, and religion.¹³² Towards the end of his account, Wright made the following observation:

As I watched the dark-faced delegates work at the conference, I saw a strange thing happen. Before Bandung, most of these men had been strangers, and on the first day they were constrained with one another, bristling with charge and countercharge against America and/or Russia. But, as the days passed, they slowly cooled off, and another and different mood set in. What was happening? As they came to know one another better, their fear and distrust evaporated. Living for centuries under Western rule, they had become filled with a deep sense of how greatly they differed from one another. But now, face to face, their ideological defenses dropped. Negative unity, bred by a feeling that they had to stand together against a rapacious West, turned into something that hinted of the positive. They began to sense their combined strength ... Day after day dun-colored Trotskyites consorted with dark Moslems, yellow Indo-Chinese hobnobbed with brown Indonesians, black Africans mingled with swarthy Arabs ... But they all had the same background of colonial experience, of subjection, of color consciousness, and they found that ideology was not needed to define their relations ...¹³³

The conference ended with pledges of economic and cultural cooperation, in the interest of building a Third World, anti-Cold War bloc dedicated to freedom and world peace. Writing for *Siasat* on April 24, the last day of the conference, Asrul Sani echoed many of Wright's observations about the unifying force of a shared colonial past and of nationalism shaped by race. It was to be hoped, Asrul concluded, that given the fact that Indonesians know more about European literature than they do about the literatures of Asia or Africa, that translations of works by authors from these traditions would become available in the coming years.¹³⁴ Although the number and variety of such translations into Southeast Asian languages, as well as the influence of the Afro-Asian writers' conferences held in the aftermath of

reviewed *The Outsider* in the April 25, 1956 issue of *Siasat*. He didn't like it, finding the theme of the contemporary situation of the African-American in America too limited, not enough concerned with the human condition in general. See Foulcher, "On a Roll," p. 11, and Asrul Sani, "Richard Wright: Seniman yang Jadi Intelektual" [Richard Wright: Artist Becomes Intellectual], in Sani, *Surat-surat*, pp. 140–47.

¹³² For more on Wright's contact with and reception by Indonesian writers during his stay in Indonesia, see Keith Foulcher, "Bringing the World Back Home: *Konfrontasi* and the International Orientation in Indonesian Culture, 1954–60," to be published in a collection edited by Maya Liem and Jennifer Lindsay; and the two-part article titled "Weekeinde met Richard Wright" [Weekend with Richard Wright], by Beb Vuyk, a member of the *Konfrontasi* group, published in *Vrij Nederland*, November 19 and 26, 1960, pp. 19 and 6. My thanks to Keith Foulcher for bringing Vuyk's article to my attention and for allowing me to read his draft translation of it.

¹³³ Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994 [1956]), pp. 175–76.

¹³⁴ I have used a Dutch translation of Asrul's article found in *Cultureel Nieuws Indonesië 1955* 43–44 (1955): 218–21.

Bandung, remain to be investigated,¹³⁵ the *tiermondiste* approach to international cooperation, free of Cold War ideological commitments and threats of cultural domination, can be said to have failed.¹³⁶ In a long essay titled "Us and Europe," published in February 1955, only months before the Bandung conference, Asrul Sani had already meditated on the loneliness of the long-distance, cosmopolitan Southeast Asian writer.¹³⁷ "European nationalism," he wrote,

... is nationalism born of industrial development, which has the characteristic of maintaining and seizing power for the nation and its own national interests and which obtains its shape by expanding abroad or grabbing commercial markets. Nationalism in Indonesia, by contrast, is in reality only this: a nationality still searching for a *raison d'être* [*kebangsaan yang masih mencari alasan*].¹³⁸

It follows that, for Europeans, "humanism" and "freedom" are part of their history, their meanings clearly understood. For Indonesians, writes Asrul, the meaning of these concepts lies in the future, since now that we are independent we must define them in the context of our relationship with the whole world, not just with Europe, as in the colonial past. Since Indonesia's literature now searches for its own form (*sedang mencari watak sendiri*), it is pointless for its authors to dream of writing about Paris, filled as they are with pride (*kebanggaan*) at being Indonesian.

Biarpun pencipta-penciptanya menulis tentang Paris dan sebagainya, sumber permasalahan dan penghargaannya terlalu jelas tergenang di sini, dan ia belum dapat melepaskan diri dari predikat "kebanggaan"-nya. Ia akan mati jika dilepaskan dengan paksa dari sumbernya itu. Karena itu saya tidak percaya bahwa seorang pengarang Indonesia akan berkembang bakatnya dan akan menghasilkan pekerjaan besar jika ia diangkat dari tanah airnya dan misalnya disemayamkan di Nice – sebuah tempat yang tenang dan aman. Dilihat dari sudut perkembangan kesusasteraan ini tidak menjadi keberatan, hanya ia mengandung bahaya dalam dirinya, yaitu: langkah untuk menjadi provinsialis baginya sangat dekat.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Denning, "International," p. 717, writes: "After the Bandung conference of 1955, these literary movements of decolonization [i.e., like Indonesia's Lekra] began to create a new novelists' international ... through a series of Afro-Asian writers' congresses and journals ... the novels by this generation of writers enfranchised by the proletarian literary movements often became the founding fictions of the new national literatures ... " Denning mentions Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Miguel Angel Asturias, and Naguib Mahfouz as writers belonging to the "new novelists' international." For the writers and the period we have been considering, there are no translations of works by any of them into each other's language except for works by Pramoedya, whose short-story collection *Blora* was translated and published in Vietnamese in 1960 (see *35 Năm Văn Học*, p. 224). To this day, very little Southeast Asian literature has been translated from one Southeast Asian language to another, a fact that raises questions about the nature and extent of Denning's "international" as far as the literatures of Southeast Asia are concerned.

¹³⁶ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, p. 108.

¹³⁷ "Kita dan Europa," Sani, *Surat-surat*, pp. 624–47. This essay first appeared in *Konfrontasi* 4 (Djanuari–Februari 1955): 2–21.

¹³⁸ "Kita dan Europa," p. 637.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 641.

Let creative artists write about Paris¹⁴⁰ and so forth, the source of the problem and of the value assigned to it, it is totally clear, is welling up right here, and it still can't free itself from how it has been designated as [an expression of national] "pride." [The artist] will die if he is forcefully separated from that source. This is why I don't believe that an Indonesian author will develop his talent and achieve great things if he is removed from his motherland and enthroned in Nice, for example—a quiet, peaceful place. Seen from the perspective of literary progress, [staying in Nice] is not a drawback [for the Indonesian writer], but it entails a danger, namely that the step leading to his becoming provincial is very close.

In Asrul's view, Paris was the province, Indonesia the center, of his literary world; in the title to his essay, the all-inclusive, national "us" comes first! Cosmopolitanism had to be cultivated at home in the nation. This is an upside-down world compared to Pascale Casanova's, but one that is fully congruent with Michael Denning's polycentric, postcolonial, modernist "international."¹⁴¹ In the last analysis, Asrul, Pramoedya, Jassin, and Trần Dần all agreed (with Mayakovsky and Ding Ling) that it was better to write poems, novels, short stories, and literary criticism living in the thick, "still stuck in the mud," of the national struggle, whatever the outcome. In this sense, they all fought on the same side during the Cold War.

¹⁴⁰ Is this a reference to the leftist writer Sitor Situmorang (1923–), who lived in Paris from 1950 to 1952 and whose collection of short stories about his experiences there, published in 1956, won an Indonesian literary prize in 1955? The other famous expatriate Indonesian artist living in Paris during this period was the painter Salim.

¹⁴¹ For another view of "world literature" that argues, like Asrul and Denning, for a model based not on hegemonic centers and peripheries but on the "variety of literatures" in a pluralistic world, see Alexander Beecroft's outstanding "World Literature Without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary Systems," *New Left Review* 54 (November/December 2008): 87–100.

RAISING XENOPHOBIC SOCIALISM AGAINST A COMMUNIST THREAT: RE-READING THE LINES OF AN ARMY PROPAGANDA MAGAZINE IN 1950S BURMA

Bo Bo

There have been various academic studies regarding political struggles, defense strategy, organization, and security policy adopted by the *tatmadaw* (Burmese for “armed forces”) to explain how it has been able to control the state for nearly half a century. Most scholarship, however, pays insufficient attention to the influence of the military mass media on the processes of nation-building and social engineering. In this essay, I try to uncover these efforts in the pages of *Myawaddy*¹ magazine.

Myawaddy, a monthly literary periodical, was published by the Myanma Tatmadaw (Burma Army) starting in November 1952 and was a mouthpiece for the then ruling AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League) leaders and their *tatmadaw* colleagues, supported by ex-communist as well as some nationalist and socialist writers.

As the Burmese civil war and the Cold War reached their climaxes, and ideological competition became very intense to attract newly independent countries, such as Burma, to one side or the other, numerous propaganda and politically oriented writings appeared in Burmese magazines. These works are still influential in contemporary Burmese political culture. Furthermore, the 1950s have come to be considered the golden age of Burmese literature, one that enjoyed a fair amount of freedom of the press under civilian rule.

A military historian, Mary Callahan, points out in her book *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* that the *tatmadaw*, which assumed the role of state builders in the mid-1950s, also took on a range of extra-military functions, including magazine publishing, as a part of its counterinsurgency warfare against the

¹ Named after the famous Burman composer-warrior U Sa (1766–1853), of Myawaddy, from the last Burmese dynasty, Kongbaung era.

communists.² Thus it will be useful to look through the popular magazine *Myawaddy*, which was published from late 1952 (until the first coup of the *tatmadaw* in September 1958) to understand more about how the *tatmadaw* took steps to build its own state as a replacement for the civilian one.

Myawaddy, which was set up by the Tatmadaw Directorate of Psychological Warfare, was indeed begun as a pet project of the then-civilian Premier U Nu (1907–95), who was also famous as a writer and playwright. He founded the magazine in 1952 in cooperation with his close friend Colonel Aung Gyi.³ From the pages of *Myawaddy*, we can assess the intellectual roots of the *tatmadaw*'s own ideology, which would evolve into the "Burmese Way to Socialism" (i.e., the state ideology that predominated during the Ne Win period [1962–88]) in the 1960s, as well examining the *tatmadaw*'s political awareness prior to taking power.

In order to understand why the *tatmadaw* became politicized even as it was trying to build itself up as a professional army, it is important to examine the origins of the *tatmadaw* in the pre-World War II nationalist movement, where most of the *tatmadaw*'s officials, the ruling AFPFL politicians, and also the insurgent communists were all closely involved with one another in student unions and strikes, the leading anticolonialist leftist association Dobama Asiayone (Our Burman Association), and in wartime struggles against the British and the Japanese. Networks linking these activists, writers, and other intellectuals can also be interestingly found in *Myawaddy* and other contemporary literature. This loose grouping of young nationalists was able to dethrone pro-British and right-wing politicians in the political arena and was able to get rid of British-trained (mostly Karen, who dominated the *tatmadaw* in the early days of independence) officials from the *tatmadaw*. But because of the influence of the Cold War and ideological conflict (in Burma's case, between the communists and socialists), the personal competition among these freedom fighters quickly turned into a long civil war, in which they also fought against ethnic minorities.

The influence of these struggles is clearly reflected in the writings published in *Myawaddy*. But rather than engaging in ideological debates, most articles reveal the *tatmadaw*'s anti-communist agenda. Unsurprisingly, there were even accusations from the pro-communists that the *tatmadaw* was allying itself with the anti-communist policies of the United States, even though the regime was claiming to build a socialist state through democracy.⁴ An exiled Burmese journalist U Thaug wrote that numerous books on the evil red empire flooded the Burmese market in those days, financed by American dollars.⁵

² Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 205.

³ Aung Gyi (b. 1918), who was later promoted to vice chief of general staff with the rank of brigadier, set up the *tatmadaw*'s business institutes and resigned early in 1963 because he disagreed with Ne Win's radical economic reforms. He initiated the 1988 uprising with his open criticism of Ne Win but faded from the political scene after a split with Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. See Mary P. Callahan, p. 183.

⁴ Sain Paul-kyaung ta-pae-gale (a student from St. Paul Missionary School), "Myan-ma pyin-nya-yay-nae-pae-paw-tho kyu-kyaw-thaw American-than-pha-naunt" [American iron heel invading Burmese education], *Oway* 1,6 (1952–53): 119.

⁵ U Thaug, *A Journalist, a General, and an Army in Burma* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995), p. 23.

INPUT FROM PRE-WAR BURMESE LITERATURE

Aung San Suu Kyi has observed that, at the turn of the twentieth century, the Burmese language was beginning to change under the same influences that had led to the modern forms of many languages in India: the impact of Western literature, the growth of the press and newspapers, and the creation of a wider reading public that flourished as a result of a boom in the rice industry.⁶ Interestingly, the emergence of Burmese fiction following the decline of traditional Burmese theater in the early twentieth century coincided with the revival of national awareness that was spurred by the founding of religious organizations and the spread of published magazines. According to Aung San Suu Kyi,⁷ “The development of the true modern novel, together with the short story, is closely linked to the emergence of monthly literary magazines, from 1915 onwards.”⁸ Popular magazines (*Thuriya* [The Sun], *Dagon* [Rangoon], *Kyi-bwa-yay* [Progress], and others) served as vehicles of nationalist (and later leftist) political organizations, presenting articles on science, Western literature, and politics. Most editors and writers were also leading politicians, and thus *Dobama thakin* (Burmese for “master,” an honorific title used by nationalists in order to defy British rule) and other young politicians started their careers as contributors to these nationalist anticolonial papers and magazines.

In the early 1930s, there appeared a new literary movement, *Khitsan*, led by Pali Professor Pe Maung Tin (1888–1973) of Rangoon University College. *Khitsan* means “experiment for a new age,” and it was an attempt to simplify flowery Burmese prose into a modernized style suitable for interpreting Western ideas. If we wish to evaluate the *Khitsan* movement, the role of *Ganda-lawka* (World of Books) magazine, edited by J. S. Furnivall, the well-known economic historian of Burma, should also be mentioned, since its influence is still apparent in contemporary Burmese literature and in academic studies. This bi-lingual publication from the Rangoon University campus brought up several *Khitsan* poets and writers.

Leftist literature became available in Burma in the 1930s through individuals who had been abroad and through literary works circulated by Furnivall’s Burma Book Club. U Nu, Soe, and Than Tun, who later confronted each other in post-war Burmese politics, were among the founding members of the Nagani (Red Dragon) Book Club started in 1937, which published translations on economics, politics, history, and literature and made these available to the public at a low price. The Nagani era was also contemporary with the decline of liberal democracy in the West before World War II. Radical leftist ideologies disseminated by Nagani writers, combined with a strong Dobama xenophobic nationalism, produced an aggressive political style that ruled until 1988.

Although the leftist approach seemed to be dominant in pre-war Burmese politics and literature, a radical nationalist like Maha Swe inspired youths to take violent measures in the independence struggle through his column “Makyaut-taya” (Letters against Fear), and inspired university students like Aung Kyaw to become martyrs in the 1938 general strike. In one of Maha Swe’s novels, the hero was

⁶ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Burma and India: Some Aspects of Intellectual Life under Colonialism* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study in association with Allied Publishers, 1990), p. 52.

⁷ Burmese opposition leader and Nobel Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi (b. 1945) is the only daughter of Burmese national leader, Aung San, assassinated in 1947 before independence.

⁸ A. Allott, “Burma,” in *Traveller’s Literary Companion to South-east Asia*, ed. A. Dingwall (Brighton: In Print Publishing, 1994), p. 8.

portrayed as an upper-class Burman science graduate who knew how to make a bomb. The novels of Maha Swe and other nationalist writers of the colonial period, such as U Po Kya, U Thein Maung (of the newspaper *Thuriya*), and Shwe-set-kyā, were republished in the early years of the ruling military regime in the 1990s as patriotic works with a radical anticolonial point of view.

THE FERVOR OF THE NAGANI SPIRIT AND THE COLD WAR'S KNOCKING AT THE GATES OF BURMESE LITERATURE

After World War II, dozens of new journals and magazines appeared in Burma and became vehicles for the different political parties—socialist, communist, non-political liberal, and so forth. Burmese politics was in the hands of young leftist *thakin* who had grown up with Nagani books. The patriotic works of older nationalist writers were not as popular as leftist revolutionary fiction among the younger generation who had joined in the resistance against the British and Japanese. Thus, Burmese politics and literature at this time both seemed to be radical and violent in nature.

As Burma moved closer towards gaining independence, the various political groups faced difficulties in finding the most appropriate ways to engage with independence and rebuild the war-torn country. There was intense conflict even among the leftist groups, between Red Flag and White Flag Communist factions, and also between communists and socialists. Disunity had started as far back as World War II, during the formation of the anti-fascist alliance. After the expulsion of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) from the AFPFL and the emergence of a communist revolt in the immediate post-independence months, all attempts to reunite leftist forces were unsuccessful. To aggravate the chaos, Karens, Mons, and some ethnic tribes staged armed insurgencies, fighting for the right of self-determination, further heightening the intense civil war during the early crisis years of the Cold War in the region.

Burma, as a newly independent state, faced the fall of the colonial powers in Asia and the onset of the Cold War, marked by the formation of the Soviet bloc as well as the rise of the PRC (People's Republic of China). This process pushed young leftist writers towards socialism, since capitalism was considered a tool of the former colonialists. On intellectual grounds, the rise of the left-wing literary movements, such as Sar-pay-thit (New Literature)⁹ and socialist realism, on the one hand, and "pure literature," "neutral literature," and "literature free from ideological tendencies," on the other, led to fierce debates on ideological and literary matters,¹⁰ assisted by input carried along diplomatic channels from both blocs.¹¹

At the same time, the first Burmese prime minister and former Nagani publisher, U Nu, with the help of *Khitsan* scholars like Zaw-gyi and U Thant, also tried to build the new nation by means of education and literature through founding the Burma

⁹ Dagon Taya (b. 1919), the main organizer of the new literature movement, was a close friend of the communist leaders Ba Hein and Than Tun and other AFPFL leaders and was also active in pre-war student politics.

¹⁰ A. Esche, "Myanmar Prose Writing: Tradition and Innovation in the Twentieth Century," in *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures: Literatures of Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam*, ed. D. Smyth (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), p. 17.

¹¹ U Thaug, *A Journalist*, p. 23.

Translation Society (BTS) in 1947, which aimed to translate valuable foreign books into Burmese and to encourage good writing through the award of prizes. U Nu, the translator of R. Page Arnot's *A Short History of the Russian Revolution: From 1905 to the Present Day*, which was published as *Lu-mwe-doh-ei-htwet-yet-lan* (The Ways Out for the Poor Men)¹² in 1938, then tried to launch anti-communist propaganda through his play *Ludu-aung-than* (People Win Through). Although the text of the play was disseminated widely via the popular media, U Nu could not influence the young intellectuals of the day too much because "his arguments were unconvincing and the sly kicks [he delivered] below the belt proved ineffective."¹³

Among examples of the anti-communist literature published by the BTS, the most influential book may have been the translation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (*Che-lay-gyaung-taw-hlan-yay* [The Four-legged Revolution], 1950) by a veteran writer and founder of the *thakin* movement, Ba Thaung. *Animal Farm* was unpopular in Burma when it was first published in the 1950s. Many of the leading intellectuals at that time had leftist leanings and read it as a criticism of the socialism they admired. When the US Embassy printed excerpts as anti-communist propaganda, the book's fate was sealed.¹⁴

Having gained solidarity through fighting together in World War II against the British and the Japanese, the *tatmadaw* (under the political dominance of the ruling socialists) tried to stand firm against the rebellious communists, who had previously lectured them on ideology in their wartime quarters¹⁵ and also been their one-time comrades in the *tatmadaw* PVOs (People's Volunteers Organization) in the 1950s. *Tatmadaw* leaders also opened their own media front against domestic and foreign communist influence in a market dominated by antigovernment publications like *Shumawa* (Readers' Favorite), which "contained many cartoons and articles penned by leftist authors who criticised the *tatmadaw*."¹⁶ But *Shumawa's* publisher, U Kyaw (1910–74), was a liberal, non-political person who tried to present his magazine as an unbiased periodical and a meeting ground for both leftist and politically neutral writers engaged in literary and ideological debates.

OF MYAWADDY'S MICE AND MEN

"Over the next few years," writes Callahan, "*Myawaddy* carried numerous articles by 'famous Communist writers' who had either returned to the legal fold or

¹²See www.phil.uni-passau.de/fileadmin/group_upload/45/pdf/research/zoellnerw10.1.pdf

¹³ Min Latt, "Mainstreams in Burmese Literature: A Dawn that Went Astray," *New Orient Bimonthly* 3,6 (1962): 173. For more on U Nu's play, which was translated into English and published in the United States in 1957, see Michael W. Charney, "Ludu Aung Than: Nu's Burma during the Cold War," in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 335–55.

¹⁴ E. Larkin, *Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop* (London: John Murray, 2004), p. 89.

¹⁵ R. H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (London: C. Hurst, 2008), p. 236. These lectures were given with the approval of the then-minister of war, General Aung San, although socialist captains like Maung Maung and Aung Gyi did not support this decision. See Yebaw Po Than Gyaung, *Sit-tat-nae-naing-gan-yay* [Army and Politics] (New Delhi: Study Desk Publication, 2006), p. 10.

¹⁶ Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 183.

who had never formally rebelled.”¹⁷ A famous Nagani writer and a leading figure from the main opposition pro-communist National United Front (NUF), Thein Pe Myint, published his masterpiece of a novel, *Ashay-ga nay-wun htwet-thi-pama* (As the Sun Rises in the East),¹⁸ in *Myawaddy*, while a serialized fictional version of his memoir about anti-fascist resistance, *Sit-atwin-khayi-the* (Wartime Traveler),¹⁹ was published in the popular magazine *Shumawa*, the main rival to *Myawaddy*. A veteran left-wing writer, Shwe-U-Daung, wrote an adaptation of an Andy Hardy story in *Myawaddy* where he praised the caliber of General Ne Win.²⁰ He had a personal hatred of U Nu, who had arrested him in the mid-1950s, and he seemed to favor the kind of strongman rule found in Egypt and Yugoslavia. Later, even the father of *sar-pay-thit* (new literature), Dagon Taya, contributed literary commentaries and translated short stories in *Myawaddy*.

Thus, “Aung Gyi stole *Shumawa*’s writers by offering them a little more money per story ...,” explains Callahan.²¹ *Myawaddy* also tried its utmost to beat its civilian rival with lower advertising rates and higher revenues, sporting covers with “prettier girls” (*Myawaddy* was a pioneer in using photographs on magazine covers in Burma; see figure 1, below). “Four years after *Myawaddy* started,” Callahan concludes in her brief discussion of the magazine, “*Shumawa*’s editor quit, and *Myawaddy*’s circulation rose to eighteen thousand.”²² The rivalry between *Shumawa* and *Myawaddy* was so intense that each agreed to a maximum limit to the circulation of both magazines. *Shumawa* claimed that it never forced anybody to buy magazine copies, a tactic that *Myawaddy* seemed to employ with members of the *tatmadaw*.

Myawaddy received strong support from socialist writers, such as the revolutionary artist Yangon Ba Swe (1916–86), who had been allied to *tatmadaw* leaders since their participation in pre-war anticolonial movements. Yangon Ba Swe had been involved in the post-independence suppression of the insurgency by organizing paramilitary forces, and he led a mission to rescue Colonel (later Brigadier) Maung Maung and other *tatmadaw* officials from the hands of the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), but did not join the *tatmadaw* or involve himself in politics after these events. A veteran Burmese journalist–politician, Win Tin, recently mentioned Yangon Ba Swe in his memoir, identifying him as a civilian who had advance knowledge of the 1958 coup.²³

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ This novel won the Sar-pay-beit-man Prize for best work of fiction in 1958. In fact, Thein Pe Myint took inspiration from a famous Soviet work, Ilya Ehrenburg’s *The Fall of Paris* (1941), for this novel depicting pre-war anticolonial resistance.

¹⁹ R. H. Taylor, *Marxism and Resistance in Burma, 1942–1945: Thein Pe Myint’s Wartime Traveller* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984).

²⁰ Shwe-U-Daung, “Shwe-man-mae-yway-pwe-ei-naut-sat-twe” [Sequel to Miss Mandalay contest], *Myawaddy* 3,2 (December 1954).

²¹ Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 183.

²² Ibid.

²³ After 1962, Ba Swe wrote a novel, *Shwe Wah Pyi* (Golden Land), in which he satirically pointed out flaws in Ne Win’s radical reforms. The novel was banned. Later, Ba Swe joined U Nu’s Parliament Democracy Party in 1972. See <http://www.myanmarisp.com/Writer-Biography/writer0037>.



Figure 1. Cover, August 1958 issue of *Myawaddy*

Most writers in *Myawaddy* showed a preference for anti-communist and pro-democratic politics, although some people were more right wing, while others preferred socialist ideology. Most of the names of *Myawaddy* contributors who opposed communists and promoted the values of democracy in the 1950s were still to be found in the pages of post-1962 issues of *Myawaddy*, where they expressed their support for General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council's radical socialist policies. Among these authors, Saw Oo (1919–91) was first involved in both the CPB and the Burma Socialist Party, later serving as the editor of the Socialist *Mandaing* newspaper and as *Myawaddy*'s first editor. He became an officer in the Directorate of Education and Psychological Warfare (1955–62), policy director in the Ministry of Information (1962–65), and then head of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party Press Department.²⁴ Under the guidance of the *tatmadaw* archivist Lt. Colonel Ba Than, Saw Oo and Chit Hlaing, an ex-Red Flag Communist who studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, prepared the drafts for the *tatmadaw*'s own official socialist ideology. Chit Hlaing (b. 1926) was described as an anti-Soviet, anti-communist Marxist in Burmese political circles. He also wrote books and translations on Marxism, Leninism, and the USSR while serving as the secretary in the Socialist-sponsored People's Literature Committee during 1948 through 1950. He joined the Defence Directorate of Psychological Warfare as a civilian military official with the same rank as lieutenant colonel in 1955. Cooperating with Saw Oo, he wrote pieces for the *Dhammarantaya* (Dangers of Religion) campaign against the communists.²⁵ Another returnee from the

²⁴ <http://www.myanmarisp.com/Writer-Biography/sawoo/>

²⁵ <http://www.myanmarisp.com/Evil-Persons/EP0006/>

communist jungle and an ex-economics student from Rangoon University, Chan Aye (b. 1927) gained the public's attention by publishing his thesis in *Myawaddy*, in which he argued that the CPB should drop the armed struggle and re-enter the legal fold. He became a special officer in Ne Win's Revolutionary Council Government's Ministries of Information, National Planning, and Cooperatives in 1964, and resigned from those posts two years later.²⁶

There were some women writers in *Myawaddy* who were the wives of senior *tatmadaw* officials. For example, Ma Myat Lay was the wife of Brigadier Tin Pe, who implemented radical socialist economic plans in Burma, and a sister of Colonel Tang Yu Saing, a member of the revolutionary council after 1962. The more accomplished Khin Hnin Yu (1925–2003), who also had family ties to the *tatmadaw*, could stand on her own in the literary field and even wrote in opposition to Ne Win and successive regimes' propaganda warfare. She was a cousin of U Nu and the wife of a colonel who also served as an editor of *Myawaddy* in the 1950s and used to edit her writings. Khin Hnin Yu served as U Nu's personal secretary before the 1958 coup and nursed him in his final days under house arrest. These women regularly contributed fiction with anti-communist themes to *Myawaddy*.

STORIES AND COMMENTARIES

Articles in *Myawaddy* can be categorized according to a variety of anti-communist themes, ranging from gossipy personal attacks on leftist leaders to ideological formulations aimed at the consolidation of the *tatmadaw*'s political goals, formulations that might include pointing out the weaknesses and inconsistencies in the Eastern bloc's position. One can also find short stories embodying the spirit of anti-communism and promoting democracy, as well as cultural commentaries focusing on the preservation and revival of traditional Burman culture, written in support of nationalistic values and against communism and Western influences.

Concerning the highly charged topic of the ongoing civil war, there was intense debate among pro-communist, neutralist, and pro-*tatmadaw* writers who disagreed about who had started it and how to stop it. Pro-communists supported the call for negotiation, while the *Myawaddy* group yelled for the extinction of communists, whom they considered to be the *Dhammarantaya* (enemies of religion) or stooges of the Eastern bloc. Among the works by these authors, some short stories and novels are still popular today, while most have been forgotten, dismissed as mere propaganda aimed by the *tatmadaw* against communists and other rebels.

A *Myawaddy* editorial published in 1953²⁷ even accused some communists of waiting for the outbreak of World War III, a crisis that they hoped would enable their comrades to conquer Burma. Similar to some AFPFL government propaganda,²⁸ *Myawaddy* accused communists of deliberately destroying local transport in order to cause poverty and hunger in the villages and so provoke revolution. According to

²⁶ Chan Aye later joined the NLD and was elected in the 1990 election, although he retired from politics after his release from prison. Now he is a leading economist and supporter of the current junta-sponsored 2010 elections, like Chit Hlaing. He is critical of the NLD and other opposition groups. See <http://www.myanmarisp.com/Writer-Biography/writer0004>

²⁷ Editorial, *Myawaddy* 1,9 (July 1953).

²⁸ Ministry of Information, *Is it a People's Liberation? A Short Survey of Communist Insurrection in Burma* (Rangoon: The Ministry of Information, the Government of the Union of Burma, 1952).

the editorial, communists used to call for radical measures, as when they urged that British firms, such as the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, should be immediately nationalized; they also asked the Burmese government to declare war against Britain and the United States, and called for Burma's resignation from the UN. After the Stalin era, the world political scene changed, and editorials in *Myawaddy* suggested that the rebels should lay down their arms, become farmers and traders, and engage in politics without weapons.

From the time of the Guomindang (GMD, also Koumintang, KMT) invasion in 1949, intense debates took place inside the Burmese parliament. A *Myawaddy* editorial in 1953 accused the opposition (i.e., the National United Front) of persuading the government to cooperate with the CPB to fight back against the GMD incursion.²⁹ The editorial stated that the opposition had shown respect for the murderous insurgents by recognizing them as an honorable Red army of Burma and had urged the formation of a coalition government between the rebel governments and the Burmese government, allied to resist the GMD. *Myawaddy* also claimed that if editors or authors had dared to voice such an opinion in Russia, their families and relatives would most certainly have been eliminated. According to the editorial, these communists, who had once called loyal Burmese soldiers "Nga Nu's"³⁰ dogs, were now distributing leaflets, calling for unity with the patriotic soldiers in the *tatmadaw*. But, the editorial concluded, the *tatmadaw* had already obtained documents revealing the communists' genuine hatred for the *tatmadaw*; the new politeness was merely a strategy.

Dozens of similar editorials appeared throughout the 1950s in *Myawaddy* showing the *tatmadaw*'s strong suspicion of and bitterness toward the CPB, and their complete lack of interest in reconciliation. The *tatmadaw*'s experience in the turbulent late 1940s, the fear of Cold War intervention, which might be triggered by the Guomindang's presence in northeastern Burma and implemented as an extension of the United States' Korean action, and the perceived failures on the part of the civil government to achieve national unity and stability in the 1950s, led the military leadership to take matters into its own hands, beginning a project that continues to this day to remold Burmese into supporters of the state.³¹

Myawaddy author Khin Hnin Yu was in favor of freedom of expression, which was not easily found in an autocracy (meaning here communist rule). She made the point that dictators try to overwhelm their subordinates by force, but artists do not need to do so to win people's support. Artistic talent cannot thrive under the restraints of dictatorship. Like a hidden moon under dark clouds, the arts are suppressed by a dictator's might.³² She also worried for young people, as some politicians tried to mold them into something they were not.³³

The most frequent theme that recurred in *Myawaddy*'s articles and stories had to do with the lack of democracy in the insurgents' jungle territories (especially in

²⁹ Editorial, *Myawaddy* 2,1 (November 1953).

³⁰ An impolite form of address for U Nu.

³¹ Callahan, *Making Enemies*, pp. 221–22.

³² Khin Hnin Yu, "La-min-hnin-tain-tite" [The moon and the cloud], *Myawaddy* 4,1 (November 1955).

³³ Khin Hnin Yu, "Ta-goe-daw-shin-ie-kya-lay-thaw-marna" [The fallen pride of the wizard], *Myawaddy* 5,12 (October 1957).

communist-controlled Pyin-mana District).³⁴ No communist writers from Rangoon described and critiqued communist oppression, even though they had seldom visited the insurgent areas. U Nu had already announced that it was impossible to form a coalition government with the rebels because even as they were squeezed by the influences of both Eastern and Western superpowers, they ruled the people as dictators and made them suffer.³⁵ In her defense of freedom of expression, Khin Hnin Yu echoed her cousin's speech.

Apart from the Burman-based communist insurgents, there were several ethnic separatist movements alive in Burma at this time. In a famous novel,³⁶ Khin Hnin Yu related the distrust of the *tatmadaw* felt by both Shan "feudalists" and Pa-o "ethnics" who fought each other in the southern Shan State. Both sides assumed that the *tatmadaw* would align with one side and suppress the other. The *tatmadaw* tried to explain that they came to the Shan State to repel the invading GMD, not choose allies among the Shan people. As Khin Hnin Yu stressed, the *tatmadaw* did not fight the insurgents because they were Karens or communists, but only because they threatened the peace and security of the state. In this novel, Khin Hnin Yu tried to suggest that the ethnic rebellions were plotted and incited by the pro-West elite class.

Socialist writers like Yangon Ba Swe portrayed communists as those who were aligned with the Karen insurgents and who received assistance from the GMD. He also accused communists and PVOs of urging naïve peasants to fight among each other.³⁷ He praised Aung Gyi and other wartime comrades in his famous novels, for example, *Thura San Kyaw* (a tribute to San Kyaw, who received the military medal "Thura" for his bravery), published in the December 1954 edition of *Myawaddy*. Ba Swe would later be highly regarded for his satirical play *Min-tha Ko Gyi Kaung* (Big Brother "Good"), featuring U Nu and also Khin Hnin Yu as emotional political fools in the 1959 Caretaker Government era. In this work, Ba Swe sharply criticized U Nu's acts during the 1958 AFPFL split. A Columbia graduate in psychology, Tetkatho Phone Naing (1930–2002),³⁸ wrote a 1958 novel with a similar perspective; his work blamed the opposition for the recent chaos in Burma, accusing it of having persuaded young people to revolt against the AFPFL government.³⁹ Another neutral writer, romance-bestseller Tint Tae, wrote a similar story, in which a villager who had joined the insurgency turned into a demon.⁴⁰

³⁴ Saw Oo, "Thet-say Ameint-taw" [Order to kill], *Myawaddy* 2,12 (October 1954); Chit Hlaing, "Hmar-pi-yin-hmar-nay-thaw Bama communit-mya" [Burmese communists with repeated mistakes], *Myawaddy* 4,1 (November 1955).

³⁵ Khin Hnin Yu, "Ahmaung-ei-naut-we" [Behind the darkness], *Myawaddy* 1,2 (December 1952).

³⁶ Khin Hnin Yu, "Kyun-akari" [Queen of the island], *Myawaddy* 1,3 (January 1953).

³⁷ Yangon Ba Swe, "Lei-thu-ma-tay-than" [The song of the peasant maidens], *Myawaddy* 1,10 (August 1953).

³⁸ Phone Naing was later dismissed from the service after he became involved in the 1988 uprising.

³⁹ Tetkatho Phone Naing, "Nyi-ma-lay-yae soe-yain-mi-dae" [Worries for the younger sister], *Myawaddy* 6,8–6,9 (June–July 1958).

⁴⁰ Aung Myin (Tint Tae), "U Inn Ba" [Mr. Inn-ba], *Myawaddy* 3,6 (April 1955).

ASSIMILATION VERSUS SECESSION

The *tatmadaw* tried to impose a kind of civic nationalism on the people, framed in accord with the 1947 constitution, while at the same time trying to suppress ethnic insurgencies ongoing since 1949. But its propaganda machine found it difficult to promote a collective nationalism for Burma's numerous ethnic minorities, with their different religious backgrounds and political traditions. However, not all the main ethnic tribes were against the Burman-dominated state at the outbreak of the civil war. Colonel Saw Myint⁴¹ thanked Kayah⁴² leaders who cooperated with the army in suppressing the pro-British KNDO. Later, most of these leaders were detained after the 1962 coup, accused as federalists who threatened to destroy the Union. Some *tatmadaw* leaders at the time even referred to the Kayah State Minister Sao Wunna, a loyal supporter of U Nu in the 1958 coup against the *tatmadaw*, as "Kayah general." A Kayah guerilla leader, Thaing Than Tin, who had served in the wartime Burma Defense Army under the Japanese and also during the anti-Japanese resistance, recruited about two thousand soldiers and ran a military police battalion when the KNDO insurgency broke out.⁴³

Although a pattern of patron-client relationship between the Burman court and ethnic chiefs was dominant in the precolonial state structure, the British promoted European nationalism in Burma's frontier areas and gave some favors and protection to certain ethnic groups and feudal chiefs in order to maintain the political balance with the majority Burmans. This policy had the result of creating a new political atmosphere, in which rival ethnic nationalities came into conflict with strong Burman nationalism, later dominated by the left wing.⁴⁴ R. H. Taylor argues that the establishment of egalitarianism as a principle of the state and "the eternal principle of equality," as stated in the constitution's preamble, meant that the unique privileges created by the colonial state were denied to some groups after independence, resulting in the never-ending civil war against Burman regimes.⁴⁵ This political scenario was worsened by the GMD invasion of eastern Burma, which led to a military administration and interference with existing feudal powers, provoking new rebellions. The Burman-dominated *tatmadaw* had to fight ethnic forces not only through guerrilla warfare but also on the media front, where serious questions arose, asking, for instance, how the insurgencies took the wrong path—a path detrimental to the welfare of ethnic people—and how ethnic insurgents should disarm.

There were several articles in *Myawaddy*, written mainly by *tatmadaw* personnel or Burmese civil officers working in the frontier areas, concerning social welfare development programs. These discussed the difficulties faced by such programs as a result of the insurgencies, the GMD invasion, and the lack of cooperation from, and sometimes interference by, local feudal chiefs (*sawbwaw* in the Shan and Kayah

⁴¹ Saw Myint later became the minister of information in the Revolutionary Council and a publisher of a famous periodical, *Mahayathi*, in the 1980s and 1990s.

⁴² Kayah is a different tribe of Karen (also known as Karenni or Red Karen).

⁴³ Bohmu Thaimain, "Ngwe-daung-pyi-oo-si-tho" [Towards the state of Silver Mountain], *Myawaddy* 1,11 (September 1953).

⁴⁴ R. H. Taylor, "Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited," *South East Asia Research* 13,3 (2005): 261–86.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, p. 289.

states).⁴⁶ Some civil servants recorded the cultural and anthropological traditions of the tribes, while others pointed out the needs of ethnic people.⁴⁷ Although these writings were full of anthropological and cultural information, they failed to show how so much ethnic diversity could be added to the mainstream Burman way of life in order to produce a unifying synthesis (see figure 2, below, showing a woman from the Kachin tribe on the front cover of the September 1953 issue of *Myawaddy*). The ethnic groups were assumed to be primitive tribes left behind by the colonialists. The Burman's duty was to protect and raise these people's living status, acting as a kind of big brother. As these ethnic people were cut off from access to Burman media outlets, it was hard for them to propagate their own narratives about their cultures and social lives. There was no way for them to publish their own views on the AFPFL or on the *tatmadaw's* services to the frontier areas in the pages of *Myawaddy*, for example.



Figure 2. Front cover of the September 1953 issue of *Myawaddy*, showing a woman from the Kachin tribe

A military administrator in the GMD-occupied Shan State, Colonel Saw Myint, narrated his experiences in the frontier areas of eastern and northernmost Burma. In

⁴⁶ Daw Yi Kyain, "Lut-myaut-pyi-thaw Maing-ton-myo-tho" [To the liberated Mong-tun], *Myawaddy* 3,8 (June 1955).

⁴⁷ Myint Maung, "Kayah-kon-myint-si-hma tay-gita" [Music from Kayah hills], *Myawaddy* 4,4 (February 1956); Myint Maung, "Kae-cho Kae-ba" [Two ethnic tribes from the Kahah State], *Myawaddy* 5,4 (February 1957); Thu-tay-thi, "Kyun-note-toh-ei-thway-yin-tha-yin-mya" [Our close tribes], *Myawaddy* 4,7 (May 1956); Aphwe-win-ta-oo (A member of the mission), "Phi-maw Gaw-lan Kan-phan tho" [To Phi-maw, Gaw-lan, and Kan-phan], *Myawaddy* 5,7 (May 1957); Maung Pyone Cho (Man Tin), "Myu-go-hmaung-wai Chin-doe-pyay" [Misty Chin land], *Myawaddy* 4,3 (January 1956).

a short story,⁴⁸ he pointed out the weaknesses in the local administration, which did not offer adequate remuneration to the police. He also pointed to the villagers' low level of education, which he attributed to the fact that, during the colonial period, there were no lay schools anywhere in the state—only monastic schools were available. He concluded that military administration must be the ideal. There were also some writers close to the ruling socialists, such as Yangon Ba Swe, who were sent to live with the hill tribes by the AFPFL government.⁴⁹ But their writings mostly focused on the beauty of ethnic girls and seemed to be influenced by the stories of the Victorian adventure writer Rider Haggard. The distrust between Ministerial Burma and the Frontiers, referred to as "civilized" and "wild" regions, respectively, and the contempt of the former for the latter, were also evident in these writings, although such sentiments were masked in the name of ethnic unity.⁵⁰ Even in the humor section, some images that showed ethnic assimilation into the *tatmadaw* could be found. Colonel Van Kul of the Chin battalion ordered his soldiers to speak only Burmese in quarters and prohibited the use of Chin and English; he also founded a school for the Burmese language. He was cheered as a unionist.⁵¹

As a newly independent state army, the *tatmadaw* needed its own official chronicles to claim a political legacy in Burma's independence struggle as a counter to communist dominance in Burma's ideological warfare (see figure 3, below). Leading *tatmadaw* scholars like Ba Shin and Ba Thaung were also outstanding experts in Burmese history and literature, and they both tried to develop a standardized culture for the new Burmese nation-state along with their civilian colleagues. Thus, dozens of cultural commentaries and a series of memoirs on the independence struggle appeared in the early years of *Myawaddy*, written by neutral civilian scholars (mostly from the *Khitsan* group), veterans, and military personnel.⁵² In these writings, nationalist fervor was heard again, in tones of Nagani pamphlets flavored with socialism, Buddhism, and anti-Western values. The Burman scholars dug out the forgotten court customs from Mandalay and bygone eras and tried to apply them to the post-war Burmese socialist republic. The AFPFL government also sent some artists and historians to London to find, collect, and draw examples of art and objects illustrating the old Burmese heritage. Redrawn old Burman sketches, accompanied by scholarly explanations, were often seen in the pages of *Myawaddy* (see figure 4, below). Most frequently, *Myawaddy* articles about the traditional Burmese focused on Burman courtly martial arts, the romantic lives of some famous Burman warrior-poets, and analyses of their works of classical literature and music. Through such

⁴⁸ Bohmu Thamain (Saw Myint's pseudonym), "Bo-kyauk-lon-thi-de-kan-baw-za" [Kambawza known to Colonel Stone], *Myawaddy* 1,9 (July 1953).

⁴⁹ San-nat-kyaw (Yangon Ba Swe), "Saya O Naing-gan-yay ma-lote-par" [The old writer avoids politics], *Myawaddy* 6,12 (October 1958); Yan Aung, "Naga hma Yan Aung" [Yan Aung from Naga Hill], *Myawaddy* 6,11–6,12 (September–October 1958).

⁵⁰ Bahmo Nyo Nwe, "Ah-naung-aphwe" [Bondage], *Myawaddy* 3,1 (November 1954).

⁵¹ Later, Van Kul became a state councilor in the BSPP (Burma Socialist Program Party) era (1974–88).

⁵² Thiri Maung (Ba Thaung), "Sit-myay-tar-hnint-chit-pay-hlwa" [Literature from the battleground], *Myawaddy* 1,3 (January 1953); Zaw Gyi, "Guli Gaza-bwe" [Burmese royal polo], *Myawaddy* 1,2 (December 1952); Bo Taya, "Ye-baw-thone-gyate-pyi-daw-byan" [Return of the Thirty Comrades to Burma], *Myawaddy* 1,7–2,2 (May–December 1953); Bohmu-gyi (Colonel) Aung Gyi, "Gabi-ma-htoo-ya-thay-thaw-aphyit-apyat-ta-khu" [An unrecorded event], *Myawaddy* 2,5 (March 1954).

essays, *Myawaddy's* writers presented a perspective on modern Burmese culture that showed it having been polluted by the West and in need of purification through a return to the Burman's own original culture.



Figure 3. March 1957 *Myawaddy* cover celebrating Armed Forces Day, March 27

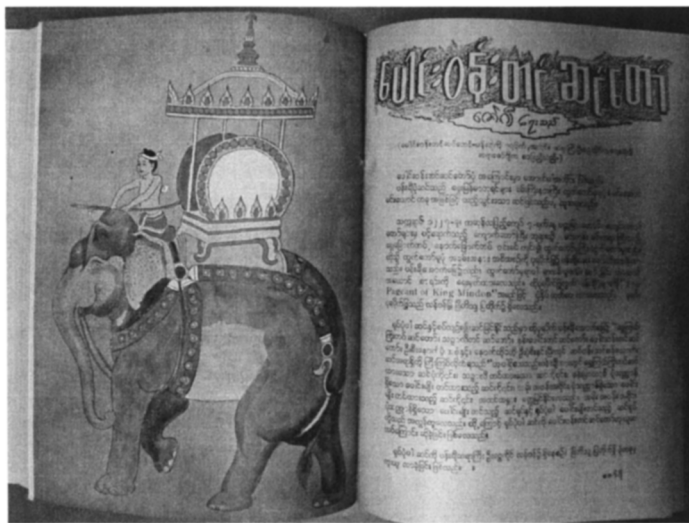


Figure 4. A drawing made from a *parabaik* (Burmese folded paper text), held in the British Museum, showing carriages and royal elephants from the court of King Mindon (1853–78), reproduced in the October 1953 issue of *Myawaddy*

Even more, adding newer chronicles written by Burman patriots during the anticolonial movements diminished the politico-social status of the ethnic groups from highland Burma who had once been allies of the British. Fostering the spirit of

unity by developing a historical perspective was mostly carried out by pre-war nationalist writers and scholars like Zeya (son-in-law of Thakin Kodaw Hmaing [1876–1964], Burmese most distinguished patriotic poet and the leader of Dobama Asiayone), Zawgyi, and a famous cartoonist, U Ba Kyi, through his comic strips on Burmese history, which portrayed the success of the Burman dynasties and explained the conflicts among different tribes in the past as merely a form of feudalistic power play (see figure 5, below). Zeya praised the four kings' gathering at Pinya (near Ava) for the opening of the Shwe-zi-gon Pagoda in the fourteenth century as an historic example that demonstrated the spirit of unity, but in fact three of the four kings he mentioned were from outside modern Burma, i.e., from Lan Xang (Laos), Yun (Chiang Mai), and China, the exception being from Arakan.⁵³

The cultural impact of post-World War II Hollywood movies was also seen as an imminent threat by the xenophobic *tatmadaw* and its nationalist officials. They assumed that social and cultural changes in the arts, media, fashion, and social relations were evidence of attempts at neo-colonization by Western capitalist states. In *Myawaddy* articles from this period, one finds, for example, a high official scolding his wife for her Westernized hair style, or for wearing a brassiere and lipstick, and criticism of teenage girls for their Westernized behavior, for their adoption of Western dress and food, and for dating.⁵⁴ This kind of radically traditionalist view, which felt confronted by the Westernized social life of Christian ethnic groups—a sort of life that included parties, night clubs, ballroom dancing, poker, and horse racing—led to the curtailment of such activities after the 1962 coup. Authors who adopted this view indicated that communal hatred towards foreigners, inherited from pre-war days, was still a strong component in relations between Burmese villagers and Indian shopkeepers, who thrived by exploiting their naïve customers.⁵⁵ It was this kind of ethnic tension, they explained, that had led to the post-1962 nationalization of foreign business firms and to the repatriation of thousands of Indians.

In addition to promoting national unity, *Myawaddy* also published critiques of forces that promoted disunity. On the tenth anniversary of the Panglong Treaty,⁵⁶ in February 1957, the magazine printed Chit Hlaing's accusation that the Union was being endangered by those who were claiming the right to secede after ten years under Chapter 10 of the 1947 Constitution.⁵⁷ This controversial right to secede had been granted in the constitution due to the demands of the feudal chiefs who did not trust the Burman nationalist leaders. The issue arose in the Shan State when it faced the GMD invasion and the introduction of the *tatmadaw* military administration that

⁵³ Zeya, "Pinya Pyidaungzu Seit-dat" [The spirit of unity from the Pinya era], *Myawaddy* 5,4 (February 1957).

⁵⁴ Phone Myint, "Padonma hñint Nylon" [Brands of foreign-exported clothing Burmese women adore], *Myawaddy* 1,5 (March 1953); Ngwe-khe, "Thamee-htan-shaut-hlwa" [Letter to a daughter], *Myawaddy* 1,5 (March 1953); Ma Myat Lay, "Du-nay-yar-du-so-daw-lae" [As a wife of an official], *Myawaddy* 4,1 (November 1955); Min Yu Wai, "Yint-mya-ywet-sin" [Maturity for a maiden], *Myawaddy* 5,7 (May 1957).

⁵⁵ Maung Kyaw Tha, "Kali-kama" [Cheating and fraud], *Myawaddy* 3,8 (June 1955).

⁵⁶ This treaty was signed by Aung San and the leaders of non-Burman ethnic groups of the Frontier Areas on February 12, 1947, pledging unity based on the principle of co-independent states with equal rights of self-determination.

⁵⁷ Chit Hlaing, "Pyidaungzu Alan-go Myint-ma-swa Pyant-lwint-zay-thaw" [Raise the union flag high], *Myawaddy* 5,4 (February 1957).

followed. Chit Hlaing portrayed the demands for self-governance as a counter-defense by some *sawbwaw*s who were worried about losing their feudal powers; he also suggested that the Shan secession movement was closely linked to the “imperialist” group’s conspiracy (here was meant the GMD invasion, which was



Figure 5. From a 1953 issue of *Myawaddy*, showing a comic-book version of the story of the three Shan brothers who founded new capitals after the fall of Pagan in the thirteenth century

popularly held to have been sponsored by the United States). He claimed that these calls to secede from the Union did not represent the Shan people’s genuine desire. Only ruin would result from these attempts, he warned, arguing that all states had equal opportunities and self-rule in the Union and that there was no point for dissociation.

The editorial in the February 1957 issue of *Myawaddy* also encouraged building support for the AFPFL’s official Pyidawtha plans⁵⁸ and adopting a correct political ideology (here it seemed to refer to a leftist parliamentary approach).⁵⁹ The ethnic insurgencies’ attempts to exercise the right to secede from the Union, and their moves to preserve the old feudal class, again, did not reflect the desires of ordinary Shan people, *Myawaddy* argued (this same assertion can be found in the current Burmese military junta’s slogans). Zin Min also stressed that General Aung San did not want other people to rule in ethnic areas apart from local tribes, and he pointed out that the Panglong Treat had promised democratic rights for the hill tribes, their full autonomy in local affairs, and suitable aid from Burma.⁶⁰ Bohmu Ba Shin, the defense historian who recorded the official anthropology of the ethnic tribes, argued

⁵⁸ Mary Callahan (*Making Enemies*, p. 246, n. 62) observes: “The Pyidawtha [‘Happy Land’] program was an all-encompassing scheme of economic and social welfare policies first introduced in 1952.”

⁵⁹ Editorial, *Myawaddy* 5,4 (February 1957).

⁶⁰ Zin Min, “Pyidaungzu nay” [Union Day], *Myawaddy* 5,4 (February 1957).

that the administrative, political, social, and democratic rights granted to the “backward” areas changed the local people from ruled to rulers.⁶¹

During his trip to Yawnghwe Haw, Bo Ta-ya⁶² criticized how feudalism suppressed ethnic people and exploited them; he wished that feudalism would fade from the world.⁶³ A young leftist writer, Mya Than Tint, portrayed the conflict between the feudalists and leftists in the GMD-threatened Shan State through his story of a love affair between a feudal princess and a leftist Shan student.⁶⁴ The two young students in his tale met in Rangoon University and fell in love with each other despite the fact that the status of the princess in highland feudal society was so far above that of the student. But when the leftist student started an anti-feudal movement in the Shan State, their love affair was destroyed by the feudal family, which had close contacts with GMD intruders and the Western missionaries. In this way, the writer, Mya Than Tint, made the feudal chiefs responsible for the backwardness of the Shan State and interpreted their close relationship with American missionaries as an act of collaboration with Western stooges. The story gives the impression that the communists and the ruling socialists shared a common suspicion of ethnic groups and Westerners, who seemed to be united in a conspiracy against their leftist aspirations. This anti-feudalist and anti-imperialist fiction by a pro-communist writer reminds the contemporary reader that in 1962 some aboveground communists supported a government coup, thereby countering the ethnic leaders’ desire to found a federal union that would give equal power to ethnic groups and majority Burmans. In raising this federal issue, both the feudal chiefs and leftist ethnic politicians worked together, and most were detained for several years, charged with endangering the stability of the Union. Thus, the *tatmadaw* seemed to fail to reconcile the ethnic nationalist political movements and the ruling AFPFL’s Burman leftist policy, despite claiming a good record in frontier development and cultural assimilation (i.e., “Burmanization,” as it was perceived by ethnic people). The *tatmadaw*’s decision to target and accuse the traditional ruling class of being imperialist stooges, combined with its drive to build a socialist economy, worsened the relationship between the rival elites. The Shan and Kayah chieftains had already felt that the military administration was a threat to their sovereignty, while the *tatmadaw* was not impressed with inefficient feudal rule. In 1961, these conflicts would reemerge, as demands increased for a federal union that would grant more administrative power to the state; this dissension made it more likely that the *tatmadaw* would stage a coup to prevent the dissociation of the Union. That said, certain descendents of ethnic feudal chiefs, such as Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, the son of the first president (Yawnghwe Sawbwa), have interpreted the situation differently

⁶¹ Thu-tay-thi (Bohmu Ba Shin), “Kyun-nok-do-ei-kone-myay-myint-day-tha-mya” [Our highlands], *Myawaddy* 4,4 (February 1956).

⁶² Bo Ta-ya (1919–93), a member of the 30 Comrades who founded the Burma Independence Army under the Japanese; he joined the communist rebellion, disarmed early, and became U Nu’s Union Party MP in 1960.

⁶³ Bo Ta-ya, “Kyun-taw-thi-thaw Kam-baw-za” [Kam-baw-za as I know it], *Myawaddy* 4,4 (February 1956).

⁶⁴ See Mya Than Tint, “Lite-khe-daw Mya Nanda” (Follow with me Princess Mya Nanda), *Myawaddy* 6,1 (November 1957). Mya Than Tin would later be detained in the Cocos Island during the Caretaker (*Bogyoke*, “General”) regime (1958–60) and the Revolutionary Council era (1962–74).

and maintained that the federal movement and the Shan uprising were reactions to the highhandedness of the Burman military and their ill-disciplined soldiery.⁶⁵

TATMADAW'S WAY TO SOCIALISM

A study of the articles published in *Myawaddy* sheds light on how the *tatmadaw* constructed its Burmese socialist ideology. As explained by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, "State socialism was a way for non-Western countries to become part of the modern, industrial world without appearing to mimic the metropolis of capitalist imperialism. This alternative route to modernity was tried in Egypt, Iraq ... and many other places. And it failed."⁶⁶ Burma was no exception to this trend. In the Burmese case, the ruling civilian social democratic regime lagged behind their enthusiastic comrade colonels, who were driven by more intense distrust of the communists and Sinophobia. A Sorbonne-trained intellectual, Chit Hlaing, who was also a brother-in-law of the then-minister of home affairs, a leading socialist from the AFPFL, seems to have taken the lead in the *tatmadaw's* own ideological formation. His most important contribution to *Myawaddy* and to the *tatmadaw* was the formulation of a new socialism for Burma.⁶⁷ He focused on materialism and spiritual issues rather than the practical steps needed to install his desired ideology through the parliamentary system in communist-threatened Burma. Though his writings are mostly against communism, he was not a supporter of liberal democracy. Moreover, he did not promote pluralism or a free-market economy of the sort that typified states in the West. Yet his model seems to have been Yugoslavia, rather than either the USSR or the PRC. His writings reveal an admiration for Tito, a leader who dared to take a stand against the USSR. It seems that Chit Hlaing may have been taking personal revenge for having been refused permission to attend the international communist youth conference in Moscow in 1951; he was distrusted by the Burmese communists who had sent a delegation there. Since Tito had stood up to a much more powerful neo-imperial power, Chit Hlaing could cite him as a figure who gave expression to the nationalist sentiments of a newly independent state like Burma.

Chit Hlaing's office, the Directorate of Psychological Warfare, "sponsored projects aimed at convincing *tatmadaw* officers and soldiers that they were part of a legitimate national army fighting for a just cause."⁶⁸ Aung Gyi, Maung Maung, and Ba Than "invited former communists and socialists to draft an ideological statement synthesizing communism and socialism within the context of a Buddhist society;" Saw Oo, Chit Hlaing, and Ba Than prepared a draft and submitted it to the 1956

⁶⁵ Chao Tzang Yawngnhe, "The Burman Military: Holding the Country Together?," in *Independent Burma at Forty Years: Six Assessments*, ed. Joseph Silverstein (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1989), p. 97.

⁶⁶ Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), p. 40.

⁶⁷ Chit Hlaing, "Myanmar Naing-gan-hnint demo-ka-ray-cy socialit-wa-da" [Burma and Democratic Socialism], *Myawaddy* 5,12 (October 1957); Chit Hlaing, "Demo-ka-ray-cy socialit-sanit-hnint Narma-rupa-wada" [Democratic socialism and Narma-rupaism], *Myawaddy* 6,1 (November 1957); Chit Hlaing, "Narma-rupa-wada-hnint lu-lawka-phyit-sin" [Narma-rupaism and events in society], *Myawaddy* 6,3 (January 1958); Chit Hlaing, "Narma-rupa-wada-ei lu-thamaing-amyin" [Narma-rupaism and its view on history], *Myawaddy* 6,4 (February 1958).

⁶⁸ Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 183.

Commanding Officers' Conference.⁶⁹ Following a decision at this conference, Saw Oo and Chit Hlaing were appointed to study and formulate the *tatmadaw's* ideology, and they became the masterminds behind the declarations of the *tatmadaw* in the 1950s and early 1960s.⁷⁰ But these ex-communist writers had been already recruited for *Myawaddy*. In support of the attempts by *tatmadaw* ideologists to synthesize these philosophies, Paragu (b. 1921), an ex-monk and writer who had studied in India, wrote an interesting article on Buddhist monks' participation in the evolution of *tatmadaw* ideology. He wrote that Colonel Ba Than sent some specially selected soldiers to a famous nationalist monk, U Oat-kha-hta,⁷¹ to study and compare Buddhism with Marxism. Furthermore, Chit Hlaing, Saw Oo, and Bo Thein Dan⁷² consulted a famous Ceylonese monk and scholar in Rangoon.⁷³

As Aung Myoe points out in *Building the Tatmadaw*, there were eight stages in the ideological development of the *tatmadaw*. Chit Hlaing's ideological writings coincided with the fourth stage of ideological study and the discussion prior to the 1958 declaration of the first ideological formulation of the *tatmadaw*, which was redrafted repeatedly to turn it into its final form, known as "The Burmese Way to Socialism."⁷⁴ Chit Hlaing even referred to the national hero, Aung San, as if he were supposed to have Burmanized socialism, just as Mao had Sinicized it.⁷⁵ Aung Myoe also remarks that the *tatmadaw's* decision to plant Marxist elements at the core of the "Burmese Way to Socialism" enabled the regime to neutralize and draw support from prominent, openly leftist leaders, and, in so doing, project itself as a revolutionary force that could achieve socialist objectives in postcolonial Burma.⁷⁶ John Badgley writes that Marxist ideology was to dominate the thought of many Burmese intellectuals from the late 1930s onward and to retain its influence over government thinking until 1988.⁷⁷

Yet Chit Hlaing's usage of the phrase "democratic socialism" echoes the ruling socialist leader U Kyaw Nyein's social democratic ideology rather than Marxist socialist doctrine. It also echoed Premier U Nu's goals for a socialist state based on democratic principles. But the phrase *Narma-rupa Wada*, used by Chit Hlaing and his associates, was changed into *Lu-hnint-pat-wun-gyin-do-ei-ei-nya-min-nya-tha-baw-taya* (The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment) in the "Burmese Way to Socialism," a revision that seemed to make it clearer and more acceptable to the urban intellectuals. Chit Hlaing also wrote against dictatorship in leftist states. Reading through his articles, one gets the impression that he preferred a third way of

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

⁷⁰ Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces since 1948* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009), pp. 60–61.

⁷¹ U Oat-kha-hta (1897–1978) studied in India in the 1920s and wrote *Marx-wada-hso-da bar-lae* (What's Marxism?).

⁷² Bo Thein Dan (? – 1995) was a former member of CPB, Leftist Unity Council (1948), and later a senior member in BSPP.

⁷³ Paragu, "Abi-dhamma hna -yat" [Two philosophies], *Myawaddy* 5,1 (November 1956).

⁷⁴ Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*, pp. 60–61.

⁷⁵ Chit Hlaing, "Kyun-naw thi-thaw U Naung Cho" (U Naung Cho as I know him), *Myawaddy* 4,9 (July 1956).

⁷⁶ Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*, p. 59

⁷⁷ John Badgley, "Intellectuals and the National Vision: The Burmese Case," *Asian Survey* 9,8 (August 1969): 601.

founding a just society, modeled along the lines of the Scandinavian states, India, or Sukarno's Indonesia, and achieved by blending a socialist economy with a parliamentary democracy.⁷⁸

In addition to Chit Hlaing's writings, ex-communist Comrade Chan Aye's analyses of CPB policy throughout the civil war are of interest. When Chan Aye was sent to negotiate with the AFPFL in 1956, he did not put forward the CPB line, a decision that led to his dismissal from the CPB for a period of time, during which he wrote a paper⁷⁹ criticizing the CPB's 1948 revolutionary strategy and urging the acceptance of parliamentary democracy. Chan Aye was subsequently arrested in Rangoon while working for the underground movement. He gave his paper to the then-socialist information minister, and it was published widely, not only in *Myawaddy* but also in the form of booklets circulated throughout the countryside by the *tatmadaw* for the purpose of reaching the CPB.

Other writings on socialism before the AFPFL split were those of Lay Gyi and Jin-dat.⁸⁰ Those authors seemed to be trying to counteract the overwhelming influence of communism—which was so strongly attractive in the midst of the chaos and moral depravity tolerated by the ruling civilian regime—by promoting (and also criticizing) moderate socialism. Although it has proved impossible to determine the real identity of the author Jin-dat, his introduction to Milovan Djilas's *New Class* agreed with anti-communist views popular in the West.⁸¹ Another author who contributed to *Myawaddy* during this period, Comrade Thein Maung, wrote an article on Yugoslavia's army.⁸² At that time, Yugoslavia served as a prominent example for the Burmese, as it was a small nation, like Burma, that wished to found a socialist state independent of the USSR and the PRC. Military dictators who attempted to lead leftist states (as in cases of Tito and Nasser) attracted left-leaning Burmese army officers.⁸³

NEPOTISTIC DEMOCRACY

In opposition to the communist call for revolution against capitalism, *Myawaddy* tried to find a third way to build a socialist state by means of democratic or parliamentary systems of government. The victory of the Indian Communist Party in Kerala State in 1957 and the declaration that the communists there would maintain the parliamentary system (this declaration was pronounced at the international meeting of communist parties in Moscow in that same year) were offered as events

⁷⁸ Chit Hlaing, "Lat-wa-gyi-oat-ar-nar-shin-sa-nit" [Constricted dictatorship], *Myawaddy* 6,5 (March 1958).

⁷⁹ Chan Aye, "Chan Aye Sit-tan" [Chan Aye's analysis], *Myawaddy* 5,7 (May 1957).

⁸⁰ Lay Gyi, "Socialit-wada-so-da ba-lae" [What's Socialism?], *Myawaddy* 5,11 (September 1957); Lay Gyi, "Socialit-wada-ei ala-ala-mya" [Future of Socialism], *Myawaddy* 6,3 (January 1958); Jin-dat, "Bar-kyauung Socialit-sanit lo-lar-at-tha-lae" [Why is socialism wanted?], *Myawaddy* 6,1 (November 1957).

⁸¹ Jin-dat, "Dilas," *Myawaddy* 5,11 (September 1957); Jin-dat, "Yugo-Soviet padi-pat-kha" [Yugo-Soviet Rift], *Myawaddy* 6,7 (May 1958); Jin-dat, "Imre Nagy-hnint communit-wada" [Imre Nagy and Communism], *Myawaddy* 6,8 (June 1958); Jin-dat, "Gaba-thit" [New world], *Myawaddy* 6,9 (July 1958).

⁸² Yebaw (Comrade) Thein Maung, "Yugo-do-ei pyi-thu-tatmadaw" [People's army of Yugoslavia], *Myawaddy* 3,1–3,2 (November–December 1954).

⁸³ Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 181

that supported *Myawaddy's* position.⁸⁴ According to *Myawaddy*, in Soviet Russia's constitution, the Communist Party was described as the guiding party. Thus, the Soviet Union would be eternally dominated by the totalitarianism of the Communist Party. No democratic right to criticize communism or the communist party existed in the USSR. That was what one could expect from communist democracy or proletariat dictatorship. *Myawaddy* openly accused the Soviet Union of being a state run by the secret police and an absolute dictatorship.⁸⁵

Myawaddy praised the role of elections in limiting corruption and the abuse of power among politicians. It accused the communists of following the same path as Aung San's assassin, Galon U Saw, by trying to take power by force. *Myawaddy* thus invoked the name of the Burmese national father to legitimize its political position and linked the communists to Aung San's killer.⁸⁶ But the AFPFL always won elections because U Nu and the socialist leaders asked Ne Win and the colonels for the *tatmadaw's* unofficial support; *tatmadaw* leaders still thought that helping the AFPFL to retain leadership was a patriotic duty.⁸⁷ The *tatmadaw's* leaders' political connection to the AFPFL and their unhappiness at seeing the emergence of support for the pro-communist opposition inside the parliament were revealed after the 1956 election. *Myawaddy* openly accused the opposition (here, the pro-CPB NUF) of gaining support in this election from "bullet votes," i.e., by cooperating with the CPB insurgents, actions revealed in *tatmadaw* and civilian reports.⁸⁸ But the NUF countered with its own publications, arguing that parliamentary elections held amidst the ongoing civil war had become tarnished because of murders, arrests, threats, and kidnappings, making people distrust the AFPFL.⁸⁹ These statements show that the *tatmadaw* was not prepared to accept communist forces back into the political arena, although they persuaded them to surrender and contest the elections. The worries of *tatmadaw* officials about a communist takeover of the state appeared vividly in the pages of *Myawaddy* when the AFPFL officially split into two factions at the end of April 1958, and U Nu's Clean AFPFL won support from the leftist NUF when he faced a non-confidence vote from the far-right "Stable" faction.

In fact, after that 1956 election, signs of a looming AFPFL split were clearly visible, and *Myawaddy's* columnists started to call for the reorganization of the league. Chit Hlaing wrote that, although the AFPFL managed to survive through the climax of the civil war in 1949–50 and despite the defection of the radical socialists in 1950, now sectarianism, jealousy, and a thirst for power had contaminated the

⁸⁴ Jin-dat, "Parliament sanit-phyint-lae Socialist lawka ti-htaung-naing-thi" [Socialist society can be founded by a parliamentary system], *Myawaddy* 6,7 (May 1958).

⁸⁵ Editorial, *Myawaddy* 6,11 (September 1958); Chit Hlaing, "Let-wa-gyi-ok Arnar-shin-sanit" [Constricted dictatorship], *Myawaddy* 6,5 (March 1958).

⁸⁶ Editorial, *Myawaddy* 5,9 (July 1957). This issue of the magazine coincided with the tenth anniversary of the assassination of Aung San and his cabinet ministers.

⁸⁷ M. W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 86; Maung Maung, *Burma and General Ne Win* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1969), p. 228.

⁸⁸ Editorial, *Myawaddy* 4,8 (June 1956).

⁸⁹ Widura Thakin Chit Maung, *Myanmar-pyi-naing-gan-yay-sittan* [Burmese Political Analyses 1492–1974] (Rangoon: Sein-pan-myaing Sar-pay, 1976), p. 69; Mary P. Callahan, "The Sinking Schooner: Murder and the State in Independent Burma, 1948–1958," in *Gangsters, Democracy, and the State in Southeast Asia*, ed. Carl A. Trocki (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998), pp. 17–38.

AFPFL leadership. It was only due to the threat of radical rebellions that the AFPFL remained united.⁹⁰ He also warned AFPFL leaders about the growth of sectarianism inside the league and the leaders' inability to expel disruptive or dishonest followers due to personal relationships.⁹¹ The split in the party occurred just one year later. It seems that although the *tatmadaw* leaders wished to foster the modernization and building of a strong democratic AFPFL, rather than continue as part of an umbrella organization united for the sole purpose of exercising power, their civilian comrades failed to pay heed to their advice. Moreover, U Nu's attempts to overhaul the AFPFL and unite it into a single party with mass support threatened the network of Rangoon socialist leaders and their local subordinates, thus increasing the severity of the split within the AFPFL. Apart from U Nu, most AFPFL leaders had their own power base in satellite mass organizations, and they linked business benefits, such as licenses and government posts, to local political bosses' promises to collect needed votes during elections.

The great importance of social and family connections in the Burmese politics of the U Nu era also played a role in the schism. The main reason why senior *tatmadaw* officials aligned with the Stable faction of the AFPFL was because of their family ties, regional backgrounds, and shared school and political experiences. Stable AFPFL leaders Kyaw Nyein and Ba Swe, and *tatmadaw* leaders Maung Maung, Aung Gyi, and Ne Win, had all cooperated with each other since participating in the underground activities of the People's Revolutionary Party in pre-World War II days and during the founding years of the Burma Socialist Party. In addition, there were other opposition politicians who had attended school and worked together before this time, and who maintained close ties to one another. Even some Clean AFPFL leaders with socialist origins formed close bonds with the *tatmadaw* while struggling to suppress the insurgency.⁹² Thus, unity between the *tatmadaw* and the Stable faction seemed to be linked to their personal interests, a common antagonism toward U Nu's policy favoring the ethnic minorities and communists, and also a right-leaning approach in domestic and foreign policy. There might also have been hidden agendas related to post-election power and interest sharing. Arrest of the (Stable) AFPFL leaders in 1963 revealed the subtle relationship between the *tatmadaw* and its civilian allies.

After the AFPFL split, clashes between the local Clean AFPFL and *tatmadaw* posts in the countryside began. It was rather hard to claim that the *tatmadaw* would always obey the government elected by the constitution and the parliament. But when the local Clean AFPFL leaders urged their Rangoon leaders to protect them from the brutalities of the "fascist" *tatmadaw*,⁹³ *Myawaddy* angrily replied in its editorials, accusing these politicians of assaulting the *tatmadaw* and assaulting the state, the people, and the constitution, as well as cooperating with the communists.

⁹⁰ Chit Hlaing, "Pha-sa-pa-la-hint aneik-sa Dhamma-yin" [AFPFL and the law of impermanent truth], *Myawaddy* 5,6 (April 1957).

⁹¹ Chit Hlaing, "Gaing-gana-wada-go-sunt-pe-gya-lot" [Drop sectarianism], *Myawaddy* 5,8 (June 1957).

⁹² Along with other socialist and PVO leaders, like Bo Min Gaung, Tun Win, and Bohmu Aung, Ba Swe raised paramilitary forces to suppress the insurgency under the Ministry of Home Affairs. See Ko Than (Kemman-dine), "Myaut-kyaung-chi-tat-hnit-atu" [With levies toward the north of Rangoon], *Chin-dwin* no. 38 (May 2009): 113.

⁹³ Some delegates at the Clean AFPFL Congress (held in Rangoon in September 1958) declared the *tatmadaw* to be "Public Enemy Number One." See Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 185.

Declaring the *tatmadaw* would not become stooges for any political party (this meant refuting their links with the Stable AFPFL), the *tatmadaw* promised it would defend the democratic state in Burma and crush the “cunning” communist threat.⁹⁴ Finally, the *tatmadaw*’s claims that it was protecting parliamentary democracy as mandated by the constitution, while at the same time it accused the opposition leftists of being pro-communists who threatened the democratic order, sound like the statements of an organization protecting its own political interests, which were linked to those of the ruling AFPFL regime.

Michael Aung-Thwin has argued that the Burmese parliamentary system during the U Nu era was not able to bring the precolonial state ideology of the *Dhammaraja* (righteous ruler), which had been interrupted by British rule, back into being.⁹⁵ That is why scholars like Donald Seekins think that the Burmese politics of 1948–58 amounted to “anarchic democracy,” in which the social order always seemed to be on the verge of falling apart, with few limits to the exercise of personal power or the excesses of destructive factionalism.⁹⁶ Due to the destructiveness of the civil war and also the emergence of the *tatmadaw* as a supra-state structure, U Nu’s idealistic goals to build a democratic Buddhist socialist state were never fulfilled. Despite the *tatmadaw*’s psychological warfare and attempts to formulate a domestic socialism mixed with Buddhism, the armed forces could not resist Mao’s radical doctrines as they were accepted and promulgated by his Burmese comrades. The clash between these ideological camps was evident during the 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon.

CONCLUSION

After the inauguration of *Myawaddy* in 1952, the *tatmadaw*’s establishment as a national institution took place within a half decade, while the civilian political structure was deteriorating due to personal conflicts and a lack of credibility deriving from its failure to accomplish the task of building a democratic state. Although this propaganda mouthpiece of the *tatmadaw* was initiated as a vehicle for the army’s ideological defense against the communist threat emanating from the CPB and the PRC, it later developed into an official organ for the *tatmadaw*, dedicated to formulating its own political ideology, called “Democratic Socialism.” In its pages, the *tatmadaw* dared to criticize openly the ruling Clean AFPFL’s negotiations with the insurgent communists, and it accused U Nu of offering the CPB an opportunity to share power.

From the early years of *Myawaddy*, before the first coup in 1958, we can see how the *tatmadaw* tried to convince the public of the dangerous threat posed by communists and communism to democratic Burma, even while it was searching for a suitable brand of socialism for the country. The *tatmadaw* promoted its own views on the survival of parliamentary democracy in a country that was engaged in an intense civil war. It also tried to show how modernization and cultural assimilation could bring the minorities a better and securer place in the Union even though these

⁹⁴ Editorial, *Myawaddy* 6,12 (October 1958).

⁹⁵ Michael Aung-Thwin, “The British ‘Pacification’ of Burma: Order without Meaning,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16,2 (September 1985): 256.

⁹⁶ D. M. Seekins, *The Disorder in Order: The Army-State in Burma since 1962* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2002), p. 31.

adaptations might not allow them to bargain for more administrative power and resources from the Burman-led Union government.

But the *tatmadaw*'s association with the ruling socialists inside the AFPFL, and its support for election rigging throughout the period of civilian rule, made a bad impression among an increasingly distrustful public. This people's distrust became apparent in the 1956 parliamentary election, when the AFPFL fared poorly, a failure that largely contributed to the split of the AFPFL in 1958. Though *Myawaddy* always claimed that the *tatmadaw* was protecting the democratic constitution of Burma, as well as parliamentary democracy, in reality the *tatmadaw* were focused on the communists' gaining a significant role after the AFPFL split and the government's attempts to draw the rebellious CPB into the legal fold. This showed that the *tatmadaw* was unable to allow a democratic culture under a constitution to come into existence. The *tatmadaw* attempted to topple the unstable U Nu regime twice in five years. The second coup was concerned with ethnic autonomy and the desire of ethnic groups to build a federal state to replace the Burman-dominated quasi-union. This struggle paved the way for the *tatmadaw* to seize complete power, a move that was intended to prevent the disintegration of the Union amid external threats. The military's hold on power in Burma has lasted nearly half a century. Following a credo that posits Burman superiority, an assumption inherited from the 1930s Dobama Asiayone nationalist movement, the *tatmadaw* were bound to adopt a Nietzschean belief in the need for a strong state built by a noble race. Such a state could not be allowed to fall apart due to imperialist stooges, feudalists, and separatists. Although the AFPFL government formed an alliance with the *tatmadaw* to impose some democratic rule while fighting a strong communist insurgency, the *tatmadaw* decided to end parliamentary democracy and suspend the constitution until a welfare state, based on a socialist economy and ethnic unity, was established and "feudalist" ties were swept away.⁹⁷

That is why the *tatmadaw* and its magazine, *Myawaddy*, ultimately failed to win the real hearts and minds of the public during the campaigns to propagate democratic ideals, discredit leftist radicalism, and bring the dream of a unified Burma to reality. The impact of the magazine's efforts to invent the *tatmadaw*'s version of political biography, formulate an official myth of Burma, and present political issues persuasively in fictional terms seem not to have been great enough to achieve the goal of building a socialist welfare state while preserving basic democratic rights. Though the editors of the magazine understood that "culture" had an important role to play in the struggle for power in these critical years of the civil war in Burma, they tried merely to revive old Burman court culture. But this attempt failed to project a unified cultural model and so deepened the existing cultural fault lines between Westernized ethnic Christians, Burman Buddhist nationalists, and ethnic Buddhists like the Mons, Arakanese, and Shans. What *Myawaddy*'s fictional works did convey to its readers, whether or not they were inclined toward socialism, was a fear of communism, an enthusiasm for traditional culture and its preservation, and a desire for a unified, modern state free of insurgency and the threat of foreign intervention.

⁹⁷ Editorial, "Taw-hlan-yay-gyi-atwet-pyin-sin-gya-zo" [Let's prepare for the Revolution], *Myawaddy* 10,6 (April 1962).

THE MAN WITH THE
GOLDEN GAUNTLETS:
MIT CHAIBANCHA'S *INSI THORNG*
AND THE HYBRIDIZATION OF
RED AND YELLOW PERILS IN THAI
COLD WAR ACTION CINEMA¹

Rachel V. Harrison

"War is Hell Mr. Thornhill. Even when it's a cold one."
— *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock)

"Everything he deemed communist he detested, and everything he detested was labeled communist."
— Thak Chaloemtiarana, on Police General Phao Siyanon (1910–60)²

On October 8, 1970, the chilling scenes of Mit Chaibancha's body being hauled up out of its coffin for the incredulous crowds gathered in the temple grounds to see provided tangible evidence of the untimely death of this monumental Thai movie

¹ I would like to thank Janit Feangfu for her help in searching out answers to some of my queries on Thai data for this paper and to thank my Advanced Thai Cultural Studies classes at SOAS for giving me the opportunity to test out some of the ideas included here. Thanet Wongyannava was helpful in providing information on the screening of American-backed films in Thailand. Duncan Harte offered a series of insightful remarks on the piece. And Jonah Foran gave indispensable comments on broader film history, which are developed in the paper in the comparisons with *Fu Manchu*. I am grateful both to the editors of this volume, Tony Day and Maya Liem, and to the two anonymous reviewers for their reflections on earlier drafts of this piece.

² Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007; Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2007), p. 57.

star.³ That year alone, Mit had starred in twenty-nine films, eighteen of which remained incomplete at the time of his demise. Throughout his thirteen-year-long acting career, he starred in a total of 262 movies, invariably alongside female counterpart Phetchara Chaowarat. This iconic combination, abbreviated in promotional material and in popular memory simply to “Mit-Phet” (see figure 1, below), contributed to a legendary phase in Thai cinema history. That phase was brought to an abrupt close, however, when Mit lost his grip on a rope ladder suspended from a helicopter and plunged to his death while filming his own stunt in the self-directed action movie *Insi thong* (The Golden Eagle) (see figure 2, below).⁴



Figure 1. Mit Chaibancha stars with Phetchara Chaowarat in a scene from *Awasan insi daeng* (The Fall of the Red Eagle, 1963). Illustration reproduced from Sek Dusit’s biographical article on the actor, *Mit Chaibancha kap khaphachao* (Mit Chaibancha and I), in an undated promotional brochure on Mit published after his death.

³ The spelling of Mit Chaibancha’s name in English is sometimes rendered as Mitr to reflect the silent “r” that appears at the end of his name in Thai. To avoid confusion, that convention has not been adopted here. A consistent transcription system has been adopted in this paper, with the exception of rendering Thai names, which are spelled according to the preference or common practice of each individual concerned.

⁴ Phetchara herself also suffered at the hands of the film industry, developing serious cataracts as a result of exposure to harsh lighting.



Figure 2. The final scene of *Insi thong* (The Golden Eagle, 1970), filmed shortly before Mit fell from the rope ladder to his death. Image from Ingsak Ket-horm, *Mit Chaibancha: Khwam-mai haeng chiwit* (Mit Chaibancha: The Meaning of Life) (Bangkok: Starpics, 2002), p. 111.

This paper casts a critical eye over Mit's filmmaking career, with particular reference to his final complete film, *Insi thong*, its relationship to the cultural politics of its day, and to the distinctive experience and expression of Thai Cold War paranoia in the "American era" of Thailand's recent history.⁵ In doing so, the paper opens with a discussion of the socio-political environment in which the movie came to be made, drawing out the key foci of the cultural anxieties of its time and how they played out in filmmaking following the release of *Insi thong* in 1970. The paper refers, by way of contextualization and comparison, to the treatment of "The Red Peril" (*phai daeng*) in a selection of roughly contemporaneous movies: notably, *Phai daeng* (Red Bamboo); *Ai yam daeng* (The Madman with the Red Cloth Bag); and *Nak phaen-din* (Scum of the Earth). In each of these Thai Cold War films, as in *Insi thong*, the role of the male action star and pin-up functioned as a vehicle for anti-communist propaganda. Yet, as this paper contends, the outwardly anti-communist position expressed through movies such as *Insi thong*, *Nak phaen-din*, and *Phai daeng* is heavily inflected with a sentiment more closely defined as anti-Chinese. Such

⁵ The "American era" is a term used by Benedict Anderson in the introduction to a collection of Thai short stories (co-translated with Ruchira Mendiones), *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1985). The term refers to the period following World War II in which Siam/Thailand came under the intense influence and effects of American foreign policy and aid, a period that provides the historical context of this chapter.

sentiments have their roots in the definitions of early twentieth-century Thai national identity, in which the sense of “The Yellow Peril” was firmly established during the reign of King Rama VI (1910–25). The perpetuation of these anxieties, which became entangled with “The Red Peril” of communism, is expressed in the Cold War era through the action movie star, who is portrayed as a defender of a Thainess (*khwam-pen-thai*) embodied in the trinity of Nation, Religion, and King (*chat, satsana, phramahakasat*).⁶

THAILAND’S COLD WAR: CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ITS “OTHERS”

Following the end of World War II, the United States developed a close and penetrating relationship with Thailand, an arrangement that minimized Western punitive action against the country, which had allied with the Japanese during the war. By 1949, US trade with Thailand had, for example, increased by 2,000 percent over the immediate pre-war level.⁷ As the Cold War escalated during the 1950s, Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram aligned himself yet more closely with the United States, the success of his regime dependent, as Thak Chaloemtiarana confirms, upon his ability to attract World Bank loans and American economic and military aid for the promotion of “development” (*kan-phatthana*) and “national security.”⁸ Jumping firmly onto the bandwagon of fighting the “international communist conspiracy,” Phibun declared Thailand to be the target of increasingly dangerous communist intentions, fueled by the rise of the leftist independence movements across Southeast Asia that had developed in the fight against colonial rule, and, most especially, by the success of the communist revolution in China in 1949.⁹ In 1960, Richard J. Coughlin depicted the perspective of the ensuing decade: “The politically conscious Thai sees Red Chinese waiting close to Thailand’s northern border; from the south in Malaya, whence the Chinese communist revolt has from time to time spilled over into Thailand, comes another threat; while to the east in Cambodia there are signs of growing Communist influence.”¹⁰

Phibun endorsed this anxiety over communism by making his country the first in Asia to provide troops in support of the US war effort against North Korea (1950–53). In return, Thailand received in excess of US\$35 million in economic aid and financial loans and was transformed into the pivot of Washington’s region-wide

⁶ Since I wrote the first draft of this paper, this same pair of contrasting colors, red and yellow, has taken on an additional significance in the context of contemporary Thai politics and its impact in terms of wider social divisions. Expressing itself in the same hues, the political divide between the “red-shirt” supporters of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a coup in 2006, and the “yellow-shirt” supporters of the People’s Alliance for Democracy continues to shape politics in the twilight years of King Rama IX’s long reign.

⁷ See Frank C. Darling, *Thailand and the United States* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1965), quoted in W. R. B. Irvine, “The Thai Yuan ‘Madman’ and the ‘Modernizing, Developing Thai Nation’ as Bounded Entities under Threat: A Study in the Replication of a Single Image” (PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 1981), p. 71.

⁸ See Thak, *Thailand*, p. 69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁰ See Richard J. Coughlin, *Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 195.

effort to expand its influence.¹¹ Treating the country, as Benedict Anderson engagingly puts it, like a “sort of gigantic immobile aircraft carrier,” America made Thailand the headquarters “not only of SEATO, but also for a vast array of overt and clandestine American operations in neighboring Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and Vietnam.”¹²

The Americanization of Thailand was further imposed at the level of cinema culture, with 95 percent of the movies screened there emanating from the United States.¹³ A distribution cartel involving eight major US film companies was formed in 1946 and made its effects felt on Thailand by the close of the decade, when its representatives firmly established themselves in the country as part of its mission to ensure that Thais were exposed only to movies from the “free world.”¹⁴ As Boonrak Boonyaketmala succinctly puts it, “During most of the collaborator–state period, Bangkok largely left the direction and pace of film-industry development to the mandate of the ‘invisible hand.’”¹⁵ While this observation is perceptive, it is also the case that Bangkok’s newly emerging bourgeoisie, responsible in 1932 for the demise of absolute monarchy and the introduction of a constitutional alternative, followed in the footsteps of the traditional elite in the deployment of cinema as a tool for propaganda. Boonrak’s survey of the “rise and fall” of the Thai film industry, from 1897 to 1992, draws attention to Phibun’s own production of two movies preaching militarism and “his own brand of nationalism,” respectively: *Leuat thahan thai* (The Blood of Thai Soldiers, 1934); and *Ban rai na rao* (Our Fields, Our Lands, 1940).¹⁶

Popular culture clearly had its political uses, further illustrated by Phibun’s establishment in 1952 of a Ministry of Culture, which served to bolster the US-fueled rhetoric that portrayed communism as public enemy number one. This message was disseminated through pamphlets, lectures in schools, radio programs, and even adaptations of folk theater (*likay*) plays, which Phibun orchestrated as head of the ministry.¹⁷ The overall aim, which Thak illuminates so well, was that “Phibun’s anti-communism and pro-Americanism points of view would become accepted, vital ingredients in the public’s view of proper Thai politics.”¹⁸ The success of this state propaganda was epitomized in the sentiments of Phibun’s Police General, Phao Siyanon, encapsulated by Thak: “Everything he deemed communist he detested, and everything he detested was labeled communist.”¹⁹

These extreme politico-cultural perspectives would gain even greater currency following the rise to power, in Phibun’s place, of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, whose premiership, extending through 1958–63, marked the establishment of the military

¹¹ See Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 144.

¹² See Benedict Anderson, “Withdrawal Symptoms,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 9,3 (July–September 1977): 14, 15.

¹³ See Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand, 1897–1992,” in *East-West Film Journal* 6,2 (1992): 67. The data he provides here refer specifically to the years 1938–40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁷ See Thak, *Thailand*, p. 65, for full details.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

strongman at the helm of Thai politics, in keeping with the worldwide penchant for dictatorship that so typified the Cold War period (e.g., Park in Korea, Ayub in Pakistan, Marcos in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia, Amin in Uganda, and Papadopoulos in Greece, to name but a few). Sarit had built up his power base as a military officer throughout the first decade of Thailand's "American era," displaying an internationally fashionable distaste for the Left through, for example, the executions of numerous former left-wing MPs and alleged communist activists.²⁰ Having paid his first visit to Washington in 1950, he subsequently

... presided over the Americanization (in terms of organization, doctrines, training, weaponry, and so forth) of the Thai military. [...] Almost a decade of close ties with the Pentagon prior to his seizure of power meant that after 1959 he found it easy and natural to link Siam to the United States in an unprecedented intimacy.²¹

As a potent side effect of this "unprecedented intimacy," Thailand's fears regarding communism were inextricably interwoven not only with pro-American sympathies, but with a converse antagonism towards the Chinese, and although reluctant to incur the wrath of a powerful neighbor, Thai policy was driven forcefully by the desires for American patronage and the dollars that this earned, interests that outweighed caution regarding China. In this context, the Thai public grew apprehensive of the Chinese, resurrecting an old cultural distrust that lay at the root of Thai nationalist discourse and which was perennially provoked by the substantial Chinese diasporic community in Thailand and the limits to which this community was culturally integrated into "mainstream" Thai society. As Coughlin reports in his 1960 study, the Chinese community in Bangkok was "so self-sufficient that by becoming a part of [this community's] life, the individual is relieved of making more than a superficial compromise with the demands of Thai society."²²

Originally defined by Rama VI in terms of loyalty to the triumvirate of Nation, Religion, and Monarchy, the ideology of Thai nationalist identity discloses, according to Walter Irvine, a persistent anxiety—that of a bounded entity in danger of destabilization:

The notion of the interior enemy who endangers national integrity thanks to support given from abroad was included in the ideology, King Wachirawat [Rama VI] setting up an ethnic minority, the Chinese, as exploiters of the Thai, and as "strangers to the concept of loyalty to the nation" in a strategy geared to sharpening nationalist sentiment.²³

Added to this pre-existing disquiet over the economic power of the Chinese minority came the subsequent threat of communism and internal subversion, posed by what Coughlin defines as the "dangerous explosive potential of the large,

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 127–30 and 143–44.

²¹ Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," p. 15.

²² See Coughlin, *Double Identity*, p. 195.

²³ Irvine, "The Thai-Yuan," p. 67. See also Kenneth Perry Landon's discussion of the Chinese in Siam in *The Chinese in Thailand* (New York, NY: Russell and Russell, 1973 [first edition 1941]), pp. 86–95.

concentrated Chinese minority.”²⁴ Motivated by its own internal agendas (and additionally driven by the powerful lobby of the Taiwanese Guomindang regime in Bangkok), as much as by international pressure, the Thai government began its crackdown on the Chinese communities beginning in late 1950. It deported Chinese involved in political activity, smashed labor organizations, imposed restrictions on Chinese schools, increased the alien tax by a hundredfold, to four hundred baht, curbed remittances, changed the Nationality Law to impede naturalization, and even banned Chinese opera shows in Bangkok.²⁵

While the American-led suppression of communism rekindled a distaste for the Chinese communities within Thailand’s own borders that had been nascent since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, Thai regimes of the Cold War era that chose to suppress the resident Chinese also took this opportunity to crack down on other perceived enemies of the state, justifying such actions by alleging that the accused showed leftist leanings. One of the clearest examples of this project is the case of former prime minister and senior statesman Pridi Phanomyong (Luang Praditmanutham) (1900–83).

Having returned to Thailand after studying law and political science at the Sorbonne, Pridi became a leading member of the civilian arm of the People’s Party (Khana ratsadorn) and was instrumental in the success of the 1932 coup. During World War II, Pridi opposed the Japanese invasion of Thailand in 1941 and played a central role in the formation of the anti-Japanese Free Thai movement (Seri Thai), incurring the wrath of then-Prime Minister Phibun. When Phibun later returned to power following a military coup in 1947, Pridi’s safety was threatened, and he took refuge with the Thai navy at the headquarters of Admiral Sindhu Songkhramchai, a name that would become important in the cinematic demonization of Pridi’s role as a political figure in the film *Insi thornng*, discussed at length below.²⁶ While Pridi lived in exile in Singapore from 1947–49, the blame for the death of the young King Ananta Mahidol (Rama VIII) was pinned on him by his political adversaries; the king had died in his palace quarters of gunshot wounds to the head in an apparent accident in June 1946, during Pridi’s brief premiership. Rumors abounded that Pridi had committed regicide as part of a master plan to convert Thailand into a republic. Following a brief return to Thailand in 1949, during which he staged an unsuccessful coup against Phibun, Pridi then fled to China, where he lived for twenty-one years, and from there to Paris, where he died in 1983. His apparent socialist principles—demonstrated by his support for labor rights and for anticolonial struggles across the region—branded him a persistent threat to right-wing Thai nationalism, even despite the pro-Royalist, nationalist ideals he propounded. *The King of the White Elephant* (*Phra-chao chang pheuak*), an anti-war propaganda film both written and produced by Pridi in 1940, while he was serving as minister of finance, provides a clear illustration of a somewhat traditionalist stance and is difficult to interpret as a representation of

²⁴ Landon, *The Chinese in Thailand*, p. 196.

²⁵ Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, p. 146.

²⁶ Admiral Sindhu was commander-in-chief of the navy at the time of the Manhattan Rebellion, a failed coup against Phibun led by the navy in June 1951. The relationship between the Thai navy and Pridi was traditionally close, dating from their support of the 1932 coup, which ushered in a constitutional monarchy and in which Admiral Sindhu had been closely involved. See Thak, *Thailand*, pp. 40–41.

leftist sympathies.²⁷ Nevertheless, as his long-term political rival and a former prime minister, Seni Pramoj, succinctly concluded: "We could never get over the suspicion that Pridi was a Communist."²⁸

The mistrust that followed Pridi during the subsequent years of military rule, a martial era fully established by Sarit's grip on power from 1958, was reflected in popular culture, as Thailand joined in the psychological warfare of the Cold War.²⁹ As the ideology that promulgated a right-wing definition of Thai national identity was strengthened during this period, communist sympathies were firmly located in the politico-cultural sphere of the "un-Thai" and marked as a source of treachery to the nation (*thorayot tor phaen-din*). Emblematic of this shift, as Anderson observes, "the triolet Nation–Religion–King was transformed from placid motto to fighting political slogan, and was increasingly understood as such."³⁰

Center-stage in Sarit's systematic revivification of this trinity lay the position of the monarch as key national cultural symbol around which "true Thais" could unite in a sense of shared identity. In contrast to the diminished role of the monarchy following the 1932 revolution, that of Rama IX was to assume greater political, psychological, and cultural weight, unprecedented since the days of Rama V (r. 1868–1910), eventually attaining the dizzy heights of quasi-deification it has come to hold in early twenty-first century Thailand, in the twilight years of the present king's reign.

Likewise, the Buddhist monkhood, or *sangha*, was also drawn more closely into the nationalist agenda, involving it directly in the fight against communism through, for example, the distribution of anti-communist propaganda leaflets. As Sombun Suksamran observes,

Posters showing a fierce demon, representing a communist, destroying *wats* [temples] and places of worship, cruelly torturing the monks, together with the words "if communism comes, Buddhism, *wat*, and monks will be destroyed," were seen and distributed everywhere.³¹

²⁷ Restored and re-released on DVD by the Thai Film Foundation (Munithi nang thai) in 2005, *The King of the White Elephant* was made in English as part of Pridi's firm anti-war statement on behalf of Thailand to the international community. The film is an historical epic set in the sixteenth century Kingdom of Ayutthaya, and deals with an era roughly contemporaneous with that explored in the nationalist Thai blockbuster, *Suriyothai*, released in 2000. The film's chief protagonist, King Chakra (a name that resonates with the ruling Chakri dynasty of the Bangkok era), righteously negotiates for peace but is drawn into war with neighboring King Hongsa (whose name evokes the sixteenth-century Burmese dynasty of Hongsawadi).

²⁸ Quoted in Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, p. 141.

²⁹ According to Morakot Kaewjinda, the national perception of Pridi can be categorized into three different views, depending on the historical period. Seen first as a "republican" and an "anti-monarchist" in the immediate aftermath of the 1932 coup, he was perceived post-1933 as a "communist" following his proposals for a new economic structure in Siam. After the pro-democracy coup of October 14, 1973, Pridi acquired the reputation of a "liberal democrat" and "protector of the monarchy." Morakot proposes that the various images of Pridi relate more closely to their role as political devices (*khreuang-meu thang kan-meuang*) than to forms of "truth." See Morakot Kaewjinda, *Phap-lak Pridi Phanomyong kap kan-meuang thai* [The Image of Pridi Phanomyong and Thai Politics] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2000).

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 166.

³¹ Quoted in Irvine, "The Thai-Yuan," p. 74.

Such sentiments were marked by yet greater extremes in the 1970s, when anti-communist sympathies had become more firmly entrenched in the nation. Following the ousting of the military dictator, Thanom Kittikachorn, and his sidekick Praphas Charusathien on October 14, 1973, as a result of effective prodemocracy demonstrations, the country entered a three-year period characterized by extreme internal divisions between Right and Left, culminating in a bloody rightist coup: the events of October 6, 1976, when right-wing vigilante groups led a violent attack on student demonstrators at Bangkok's Thammasat University (which had been established by Pridi). Some months prior to the attack, the outspoken Buddhist monk Phra Kittiwuttho had made a speech declaring that no religious demerit would be accrued by Buddhists who killed communists (*kha khommiwnit mai bap*):

Killing communists is not killing persons because whoever destroys the nation, the religion, or the monarchy, such bestial types are not complete persons. Thus, we must intend not to kill people but to kill the Devil (Mara); this is the duty of all Thai.³²

THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL HEROES AND THEIR ENEMIES ON SCREEN

The heightened tensions of the times are notable by comparison with the spirit of the previous two decades, in which, as Anderson points out, "it was possible for many Thai conservatives to view the Thai Left quite sincerely as a kind of alien minority ('really' Vietnamese, Chinese, or whatever), and the anticommunist struggle as a loftily national crusade."³³ Reflecting this perspective, the 1954 novel *Phai daeng*, which was translated into English in the early 1960s under the title *Red Bamboo*, depicts the hazards posed to deeply rooted Buddhist belief, which in the novel undergirds a traditional and harmonious, pastoral Thai lifestyle. (Although the Thai word *phai* in the novel's title means "bamboo" and alludes therefore to China and its related communist threat, a differently spelled though similarly pronounced word *phai* also provides the meaning of "danger," therefore compounding the "Red Peril" connotation here.)³⁴

Penned by senior statesman and founder of the conservative Social Action Party, Khukrit Pramoj, *Phai daeng* conveys traditionalist predilections similar to those of Khukrit's elder brother Seni, who had so mistrusted Pridi's political persuasions.³⁵ The novel is closely modeled on Giovanni Guareschi's tales of the village priest Don Camillo and his quarrel with the local communist mayor. As in the Italian prototype, Khukrit's protagonist—this time a Buddhist abbot in the Thai village of Phai Daeng—is at odds with a communist zealot in his community whom he has known since childhood; and, like Don Camillo, he gains advice through communion with a

³² The translation is provided by Charles Keyes, quoted in Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 89. As Anderson relates, the offensive against the Left went into high gear in the spring of 1976, particularly during the campaign for the April parliamentary elections, when the leader of the Chart Thai party, Pramarn Adireksarn, announced the slogan "Right Kill Left."

³³ Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 173.

³⁴ The tonal register of the two words is also different, with *phai* meaning "danger" pronounced with a mid tone and *phai* meaning "bamboo" with a low tone.

³⁵ Khukrit also served as prime minister between 1975 and 1976.

religious icon in his place of worship. In 1979, *Phai daeng* was made into a film (dir. Phoemphon Choei-arun), with the script authored by Khukrit himself. In accord with the spirit of the times, the film's release coincided with a cooling of the polarized hatred between Left and Right and coincided with the announcement of an amnesty for all former students, activists, and intellectuals who had swelled the ranks of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the jungles of the north, south, and northeast in the aftermath of the October 6 coup.

Unsurprisingly, the film ridicules its antagonist, Kwaen, for his "quaint convictions" and blind, stubborn allegiance to Maoist ideology, while confirming the integrity of Thai village life as it is formed around the core community values of Buddhist religion. Mockingly referring to Kwaen as "Comrade" (*sahai*), the abbot has some important (and patronizing) lessons on life to convey to the village communist as he directs his gaze to the sky and explains how "the sun is *red* at present, but soon it will turn to *gold*." In other words, communist ideology will be superseded by the "traditional" ideology of royalist, Buddhist Thailand, embodied in the ultimate "Golden Land," Suvarnabhumi.³⁶ The symbolism of his teaching is supported by more direct advice: "Comrade, there are many ways in life to solve a problem without having to resort to arms!" The abbot calls on the virtues of compromise, traditionally deemed in nationalist discourses to constitute an integral feature of (Buddhist) Thainess. Significantly, what unites these two oppositional elements, personified by the abbot and the communist, in addition to their shared childhoods, is the attack made on their community by the grasping Sino-Thai businessman Sia Leng—both his name and his heavily accented Thai speech betray his Chinese heritage. Here, the threat posed by the "Yellow Peril" trumps that of the Red. When Sia Leng dupes a poorly educated old lady out of her land and pursues fraudulent means to build a dam on the nearby canal for his own personal gain, the fellow villagers of Phai Daeng attack and capture him, supported by the prompt arrival on the scene of police and government agents who have come to arrest him on charges of corruption. Here, the traditional lifestyle of Phai Daeng's ethnic Thai community members is threatened more by the machinations of a diasporic Chinese merchant than it is by an adopted communist ideology, recalling Irvine's definition of the Thai national self as a bounded entity in danger of destabilization by an interior enemy; communist ideology is relatively unthreatening, since it can be contained within "Thai ideals" by a combination of good humoredness, self-deprecation, and compromise.³⁷

The veteran actor Sorapong Chatri (b. 1950) plays the part of Kwaen in *Phai daeng*, a role that seems to suit this star, who had been typecast as the embattled, radical hero of a number of socialist realist movies throughout the seventies. Sorapong rose to fame in the latter half of the decade at the forefront of the

³⁶ Suvarnabhumi (in Thai, *Suwannaphum*) is the Sanskrit term literally meaning "Land of Gold," used to refer to mainland Southeast Asia, although the precise extent of the territory is still disputed by historians. Thai nationalist sentiment has tended to lay claim to the term and associate it with Siam as a mark of proud, local heritage; this would explain why King Rama IX bestowed the name on Bangkok's new and ostentatious international airport, which opened in 2006. According to the airport's website: "The name Suvarnabhumi has a long and interesting history, reminiscent of a golden era of peace and prosperity that's part of the cultural and historical legacy of Thailand." See <http://www.tour-bangkok-legacies.com/suvarnabhumi-airport.html>, last accessed November 8, 2008.

³⁷ As testimony to its enduring popularity, *Phai daeng* was also adapted for television in 1990.

generation of actors who succeeded Mit Chaibancha, and he made his particular reputation as the lead in *Khao cheu Kan* (His Name was Kan, dir. Chatrichalerm Yukhon, 1973), *Thep-thida rongraem* (Hotel Angel, dir. Chatrichalerm Yukhon, 1974), *Thorngphun Khokepoh, ratsadorn tem khan* (Taxi Driver/Citizen I, dir. Chatrichalerm Yukhon, 1977) and *Phlae kao* (The Scar, dir. Cherd Songsri, 1979). One of his most interesting performances, however, is captured in the little noted film *Ai yam daeng* (The Madman with the Red Cloth Bag, dir. Chao Mikhunsut, 1980). Like *Phai daeng*, this movie relies on the narrative device that features an evolving conflict between two characters who were once childhood friends, but who are brought into opposition in later life. Despite making no direct reference to the traditionalist/communist divide that marred rural Thai community relations in the 1970s, *Ai yam daeng's* symbolism clearly evokes Thai political history, though its references to political conflicts remain oblique. The cover of the VCD version of this film depicts a harried and blood-drenched Sorapong, sporting long, tousled hair, a red bandana and armbands, and clutching both a sickle and a bloodied cloth shoulder bag (see figure 3, below). His style of dress immediately calls to mind those who took part in Thailand's leftist student movement, as protests built up in the heady days between 1973 and 1976. The cloth shoulder bag, or *yam*, was de rigueur attire for such activists, while the sickle clearly reads as a symbol of communism. Yet *Ai yam daeng* deals only figuratively with these concepts, preferring instead to define societal breakdown within a rural Thai community in terms of the offence committed against a poor villager (Sorapong) by a wealthy one who abducts the poor man's pregnant wife. When the husband loses his wits as a result of the emotional trauma, he metamorphoses into "*Ai yam daeng*"—"The madman with the red cloth bag." In his "unbounded" state, to use Irvine's anthropological terminology for mental instability, "*Ai yam daeng*" puts this vital accessory of the cloth bag to good use as storage for the unborn child whom he cuts from his murdered wife's womb with his sickle, consequently reddening the bag with blood. The film has all the macabre overtones of Thai literary texts penned in the prelude to and immediate aftermath of the October 1976 bloodshed.³⁸ Nursing the maggot-infested fetus in the bag as he goes, "*Ai yam daeng*" soon becomes the scapegoat for all village crimes, assumed culpable for several murders and treated by all but the headman's daughter Bunlam as a pariah. Bunlam's love for him restores him to sanity, but the weight of both public and state incrimination, compounded by residual self-loathing, eventually drives him to commit suicide by slashing his throat with his sickle.³⁹

³⁸ See, for example, Rachel Harrison, "Birth, Death, and Identity in the Work of Sidaoru'ang," in *Thai Literary Traditions*, ed. Manas Chitakasem (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1995), pp. 87–117.

³⁹ The interpretation of this persecution of a "mad" or abnormal person at the hands of a wider village community as a politically loaded trope accords with Chusak Pattarakulvanit's reading of Chart Kobjitti's 1981 novel, *Kham-phiphaksa* (The Judgment). Chart's text ostensibly discusses the demise of a village school caretaker, Fak, as he succumbs to persecution by fellow villagers for sheltering his deceased father's mentally ill wife, Somsong; his sorrows drive him to become an alcoholic. In Chusak's interpretation of this work, the villagers can be read as bullying, rightist activists, while Fak and Somsong are symbolic of the intimidated leftist students who were hounded into the ranks of the CPT post-1976. See Chusak Pattarakulvanit, "25 Years of 'The Verdict' and Somsong's Appeal" [25 pi kham-phiphaksa kap kham-uthorn khong Somsong], *Matichon sut sapada* 26, 1347–8 (June 9, June 16, June 23, and June 30, 2006), pp. 89–90.



Figure 3. VCD cover of *Ai yam daeng* (The Madman with the Red Cloth Bag, 1980), starring Sorapong Chatri. Courtesy of Solar Marketing.

In contrast, and again symptomatic of the time during which it was made, the overtly didactic 1977 movie, *Nak phaen-din* (see figure 4, below), is impelled by fervent anti-communist sympathies. Starring and directed by Mit Chaibancha's contemporary, the extraordinarily prolific and popular Sombat Methanee (b. 1937), *Nak phaen-din* takes its title from the song of the same name, played incessantly after its introduction in 1975 by army-sponsored radio programs in support of rightist ideological values, according to which those who chose to be communists could not be embraced as truly Thai:⁴⁰

All who call themselves Thai, and who look like Thais
 All who live in the Buddhist land of the King, but who think to destroy it.
 All who think the Thais enslaved, and look down upon the Thai nation,
 But who still live off its provisions, while despising Thais as its slaves.

They are the scum of the earth.
 They are the scum of the earth.
 These people are the scum of the earth!

⁴⁰ The term *nak phaen-din* refers to the tale of the Buddhist monk Devadatta (Thai: Thewathat), who attempted to kill the Buddha and was, as a result, swallowed up by the earth. Thus, *nak phaen-din*, or Devadatta, represents the stereotypical villain who would betray his parents, nation, religion, or king. See <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2007/09/11/scum-of-the-earth>, last accessed September 18, 2008.

All who agitate for Thais to fight among themselves and who disunite them,
 All who rouse the mob to cause confusion to pitch Thais against each other,
 All who extol other nations, yet threaten their own,
 Seizing our assets to slaughter fellow Thais,
 while respecting foreigners as their own.

They are the scum of the earth.
 They are the scum of the earth.
 These people are the scum of the earth!⁴¹



Figure 4. VCD cover of *Nak phaen-din* (Scum of the Earth, 1977), starring and directed by the central figure in the illustration, Sombat Methanee. Courtesy of Solar Marketing.

Nak phaen-din was also adopted as the anthem for the Thai Village Scout movement (*luk seua chao-ban*) and became the popular theme song of the violent months leading up to the lynching, torture, and execution of student demonstrators by right-wing vigilante groups in October 1976. Quoting the work of Natee Pisalchai, Anderson indicates that mock murders of the students were actually staged at one Village Scout training camp in the days preceding the actual attacks.⁴² Described by Anderson as “the culmination of a two-year-long right-wing campaign of public intimidation, assault, and assassination best symbolized by the orchestrated mob violence of October 6 itself,” the 1976 coup evidently provided the impetus for the production of fanatical films such as *Nak phaen-din*.⁴³ Boonrak confirms as much in his acknowledgement that, in the immediate aftermath of October 1976, the

⁴¹ The translation is my own and remains intentionally close to the Thai to convey a sense of the use of language in the Thai original.

⁴² Natee Pisalchai, “Village Scouts,” *Thai Information Resource* (Australia) no. 1 (May 1977), quoted in Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 172.

⁴³ Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 170.

government was lobbied to engage more actively in pressuring local film companies to produce movies that would reflect the right-wing ideology of Nation, Religion, and King.⁴⁴

In a clarification of its political allegiances from the outset, the film *Nak phaen-din* opens with a lengthy rendition of the song performed by a mass gathering of Village Scouts at a training session in a rural area of Northeast Thailand (Ubon Ratchathani province). Linked to the Boy Scouts (established in Siam by Rama VI as a quaint inheritance from the days of his English education), the Village Scout movement gained huge popularity, indicated by the fact that over five million residents, or 10 percent of the population, completed its five-day training courses in a short time following the organization's establishment in 1971.⁴⁵ The training program included "lectures by right-wing monks, parades, oath-swearings, salutes, beauty and dance contests, visits to military installations, royal donation ceremonies, and 'sing-songs,'"⁴⁶ and a number of these activities are depicted in the film's opening credit sequence.

Nak phaen-din—both song and movie—reiterates the notion that the threat to "authentic Thai identity" is one posed from outside, and identified specifically in this period as communism. The threat of communism is foregrounded at the beginning of the film's narrative by the attack on a Village Scout tour bus, carried out by armed men—presumably leftist guerrillas, though they appear undifferentiated from common bandits—who kill a number of the Scouts. The two key characters, Chat (a common Thai name, which is nevertheless loaded here by its literal meaning as "nation") and Thai (i.e., Thai or "free," a character played by Sombat), attend to their wounded leader, whose dying wish is to hear repeated to him the "three commandments" of the Scouts code of honor. Sombat/Thai promptly obliges:

One: I must be loyal [*jong-rak phak-di*] to Nation, Religion, and King.

Two: I must be of help to others at all times.

Three: I must act according to the regulations of the Scouts.

Reassured, the old man expires in timely fashion, leaving the cinematic audience in no doubt of the film's ideological standpoint and underpinnings.

From this point onwards, the narrative maps the trajectory of Chat's "demise" as he deviates towards the cause of the "enemy within," as defined by the lyrics of *Nak phaen-din*. As in the case of *Phai daeng* and *Ai yam daeng*, the movie achieves its

⁴⁴ Boonrak, "The Rise and Fall," p. 83.

⁴⁵ See Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 1. This date is at odds with Irvine's reference to the Village Scouts, in which he states that even by 1958, over 5 percent of the Thai population had completed the five-day training course. See Irvine, "The Thai-Yuan," p. 73. Agreeing with Bowie, Benedict Anderson, in his essay "Withdrawal Symptoms," states that the Village Scouts organization was founded in 1971. Others who agree include: Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*; Chai-anan Samudavanija and David Morell, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn, and Hain, 1982); and Thak, *Thailand*. This is contradicted, however, by the details provided on the website of the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP), under whose aegis the movement was established. According to them, the Village Scouts organization was founded in 1969, however, training programs commenced later, in August 1971. See: www.bpp.go.th/bpp22/scout.html, last accessed September 22, 2008.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 160.

narrative aim through recourse to the device of binary opposition, formulated as a rift between former childhood friends that draws them into divergent ideological positions—Right and Left. Chat experiences a series of personal mishaps and misadventures, orchestrated by local entrepreneurs and dyed-in-the-wool, exploitative capitalists precisely typical of those vilified in leftist, socially conscious fiction of the time. Oddly, however, in terms of the film's political position, these capitalists turn out to be undercover communists. (In reverse, similar ideological confusions are to be noted in the film's penchant for having its Rightist heroes invariably sport bright red attire.)

After unfairly depriving Chat of his leased truck and his rice harvest, the capitalist communists of *Nak phaen-din* draw him further into their web. Forced to leave for Bangkok, Chat abandons his pregnant wife and his blind, frail, and aged mother, the potent symbols of the traditional Thai family/nation. Once in the metropolis—a site persistently associated in Thai cinema and literature with the evils of American-era development and with cultural “impurity”—Chat falls victim to more plots invented by the well-heeled communist agents, who wish to lure him into debt and dependence. Trapped into succumbing to their ideological pressures, he is shown swearing his allegiance to an international gathering of representatives vaguely suggestive of the brainwashing leftists who are assembled in the dream sequences of the American Cold War classic, *The Manchurian Candidate* (dir. John Frankenheimer, 1962). The group is marked out by stereotypical features for easy recognition: it includes a man in Indonesian national costume (hence inciting audience fears via reference to the proximity of recent communist activities in the region) and a Westerner (or *farang*), oddly referred to by his accomplices as “Mr Sam.” The choice of name here, which implies “Uncle Sam,” a nickname for America, is again ideologically disorienting, and it remains uncertain whether this labeling is intended by the scriptwriter as ironic or humorous, or is merely inept.

Once confirmed as a member of their team, Chat earns from his high-powered communist “brothers” a reward that asserts patron–client hierarchies rather than equality: a trip to the brothel for a raunchy sexual encounter is followed by the company of easy women who ply him with luxurious food at a “no hands” banquet. These scenes represent stereotypical sins of the city, strangely associated here with the lure of communism, despite the fact that socialist–realist filmmaking and short-story writing of the same time label such adventures equally clearly as symbols of the erosion of Thainess under the pernicious influences of Western capitalism.⁴⁷ *Nak phaen-din* compounds this ideological confusion when the camera cuts away to show the meager serving of sticky rice (*khao niaw*, a potent symbol of rural Northern and Northeastern Thai identities) that Chat's indigent wife feeds to her blind mother-in-law on the balcony of their run-down wooden hut in the country. The wife's loyalty and poverty are clearly antithetical to “communist” values as interpreted by the film.

Sated by the pleasures of the city, Chat accompanies the clique back to its hideout near his home village and is sent forth to disseminate the communists' propaganda in the local market place. He is promptly met with a feisty resistance, spearheaded by his former Village Scout comrade, Thai. Thai reminds the gathered villagers that their impoverished life is the fault of inadequate parliamentary representation, but that to fight this inequity through violent rebellion, rather than

⁴⁷ See, for example, the urban experiences of the prostitute, Mali, in Chatrichalerm Yukhon's *Thep-thida rongraem* (Hotel Angel), 1974.

by democratic means, would be un-Thai, un-Buddhist, unjust, and counter to the monarchy that rules the nation (*mi khwam-pok-khrorng yu*). Thai's concept of "democracy" appears to discount the constitutional role of the king. Nor does he heed his own counsel advocating peaceful protest as he lunges aggressively towards the treacherous Chat.

Hearing the news of Chat's political conversion, Chat's wife, mother, and foster-brother all disown him, so horrified are they by his newly espoused ideals. The mother acts out her loathing by beating her breast in despair and implores the heavens to condemn Chat to death by the sword, by poisoning, and by torture, and to ensure Chat burns in everlasting hell for his treachery. Little doubt can remain in the audience's mind as to the intensity of her maternal rejection when she expresses her wish that, were it not a sin, she would have the unborn child torn prematurely from her daughter-in-law's womb. The breakdown in Thai familial relations is compounded by Chat's subsequent accidental murder of his mother, when she steps on a land mine he has planted to deter those who would attack the communists' headquarters. But the inviolability of the "ideologically unsullied" family is then restored when Village Scout hero Thai valiantly paraglides into the communist compound to rescue single-handedly his girlfriend and son who are being held hostage there. (The venture presumably recalls, and pays tribute to, the last airborne moments of Mit Chaibancha's fateful stunt in *Insi thong*.)

It is family ties that ultimately bring Chat back to his senses and cause him to realize the full weight of his transgression against Thainess, for his awakening takes place when he stumbles across his mother's corpse in the battle that ensues between Right and Left. It is too late, however, for redemption, and Chat must be castigated in the film for the error of his ways: he is killed in the Scouts' attack on the compound, their victory symbolized by Thai/Sombat's ardent sprint across the screen, with a billowing Thai national flag under one arm and a machine gun clasped in the other. The red flag of communism is duly toppled and, in the military-assisted mop-up of the wounded, the army commander magnanimously offers to sacrifice his place in the rescue helicopter for the injured leader of the communist force. Experiencing a sudden ideological transformation, the adversary graciously declines: "Your life is far more valuable than mine. Wicked people [*khon chua*] such as I do not deserve to be helped." The soldier consoles him with persuasive counsel: "We are all equals here. And even though you have wronged, you now have the chance to redeem yourself."

The sense of Thai community is hereby restored through the medium of "Buddhist compassion" and forgiveness in a statement of nationalist propaganda that is characterized neither by subtlety nor nuance. The movie's consistent implication is that communism is a threat from "outside," an Otherness that has been brought "within" the confines of the traditional rural community that epitomizes Thainess. Identifying "The Yellow Peril" as an aspect of this Other represents part, though not all, of *Nak phaen-din*'s didactic purpose: the movie's communist capitalists have drawn the local Sino-Thai shopkeeper into their network, but he is, at the same time, a victim of their manipulative, authoritarian ways, as demonstrated by the fact that they threaten to execute him if he fails to secure them sufficient supplies. The real enemy here reads as a heady mix of international capital working under a communist guise. The film depicts this mix in negative terms, not because of ideological difference but because it represents an Otherness within that provokes cultural anxiety.

As such, *Nak phaen-din* provides a robust, if somewhat crude and clumsy, illustration of the nationalist ideologies that crept into filmmaking and became particularly prominent in the 1970s, as Thai society grew yet more polarized in its political allegiances. In this sense, the movie clearly reflects anti-communist filmmaking in the West, with its tendency to depict subversives as operating in small, isolated groups rather than as part of a wider conspiracy, and to focus on the threat presented by an “enemy within.”⁴⁸ The plot development of *Nak phaen-din*, and the rightist anxieties this film seeks to isolate and develop, also recall aspects of Hollywood movies such as *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Led Three Lives* (1953), and *Red Nightmare* (1962). *Red Nightmare*, for example, depicts an idyllic, small-town family being turned into unfeeling apparatchiks by a communist takeover, and was produced by the US Department of Defense as an educational film to be screened in American schools.⁴⁹

As Cold War paranoia gained momentum in the 1960s, both in the United States and abroad, American-funded Thai-language movies thematically similar to those described above were also widely shown in Thailand, most notably in rural and border areas deemed under threat of insurgency. Examples include the United States Information Service-sponsored films *Fai yen* (Cool Fire) and *Het-koet thi Phang Phone* (The Incident at Phang Phone), the latter vilifying early CPT activities in the Northeast. Both Thai and American filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s fueled anxieties that were typical of the anti-communist mindset in Bangkok and beyond.

COLD WAR CINEMA: PROPAGANDAS AND PARANOIAS

As marked by examples that can be found in US and Thai filmmaking alike, widespread paranoia was a significant cultural and psychological side effect of the Cold War. Sharon Packer articulates this succinctly in her work *Movies and the Modern Psyche*: “During the Cold War, the ‘Free World’ worried [...] to the point of paranoia. That paranoia seeped into films produced during those strange years.”⁵⁰

The anxieties of the times were expressed through propaganda transmitted by words and by images and employed as an essential and often seemingly innocent “fourth weapon” in the Cold War armory that firmly comprised military, economic, and political strategies⁵¹ According to Tony Shaw, while high art was deployed by the CIA to communicate a sense of ideological superiority to the elite, “moving pictures were aimed emphatically at the masses.”⁵² Cinema became not only a passive “reflector” of the *zeitgeist*, but an active producer of political and ideological sentiment:

⁴⁸ Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War* (London and New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2001), p. 45.

⁴⁹ See David Seed, *Brainwashing: The Fictions of Mind Control* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2004), p. 67. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Nightmare, last accessed September 22, 2008.

⁵⁰ Sharon Packer, *Movies and the Modern Psyche* (Westport, CT, and London: Praeger, 2007), p. 110.

⁵¹ See Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 3 and 5.

⁵² Tony Shaw, *British Cinema*, pp. 1 and 3.

The American and Soviet film industries are known to have played an integral part in the establishment of a Cold War culture in their respective countries. [...] Hollywood is widely held to have contributed significantly to the “Red scares” that periodically swept American society after 1917, particularly during the McCarthy era of the early 1950s. More recently, historians have cast light on Hollywood's semi-official capacity as advertising agent to the US government during the Cold War, exporting American ideals in line with the State Department's wishes.⁵³

According to Shaw, the late 1940s and early 1950s are commonly regarded as “Tinsel Town's darkest hour,” as producers and actors alike were placed under considerable pressure to participate in and display the national aversion to communism.⁵⁴ Yet while numerous filmmakers' careers were destroyed by bogus accusations that they were active leftists, other well-known stars rallied to the government cause, nowhere better exemplified than by the career of the veteran US actor John Wayne. Defined by Shaw as the Cold War's “living symbol of American patriotism,” Wayne

waged a relentless war—on and off screen—against those he defined as America's Cold War enemies. Wayne was at the peak of his powers during the Cold War's most critical years, and had a greater impact on the way Americans viewed the conflict than probably any other Hollywood figure. Moreover, Wayne's powerful cowboy-cum-soldier persona was tied inextricably to the special relationship that the film industry enjoyed with the military during the Cold War.⁵⁵

A clear case of this “special relationship” is exemplified by the production of *The Green Berets* (1968), co-directed by and starring Wayne as the protagonist, Colonel Mike Kirby. This was the only Hollywood Vietnam War film to have been made and released during the war itself. Shaw typifies it as: “A paean to the US military's efforts to show that the Cold War was just as much a matter of life and death as the Second World War, *The Green Berets* represented mainstream Cold War cinematic propaganda at its most overt.”⁵⁶

Clearly, Wayne's role in *The Green Berets* serves as a model for Sombat Methanee's dedication to the cause of *Nak phaen-din* a decade later. But while Sombat holds a place in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the actor who performed in more movies than any other person in the world, his star status has been eclipsed by a greater name in Thai film history—that of Mit Chaibancha. It is Mit who stands out as the Thai actor whose Cold War politico-cinematic career most closely parallels that of the American “Duke” Wayne.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵⁵ Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, p. 200.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

The Making of a Thai Cold War Movie Star: Mit Chaibancha⁵⁷

Born Phichet Phummeh in the province of Phetburi in 1934, Mit assumed his stage name when he embarked on a career in the movies in 1957, the same year in which Field Marshal Sarit came to power. Mit had joined the Royal Thai Air Force upon leaving school, achieving a rank equivalent to that of chief master sergeant in the US Air Force (*phan-ja-akat-tho*). Deploying his military associations to good effect, and clearly capturing the mood of the times, Mit canvassed for cinematic roles by distributing photographs of himself in his uniform (see figure 5). The fine figure he cut in this guise led to him being cast in his first film, *Chat seua* (Life of a Gangster), as an action hero, starring alongside no less than six leading ladies.



Figure 5: Mit in his Royal Thai Air Force uniform.
Reproduced from a commemorative postcard of the actor.

Like most actors of his time, Mit had received no formal training in the dramatic arts, nor did he have prior theatrical experience. But following the success of *Chat seua*, he was recognized as having audience appeal based on his handsome looks and above-average height. Describing him as “more than a little dashing” (*sanga mai noi*), the prolific author Sek Dusit (Roengchai Praphasanon) was keen to have this twenty-

⁵⁷ Much of the material on Mit’s acting career in the section below is taken from Sek Dusit’s undated biographical article on the actor, *Mit Chaibancha kap khaphachao* [Mit Chaibancha and I] and from Ingsak Ket-horm’s extensive biography, *Mit Chaibancha: Khwam-mai haeng chiwit* [Mit Chaibancha: The Meaning of Life] (Bangkok: Starpics, 2002).

three-year old novice play the key part in the first screen adaptation of his widely popular pocketbook adventure series *Insi daeng* (The Red Eagle). Sek considered Mit to have a perfect physique for the role, although his “feminine politeness” (*riaproi meuan phuying*), reticence, and lack of practice in smoking and drinking were at odds with the characterization of Sek’s protagonist, Rome Ritthikrai. Sek’s main character, Rome, was a somewhat flamboyant, elegantly dressed, womanizing, and oft-inebriated Bangkok businessman, a successful, urban, middle-class man who transforms himself into the masked action hero “The Red Eagle” to confront local and national emergencies (see figures 1 and 7). In terms both of the requirements of the role and of the hero’s attire, the character *Insi daeng* drew clear inspiration from a range of British and American action heroes, from Batman, Superman, and Captain America to James Bond and Sherlock Holmes, all of whom Mit said he admired. A further likeness is to be noted between “The Red Eagle” and “The Green Hornet,” the crime-fighting star whose adventures were initially broadcast over radio in the United States and whose show shifted to the medium of television during the 1960s, with Bruce Lee cast in the role of the Hornet’s similarly masked, kung-fu-blasting valet, Kato.⁵⁸ Nor is it surprising that Thai authors and actors would be inspired by Hollywood. K. P. Landon observed that, even before the Cold War, in the Thai film industry of the 1930s:

Movie heroes are made members of the community life. [...] Many Siamese young men yearn to go to Hollywood. [...] A heroic figure named “Towmick” featured in daily stories recounted by one employee [of a Siamese film production company]. This fabulous character could fight bandits, save helpless women, and escape from impossible situations. [...] The movies are helping to form Siamese character as shown by the candid admission of a certain bandit who said that he got some of his best ideas from the shows he saw. Standards of living shown in the movies, patterns of behaviour that are acted out, and styles of clothing that are shown, are all observed and often are copied.⁵⁹

The Green Hornet, like The Red Eagle, spends his days, when unmasked, as a dashing and debonair public character—Britt Reid, a newspaper publisher. The alter egos of both these action heroes resemble that of Batman, the masked vigilante who, by day, performs as a young socialite—Bruce Wayne. By night, Batman, the Hornet, and the Eagle work independently of the “official” police force, outside the mainstream (cf. Sherlock Holmes). In one film in the Thai series, *Awasan insi daeng* (The Fall of the Red Eagle, 1963), one faction of the Thai police force is bent on tracking down the vigilante and arresting him. Despite this characterization, neither Batman nor The Red Eagle is a mere dumb action hero; they also function in

⁵⁸ As a result of Lee’s involvement in the series, it was widely screened in Hong Kong and may have become a success in the wider region as a result. I am grateful to Duncan Harte for drawing my attention to the relevance of *The Green Hornet* to this paper, most notably the theme of racial difference evoked by the casting of Kato initially as Japanese, then Korean, and later as a Filipino (albeit acted by a Chinese American), depending on the international relations of the time.

⁵⁹ See Kenneth Perry Landon, *Siam in Transition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 175–76.

detective mode, employing deduction and resourcefulness to fight crime.⁶⁰ Moreover, both characters tend to be drawn into the overall didactic purpose of their adventure tales, as the war against crime becomes “not just a personal vendetta but a patriotic duty.”⁶¹

In addition to these “Western” attributes, however, *Insi daeng* also discloses ethnic Thai accretions, with references back to the protagonists of popular writer Por Intharapalit (1910–68, see figure 6, below) and to the first masked hero of Thai cinema, Chaiya Suriyan in *Hao dong* (Wild Cobra).⁶²



Figure 6. The book cover of the third edition (2004) of *Phaen phikhat* (The Murder Plan), by Por Intharapalit. Courtesy of Praphansan Press.

⁶⁰ The assessment of Batman for purposes of comparison here is drawn from Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York, NY, and London: Continuum, 2005), p. 46.

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, p. 65. Brooker stresses the extent to which comic books and cartoons were decisively recruited into the war effort. “Comics and cartoons, then, were used for propaganda purposes in domestic advertisements, on recruitment posters, in satirical newspaper features, in leaflet drops for allies and enemies, in humour strips shipped out to servicemen, and in the superhero titles read at home and on the front” (p. 72).

⁶² See also Mit’s contemporary Leuchai Nareunat in *Phrai dam* (Dark Specter) and the masked actresses who appear in movies such as *Ai maew dam* (The Black Cat). As Baker and Pasuk note, Por Intharapalit was the author of “hugely popular serialized fiction about swaggering bandit chiefs and superheroic crimebusters.” See Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, p. 171.

Various biographical references have noted that Mit, when playing the role of The Red Eagle, was particularly proud of his *Insi daeng* outfit, a tight-fitting black trouser suit, with a partially unzipped top, black leather gloves and boots, a red felt eye mask in the form of an eagle's head, and matching leather belt, echoing the eagle symbol in its red buckle (see figure 7, below).⁶³ Mit himself took personal responsibility for the storage and care of this costume, entrusting it to no one else, in a demonstration of possessiveness that reveals the degree to which he identified himself directly with the role. Certainly the part proved to be the making of Mit as a successful Thai movie star; the first film of the series, *Jao nak-leng* (The Gangster), earned in excess of a record one million baht at the box office when it was released in 1958. Moreover, it marked a sea change in the approach to Thai movie publicity, for in this case the name of the leading actress, traditionally featured ahead of the male star's name, was relegated to second billing. Mit's performance as The Red Eagle was not only to effect permanent change in the gendered ordering of screen names, but, more widely, to signal the advent of the male pin-up in Thai cinema history.



Figure 7. DVD cover for *Awasan insi daeng* (The Fall of the Red Eagle, 1963), showing the “Red Eagle” in the foreground in full costume. Courtesy of Saha-phanthamit Sound and Film.

⁶³ See Sek, *Mit Chaibancha*; and Kingdao Darani, *Bantheuk chiwit-rak khong Mit Chaibancha* [Remembering the Love Life of Mit Chaibancha] (Bangkok: Samnak-phim sam si, 2000).

Following his performance in *Jao nak-leng*, Mit went on to play the lead role of The Red Eagle in the entire series of films about that character: *Thap samingkhla* (The Venomous Snake, 1962); *Awasan insi daeng* (The Fall of the Red Eagle, 1963); *Pisat dam* (The Black Devil, 1966); *Chao insi* (The King of Eagles, 1968); and finally, *Insi thong* (The Golden Eagle, 1970).

The integration of the actor's own persona with that on screen persisted when Mit resolved to undertake his own stunts. His refusal to rely on stand-ins led, prophetically, it would seem, to a personal accident and injury in the production of *Neua manut* in 1958, an action drama also penned by Sek Dusit. During the filming of this movie, Mit jumped awkwardly from a moving truck and was knocked unconscious, yet following this incident, he insisted that the mishap had taught him a lesson that would improve his technique and announced that he planned to continue performing his own stunts.

Binding himself even more closely to his on-screen persona, Mit established his own film production company, *Chaibancha phaphayon* (Chaibancha Films), the logo of which depicted a lone warrior on a rearing horse. Responsible for the release of an additional movie scripted by Sek, the company fell foul of the censors in naming the film *Khrut dam* (The Black Garuda) after the mythical bird that was the symbol of Thai government offices, and it was forced to alter the title to *Yiaw dam*, or "The Black Falcon."

Mit went on to perform leading roles in numerous movies in a full range of different genres, from action and adventure (*nang bu*), to melodrama and romance, (mild) horror (*nang phi*), and Chinese martial arts (*nang kamlang-phai-nai*). Prior to 1965, all were filmed in 16mm format and therefore dubbed, but with the advent of 35mm film, higher production values were made possible and implemented, illustrated by the release of *Phet tat phet* (Operation Bangkok) in 1966, which was filmed in part in Hong Kong and similarly authored by Sek Dusit.

Mit's international profile was subsequently enhanced through his appearance in 1968 alongside a Chinese actress in *Sombat mae-nam khwae* (The Treasures of the River Kwai), which was screened not only at home in Thailand but abroad in Hong Kong and Italy, presumably attracting attention through its title's reference to the 1957 Oscar-winning movie set in Thailand, *Bridge over the River Kwai* (dir. David Lean). Such overseas exposure reflected Mit's conviction that the products of the Thai film industry should be able to compete alongside foreign productions and that its movies should be exportable, as exemplified by his performance in *Asawin dap kayasit* (The Knight with the Magic Sword), filmed entirely in Hong Kong in 1970 by a Taiwanese director for Southeast Asia Films and reportedly screened in Chinatowns all over the world. As a self-styled Thai nationalist *asawin* (knight), Mit made the strengthening and support of the Thai film industry a symbol of the country's cultural success on the world stage and central to his campaign when he chose to stand for election in 1969. Having been unsuccessful in campaigning for election to the Bangkok city council two years earlier, Mit entered the arena of national politics as an independent candidate (*mai sangat*), deploying the private fortune he had amassed from his movie-making career. Little detail is recorded indicating his political beliefs, other than to suggest his fulsome support for the Thai film industry and his self-presentation to the electorate as their guard dog against corruption (*sunak thi fao-rawang mai hai khrai-ko-tam ma khot-kong prachachon*). But the particulars of the problems he encountered with Thai film journalists in 1964, when he accused them of communist sympathies, suggest that he supported the mainstream rightist

cause, an inclination further evidenced by his direction of *Insi thong* (The Golden Eagle).⁶⁴ Mit's charisma as an actor clearly outshone his performance as a would-be politician, and he failed to secure a seat in parliament. The speech he gave at the announcement of his defeat was nevertheless characteristically spirited and defiant: "I will always continue to dream and to hope, [...] and even though my dreams have come to naught, I will never give up and will continue in my love of life—so that I can carry on fighting."⁶⁵

WHEN BATMAN MEETS FU MANCHU: TRACING THE SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION OF "THE RED EAGLE" TO "THE GOLDEN EAGLE"

The huge numbers of movies in which Mit Chaibancha starred, the immense following he cultivated as a local hero of the silver screen from the late 1950s to 1970, and the widespread national mourning that ensued at his death all bear testimony to the popularity of cinema in Thailand during the American era. Mit's profile and success coincided with what Anderson typifies as a massive war-related boom, "which built on, but far outstripped, the 'prewar' prosperity of the early Sarit years," prompting "a proliferation of hotels, restaurants, movie houses, supermarkets, nightclubs, and massage parlours."⁶⁶ With the birth of a new middle class and petty bourgeoisie that Anderson recognizes as the effect of such rapid economic expansion, the social base in Thailand became ready for a quasi-popular right-wing movement to spring into action.⁶⁷ The final section of this paper argues for Mit's significance, through his participation in *Insi thong*, as a representative of this new social class, symbolizing its political prejudices and aspirations, framed as they were by the influences of American capital, American ideology, and American Cold War paranoia.

Set in Bangkok and its environs, *Insi thong* opens with a credit sequence displaying scenes in saturated red negative. The multiplying and menacing image of the film's antagonist, Ba Khin, his tauntingly mirthful head a seeming composite of Ho Chi Minh, Fu Manchu, and Rasputin, is subsequently encapsulated in a glowing red orb that flits intermittently across the screen. The color-coded iconography suggests the evident perils of a communist threat, which is problematic for an adventure series that has drawn, in all its previous episodes, on the feats of its action hero, The Red Eagle. In this expression of anxiety over the potential for a communist takeover of Thailand, as Dulles's "domino theory" forecast, the persona of The Red Eagle is hastily ditched. It is revealed early in the narrative that an enemy force has adopted the hero's disguise and usurped his identity and is committing murders in the name of the popular and respected vigilante. Breaking into the bedroom of a Bangkok newspaper editor, the bogus Red Eagle taunts his victim, who realizes the truth of the deception just before he dies:

You cannot be The Red Eagle. Who are you? The Red Eagle never kills the innocent. You must be a fake. Yes, that's it. Now I know. You are from the Red

⁶⁴ Mit's relationship with Thai journalists is documented by Ingsak, *Mit Chaibancha*.

⁶⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶⁶ Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," p. 15.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

Bamboo gang [*phuak wai-rai phai daeng*], the gang bent on harm to the nation [*chat*].

Leaving the audience in little doubt as to the film's ideological underpinnings, this politically committed dialogue alludes to the title of Khukrit Pramoj's earlier novel, *Phai daeng* (Red Bamboo), and, as with Khukrit, draws the audience's attention to the links between the communist threat to Thailand and mainland China.

Now that his heroic guise has been commandeered by leftists, the genuine Red Eagle must assume a new and untarnished identity. The transformation is a symbolic one, whereby his new costume represents an upgrade of the old outfit, from black and red to gold, changing the color of his boots, gauntlets, and mask, so that the mask now clearly suggests an association with the iconic eagle which represents the United States (see figures 8 and 9, below). Thus transformed, "The Golden Eagle" undertakes to root out the invasive Red Bamboo gang after two more businessmen die suspicious deaths from shock, effected by mysterious commands emanating from a red glass statue. In a salubrious Bangkok nightclub, owned by a Sino-Thai entrepreneur with the Thai-ified name of Mr. Thongchai Limpattana (a.k.a., Liam Jiew Thong), just such a statue is delivered as a gift to a guest celebrating his birthday in the company of his friend Rome Rittikrai. (The film confirms its lack of ideological conviction in the principles of equality when it has the birthday boy's fellow diners express their suspicion of the package that arrives at their table and all agree to have the waiter open it for them in case it is a bomb.)

Referred to as a "doll" (*tukata*) in the script, the statue in the package clearly resembles a seated Chinese Buddha image, again implying that China is a source of peril: the icon, in fact, connotes Chineseness much more than it connotes the atheism typical of communism. From within the doll comes the voice of arch villain Ba Khin, whose monstrous instructions are activated when the victim establishes eye contact with the statue. Ba Khin's powers of brainwashing (*lang samornng*) and his ability to separate his body from his soul to assume immortality and to appear in triplicate are explained in the narrative as "tricks of the trade," which he has apparently learned from the school of Rasputin. But these expressions of demonic prowess have seemingly less connection with the brainwashing techniques of fictional villains invented during the anxious Cold War era than they do with the magical and less overtly politically grounded potencies of popular fiction villains, many of whom predated the Cold War. For although, as David Seed confirms, the concept and the term "brainwashing" were popular Cold War phenomena directly invoking communist conspiracy, pre-1945 Western fiction certainly referred to practices that resembled brainwashing.⁶⁸ *Insi thornng* arguably draws its inspiration less from the tools of the anti-communist grand narrative than it does from the attributes of the character of Fu Manchu, who, making his first appearance in Sax Rohmer's 1913 novel, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, was defined by the author as "The Yellow Peril incarnate in one man." The subsequent adventures of this Manchurian arch-villain,

⁶⁸ See Seed, *Brainwashing*, p. xiii. As Seed further notes, the term "brainwashing" was coined in 1950 to describe the thought-reform methods being used by the communist authorities on Chinese citizens and was then applied to describe the treatment of US captives in the North Korean prison camps set up along the Manchurian border. By the end of the decade, the term had become "associated with all communist efforts to extract confessions and indoctrinate captive audiences, as well as with their internal educational and propaganda efforts." Seed, *Brainwashing*, p. 27.



Figure 8. "The Golden Eagle" strikes a dominant pose. Illustration reproduced from Sek Dusit's biographical article on the actor, *Mit Chaibancha kap khaphachao* (Mit Chaibancha and I), in an undated promotional brochure on Mit published after his death.

widely reworked over the next ninety years in the various media of cinema, television, radio, and comic books, revolved around Fu Manchu's machinations as head of the secret and criminal organization Si-Fan, bent on nothing less than world domination. To succeed in his quest, Dr. Fu Manchu has devised and imbibed a special elixir to grant him longer life. Detective Nayland-Smith of Scotland Yard (a throwback to Sherlock Holmes, who was himself popularized in early twentieth-century Siam in Rama VI's rewrites of the Conan Doyle tales) is charged with the task of countering Fu Manchu.⁶⁹ The antagonist's equally devious daughter, Fah Lo Suee, on occasion rebels against Fu Manchu, siding instead with his enemies, and in one incident she is brainwashed by her father into forgetting her identity.

⁶⁹ For a further discussion of the King's detective fiction, see Rachel Harrison, "'Elementary, My Dear Wat': Influence and Imitation in the Early Crime Fiction of 'Late-Victorian' Siam," in *Chewing on the West*, ed. Doris Jedamski (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 303–47.



Figure 9. DVD cover of *Insi thong*, showing the “Golden Eagle” locked in combat with the bogus “Red Eagle” and epitomizing Thailand’s Cold War struggle with the communist enemy. Courtesy of Saha-phanthamit Sound and Film.

Apparently, a spate of popular, British-made Fu Manchu films released each year between 1965 and 1970 had a direct impact on Thai adventure filmmaking of the 1960s. The British films included: *The Face of Fu Manchu*; *The Brides of Fu Manchu*; *The Vengeance of Fu Manchu*; *The Blood of Fu Manchu*; and, finally, *The Castle of Fu Manchu*. Clear accretions from this source can be discerned in the *Insi daeng* series: *Awasan insi daeng* introduces, for example, a Thai detective recently returned from training at Scotland Yard; and, in *Insi thong*, the daughter of Ba Khin’s accomplice, Benjamat, beds the film’s action hero, becomes sympathetic to his cause, and is punished with death by brainwashing at the hands of Ba Khin. Here the tantalizingly wicked, Svengali-style charisma of Christopher Lee, or the low-tech maneuverings of Ernst Stavro Blofeld in the early James Bond adventures, appear far more inspirational to the demonic techniques of Ba Khin than do the brainwashing sequences of Frankheimer’s *The Manchurian Candidate*.⁷⁰ Moreover, the connection between the anti-Chinese sentiments expressed in *Insi thong* (as in *Nak phaen-din* and *Phai daeng*) become conveniently, yet not consistently, blurred into anti-communist ones, speaking to an unrelenting suspicion of the Chinese that long predates the Cold War era. Rama VI, who took inspiration from the detective fiction of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, also chose to translate Sax Rohmer’s 1919 novel, *The Golden Scorpion*, a decision that has political implications. Another classic of the “Yellow Peril” genre, *The Golden Scorpion/Malaeng-pong thong* introduced the character of Fo-Hi, a

⁷⁰ Despite this, the distinction between the influences behind Fu Manchu and those that helped shape *The Manchurian Candidate* are blurred by the effects of the former on the latter. As Seed notes in his extensive discussion of the 1958 novel by Richard Condon, on which the movie was based, *The Manchurian Candidate* combines “three elements in its title: the threatening Chinese alien (Fu Manchu), American politics, and specific allusions to Korea. Condon deploys a number of Chinese references throughout *The Manchurian Candidate*. In particular, his oriental conspirator, Yen Lo, is compared to Fu Manchu at one point.” See Seed, *Brainwashing*, p. 109.

Chinese arch-villain who, like Fu Manchu, was identified as “the oriental mastermind behind the greatest criminal organization the world has ever known.”⁷¹ For Rama VI, Fo-Hi surely provided an illustration of fiendish characteristics similar to those the monarch outlined in his political writings on the Chinese, to which Baker and Pasuk refer as follows:

Borrowing from the anti-semitism which flourished among European aristocracies in the early twentieth century, Vajiravudh [Rama VI] labeled the Chinese as “The Jews of the East.” In the 1913 pamphlet of that title, he accused the Chinese of refusing to be assimilated into Siamese society, being politically disloyal, expecting undue privileges, worshipping wealth as a god, and being parasites on the economy “like so many vampires who steadily suck dry an unfortunate victim’s life-blood.”⁷²

Given these cultural precedents, there is less irony here than might be imagined in the way that *Insi thorn* draws upon the character of Fu Manchu as inspiration for the proponent of “Red Peril” when, in fact, Fu Manchu was called upon in his adventures post-1949 to fight against communism in his homeland. For, as in other processes of adaptation and reinvention in Siam/Thailand (and elsewhere), the original associations become dislodged, and a charismatic character such as Fu Manchu can comfortably be manipulated into becoming a “free-floating signifier” to suit the cultural and political purposes at hand.⁷³ Moreover, a number of alluring, popular fictional characters have been drawn into didactic political debates through the years, including Fu Manchu, Sherlock Holmes, Batman, and the hero of *Insi daeng* and *Insi thorn*. Thus, reconsidering the functions that US comic strip heroes of the World War II generation were designed to serve helps clarify the ways in which both the iconic “Red Eagle” and the “Golden Eagle” were put to use, as Will Brooker demonstrates:

By locating the serial within the national discourse of anti-Japanese propaganda, Columbia [film company] was able to position Batman as a contemporary patriotic adventure in keeping with so many other films of the early 1940s. [...] This discourse of unashamed hatred for the racial “other” was enthusiastically taken up by many superhero comics of the period. The comic book covers discussed above—from *Captain America*, *Major Victory*, and so forth—echo the popular shorthand of the time in their depiction of grotesque “Jap” soldiers with bright yellow skin and buck teeth. More pertinently, *Detective Comics* embraced the same stereotypes and racist slurs, in virtually every strip but Batman. In the early 1940s, this treatment extended equally to the Chinese, who were popularly regarded in the Fu Manchu mould as a part of a generalised Oriental “Yellow

⁷¹See www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/sax-rohmer/golden-scorpion.htm, last accessed November 8, 2008.

⁷² Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, pp. 114–15.

⁷³ For a discussion of similar transformations and mutations, see Harrison, “Elementary,” pp. 303–47; and Rachel V. Harrison, “Siam’s/Thailand’s Constructions of Modernity under the Influence of the Colonial West,” in *South East Asia Research* 17,3 (November 2009): 325–60.

Peril," before any need arose to distinguish between "friendly" Chinese and "enemy" Japs.⁷⁴

In *Insi thornng*, the Fu Manchu-inspired Ba Khin is revealed to be none other than the disguised political villain Luang Prasitsutthitham, or Mr. Prida Panayan, a Thai who has returned from exile in Beijing to bring the nation to its knees, inspired by the communist ideology he espouses. Prida's name clearly alludes to that of Pridi Panomyong (Luang Praditmanutham), discussed in detail above, while his son in the movie, Phuwanat (meaning "king"), the villain's heir apparent, raises the specter of the end of the Thai monarchy and the imposition of a new regime. Phuwanat has been engaged, since the time when their fathers were friends, to the daughter of Admiral Sindhu-apa, a name that clearly resonates with that of Admiral Sindhu Songkhramchai, who sheltered Pridi before he went into permanent exile in 1949. While Phuwanat has taken on the guise of the bogus Red Eagle, his fiancée, Ratchani (meaning "queen"), has been abducted by the Red Bamboo gang in revenge for her father's refusal to cooperate with their plans. (Here the plot again recalls devices typical of the Fu Manchu movies, as father and daughter are, respectively, tortured and captured to fulfill the antagonist's evil scheme.) The Golden Eagle breaks into Liam Jiew Thong's house, where he finds Ratchani in chains on the balcony. After helping her to escape, he runs the gauntlet of Liam Jiew Thong's henchmen, all of whom appear clad in skin-tight trousers and polo neck T-shirts, seemingly modeled on the costumes of the crew of the Star Ship Enterprise in episodes of the popular 1960s space adventure television series, *Star Trek*. The Golden Eagle, in turn, escapes by slipping unnoticed into the bedroom of Liam Jiew Thong's daughter, Benjamat, where she willingly succumbs to his amorous charms and conceals him within her room for the remainder of the night. This superman's sexual prowess, also alluded to in earlier films in the series, corresponds not only with the characterization of the traditional Thai male hero (*phra-ek*), but also models itself on the sexual accomplishments of Special Agent 007, James Bond. The Golden Eagle's first encounter with Benjamat comes when he accidentally enters her bedroom while she is sleeping. The camera pans across her scantily clad body, prone on the bed, revealing piece by piece, in eroticized segments, first her thighs, then her knees, and finally her ankles, as The Golden Eagle sheds extra light on them with the aid of a tiny torch!

The film's sexualization of the female body acts as a counterpoint here to its usual gaze, which is more typically focused on the physical attributes of the male action hero, performed by Mit Chaibancha. As Yvonne Tasker notes in her study of masculinity and action cinema, the body of the star as hero characteristically functions as spectacle.⁷⁵ The male pin-up, she contends (albeit from an avowedly "Western" cultural perspective), "is certainly of a different order to the female pin-up, shot through with a different set of anxieties, difficulties, and pleasures."⁷⁶ In making this point, Tasker refers to Richard Dyer's argument that such uncertainties are linked to problematic processes involving the "disavowal of the very fact that the man is being looked at." This disavowal, Dyer asserts, is achieved through imagery

⁷⁴ Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, pp. 86 and 91.

⁷⁵ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 76.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

that stresses tough, hypermasculine action as compensation for the display of the male body, thus offering “the body as to-be-looked-at whilst refusing the ‘femininity’ implied by that quite passive position.”⁷⁷

In the case of *Insi thornng*, Mit’s performance, undertaken in the characteristically tight-fitting attire that also typified his other roles, suggests an appeal to female visual pleasure. In movies such as *Pisat saneha* (*The Allure of Ghosts*, 1969), his skin-tight trousers have an added sheen, though by the time he appears in *Insi thornng*, the ravages of early middle age and good living are clearly beginning to take their toll on the Chaibancha waistline. The poster images of Mit as The Golden Eagle are undeniably sexualized, shot from below to emphasize his dominance over the viewer as the camera points upwards towards his crotch (see figure 8). Mit’s pin-up status clearly owed as much, if not more, to his aesthetic pull and charisma as it did to his acting talents. His overt display of sexual charm intimates a change in the status of Thai women under the influence of modernization and Westernization. The American era arguably opens up a space for the expression of female sexual desire, as implied by the elements of the *Insi thornng* plot itself, in which women are depicted as independent, mobile, fashionable, and urbanized.⁷⁸ It is The Golden Eagle’s wife, Oi (played by Phetchara Chaowarat), who arrives to collect her drunken husband from a night out on the town, pulling up outside the bar in a white sports car and modeling a pink trouser suit, thus ensuring that the visual pleasure of the male cinema audience has also been accommodated. *Insi thornng* is set in a swinging Bangkok of the late 1960s, complete with nightclub singers, dancing, and a performance by Western entertainers belonging to an itinerant knife-throwing act. In this depiction of a buzzing nightlife, the audience is also introduced to a third element of gendered focus: the transvestite (*kathoeey*) “call-girls.”

By introducing the character of Sisamorn, the movie draws the depiction of feminized masculinity into its broader political framework, evoking audience anxieties over communism, homosexuality, and transgender sexuality and combining those threats into a tidy package.⁷⁹ Sisamorn transpires to be a key member of the Red Bamboo gang. She appears in the narrative following The Golden Eagle’s rescue of Ratchani. Arriving at Rome’s gate complete with bouffant hair and a handbag, Sisamorn requests a meeting with Ratchani to convey the threat that Ratchani’s father will be executed by the gang if she fails to cooperate. The scene then shifts, by way of a comic editorial cut, to a nightclub-cum-brothel, where Sisamorn and her fellow transvestites entertain their customers. The opening image

⁷⁷ Ibid., with reference to Richard Dyer, “Don’t Look Now,” *Screen*, 23,3–4 (1982): 61–73.

⁷⁸ I am grateful to Janit Feangfu for drawing my attention to this portrayal of women in the movie.

⁷⁹ This echoes similar practices in Cold War filmmaking in the United States, as Thomas Doherty illuminates in *Cold War, Cool Medium* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003, p. 221). Doherty writes: “In the cultural and constitutional law of the land, the link between homosexuality and communism—of perversion and subversion, red-baiting and fag-baiting—was overt. Like domestic communists, homosexuals met in secret cells, possessed a preternatural ability to detect one another, and threatened the moral fiber of the nation.” For a detailed discussion of homosexuality and *kathoeey* as sexual and social deviance in Thai discourse, see Terdsak Romjumba, “Wattthakam kiaw kap ‘gay’ nai sangkhom thai, 2508–2542” [Discourses on “Gay” in Thai Society 1965–2001] (Master of arts dissertation, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 2002). See also Jaray Singkhakowinta, *Unimaginable Desires: Gay Relationships in Thailand* (PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2009).

is a close-up shot of a jiving male bottom on the dance floor, doubtless intended humorously to suggest homosexual gaze and encounter. A Thai policeman, Chat (Mr. Nation, once again), poses in drag to intercept the Red Bamboo gang through seduction, while The Golden Eagle listens at the wall of the next bedroom. However, when the policeman's cover is blown—his wig falls off as he attempts to extricate himself from the tryst—he is mugged by the assembled transvestites waiting outside in the corridor and driven away in a truck. The Golden Eagle comes to his rescue, after which he takes up pursuit of the remaining villains, rushing to Ba Khin's headquarters in the outskirts of Bangkok.

With the aid of military intervention, the gang is successfully defeated. The Golden Eagle shoots the fake "Red Eagle" dead and terminates the ever-multiplying Ba Khin by unlocking his disembodied heart from the crystal ball in which the villain had sheltered it and destroying the heart. The "magic" of Ba Khin's politically motivated spells expires in a narrative that follows less the style of a political thriller than it does a comic-strip cartoon. Order is restored, and Thailand remains a free, anti-communist nation. The Golden Eagle can safely reassume the red-and-black attire of his regular Red Eagle persona ... though it was in this Red Eagle guise that Mit Chaibancha was to meet his own death as he filmed the character's final journey home.

CONCLUSION

The role of the masked action hero of *Insi thong*, performed by the iconic movie star Mit Chaibancha, provides an apposite cultural symbol of Thailand's American era and the particular nature of its own Cold War anxieties. Shedding his associations with the "redness" of communism, the revamped vigilante of this 1970 movie steps out to defend the values of the Thai nation in a redesigned uniform that is complete with golden gauntlets and an eye-mask shaped to mimic the features of an eagle, symbolic of the United States. This paper has investigated some of the confusions, uncertainties, and hybridities regarding such symbolism in Thai cinematic interpretations of the Red Peril and its associated ideology. By drawing comparisons with later films, such as *Nak phaen-din*, the paper pinpoints idiosyncratic understandings of the communist threat to Thailand, as expressed in cinema, in two key ways: Firstly, the most significant feature of communism from the perspective of the Thai Right is as "threat" to the nation, defined in Irvine's anthropological study of the period as "a bounded entity in danger of destabilization." In order to convey this sense of menace most poignantly, *Nak phaen-din* draws on popular understandings of that which is menacing, which, somewhat confusingly, often includes threats that are the antithesis of actual communist belief and practice. In *Nak phaen-din*, therefore, the communist villains are, in fact, depicted as well-heeled and sinister capitalists with a penchant for the various overindulgences they are at liberty to experience amid the bright lights of the city. In this they differ little, if at all, from the villains of socially conscious leftist literature and film of the same period. Nevertheless, these characters are clearly emblematic of treachery and read by popular cinema-going audiences as a threat to that which is widely understood by them as essential to "Thainess." For those sympathetic to the ideology of *Nak phaen-din* and its trumpeting of the Village Scout movement, that core national identity is conveyed through a sense of loyalty to Nation, Religion, and King, with a particular emphasis on King.

Concomitant with this is the second aspect of Thai anti-communist paranoia this paper has sought to identify, namely, a merging between the peril posed by the Left and an older and persistent threat posed by the Chinese that figures in popular cultural belief and plays out in filmmaking practice. At both the political and the cinematic levels, fear of the "Red Peril" provides only a thin veneer over a persistent and historical mistrust of the Chinese as "other" to the construction of Thai national identity. *Insi thornng* reveals in several ways anxieties that identify Beijing as a counter to Thailand's constitutional monarchy, raising the specter (quite literally through the characterization of Ba Khin) of the return of exiled former statesman Pridi Panomyong and the threat of republicanism he was imagined to have posed. Through recourse and allusion to the popular symbols of the "Yellow Peril," far more than to the emblems of hard-line communism, *Insi thornng* invokes Fu Manchu as the demon to be slain by Batman-cum-James Bond.

These expressions of cultural adaptation and reinvention should not come as a surprise: they are neither new nor unique to Thailand. Popular cultural references are frequently syncretic in nature, making them ripe for ideological (mis)representation. Amidst this sea of "free floating signifiers," Thai cinema forged its own articulations of the Cold War experience.

FESTIVAL POLITICS: SINGAPORE'S 1963 SOUTH-EAST ASIA CULTURAL FESTIVAL¹

Jennifer Lindsay

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between culture and the Cold War is a broad topic that has been approached in various ways. In their useful “stocktaking” of the study of Cold War cultural history, Patrick Major and Rana Mitter summarize a major difference in definition separating recent writing on this broad topic, namely between the “cultural cold war” and “cold war culture.” Writing on the former, they say, focuses more on “cultural diplomacy between the blocs, and within them, in areas outside what is ostensibly the direct state and governmental ambit, whether in the field of high culture (literature, the arts, music) or popular culture (television, pop and rock music, films).” The latter “has a more anthropological sense, relating to the less specific but wider-ranging concept that everyday social existence may have been shaped by the global dynamics of the cold war.”²

No matter which way one looks at it, the relationship between culture and the Cold War is central to any understanding of the period. One need think only of the prominence given to culture in Cold War ideologies, whether it be the role for culture in diplomacy (winning hearts and minds for “freedom” or for “social justice”), in popular edification (inculcating socialist ideals), or in popular expression (facilitating the voice of the People). (I am not using “popular” here in the Major/Mitter sense noted above, of mediatized, commercial culture—not a particularly useful distinction in this context—but rather I refer to culture for, or of, the people, which included literature, the arts, music, and film.) Furthermore, the

¹ The Festival was named “The First South-East Asia Cultural Festival.” I maintain the hyphenated “South-East” when referring to the festival; otherwise, I use the common “Southeast Asia.” Clearly, organizers expected that there would be ongoing festivals. At a meeting at the end of the festival, Thai officials proposed to host the second one. However, since the region was embroiled in conflict from 1963, no subsequent festival was held. Henceforth, I omit the “First” in my references to the festival.

² Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, “Culture,” in *Palgrave Advances in Cold War History*, ed. Saki R. Dockrill and Geraint Hughes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 240–41.

Cold War indisputably created an overarching frame for the creation of translocal communities linked by ideology (socialism, capitalist “freedom,” or Third World nonalignment), even as these ideologies were vernacularized. The large Cold War blocs were themselves defined beyond geography, beyond nation, beyond ethnicity, and beyond race. The Cold War was global in essence and created a global consciousness that also found cultural expression.

Writing on these aspects of cultural history has hitherto focused on the Cold War hubs of the United States and the Soviet Socialist Republic.³ Recently, attention has turned elsewhere: towards the Third World and towards Asia. In his masterful book on the Cold War as a global phenomenon, Odd Arne Westad points out that “... US and Soviet interventionisms to a very large extent shaped both the international and the domestic framework within which political, social, and *cultural* changes in Third World countries took place” [*italics mine*].⁴ However, he does not then delve into these cultural changes, other than to examine the creation of Third Worldism itself; his interest is primarily political. Susan Bayly’s recent work on Vietnam and India does look closely at cultural changes, following intellectuals in their cosmopolitan existence in what she terms the “socialist ecumene.”⁵ Bayly’s book is an important contribution to the “cold war culture” approach, showing how an examination of socialism in Asian settings can challenge ideas of “socialism” itself, inasmuch as socialism existed in a very “broad spectrum of political and cultural modes.”⁶

Bayly’s work on Vietnam is particularly significant because it discusses a postcolonial socialist society in Southeast Asia. It is an example of how broad Cold War concepts such as “socialism” must be redefined in a nuanced way when applied to Southeast Asia, a region where the Cold War coincided with (and influenced, and was influenced by) nationalism, postcolonialism, and anticolonialism. The global politics of the Cold War intersected with local politics of nation, ethnicity, race, anticolonialism, and postcolonialism in particularly vivid and visible ways in Southeast Asia. Throughout the region, a sense of translocal community was being forged at the level of nation as new nations were born. At the same time, translocal communities were being forged globally and across Southeast Asia via Cold War networks that were political and cultural in nature.

This essay discusses one occasion where national, regional, and global factors intersected in cultural display, namely the South-East Asia Cultural Festival held in Singapore in 1963. This festival occurred at a particular historical moment: it took place in the midst of the Cold War; it heralded the merging of Singapore with Malaya and the creation of Malaysia; it marked the crushing of the Left in Singapore; and it officially opened Singapore’s National Theatre. My investigation of the South-East Asia Cultural Festival takes the discussion of culture and the Cold War into a

³ See, *inter alia*, Douglas Field, *American Cold War Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1992); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

⁴ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁵ Susan Bayly, *Asian Voices in a Postcolonial Age: Vietnam, India, and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

new area, one that arises precisely because of the Southeast Asian context of the festival at this historical moment.

As I will show, the 1963 South-East Asia Cultural Festival might, on the one hand, be seen as an example of “the cultural cold war,” as Major and Mitter define this concept. The festival was certainly a diplomatic deployment of the arts, and it epitomizes the way culture is employed to bolster and justify political communities. The political community of nations (predominantly those aligned with the United States) that attended the festival was defined in cultural terms. But it was also cultural ties (and the relatively fluid perception of them at this historical moment) that allowed for odd political bedfellows. The South-East Asia Cultural Festival is thus a fertile case study for asking two questions: how does a political network foster and depict a cultural image, and, conversely, how does cultural expression depict or foster a political network?

Both the “culture of the Cold War” and the “Cold War culture” approaches described above focus on the link between the Cold War and culture. The Cold War produces the cultural expression, or the culture expresses the Cold War. In both cases, the Cold War is the starting point and the frame that culture follows (in myriad ways, of course). Once we begin looking at Southeast Asia, however, we see that both approaches are problematic. Firstly, a closer study of Southeast Asia demonstrates how cultural networks can cut across political and ideological ones. Secondly, we come to understand more clearly that the Cold War was only one of many co-existing frames for cultural expression and only one of many co-existing cultures.

My study of the South-East Asia Cultural Festival highlights the fluidity of the relationship between culture and political identity in this period. It focuses on some of the competing, concurrent cultures that were uniting and dividing people in something called “South-East Asia” in 1963, including cultures of race, heritage, modernity, nation, postcolonialism, and anticolonialism, all of which were similarly at play in uniting and dividing people into nations.

My discussion of the festival proceeds broadly in three sections. First, I place the festival in its context of the merging of Singapore with Malaysia and the opening of Singapore’s National Theatre. Then, I discuss how the festival was placed in the political and cultural networks of the time. In the third section, I analyze the festival itself, followed by some concluding comments.

1963

1963 was a year of great change. Globally, the Cold War was raging. In the United States, the Civil Rights movement gained force. In Southeast Asia, there was a tightening of Cold War spheres of influence and an escalation of US military involvement in Vietnam, while the socialist-leaning camp was becoming increasingly divided between those orientated towards the USSR or China. In Indonesia, Foreign Minister Soebandrio in January declared a policy of Confrontation (*Konfrontasi*) against the newly emerging nation of Malaysia. Indonesia’s links with China were strengthening, and the Indonesian Communist Party was the third largest in the world, after those of China and the USSR. However, in March President Sukarno veered to the right when he adopted the United States’ stabilization plan to combat rampant inflation. West Irian, which had remained under Netherlands rule, was

finally handed over to Indonesia in May. Sukarno banned the music of the Beatles. In South Vietnam, the months of May and June saw the Buddhist crisis and a surge of protest against the US-supported Diem puppet regime. Laos was enjoying a brief moment of fragile peace following the Geneva Convention of 1962. In Singapore, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) finally crushed its left-wing opposition, the Barisan Sosialis, when its top leaders were detained on February 2, 1963. And in Singapore and Malaya, preparations were underway for the birth of Malaysia, with the merging of the Federation of Malaya, Sabah (North Borneo), Sarawak, and Singapore scheduled to take place on August 31, 1963.

Preparations were also underway for another event, the "First South-East Asia Cultural Festival" to be held at the new National Theatre in Singapore, August 8–15.

CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

The South-East Asia Cultural Festival was timed to mark the opening of Singapore's National Theatre. The plan to build the National Theatre was a grand project that had been first announced four years earlier by Singapore's minister of culture, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, in November 1959, only five months after the establishment of Singapore's internal self-government in June 1959. At the "breaking-the-sod" ceremony for the National Theatre project on June 5, 1961, the Minister declared that the South-East Asia Cultural Festival would be held to mark the theater's opening.

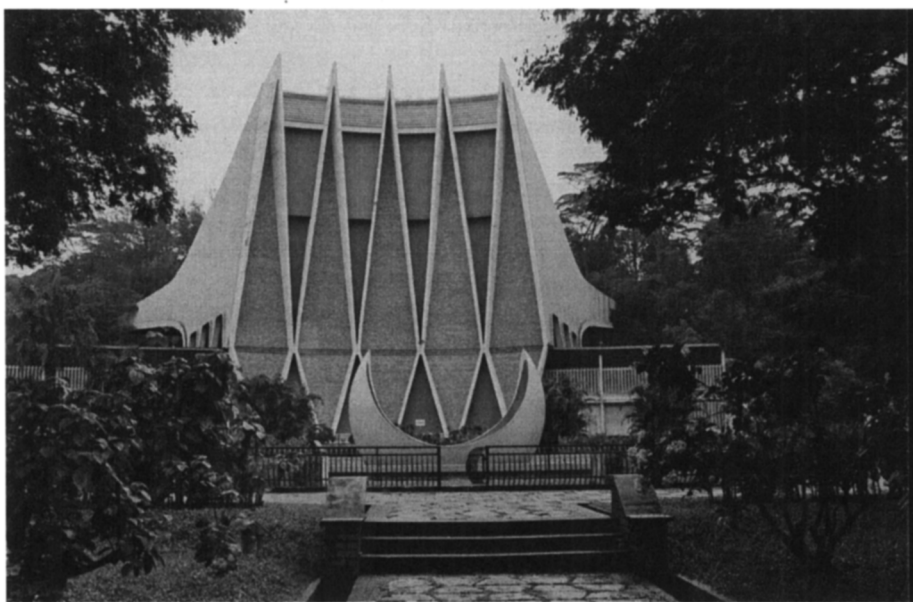


Figure 1. The National Theatre, Singapore (National Archives of Singapore Acc 57201)

Building the National Theatre was a huge community project in Singapore. A theater—a performance venue—was to be the first project and icon of the self-governing state. Funds were raised through community donations and other community activities. The building, on Clemenceau Avenue, was designed as a great symbol of nationhood, with a five-pointed façade representing the five stars of the

Singapore flag, and a fountain, representing the crescent moon, planned for the front plaza. The theater was also an emblem of modernity. It was designed with all the facilities of a modern performance venue of the time, including a revolving stage. Its capacity was 3,420 seats, and part of the auditorium was open-air.

As the construction of the National Theatre progressed, another construction was taking place—the new nation of Malaysia. In May 1961, just one month before the “breaking-the-sod” ceremony for the National Theatre and the announcement of the South-East Asia Cultural Festival, the prime minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, declared that Malaya (independent since August 31, 1957) should unite with Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak, and Brunei. This was an outcome that Lee Kuan Yew, the prime minister of the state of Singapore (which had been granted internal self government in 1959), had been seeking, a plan that the Tunku had previously resisted and the Left in Singapore opposed. On July 31, 1961, the Tunku and Britain’s Prime Minister Macmillan signed the agreement for the transfer of sovereignty of North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore by August 31, 1963, when the new Federation of Malaysia would come into being. Facing opposition on the issue in Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP mounted a huge publicity campaign to rally support for the merger. This campaign included free public cultural performances called *Aneka Ragam Ra’yat* (various peoples), which presented Singapore’s ethnic groups to each other. In September 1962, a referendum was held on the proposed merger, the results of which showed 71 percent in favor.⁷

The two projects thus came together: the construction of Singapore’s National Theatre, with the South-East Asia Cultural Festival to mark its opening, and the birth of the new nation of Malaysia, which would include Singapore. In September 1962 (after the referendum), it was announced that the National Theatre would be completed on July 31, 1963. The South-East Asia Cultural Festival was timed for August 1963, the month of the birth of the new Federation of Malaysia, scheduled for August 31, Malaya’s national day.

The South-East Asia Cultural Festival did indeed open on August 8, 1963, as scheduled and ran until August 15. The National Theatre was also officially opened at this time, even though its construction was not complete.⁸ However, although initially timed for August 31, the date for revealing the construction named Malaysia had to be delayed until September 16. Both President Sukarno of Indonesia and President Macapagal of the Philippines were hostile to the Malaysia project. Manila had claims to Sabah, and Sukarno, already deeply suspicious of British imperialist motives in designing Malaysia, was further angered by the British suppression of Azahari’s attempt to topple the Sultanate of Brunei. The two leaders, Sukarno and Macapagal, aligned in opposition. Sukarno finally agreed to attend a summit meeting with both Macapagal and the Tunku in Manila, August 1–5, 1963. Time was running out. The date set for the establishment of Malaysia was now less than a month away. On August 6, just two days before the opening of the South-East Asia Cultural Festival, Sukarno, Macapagal, and the Tunku signed an accord called the Manila Declaration, with Indonesia and the Philippines achieving the Tunku’s

⁷ In fact, technically the referendum was not for or against a merger, but rather it offered a choice among three alternative formulas. See further J. A. C. Mackie, *Konfrontasi: The Indonesia–Malaysia Dispute, 1963–1966* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 47.

⁸ Only the stage and part of the hall were completed. The façade was still brick and mortar. See n.a., *Souvenir of the First S.E. Asia Cultural Festival in Celebration of the Opening of The National Theatre—1963* (Singapore: South-East Asia Cultural Festival Committee, 1963), p. 187.

acquiescence to their demand for a United Nations fact-finding team to investigate the validity of elections and support for the merger in the Borneo territories before the Malaysian Federation came into being, and Malaya conceding flexibility with the August 31 date.



Figure 2. Front page, *The Straits Times*, August 7, 1963

The South-East Asia Cultural Festival took place immediately following the Manila Summit, at a time when a delicate truce operated among Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines on the eve of the birth of Malaysia. Frantic negotiations were taking place among them and the United Nations and Britain, with the exact date of Malaysian independence still uncertain. Sukarno played a stalling game, increasing his demands for Indonesian observers to be included in the UN mission, effectively delaying the date of the Malaysian merger, while Indonesian guerrilla skirmishes continued along the border in Borneo. The new date set for the declaration of Malaysian independence—September 16—was not announced until August 30, two weeks after the festival was over. When that date arrived and Malaysia was officially born, Indonesia and the Philippines refused to recognize the new nation, and Indonesian *Konfrontasi* with Malaysia broke out in earnest.

Malaysia was not the only new nation actively under construction at this time. The PAP (in power from 1959) saw that the way to Singapore's complete independence was through a merger with Malaya, and it was therefore keen to

demonstrate its Malay credentials. But in mid-1961, an internal split opened within PAP between its left-leaning, Chinese-oriented grassroots cadres and its English-educated leaders. The Socialist wing quit the PAP to form the opposition party, the Barisan Sosialis, which the PAP finally succeeded in crushing in early 1963 in Operation Coldstore, with the arrest of 130 people accused of being members of Barisan Sosialis, including top-echelon leaders.⁹

In 1962–63, the PAP tried to foster grassroots support in the wake of its split with the Left, and to cultivate an image of multiracial harmony and openness to Malayness, thus allaying Malay fears of Chinese chauvinism. This was the concept behind the *Aneka Ragam Ra'yat* performances that the PAP established in early 1963, where the different labeled races of Singapore performed for each other and with each other, creating a sense of shared participation in the nation as both audience and performers. The South-East Asia Cultural Festival concept, which was also a PAP creation, developed directly out of the *Aneka Ragam Ra'yat* shows.¹⁰ Like the National Theatre, the festival was designed to stage a politically, racially, and culturally harmonious state of Singapore.¹¹ Thus, while the festival and the theater had been in the pipeline from 1961, by early 1963 there was a new sense of focus and urgency about bringing them both to fruition.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FESTIVAL CONCEPT

The idea to mount a cultural festival was first mooted in 1960, but it was conceptually quite a different kind of festival from the one that transpired. In July 1960, in a Memo to Cabinet, Minister Rajaratnam proposed a South-East Asian Festival to be held in 1961, to coincide with "Visit the Orient" year. He proposed:

A SEA Exposition of Commerce, Industry, Culture and Sport ... to be held in Singapore sometime in 1961 to coincide with National Day celebrations and the "Visit the Orient Year." ... To propagate Singapore's position as:

- (a) a centre of world trade and the emporium of South-East Asia
- (b) a place for capital investment and industrialisation
- (c) an attraction for tourists in view of its cosmopolitan character and it being a very convenient stepping-stone for further travel in South-East Asia

⁹ See Mackie *Konfrontasi*, pp. 39–52; and Guo Quan Seng, "The Barisan Sosialis and the Collapse of the Socialist Alternative in Singapore (1963–66)," (BA thesis, National University of Singapore, Department of History, 2005), pp. 22–26.

¹⁰ The *Aneka Ragam Ra'yat* shows were directly linked to PAP promotion of its terms for the merger with Malaya (named Alternative A, as opposed to Alternative B, which called for a complete merger) and its vision of a multiracial Malaysian Malaysia. Leading up to the 1963 referendum on the merger, ten *Aneka Ragam Ra'yat* shows were held, at which Alternative A "was put across through banners and skits." See *Souvenir 1963*, p. 230.

¹¹ The National Theatre was an extension of the *Aneka Ragam Ra'yat* shows. The essay on the National Theatre in the *Souvenir* booklet notes: "This Theatre will make it possible for a larger number of persons to enjoy through greater participation [*sic*] because of its special design and salubrious surroundings the drama and other manifestations of culture. The next stage in the development of the *multi-racial* use of this Theatre would be inevitable. We have already seen the success of the *Aneka Ragam* shows and the ability of one cultural group to appreciate especially the rhythm and music of another group which is symptomatic of greater things to come." *Souvenir 1963*, p. 96. Italics mine.

- (d) a meeting place of the four major cultures of the world—Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Western.¹²

The proposal's rhetoric is primarily framed in terms of trade, investment, and tourism. At this stage (1961), there is no discourse of postcolonialism or even nationalism, as appeared later in publicity around the event itself. And the "cultures" of Singapore are named in terms of diasporic "cultures of the world," which happen to be the four official racial divisions of Singapore. The festival was to be an international festival held *in* Southeast Asia. But the focus began to shift as the festival project became linked to the National Theatre project, and this in turn became linked to region. By early 1963, the name of the festival was causing concern, indicating growing awareness of a distinction between a festival held in Southeast Asia and a region-focused festival. The Festival Committee decided to change the name of the event from South-East *Asian* Cultural Festival to South-East *Asia* Cultural Festival, feeling this was "a more suitable title, as various countries not within the South-East Asian region have been invited." Ironically, this new name stuck, even as the festival focus on region sharpened.

The discourse of postcolonialism also sharpened. By early 1963, promotional materials defending Singapore's role as host cited its place in the new Southeast Asian postcolonial society of nations:

The Chairman stated that the proposed Festival was timely in that Singapore, as the youngest State to emerge from European colonial rule, wished to play its part in demonstrating Asian cultural heritage, which had long been submerged under the weight of an imposed European culture.¹³

NETWORKS AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

When the festival was first announced, in September 1962, sixteen countries were slated to be invited: Cambodia, India, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, South Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, Pakistan, Ceylon, Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak, Brunei, Hong Kong, and the United Arab Republic.¹⁴ Burma was subsequently included. Ministry of Culture archives record the number of invited countries as seventeen in October 1962, by which time Burma was one of the number, and the United Arab Republic had been replaced by Yugoslavia.¹⁵ The initial line-up of invitees was not geographically limited to Southeast Asia, and it included countries linked to Asia through other networks, particularly the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), thus

¹² Memo to Cabinet, July 20, 1960, Singapore, Ministry of Culture (MoC) Archives, General Files, MC 657 on AR 30, item number 0008 0255.

¹³ Record of Festival Committee meeting, January 11, 1963, Singapore, MoC Archives, General Files, MC 657 on AR 30, item number 0009 0088-91.

¹⁴ *Souvenir* 1963, p. 81.

¹⁵ "A total of 17 countries were invited on 26.10.62; Burma: Cambodia: Ceylon: India: Brunei: Japan: Laos: Malaya: Philippines: Pakistan: Indonesia: South Vietnam: Hong Kong: Thailand: North Borneo: Sarawak and Yugoslavia. Subsequently (late December 1962), an invitation was issued also to the United Arab Republic." Brief note by Edward Khan, Secretary of National Theatre Trust, dated January 29, 1963, prepared on position re South-East Asian Cultural Festival. Singapore, MoC Archives, General Files, MC 657 on AR 30, 0008.0169 (file NTT.17/61).

explaining the possible participation of NAM leaders from the United Arab Republic (Egypt) and Yugoslavia. When the festival took place in August 1963, however, "eleven countries" (as the festival publicity named them) participated, listed here as they were in the program:

- Kingdom of Cambodia
- Colony of Hongkong
- Kingdom of Laos
- Federation of Malaya
- Republic of Pakistan
- State of Singapore
- Kingdom of Thailand
- Republic of Vietnam
- Republic of India
- State of North Borneo
- Republic of the Philippines

Cold War affiliations obviously played a part in the choice of countries initially invited to participate in the festival. No communist country was invited (such as China, North Vietnam). Yet invitations were sent both to confirmed US allies (Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines) and NAM members, including India, which leaned toward the USSR, and Indonesia, whose pro-China Communist Party, as mentioned above, was then the third largest in the world.

The countries that declined the invitation did so for various reasons, both because of Cold War politics and because of national and regional considerations. Ceylon (Sri Lanka), a founding member of the Afro-Asian Movement and the Non-Aligned Movement, declined, for reasons that remain unclear. Burma, likewise a founding member of both the Afro-Asian Movement and NAM, also declined, despite repeated invitations from the organizing committee right up until July 1963.¹⁶ Indonesia played along to the very last moment, sending a representative to planning committee meetings until May 1963. Even in July 1963, the committee noted that Indonesia's participation was still "hoped for," but finally Indonesia did not send a delegation because of the Malaysia issue, a conflict discussed below. Brunei declined because of what the festival correspondence euphemistically calls "unavoidable circumstances," following the crushing of the Brunei revolt in December 1962.¹⁷ The motive for Sarawak's non-participation is not clear, although the reason given was "difficulty ... in view of her preparations for the Malaysia

¹⁶ As late as July, 1963, the chairman of the Festival Committee, Mr. K. C. Lee, included Rangoon in his tour when he traveled to secure final confirmations that the countries invited would participate in the Festival. See LKC 03 in NA 2047, Private Records of K. C. Lee, held in the Singapore Archives. The official reason given for Burma's decision to opt out was that the festival "coincides with the national Burmese festive season, and, as such, the Ministry of Culture will be busily engaged at that time." MoC archives General Files, MC 657 on AR 30, 0008.0135 and 0008.0108 (April 30, 1963).

¹⁷ Committee meeting records take pains to separate this issue from the Malaysia issue, noting a letter from P. M. Yusuf, State Secretary of Brunei, to Rajaratnam (dated July 20, 1963), saying that: "I must point out that Brunei's decision not to participate in the said festival is not due to Brunei not joining Malaysia, but due to unavoidable circumstances prevailing in Brunei now." MoC Archives. General Files. MC 657 on AR 30. 0008.0092.

Cultural Exhibition later [in the] year."¹⁸ The Philippines, which initially accepted the invitation, but by mid-1963 was embroiled, together with Indonesia, in the fight against the creation of Malaysia, almost did not participate, and finally took part only because of last-minute negotiations and promises of funding assistance from Singapore. The reason for Japan's nonparticipation is also unclear. In April 1963, the Festival Committee was still "hopeful of Japanese participation."¹⁹

The initial invitation list for the 1963 South-East Asia Cultural Festival, and, to a lesser extent, the final line-up of participating countries, demonstrates the organizers' belief that events marked as "cultural" could cut across political-ideological networks. It is important to realize, however, that these political-ideological networks were also multiple and intersecting, as I will discuss. Furthermore, culture (rather than political ideology) was itself emerging as the defining factor in the entity named "South-East Asia," a network linked by combinations of perceived commonalities of heritage, race, and postcolonial modernity. At the same time, these perceived or projected commonalities were also shaping new Southeast Asian nations.

POLITICAL-IDEOLOGICAL NETWORKS

In 1963, countries in Southeast Asia were linked to political and ideological networks established by the Cold War or those formed in reaction to it. As already mentioned, there were broad political alliances binding countries to the opposed Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Socialist Republic, and, increasingly, to China. There were also networks of nonalignment and anti-imperialism. Some networks were defined ideologically (i.e., the Non-Aligned Movement), while others were defined geographically (the Afro-Asian Movement or The Association of Asian Nations). Geography and ideology overlapped in different ways.

The Non-Aligned Movement grew from the Asian-African Conference held in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, and was based on the idea of Third Worldism, the basic premise of which was that the new nations of Asia and Africa should band together to form a third, neutral force so as to resist becoming satellites of the Cold War superpowers. By 1961, the Third World non-alignment movement had split into two: the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which was not limited by geography and which espoused the Nehru-led ideology advocating world peace; and the Afro-Asian Movement, which championed the Sukarno-driven ideology of anti-imperialism and was geographically defined.

Both movements linked their Asian members within an international network, and many Asian countries were members of both. NAM linked its Asian member countries internationally along ideological grounds. The Afro-Asian Movement linked its members geographically, within Asia and to emerging nations in Africa, with looser ideological ties than those of NAM.²⁰ The most significant difference in

¹⁸ Minutes of meeting of Festival Committee, March 29, 1963. Singapore, MoC Archives. General Files. MC 657 on AR 30. 0009 0061.

¹⁹ Minutes of meeting of Festival Committee, April 3, 1963. Singapore, MoC Archives. General Files. MC 657 on AR 30. 0009 0058.

²⁰ See further David Kimche, *The Afro-Asian Movement: Ideology and Foreign Policy in the Third World* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1973), pp. 95, 104–5.

membership, as far as Asia was concerned, was that China was excluded from NAM membership, but included in the Afro-Asian Movement. (The USSR was excluded from both, although it pushed hard for inclusion in the broad Afro-Asian group.)²¹ At the first NAM meeting in Belgrade in 1961, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Cambodia were the only Asian countries that attended. Thailand, the Philippines, Pakistan, Laos, and both Vietnams were not present, although they had all attended the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955. Meanwhile, as NAM came under the leadership of Tito and Nasser, and was supported by Nehru, Sukarno developed a rival concept that was also non-geographical, namely, that of the New Emerging Forces (NEFO). This was a looser grouping, congregated around Sukarno's vision of an aggressive, confrontational politics of anticolonialism and anti-imperialism, and it included all socialist countries.²²

On the other side, various Southeast Asian countries were linked in political associations that clearly aligned themselves with one of the superpowers. SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization), founded by the United States in 1954 as an Asian NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), and despised by Sukarno, was based on a military treaty among the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan, France, New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Solidly anti-communist and aligned with the United States, it backed the US policies in Vietnam. The Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) was formed in 1961 with three member countries, Malaya, Thailand, and the Philippines, all of which were non-NAM members, strongly anti-communist, and opposed to Chinese or Soviet influence. The membership of this organization, the forerunner of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), was geographically defined in terms of Southeast Asia.

In 1963, there were also various politically-defined networks that included Southeast Asian countries. Some, like Maphilindo—the short-lived association that united Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia, which was formed to smooth negotiations regarding the formation of Malaysia—brought ideological adversaries together around a specific issue. In general, though, by the early 1960s, as Sino-Soviet relations worsened, camps were forming in terms of their relationship to China. By late 1962, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Vietnam were firmly aligned with the United States. As Cambodia was coming under increasing Chinese influence, relations between Cambodia and Thailand worsened. Relations between Indonesia and India also soured following China's September 1962 attack on India, which Indonesia did not condemn.²³ And there was growing friendship between

²¹ Both China and the USSR were members of the more militant subgroup of the Afro-Asian Movement, namely, the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), formed in Cairo in December 1957, although even here the USSR's inclusion was increasingly contested and the Sino-Soviet split bitterly perpetuated. See further Kimche, *The Afro-Asian Movement*, chapters 7 through 9.

²² NEFO was not only geographically open, it was also not even necessarily tied to nations and national governments. "Forces" could mean forces for progressive change or for anti-imperialism within a country, and so might encompass labor movements and sports clubs, for instance. See further, Ewa T. Pauker on the November 1963 Games of the Emerging Forces, held in Jakarta, "Ganefo I: Sports and Politics in Djakarta," *Asian Survey* 5,4 (April 1965): 171–85.

²³ At the Asian Games in Jakarta in September 1962, Sukarno refused visas to Nationalist China and Israel. One week later, China attacked India, but Jakarta did not condemn this action. See *ibid.*, p. 172; and L. P. Singh "Dynamics of Indian-Indonesian Relations," *Asian Survey* 7,9 (September 1967): 659.

India's adversaries, between Indonesia and Pakistan, for instance, with Pakistan giving support to Indonesia's "Crush Malaysia" campaign.

Mapped against these networks, the list of countries attending the 1963 South-East Asia cultural festival reveals overlapping political affiliations:

SEA Cultural Festival 1963	SEATO 1954	Bandung 1955	Afro-Asian 1963	NAM 1961	ASA 1961	Maphilindo 1963
Kingdom of Cambodia		x	x	x		
<i>Colony of Hong Kong</i>						
Kingdom of Laos		x	x			
Federation of Malaya					x	x
Republic of Pakistan	x	x	x			
<i>State of Singapore</i>						
Kingdom of Thailand	x	x			x	
Republic of [South] Vietnam		x				
Republic of India		x	x	x		
<i>State of North Borneo</i>						
Republic of the Philippines	x	x			x	x

While there was a certain degree of fluidity in political affiliation in Southeast Asia, even under the Cold War umbrellas, culture could provide other fluid groupings. Culture could be featured not only as a pretext for the meeting of political adversaries (as in the cultural diplomacy of festivals), but also as the actual grounds of a deeper affiliation, particularly through citing links of shared heritage or race.

One cultural-racial link was Malayness. For instance, at the same time that Indonesia was backing its political links with China with cultural events and exchanges (through writers' visits, art exhibitions, and performances), it was also exchanging official cultural missions with Singapore and Malaya.²⁴ And while Indonesia was deeply suspicious of Malaya's cultural claims of pan-Malay brotherhood, as it feared Malaya's political designs on Sumatra, it was amenable to playing the cultural-ethnic-Malay card when negotiating with the Philippines and Malaya on a settlement concerning north Borneo and the formation of Malaysia. Maphilindo, the short-lived association of Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia that was established in 1963, was based on a notion of Malayness.²⁵ Maphilindo pointedly excluded Singapore—much to Singapore's chagrin—and was designed to

²⁴ An official Indonesian cultural mission was sent to Singapore in August 1959. Singapore's Ministry of Culture archives mention a planned cultural mission to Malaya and Indonesia in 1960 (Singapore, MoC Archives, General Files, MC 657 on AR 30, 0008.0248-53).

²⁵ Mackie, *Konfrontasi*, p. 33.

exclude overseas Chinese.²⁶ The exclusive concept of Malayness was driven both by the fear that the PRC would influence the overseas Chinese living within the borders of these countries and by a more basic fear of being dominated by those who were racially Chinese.²⁷ Indonesia's ex-vice president, Mohammad Hatta, recalled the advice he gave to the British in 1949 about the creation of Malaysia through the amalgamation of Malaya and Singapore:

... the Malaysia that would emerge would inevitably become a second China, dominated both politically and economically by the Chinese. The Singapore Chinese would then be able to extend their power throughout the entire area, and together with the Chinese in Malaya, would no doubt achieve a preponderant position at the expense of the Malays, who would thereby lose their own country. This would not only be very dangerous for the Malays themselves, but also for us Indonesians.²⁸

SOUTH-EAST ASIA CULTURAL FESTIVAL: THE SHOW

The festival was originally conceived in 1961 as an international arts event to be held at a venue in Southeast Asia, but by the time this event took place in 1963, "South-East Asia" was presented as a cultural entity, characterized by a transnational shared heritage and deeply rooted indigenous traditions. "Shared culture of South-East Asia" was now presented as the reason *why* the participating countries had come together and cooperated in this venture. The official messages of the festival stressed a shared culture that had been interrupted by colonialism.

Ethnically, geographically, and historically, the countries of South East Asia are either distant relatives or close neighbours. In the past, because of the obstructions created by colonial rule, these countries had no intercourse, at least

²⁶ Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Soekarno: Ideology and Politics 1959–1965* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 218. Singapore's sensitivity over the racial aspect of Maphilindo is reflected in the reporting of *The Straits Times*. The headline on August 23, 1963, p. 2, read: "Macapagal says it: Maphilindo not racial." The article went on: "President Macapagal said the aim of Maphilindo was 'close fraternal relations between the peoples related by race and culture in order that together they may cooperate in charting a brighter future and in building a better society for themselves and their children.' It was not a racial or racialist grouping, although it was a fact that the three countries were drawn together by the magnetic forces of race, culture, history, and geography. Nevertheless, Maphilindo is not inspired by any doctrine of racial exclusivism. It will keep its doors open and remain hospitable to all persons regardless of race, creed, or colour who pledge undivided allegiance to any of the three Malay states that compose it."

²⁷ The relationship of the racial issue to socialism is complex. The ideals of socialism purport to be above race. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was a multiracial union, with nationalities subservient to the Soviet state and its unifying socialist ideology. See Westad, *Global Cold War*, pp. 47, 52–53. Yet the USSR was particularly bitter about being excluded from the Afro-Asian Movement. It claimed that it should qualify as an Asian country because of its Asian republics. China, in particular, labeled the USSR as European, and the racial element was one factor in the Sino-Soviet split. See Michael Freeberne, "Racial Issues and the Sino-Soviet Dispute," *Asian Survey* 5,8 (August 1965): 408–16; and David Kimche, *The Afro-Asian Movement*, pp. 18, 118, 176–77.

²⁸ Mohammad Hatta, "One Indonesian View of the Malaysia Issue," *Asian Survey* 5,3 (March 1965): 140.

in the realm of art and culture. Despite their close proximity, the people hardly had any opportunity to enjoy and appreciate one another's arts and cultures, let alone organise cultural exchange.²⁹

In pre-colonial days, this region's cultural development was the result of steady, if leisurely, cross-stimulation and interchange. This process was interrupted, temporarily, with the advent of colonialism, but now that these restraints have been removed, it is both inevitable and desirable that there should be a resumption of traditional contacts and influences.³⁰

Elsewhere, Minister Rajaratnam explained these cultural commonalities of heritage in terms aligned to the racial categories of Singapore.

All the countries which are participating in this festival have three common golden thread[s] running through the rich tapestries of their cultural life. These common influences are the Malaysian [*sic*], Chinese, and Indian heritages. There is, however, the additional element of Western influence, which has been assimilated to various degrees in different parts of South East Asia. I have no doubt that delegates and artists of the various countries involved will have a pleasant surprise at this festival to see, in many a presentation, familiar echoes of their own cultural heritage.³¹

However, while the performances from the different countries were expected to call forth familiar echoes that related one to the other, performances by groups from the respective nations were also supposed to maintain national distinctiveness. Festival organizers asked each participating country to favor performances that would demonstrate local specificity as it judged which groups should participate in the festival:

... each participating country should try to present dances, music, songs, or tableaux which is typical itself [*sic*], or, if the country has more than one distinguishable cultural complex, as for instance has the Federation of Malaya, to present the diverse elements of the national culture.³²

The final festival program followed this prescription mandating both demonstrated commonality and distinctiveness. There were five hundred participants from outside Singapore, with the largest contingent of 150 from Malaya. Singapore presented one thousand performers. The South Vietnam group numbered seventy-five, Cambodia fifty-eight (including four of Sihanouk's children), fifty-eight from Thailand, forty from Laos, twenty-six from Hong Kong, nineteen from India,

²⁹ Foreword by Mr. K. C. Lee, chairman of the First South-East Asia Cultural Festival Committee and the National Theatre Trust, in *Souvenir* 1963, p. 57.

³⁰ "Message from the Honourable Minister for Culture Mr. S. Rajaratnam," *Souvenir* 1963, p. 49.

³¹ "A Historic Event," *The Straits Times*, August 8, 1963, p. 9.

³² *Souvenir* 1963, p. 106.

three from Pakistan, and a group from the Philippines (the number is not mentioned).



Figure 3. Opening night. Representatives from performing groups together on stage (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore, Acc 19980000515/44)

The artists involved were members of performing ensembles, or film stars. Singapore presented dance, choirs, and orchestral ensembles. Malaya presented traditional Malay dances, “Portuguese dances” of Malacca, the Radio Malaya Orchestra, the Baba and Nyonya troupe, and Indian dances. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and India all sent classical dance ensembles: Cambodia, its Royal Ballet Troupe; Laos, a dance troupe; Thailand, a *khon* (dance drama) troupe from the Royal Academy; and India sent dancers from the Kalakshetra academy. South Vietnam sent a variety show featuring dance, drama, and music, as well as a Vietnamese “movie queen.” The Philippines sent the Baranguay Folk Dance Troupe. Pakistan sent vocalists. North Borneo presented traditional Kadazan music and dance. Hong Kong sent film stars.

In addition to events staged at the new National Theatre, performances were also held outside City Hall, at Victoria Theatre, in Hong Lim Park, and at community centers. Overall, festival performances tended to present three, broad thematic images: of indigenusness and classical antiquity; of multiracialism and harmonious coexistence; and of modernity, presented as film stars, fashion, and glamour.

Hong Kong, the only colony among the participating countries (specifically named as such in the program) and thus excluded from the discourse celebrating progressive postcolonialism, nonetheless projected the most modern image of the festival with its large contingent of film stars. Unlike the troupes representing other countries, the film stars were sent not as part of an official government mission, but

privately, by the film companies.³³ There was huge media and public interest in the celebrities from Hong Kong and in the South Vietnamese film star, Tham Thuy Hang, both in Singapore, at the festival, and in Kuala Lumpur, during a stopover on their way home. They were the main attraction at official events, and heads of state clamored to be photographed with them. The Hong Kong film stars' projection of glamour—an image carried almost entirely by the female body—projected a very particular image of modernity. At a time when the world was dominated by two competing models of progress—on the one hand, Western capitalism with its cultural products, epitomized by the United States, and, on the other hand, socialism, with its revolutionary cultural imagery, epitomized by the Soviet Union and China—the Hong Kong film stars stood apart. With their festival participation sponsored by commercial film studios, and wearing skin-tight *cheong sam* and stiletto heels, they projected an image of modernity that was at once non-socialist and Chinese.

This image of glamorous modernity contrasted sharply with that of classicism and antiquity depicted by other artists. The royal status of the dancers from Cambodia was stressed in all the media coverage, and festival organizers had to guarantee special red-carpet treatment for the dancers before Cambodia officially agreed to allow them to participate.³⁴ Festival publicity described the tour as the first time the dancers had performed outside of the palace to a public audience. The Lao group from the Natasinh Dance Academy performed “traditional court dances in ancient classical costumes.” The Thai *khon* was “classical dance from the Royal Academy,” and Kalakshetra performed “classical dance from India.” The related themes of antiquity and indigenosity were also conveyed by “folk” dances (including dances by the Philippines Baranguay troupe, and dances from Vietnam and Laos), “traditional dancing and music” (North Borneo Kadazan), and staged traditional ceremonies (Malay weddings), all of which emphasized the specificity of local traditions.

If judged in terms of sheer numbers of performers, then the strongest cultural image projected at the festival had to do with multiracialism and harmony, especially as represented in the performances from Malaya and Singapore. The rhetoric here was of nation-building and the need to create a common Malaysian culture. “We have at the moment Malaysian cultures. A common culture for us is a vital necessity. Without it, we are weaker to meet the demands to be made on us for the development of our country so that it can take its place among the nations.”³⁵ Malaya's performance of “common Malaysian culture” was a blending of “Chinese,” “Malay,” and “Indian” elements conveying an impression of interracial harmony. Performance publicity stressed this point.

Datin Sambanthan's troupe, led by Shanta Menon, will dance the Taman Gemala Sari, an Indian dance set to the melody of a traditional Malay folk song. The adaptation is a step towards the interplay of Malaya's various dance forms

³³ The film stars hailed from eight cinema companies: Great Wall, Kong Ngee, Hongkong United, Fung Huang, Sun Lien, Shaw, Cathay, and Southern Film Corporation. See *Souvenir* 1963, p. 137.

³⁴ Interview with Mr. K. C. Lee at ISEAS, Singapore, June 12, 2007. I wish to express my thanks to Mr. Lee, former chairman of the South-East Asia Cultural Festival Committee, for his willingness to meet me and share his memories of the festival and of his important part in it.

³⁵ *Souvenir* 1963, p. 96.

and music. The Taman Gemala Sari marks the first attempt at interpreting a song in the national language by Indian dance form.

The Nyonya Malaka troupe of Straits-born Chinese damsels will portray in dance the habits and traditions of the community. Here too, the tunes are based on Malay folk songs.³⁶

This state-sponsored image of multiracial blending promoted by Malaysia in 1963 is a significant narrowing of the grassroots position of the late 1950s, during the conflict between the British colonial government and the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party. This conflict, which the British called “the Emergency,” fostered new assertions of communal identity against the new “Malayan” political community that the British were trying to construct at the time, as Tim Harper has described.³⁷ Despite all the festival’s postcolonial rhetoric, the locking of national culture into a composite made of discrete racial components more closely resembles the colonial social policy of “fostering a national culture, or a culture for multiracial politics” than the late 1950s, when, as Harper explains, the new national culture was “up for grabs” and Malaysia was open to alternative reconstructions of national identity, with political leaders even questioning the “nature of multiracialism itself.”³⁸

Singapore’s own presentations at the festival closely followed the official Malaysian model, but included forms that were not “race-specific,” such as Western concert music. Otherwise, they too presented a deliberate merging of elements identified by their association with a particular race, including:

... a 100-member Western Orchestra, 150-strong Chinese, Malay and Indian orchestra, 400-member choir, and a dance drama in which several hundreds of artists from the three main *races*—Chinese, Indians, and Malays—will take part. The dance drama is called “The Oceans Meet.”³⁹

The slippage between “race” and “culture” indicates the charged atmosphere of the time, as Singapore strove to prove its readiness to merge with Malaya to become Malaysia. But the same slippage occurs with reference to “South-East Asia,” indicating a conceptualization of Southeast Asia as similarly poised between race and nation: “The Festival is unique in the history of South-East Asia, for never before has there been such a large gathering of artists of so many *races* at one place.”⁴⁰

The Festival projected a vision of the nation made up of gathered races performing to and with each other, a vision that was extended to Southeast Asia as a whole.

³⁶ “A Mixed Bag,” *The Straits Times*, August 8, 1963, p. 4.

³⁷ T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially chapter 7, pp. 274–307.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 275, 289.

³⁹ Lee, in *Souvenir 1963*, p. 112, italics mine.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111, italics mine.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The 1963 South-East Asia Cultural Festival reveals overlapping and competing political and cultural networks. Furthermore, neither kind of network is unitary. There are various political networks, and various cultural ones, intersecting in various ways.

Publicity material and newspaper coverage portrayed Southeast Asia as the totality of these networks using rhetoric that invoked postcolonialism, race, shared heritage, and a brand of nativist cultural revivalism. Some of this rhetoric, particularly that of race, was an extension of the nation-building rhetoric of Singapore and Malaysia. The South-East Asia Cultural Festival, held at a particular moment of Southeast Asian nation-building, reflects a process of questioning vital at this time: What is a nation, what is Southeast Asia, and what is the place of culture in projecting or determining these entities? The Festival reflects tensions about sameness and difference, race and nation, and cultural heritage and modernity.

Domestically, that is, at the home level of nation, and particularly at the level of Singapore as it merged with Malaysia, there was an emphasis on the blending of difference, and that difference was named as race. Culture was seen as a way of bringing races together, to forge the commonality of nation. To a certain extent, Singapore's domestic presumption of significant racial differences was applied to the festival overall, and we might view the South-East Asia Cultural Festival as merely a larger version of Singapore's *Aneka Ragam Ra'yat* performances. Existing differences of race/culture were acknowledged, but the emphasis was on creating commonality. Regionally, however, the emphasis was on existing commonalities, highlighting, for instance, those based on shared cultural roots (Indian heritage) or race (Malayness). But these commonalities were delimited, at the same time, by the affirmation of differences between nations, since each country was asked to bring to the festival cultural forms "typical of itself."

However, all these questions of nation, region, and the place of political-versus-cultural alliances bounced against a rigid international backdrop: the powerful Cold War ideologies advocating socialism, communism, and Third Worldism, which were beyond race, nativism, and region. Socialism offered a sense of involvement in a global "socialist ecumene," to use Bayly's term, which was progressive precisely in its rejection of race, ethnicity, and "cultural heritage" as defining factors of community. The international proletariat of communism was a community based on class. And Third Worldism and non-alignment offered a sense of involvement in a global community that was progressive in preaching anticolonialism and anti-imperialism. This, too, was a community beyond race, ethnicity, or region, although it did allow space for cultural heritage as a defining factor of community in the fight against colonialism.⁴¹ While the countries that participated in the 1963 festival in Singapore were predominantly anticommunist, the vocabulary of anticolonialism and anti-imperialism certainly helped shape the "South-East Asia" of the festival,

⁴¹ Sukarno's explanation of why he was not a Marxist, which he gave at his trial in 1929, is significant here and has also been noted by Westad, *Global Cold War*, p. 83. Sukarno rejected class as a basis of struggle, seeing this as a phenomenon peculiar to Europe or America. In colonized countries, he argued, anti-imperialism was the basis of struggle. Anti-imperialism was the unifying factor of Third Worldism, as he later developed this concept. See Paget's translation of Sukarno's speech in Roger K. Paget, *Indonesia Accuses! Soekarno's Defence Oration in the Political Trial of 1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 77–78.

providing a connection among the region's postcolonial nations, and a way for their pasts also to be projected as modern.

The 1963 South-East Asia Cultural Festival highlights the complexity of cultural history in Southeast Asia in the Cold War period. Whether we consider the cultural implications of the Cold War or implications of the Cold War on culture, the Festival illustrates that multiple competing political and cultural forces were at play. At the very least, my discussion of the 1963 Festival suggests that if we do privilege the Cold War as an interpretive frame when looking at cultural history of the 1950s and 1960s, then, in Southeast Asia at least, we must acknowledge that Cold War culture included a search for alternative cultures.

Postscript: Singapore's National Theatre was demolished in 1986. The Esplanade, Singapore's icon of global, commodified art, was officially opened in 2002.

FILLING IN THE GAPS OF HISTORY: INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIES RE-PRESENT THE MALAYAN LEFT

Gaik Cheng Khoo

I fought a liberation war. To ask whether I would do it again is idle talk. I was a young man in an entirely different setting. But the realities and the lessons I learned from that time comprise a body of values I can share with the young who may wish to look beyond their palmtops and understand how history is shaped. I would like to be involved in a forum. It is the exchange of ideas that ultimately moves the world. The barter of views still exhilarates me. You can tell me I was wrong. You can tell me I failed. But I can also tell you how it was and how I tried.¹

INTRODUCTION

What have been the effects of the Cold War on Malaysian culture? Answering this question requires focusing on the historical events that unfolded from the anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles in Malaya and Singapore, which then sharpened during the Japanese Occupation and continued in the form of nationalism. What kind of nation would be formed by the end of the Pacific War in 1945? In Malaya, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) had helped the British defeat the Japanese during World War II, and its leader, Chin Peng, was even awarded the Order of the British Empire. But upon realizing that the British were neither going to leave Malaya nor give the party political legitimacy, the CPM was forced underground to pursue armed struggle. Chin Peng became Public Enemy Number One. A state of emergency was declared for twelve years (1948–60), during which the CPM waged guerrilla warfare against the colonial and Commonwealth troops, as well as the civilian population. The British responded by detaining and arresting several thousands of suspected communists and communist sympathizers, sending some into banishment or exile, killing others, and then creating New Villages, which were actually detention camps organized to cut off contact with

¹ Chin Peng, *My Side of History* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003), p. 516.

sympathetic villagers and prevent them from aiding the communists.² In the sweep, anticolonial activities, including the actions of trade unionists and workers demanding better working conditions and improvement of wages, were also repressed.³ Although the Emergency was officially declared over in July 1960, the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA) was introduced in the same year to replace the Emergency Regulations Ordinance.⁴ The Federation of Malaya's achievement of independence by the conservative, racialized Alliance government of UMNO-MCA-MIC in 1957 had taken the wind out of the sails of the CPM.⁵ In 1963, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak joined Malaya to form Malaysia. Lee Kuan Yew, the leader of the People's Action Party (PAP), regarded this merger as necessary for his political survival against the "communist" threat in Singapore.⁶ In fact, Operation Cold Store was launched in February 1963, shortly before the merger; during this action, the British arrested and detained 133 persons, mainly members of the PAP's rival, the party Barisan Sosialis, which opposed the merger, and included trade unionists, newspaper editors, and university students.⁷ This operation and various detentions carried out under the ISA in subsequent years, both in Singapore as well as Malaysia, effectively silenced any opposition to the PAP and Alliance governments, although the Democratic Action Party (DAP), an offshoot of the PAP, continued to function in Malaysia.

Dwindling aid to the CPM from the Chinese government, among other factors, weakened the communist party and led to its peace negotiations with the Thai and Malaysian governments in 1989, formally marking the end of hostilities. The members of the CPM settled in four Peace Villages in southern Thailand, sponsored by Thai Princess Chulaporn. Chin Peng claims in his memoir that out of the 479 Malaysians involved with the CPM, 330 went home to Malaysia.⁸ The fifteen Singaporean-born nationals could not return without reprisals, as the Singapore government had not been party to the Peace Agreement.

History has been written and rewritten by the conservative winners, with whom the British sided in order to prevent the communists from ascending to power

² According to Simpson, 14,000 to 26,000 Chinese were banished or deported to China during the Emergency. The British destroyed villages, and, under collective detention policies, placed whole communities under arrest for "aiding terrorists." Two hundred twenty-six people were "hanged for terrorist offences." Alfred William Brian Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 833.

³ James Wong Wing On, *From Pacific War to Merdeka: Reminiscences of Abdullah CD, Rashid Maidin, Suriani Abdullah, and Abu Samah* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Center [SIRD], 2005), pp. 53–54.

⁴ Ooi Kee Beng, *The Reluctant Politician* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006), p. 130.

⁵ UMNO is the United Malays National Organisation, MCA stands for the Malaysian Chinese Association, and MIC, the Malaysian Indian Congress. These parties represented the three main ethnic communities and have constituted the majority government in power until recently, when ethnic Indian Hindus came out in a mass demonstration of twenty-thousand people to protest against their economic and social marginalization. They voted out the MIC leadership in the 2008 general elections.

⁶ Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2002), p. 94. See also Francis T. Seow, *The Media Enthralled: Singapore Revisited* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), pp. 23–24.

⁷ Ooi, *The Reluctant Politician*, p. 142.

⁸ Chin Peng, *My Side of History*, p. 491.

following the end of World War II. However, since the signing of this 1989 treaty and the end of the Cold War, numerous communist and leftist narratives in the form of memoirs, dialogues, and interviews with top leaders and members of the Malayan Communist Party, including Chin Peng, Abdullah CD, Rashid Maidin, Suriani Abdullah, trade unionist Lim Chin Siong, and several others have appeared. They have, in turn, inspired the making of theatre works, such as the plays presented at DW5 in 2005,⁹ and several documentaries, which provide alternative narratives and representations of Malaysian history compared to the official account offered by the conservative Malay party UMNO and the National Front (Barisan Nasional). Collectively, these accounts contribute to a counter discourse about the historical formation and development of the nation.¹⁰

This essay focuses on current (2003–07) independent cinematic representations of the period, which contrast sharply with an earlier mainstream Malaysian nationalist film, *Bukit Kepong* (Kepong Hill, dir. Jins Shamsuddin, 1982). Official discourse has often demonized and racialized the communists and downplayed their role in the anticolonial independence movement since the Emergency, but recent films, beginning with the mainstream Malay film *Paloh* (Paloh, dir. Adnan Salleh, 2003) and independent documentaries by Amir Muhammad, such as *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (The Last Communist, 2005) and *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (Village People Radio Show, 2006), followed by Fahmi Reza's *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (Ten Years Before Independence, 2007), all offer alternative understandings of the ideological struggles of the Cold War era. The same sort of reinterpretation is also occurring in Singapore, with *I Love Malaya* (2006), which investigates why the Malaysian government would not allow Chin Peng to return to Malaysia. In their journey, the Singaporean filmmakers discover "the lives and histories of a forgotten people," the members of the CPM who are living in exile in southern Thailand, a few of whom are stateless.

It is important to note that not all recent period films, particularly commercial mainstream films, provide an alternative national history. For example, there have been historical dramas set during the Japanese Occupation and Merdeka (Independence) that espouse a conservative history, such as *Leftenan Adnan* (Leftenant Adnan, dir. Aziz M. Osman, 2000), which focuses on the Malay regiment that fought against the Japanese as the British were fleeing Malaya. The scene where Leftenant Adnan whips up nationalist sentiments among his soldiers climaxes with cries of "*Hidup askar Melayu!*" (Long live Malay soldiers!), reinforcing the notion that anti-Japanese nationalism in Malaya was strictly coded as a Malay prerogative and

⁹ DW5 was the Fifth Directors' Workshop organized by Five Arts Centre. It included new plays by four young theatre directors who set out to reinterpret the era of the Communist Party of Malaya. According to one reviewer, Kam Raslan, the project was "part of a two-year quest that has taken them through books and archives as well as trips to Baling and southern Thailand, conversations with ex-Communists, and trawls through family memories." See Kam Raslan, "Fine Young Communists," *Kakiseni.com*, July 12, 2005. <http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/reviews/MDCwMg.html/all#top>, last accessed on January 6, 2010.

¹⁰ See memoirs and book compilations of articles and interviews with members of the Malay regiment of the CPM published by SIRD both in English and Malay in 2004 and 2005. *Insan*, an earlier incarnation of SIRD, also published memoirs of former political prisoners Said Zahari, Lim Chin Siong, and S. Husin Ali. University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) publishers came out with the memoirs of Ahmad Boestamam and Ibrahim Chik while withdrawing the autobiography written by the female communist Shamsiah Fakeh in 2004 (her book was republished by SIRD in 2007).

sentiment. Likewise, the film *Embun* (*Embun*, dir. Erma Fatima, 2002) suggests a feminist twist to the anti-Japanese struggle by Malays during the Japanese Occupation. The film won a special jury prize at the Sixteenth Malaysian Film Festival (2003) for “historical value and patriotism,” but was criticized elsewhere for historical inaccuracies and poor research.¹¹ Another recent historical drama, *1957: Hati Malaya* (*1957: Heart of Malaya*, dir. Shuhaimi Baba, 2007), was released to coincide with the anniversary marking fifty years of independence. According to the website’s rather hyperbolic statement, it was made to “remember the sacrifices made by our founding fathers to free us from colonialism.”¹² But this mainstream feature also did not challenge textbook history and focused on the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

What becomes clear is that the mainstream, commercial film industry is driven by the profits that can be earned from tried-and-true formulas and conservative political agendas, since it is under the control of the Ministry of Culture. In contrast, most independent films are low-budget, shot on digital video, self-funded as opposed to dependent on loans from the state, are not considered for competition in the Malaysian Film Festival, and, if not intended to be screened in the cinemas, they need not undergo censorship. Amir Muhammad’s *The Last Communist* received pre-production funding from the Jan Vrijman Fund, Amsterdam. Fahmi Reza’s film was not made for profit, and he used up RM5,000 from a nongovernmental organization, KOMAS (Pusat Komuniti Masyarakat) on film, equipment, and expenses.¹³ Independent films (though this was not true of Amir’s banned films) circulate “underground” at alternative venues, on the Internet and on DVD, and they travel to universities and private colleges. Bypassing state censorship allows indie filmmakers to take on issues that are regarded as “sensitive” and to be critical of state policies. Thus, independent filmmaking provides a realm of alternative cinematic possibilities and counter-hegemonic discourse.

The resurgent interest in the Malayan Left, despite the passing years, has everything to do with the consequences of the Cold War. First, strident anticommunism repressed and eradicated a whole spectrum of left-wing parties that were socialist in orientation but not necessarily communist. Moreover, the British used race to divide and conquer the country when they selected UMNO and its component parties under the Alliance, the MCA and MIC, to become the future leaders of the independent Federation of Malaya. This decision effectively meant that the Malaysian politics of representation would be defined through a primordial lens. British paternalistic colonial race policies regarded Malays as the natural inheritors of the land and the Chinese and Indians as migrants. The postcolonial state retained these policies, which privilege Malays as indigenous peoples, even though new migrants from the Indonesian archipelago could become Malays and gain access to ethnic rights denied Malaysian citizens of Chinese and Indian descent, whose forefathers may have arrived in Malaya even earlier. Henceforth, a multicultural nation would be yoked together by means of an originary myth about a social

¹¹ Khoo Gaik Cheng, “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby: Erma Fatima, Film and Politics,” *South East Asia Research* 14,2 (2006): 179–209.

¹² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1957_Hati_Malaya, last accessed January 27, 2010.

¹³ Jacqueline Ann Surin, “The Untold Story of the *Hartal*,” interview with Fahmi Reza, *The Sun Online*, November 1, 2007, p. 11. See <http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=19842>, last accessed January 6, 2010.

contract that was invented by the founding leaders, whereby Malays were to be given political primacy and Chinese and Indians, in exchange for citizenship rights, had to acquiesce to a special position for the Malays and to the allocation of both land and a proportion of civil service jobs for Malays, and to accept Malay as the national language, Islam as the official religion, and the Malay rulers as constitutional monarchs.¹⁴ This “historic bargain” is the kernel of Malaysian nationalism and part of a master narrative defining Malaysia’s pluralistic sociopolitical fabric. The bargain assumes that Malay political primacy would counterbalance Chinese economic and commercial power. But in actuality, Malaysian pluralism consisted of “a nucleus of Malay nationalism enclosed by the idea of a Malay-Chinese-Indian partnership.”¹⁵ Based on compromise, consensus, and reciprocity between Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and the MCA and MIC leaders of the Alliance, the bargain became “a binding and cast-iron ‘social contract’”¹⁶ deployed to control or prevent communal differences after the May 13, 1969 riots.¹⁷

Moreover, through the National Economic Policy (1971–90),¹⁸ which was put in place after the race riots, the Alliance government entrenched a “regime of truth”¹⁹ that accounts for the racialized logic that operates at and permeates all layers of Malaysian society and politics. Under this regime, acts such as questioning the necessity of the NEP or opening up Islam to public discussion by liberal Malays and non-Malays can be interpreted as broaching “sensitive issues,” and therefore make one liable to arrest and detention under the ISA.²⁰ To put it in the words of writer Kam Raslan:

The received interpretation [of the effects of the Emergency] seems to have boiled down to: Communists bad, [w]e beat them, [t]hat’s why we need to keep the ISA. The complexities, ironies, and contradictions of the war are willfully ignored because, like almost everything else in Malayan/Malaysian

¹⁴ Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 37.

¹⁵ Quote from Wang Gungwu, cited in R. S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy, *Politics and Government in Malaysia* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1978), p. 366. Wang Gungwu, “Malayan Nationalism,” *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 49, 3–4 (1962): 317–28.

¹⁶ Of late, there has been much public debate around whether a “social contract” actually exists with regard to the interethnic bargain. The term was actually coined by Abdullah Ahmad, an UMNO Member of Parliament in 1986, and even then was disputed. See Lim Teck Ghee, “The Social Contract: What Next?,” Centre for Policy Initiatives Writings, October 22, 2008. http://english.cpiasia.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1220:the-social-contract-what-next&catid=141:lim-teck-ghees-contribution&Itemid=93, last accessed January 6, 2010.

¹⁷ Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 51.

¹⁸ The NEP continues under the NDP (National Development Policy, 1991–2000) and the National Vision Policy (2001–10). See K. S. Jomo, “The New Economic Policy and Interethnic Relations in Malaysia,” for the series “Identities, Conflict, and Cohesion,” Programme Paper No. 7 (Geneva: UNRISD, 2004).

¹⁹ I borrow Foucault’s idea of discourse becoming a “regime of truth.” See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–77*, ed. and tr. Colin Gordon (Brighton, NY: Harvester, 1980).

²⁰ Blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin was arrested under the ISA for allegedly insulting Islam in September 2008.

history, to dare to look at them will lead to another May 13th. That's why we need to keep the ISA.²¹

What needs to be acknowledged is that, on Independence Day in 1957, Malays and other indigenous peoples made up only 42 percent of the total population.²² Thus, as the minority, they felt a need to preserve their rights. But today, many critics of the NEP argue that the target of 30 percent Malay equity has already been achieved. While it was a positive move in 1970, meant to eradicate poverty across all ethnic groups and to remove the association of ethnicity and occupation (e.g., Malay fisherman and farmer, Indian rubber tapper, Chinese middleman), critics of UMNO claim that the NEP is now used only by the corrupt Malay elites to accrue personal wealth.

My central reason for focusing on the films I discuss in this essay is that they fulfill certain important functions, such as providing an alternative history, undoing racialization, and connecting past and present. Their timing (2006–07) crucially complicates the hegemonic discourse of Malay ethno-nationalism and asks what fifty years of independence have achieved in a multi-ethnic nation where racial and religious entitlement on the part of the majority has become a source of increasing social tension. For example, Fahmi Reza's documentary about the one-day general strike (*hartal*) in 1947 compares the People's Constitutional Proposals for Malaya, drafted by two umbrella leftist organizations, the joint PUTERA-AMCJA, with the Malay-British Working Committee's 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement.²³ The People's Constitution, which was ignored by the British, included a stipulation for citizenship that would have defined allegiance and loyalty, as well as grant "Melayu" identity to all Malayan citizens irrespective of ethnicity.²⁴ The film provides a small window into a history of the Malayan Left that was wiped out by the declaration of Emergency, a history that shows the path that was not taken.²⁵

²¹ Kam Raslan, "Fine Young Communists," *Kakiseni.com*, July 12, 2005. <http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/reviews/MDcwMg.html/all#top>. Filmmaker Amir Muhammad also has this to say: "The implied threat of raising issues is that talking about our history will lead to *race riots*. This is another reason my films are challenged." See Roderick Coover, "Politics and Pomeloes: An Interview with Amir Muhammad," *Cineaste*, June 22, 2007.

²² Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 5.

²³ The more renowned groups in the AMCJA included the Malayan Indian Congress (led by John Thivy), the Malayan Democratic Union (led by John Eber), the New Democratic Youth League, the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Ex-Comrades' Association, and the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions, among others. PUTERA consisted of the Malay Nationalist Party (led by Dr. Burhanuddin Helmy), Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API, Conscious Youth Corp, led by Ahmad Boestamam), Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS, Conscious Women's Corp, led by Shamsiah Fakeh), Gerakan Angkatan Muda, (GERAM, Movement of Youth Corp, led by Aziz Isyak and A. Samad Ismail), Barisan Tani Se Malaya (BATAS, Pan Malayan Farmers' Front, led by Musa Ahmad), and Majlis Agama Tertinggi SeMalaya (MATA, Pan-Malayan Supreme Religious Council). The coalition was headed by Tan Cheng Lock. See Mustapha Hussain, *Malay Nationalism Before Umno: The Memoirs of Mustapha Hussain*, trans. Insun Sony Mustapha, ed. K. S. Jomo (Cheras, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications; Singapore: Distributed outside Malaysia by Singapore University Press, 2005).

²⁴ PUTERA-AMCJA, *The People's Constitutional Proposals for Malaya 1947* (Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia: Ban Ah Kam, 2005), p. 18.

²⁵ A conference at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, was held in 2005 on political movements in postwar Singapore that were rivals of PAP. Focused on alternative histories, the conference took the title, "Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in

In the remainder of my essay, I attempt to contextualize and theorize the reasons for the emergence of such cultural expressions before dealing with the functions of the films through close textual analysis. It is hoped that this essay will provide a better understanding of the effects of the Cold War on the history of Malaysian politics and film by focusing on the works of a young generation of filmmakers whose cosmopolitan, humanist attitudes and detached curiosity about a repressed leftist past can help fill the gaps in Malaysian history. In addition, these alternative documentaries not only revisit ideologically polarized mindsets and deconstruct some Cold War stereotypes but implicitly suggest that revisiting the leftist past can offer lessons about race relations in the present.

WHY NOW? REASONS FOR THE RESURGENT INTEREST IN THE MALAYAN LEFT

A number of reasons account for the resurgent interest in the Malayan Left: foremost is practical logistics. After the Peace Agreement was signed, the members of the CPM settled in four Peace Villages in southern Thailand, which are now open to tourists, the general public, researchers, historians, and journalists. Moreover, the gradual declassification of colonial reports and documents about the Emergency,²⁶ recent reassessments of the role the CPM played in accelerating the Independence process, and the fact that 2005 was the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War have all facilitated this growing counter-discourse. The privileging of state-level talks between Malaysia and China under Deng Xiaoping in 1981 signaled the beginning of the end of PRC (People's Republic of China) financial support for the CPM, leading to the Peace Agreement of 1989. Moreover, many of the exiled Communist Party of Malaysia members are now in their eighties and do not pose any real danger to regional governments (particularly since they have either destroyed their weapons or sold them back to the Thai government). In films and published memoirs, they express their desire to return to Malaysia and Singapore in their twilight years, but some cannot do so for one reason or another. Filmmakers and researchers emphasize the importance of capturing the voices and stories of this generation before its members pass away. Indeed, several individuals who were subjects of these films died during or not too long after production. Most recently, at the time of writing, a woman leader of Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS) and member of the CPM, Shamsiah Fakeh, passed away on October 20, 2008.

The documentary *I Love Malaya* adopts a sympathetic stance towards the CPM veterans who remain stateless following the Peace Agreement. In the case of Chin Peng, his application to settle down in Malaysia was denied, and his legal bid to reverse this decision—which is an ostensible entry point to the documentary—eventually failed. In the film, Chin Peng's lawyer, Darshan Singh, rationalizes that the Malaysian government's ban on his client's return is most likely "symbolic"—meant to assert its disagreement with the recent reassessment of the contribution and role of the CPM, a reassessment that suggests the CPM's involvement accelerated the

Postwar Singapore." See Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki, eds., *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Postwar Singapore* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008).

²⁶ Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 26.

nation's achievement of independence by ten to fifteen years.²⁷ Nevertheless, although the terms of the agreement allow for those expatriated from Malaysia to return, the waiting time of their application (for Thai citizenship and passports, for Malaysian identity cards) can be protracted, taking up to ten or fifteen years, as those interviewed in *I Love Malaya* and *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* testify.²⁸ Sometimes application forms are even returned unprocessed. According to one man, Ah Hai, who appears in *I Love Malaya*, conditions are imposed on Central Committee members if they seek to return; for instance, they may have to undergo thought reformation or sever ties with the Party. The latter is unacceptable to the exiles as it amounts to surrender.²⁹

While these people are now too old to pose a real danger to the state, nevertheless they still constitute a symbolic threat and awaken irrational fears and strong feelings due to the long-lasting effects of British colonial propaganda. For example, Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist*, which first passed the National Film Censorship Board without any cuts, was eventually banned when the ethno-nationalist daily *Berita Harian* printed articles criticizing the board's decision. Most of the film's opponents had not even seen the film before opining that it would be against the public interest to screen a film that was, according to Akmal Abdullah, "a tribute" to a communist leader. Akmal Abdullah, the assistant entertainment editor of *Berita Harian*, was quoted as saying that "Communism was not dead and could be revived at any time."³⁰

The emergence of an alternative history that does not scapegoat communists is conveyed by the attitudes of a younger, more middle-class generation growing up under the authoritarian capitalist regimes led by Mahathir Mohamed and Lee Kuan Yew in the 1980s and 1990s. This generation did not experience firsthand the contempt and violence of British colonialism and the Japanese Occupation. For these comparatively young citizens, the idea that one would readily toil in the jungle for over thirty years and fight and die to defend an abstract notion such as "freedom from oppression" is far removed from their urban comforts and daily reality. Distanced experientially and temporally from the emotive propaganda of the times, they are able to revisit a past with some detachment and curiosity. For example, the film narrator of *I Love Malaya* tells us: "Growing up in post-Independence Singapore, we had very little understanding of communism even though it played a significant role in the birth of our nation."

The same kind of generational distance is evident in Amir Muhammad's response. When asked in an interview whether he is not reviving painful memories with his films on the CPM, he states that he is simply keen to record a part of Malaysian history, especially that of "'the minority of a minority' [i.e., the Malay

²⁷ Karl Hack and C. C. Chin, "The Malayan Emergency," in *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party*, ed. C. C. Chin and Karl Hack (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), p. 235.

²⁸ The Malay title means "What's Up, Villagers?" Its English title, *Village People Radio Show*, adopts the name of the former communist broadcast radio program.

²⁹ See also "SM's Message to Plen: Try Malaysia," *The New Paper*, August 4, 1997, at <http://ourstory.asia1.com.sg/independence/ref/plen7.html>, last accessed January 6, 2010.

³⁰ Phang Liew-Ann, "Public Wants Movie Banned: Chai Ho," *Sun2Surf*, web edition, May 8, 2006, at <http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=14052>. See also Baradan Kuppusamy, "Media-Malaysia: Film on Communist Leader Banned on Shaky Grounds," *IPS*, May 11, 2006, at <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=33202>. Both sites last accessed January 6, 2010.

communists], before it is lost in the passing of time."³¹ In the same interview, Amir also speculates that the current national interest in the CPM may be motivated by the nostalgic desire for a world that was not so unilateral, not so dominated by US interests, where instead of one superpower, there were two, and communism provided an alternative way of living, if not a balance of global power.³² Yet, his is also a generation blessed with hindsight that enables it to perceive the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and communism's descent into dictatorial practices.³³

FILLING IN THE GAPS OF HISTORY, UNDOING RACIALIZATION

Amir Muhammad (b. 1972) is one of the pioneers of the independent filmmaking movement in Malaysia. Prior to producing *The Last Communist*, he had made two other documentaries, *The Big Durian* (2003) and *The Year of Living Vicariously* (2005).³⁴ Amir's interest in Chin Peng was sparked by his interviews for *The Year of Living Vicariously*, when he spoke with Indonesians who had been involved in the making of *Gie*, a feature film about student activist Soe Hok Gie who resisted the Sukarno regime during the turbulent 1960s in Indonesia.³⁵ Amir's films seek to document, revisit, and recover an alternative oral history about the Malaysian nation.³⁶ Likewise, self-taught independent filmmaker and activist Fahmi Reza (b. 1977) explains that working artists (like himself) can do more than make beautiful art by

³¹ Lee Sze Yong, "Boost from Ban," *Straits Times Singapore*, March 20, 2007.

³² Bissme S., "A Rebel with a Cause," *The Sun*, July 1, 2005, at <http://www.thesundaily.com/article.cfm?id=9931>, last accessed January 6, 2010.

³³ Benjamin McKay, "A Conversation with Amir Muhammad," *Criticine.com*, October 13, 2005, p. 12, at http://www.criticine.com/interview_print.php?id=18, last accessed January 29, 2010.

³⁴ *The Big Durian*, which is Amir's first (pseudo-)documentary, shows him broaching all the "sensitive" issues in Malaysian society and politics: race and religion, the rights of sultans, police corruption, and the feudal mindset that allowed Mahathirist authoritarianism to set in. The film ostensibly focuses on the violent actions of a Malay soldier, Private Adam, who ran amok in a mainly Chinese working-class neighborhood of Chow Kit in 1987, and it asks why Kuala Lumpur residents stayed at home for several days after the event. Tracing their irrational reactions leads the filmmaker to an analysis of the national trauma, the racial violence of May 13, 1969, and the more immediate chain of political events in 1987 that eventuated in the mass panic triggered by Private Adam's violence. While 1969 might have been the height of the Cold War for Americans, in Malaysia the communists had been contained by 1960, and although there were periodic outbursts of fighting on the fringes, the so-called race riots of 1969 were not a result of a communist plot (as claimed by then-Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman), but, rather, were incited by ultra-radicals in UMNO. On a lighter note, the film suggests that the problems of racialization result in Malaysians' hilarious misunderstandings of each other's cultures. For a more detailed analysis of this film, see Khoo Gaik Cheng, "Urban Geography as Pretext: Sociocultural Landscapes of Kuala Lumpur in Independent Malaysian Films," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29,1 (2008): 34-54.

³⁵ Paul Agusta, "Proving It's Two Strikes You're In as Far as Film Festivals Go," interview with Amir Muhammad, *The Jakarta Post*, December 12, 2007, at <http://amir.mu.blogspot.com/2007/12/interview-in-jakarta-post.html>, last accessed January 29, 2010.

³⁶ See specifically his director's statement for *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung*: "The history of Malaysia, like that of any other nation, is not served by shutting out voices that do not conform to a hegemonic telling...." at <http://www.dahuangpictures.com/blogs/akok.php?cat=33>, last accessed January 29, 2010.

recovering historical memory that has been forgotten by many.³⁷ His film *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (10 Years Before Independence) focuses on the experiences of five individuals involved in the struggles of the political Left in forging a Malaysian independence movement ten years before independence.

Taken together, Malaysian independent documentaries are a collective response to the social amnesia of the past, particularly amnesia regarding the role that the communists and all left-wing organizations played in the anticolonial and nationalist struggles of the 1940s. This response also speaks to the more contemporary processes of revisionist history that are driven by the state project of asserting Malay primacy—*ketuanan Melayu*—through casting the Chinese as communist enemies in history textbooks and lauding UMNO as the party that led the country to independence.³⁸ In Malaysia, ethnic identity is based on a binary relationship, where the “Self,” if Malay, is always defined against the “Other,” identified as Chinese.³⁹ This relationship is consistently regarded as a zero-sum game, in which demands made by ethnic minorities, such as the Chinese Associations Elections Appeals Committee (SUQIU) in 2000, advocating an inclusive Malaysia in which all have equal voting rights, are seen as “tantamount to abolishing Malay rights.”⁴⁰ In seeking equality of status for all Malaysians, SUQIU’s statement was likened by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed to a communist proposal, for, he argued, it had the same goals.⁴¹ This conflation of “Chinese” and “communist” is a gesture that alienates Chinese Malaysians, a constant reminder that they are perceived as the enemy within.

But in *The Last Communist*, the Chinese communists are given room to speak back. One woman CPM member interviewed asks, “In what ways were we terrorists? We fought for the people, we weren’t doing bad things. Why call us terrorists?” She goes on to explain that many of the communists she knew had died in the anti-imperialist struggle to free Malaya, and that only fifty to sixty people survived out of three hundred members. In fact, their loyalty and patriotism were proven by their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the love of Malaya: the title of the Singaporean documentary derives from a revolutionary Mandarin song sung by seventy-three-year old Huang Xue Ying: “I love my Malaya. Malaya is my home.”

Communists have not only been racialized as Chinese, they have also been demonized for being anti-Islam, “bedraggled, unkempt, gun-toting, hungry, long-haired desperadoes in battle fatigues.”⁴² Amir Muhammad’s documentary *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung*, a follow-up to *The Last Communist*, focuses on the Malay members of the 10th Regiment of the CPM, which, at its peak, had four hundred

³⁷ Interview with Fahmi Reza, “50th Merdeka: The Untold Human Rights Stories,” FreedomFilmFest 2007 DVD trailer.

³⁸ See Helen Ting, “Malaysian History Textbooks and the Discourse of *Ketuanan Melayu*,” in *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. Daniel P. S. Goh, Matilda Gabrielpillai, Philip Holden, and Gaik Cheng Khoo (London: Routledge, 2009). Fahmi Reza also acknowledges the missing chapter in the Form Three history textbook in his interview. See Surin, “The Untold Story of the *Hartal*,” interview with Fahmi Reza.

³⁹ Khoo Gaik Cheng, “Reading the Films of Independent Filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad: Cosmopolitanism, Sufi Islam and Malay Subjectivity,” in *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*.

⁴⁰ Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 69.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Che Husna Azahari, “The Malay Commie,” *Tenggara* 38 (1996): 60.

members. In particular, the film deconstructs the idea that communism was anti-Islam, a point the British colonials had played up.⁴³ The Malay communists did not see their religion and communism as being at odds with each other. They helped to build mosques, went to fulfill the Hajj after they got passports to go to Mecca, and prayed. Pak Kassim, the main interviewee in the film, states, "Faith in God is up to the individual. As Muslims, how can we not have faith? Without faith, what would happen to us in the afterlife? I know my religious obligations. Although we are communists, we still need religion." Demonstrating his commitment to Muslim virtues, he criticizes the existence of casinos at Genting Highlands, observing that "ours is a Malay-Muslim country, but many things don't go with Islam." One of the wrong-minded criticisms of Amir's *The Last Communist* was that Amir chose to focus on the Chinese rather than on historical Malay figures. Yet when, in *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung*, he turned his attention to the Malay communists, this film was also banned for sections that were not just critical of the government's treatment of the communists after the Peace Agreement, but also critical of the nobility (members of which had colluded with the British) and Malay society.⁴⁴

The populist reading of nationalism in *10 Tahun* inflects our understanding of UMNO nationalism and its orientation as ethno-nationalist, elitist, and pro-British. In 1947, while the Malay Left demanded independence from the British, UMNO focused only on Malay rights with their slogan "*Hidup Melayu!*" When Dato' Onn Jaafar formed UMNO in response to the Malayan Union Proposal, the Malay National Party (MNP, or *Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya*, PKKM in Malay) and its youth wing, API (*Angkatan Pemuda Insaf*, Conscious Youth Corp), joined UMNO. But when they were outvoted by smaller groups within UMNO, the MNP and their allies walked out, leaving only the royal parties, made up mainly of small Perak societies with which the British chose to negotiate. The MNP then formed PUTERA, a coalition of twenty-nine Malay leftist parties such as API, AWAS, and GERAM, to oppose the Federation plan.⁴⁵ PUTERA joined another coalition, the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA), which included trade unions, women, and youths who were also against the Federation proposals. These two joint coalitions drafted a People's Constitution as an alternative to the Federation proposals. This proposal was met by the racialized skepticism of the pro-British Malay-language media as expressed by this poem in the documentary:

Malay Land is for the Malays,
 Senohong fish is not a shark,
 Ah Chong can never change his allegiance,

⁴³ Tim N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 167.

⁴⁴ The fourth reason given for the ban: "Criticisms against the Malaysian Government are blatantly shown in this film for offering unacceptable rehabilitation terms as opposed to the Thai government, which was willing to provide land, houses, and basic amenities to support them after they stopped being communists. Aside from criticizing the government, the monarchy and the Malays are also insulted." See "Banned," *Komunis & Kampung*, February 22, 2007, at http://lastcommunist.blogspot.com/2007_02_01_archive.html, last accessed January 29, 2010.

⁴⁵ PUTERA (*Pusat Tenaga Rakyat*, People's Central Effort), AWAS (*Angkatan Wanita Sedar*, or Conscious Women's Corps), GERAM (*Gerakan Angkatan Muda*, or Movement of Youth Corps).

Ramasamy will always be a Hindu.⁴⁶

Finally, when their proposal was ignored by the British (who, according to Zainuddin Amdika in the film, only accepted UMNO's recommendations), the coalitions demonstrated their strength among the masses by organizing a Malaya-wide strike on October 20, 1947.

The revived interest in the Left may be driven by a longing that transcends the racial and religious divides that confront Malaysia. The ban on documentaries about the CPM was not motivated by an anti-authoritarian rationale or a genuine desire to appease the families of those who died fighting the communists during the Emergency. Rather, the Barisan Nasional, following its own racial policies (and defending its own power, largely built on corruption), banned this film because the BN is unwilling to allow the CPM's specific, localized patriotism, a patriotism tied to a critique of imperialism, capitalism, and a desire for a kind of social-ethnic equality, for it is this passion that underlies the threat the communists pose to the regime. During the anti-Japanese War, Mao Zedong wrote that patriotism was intimately connected with internationalism: "Our slogan is—Fight against aggression, in defense of our Fatherland." For Mao, "patriotism is the application of internationalism in the national revolutionary war."⁴⁷ Similarly, CPM members who initially got involved in the anti-Japanese movement in Malaya out of primordial loyalty to China began to experience a sense of belonging to Malaya and made the easy transition into the communist logic that urged them to defend their freedoms in Malaya from British imperial interests. "I sacrificed two brothers. We fought against the British ... they returned and wouldn't give us our independence so we continued ... we fought so hard for so many years, so why should we surrender?"⁴⁸

I highlight these issues because the anticolonial, proletariat, internationalist outlook of this old generation of revolutionaries seems to resonate with the cosmopolitan sentiments of the independent filmmakers who collaborate across ethnic boundaries and are not afraid to represent characters who do not share their own ethnic background.⁴⁹ Cosmopolitanism implies a commitment to commonly shared values and humanity, regardless of race, class, and gender. To be cosmopolitan is to be open to the culture of others, whether within or outside of one's nation. Having a cosmopolitan sensibility does not necessarily entail traveling beyond national borders; rather, it could mean having a "broad commitment to civic-democratic culture at the national level."⁵⁰ Among the members of the older generation who share this cosmopolitan ideal in Amir's documentary is Pak Sukor,

⁴⁶ Negeri Melayu hak Melayu/ Ikan senohong bukannya yu/ Ah Chong tak boleh bertukar bulu/ Ramasamy tetap bercorak Hindu.

⁴⁷ Liu Shaoqi, "Conclusion: Genuine Patriotism Is Intimately Connected with Internationalism," in *Internationalism and Nationalism*, pamphlet (Liu Shaoqi Reference Archive, January 2004), at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/liu-shaoqi/1952/internationalism_nationalism/index.htm, last accessed January 6, 2010.

⁴⁸ Ziyi in *I Love Malaya*.

⁴⁹ Khoo Gaik Cheng, "Just Do-It-(Yourself): Independent Filmmaking in Malaysia," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8,2 (2007): 227–47.

⁵⁰ Amanda Anderson, "Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity," in *Cosmopolitics*, ed. Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 279.

an octogenarian CPM member who recalls a saying fighters had in the jungle: "Our bodies in the wilderness ... Our hands embrace the motherland ... And our eyes see the whole world."⁵¹

These sentiments appear clearly in an interview with Fahmi Reza, who says that he made the film *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka*, because "this story is a collective history that we can share, regardless of [race]. Because we live in a time when everything is about race. So, I wanted to produce something that can be shared collectively by everyone, regardless of what your race is."⁵² He also explains that he had tried to be inclusive by looking for women and Indian voices, but had little success.⁵³ Similarly, Amir Muhammad consciously makes a cosmopolitan effort to surmount racism. In an interview published in *Cineaste*, in which he talks about *The Last Communist*, he specifically states that he did "not talk about history as a story of race, the way that the history books do—as if asserting those who came first should be more privileged and those who came later as workers should just be thankful they can stay."⁵⁴

The political Left was more progressive in guaranteeing individual freedoms and opposing the ISA.⁵⁵ Fahmi's film uses agitprop theatre-style tactics to compare and contrast the People's Constitutional proposals with the Federation Constitution: the former called for full citizenship and equal political rights for all, granted voting rights to those who were eighteen and above, and sought to establish a "Council of Races" to filter out discrimination in the laws. The Federation offered limited citizenship to non-Malays and none of the other advantages and protections found in the People's Constitutional proposals. As for racial unity, Yahya Nassim bin Haji Hussin (MNP deputy treasurer), interviewed in Fahmi's film, tell us that the PKMM "had already initiated political cooperation between the different races" even before there was an Alliance Party. Founding Malaysian Democratic Union member Lim Kean Chye (part of AMCJA), who is also shown in the film, supports this view, further explaining that "The unity we talked about never mentioned the racial aspect as is emphasized nowadays." This inter-ethnic leftist cooperation between AMCJA and PUTERA has been categorized as a form of transethnic solidarity by historian Sumit Mandal.⁵⁶ These acts of cooperation included not just Malays and Chinese, but also Indians like S. A. Ganapathy and P. Veerasesenan, who headed the powerful trade unions.⁵⁷ Fahmi Reza's film illustrates how such progressive, transethnic solidarities culminated in the *hartal*. Reports of the strike in numerous towns are delivered in four languages—English, Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin—in Fahmi's

⁵¹ *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung*.

⁵² Surin, "The Untold Story of the *Hartal*," interview with Fahmi Reza, p. 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Roderick Coover, "Politics and Pomeloes."

⁵⁵ See The PUTERA-AMCJA People's Constitutional Proposals for Malaya under "Rights," section 10, p. 44. The CPM also called for the repeal of the Internal Security Act during the 1989 peace negotiations. See Chin Peng, *My Side of History*, p. 486.

⁵⁶ Sumit Mandal, "Transethnic Solidarities, Racialisation, and Social Equality," in *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity, and Reform*, ed. Edmund Terence Gomez (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

⁵⁷ Ganapathy, first president of the PMFTU, was hanged by the British for "possession of firearms" in May 1949; Veerasesenan, the secretary general of the Harbour Labour Union, was shot dead by the British in early 1950. See James Wong Wing On, "A Merdeka Salute to Martyr S. A. Ganapathy!" *Clare Street*, August 29, 2006, at http://jameswongwingon-online.blogspot.com/2006_08_01_archive.html, last accessed January 29, 2010.

documentary. These different voices overlap and create an exciting cacophony of sound that peaks and ends abruptly with the announcement of the clampdown on the organizations, mass arrests, detentions, and banishment of their members. Altogether, 29,857 people were arrested during the Emergency operations to “eradicate the Communists.” Yet the film conveys hope through inserting a revolutionary song sung by one of the old-timers, former PKMM member Hashim Said: “The blood of the *rakyat* [people] is boiling ... there will come a time of retribution, when the *rakyat* will be the judge, *rakyat* will be the judge.” Here the tone is neither bitter nor fractious: rather than seeking retribution for past injustices, the film asks of its audience first to be open to this alternative history in order to judge fairly the sociopolitical legacy Malaysians have inherited. In that way, *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* transcends the old animosities of the Cold War.

In my book *Reclaiming Adat*, I suggested that “communal politics function to prevent other kinds of alliances (i.e., class) from forming across racial boundaries and becoming a collective political threat to the ruling elite.”⁵⁸ Moreover, I discussed Malaysian society under the NEP and Mahathirist policies in terms of the Lacanian “big Other,” and then briefly posited that the “repressed” resurfaced in the form of the 1998 *Reformasi* street demonstrations.⁵⁹ *Reformasi* politicized a new generation of cultural activists and independent filmmakers such as Amir Muhammad, signifying disbelief in UMNO’s authoritarian, divisive, racial politics. *Reformasi* suggested that Malaysian society actually believes in democratic institutions.⁶⁰ I suggest here that we should extend our search for the “big Other” further back in national history to the interethnic bargain, Emergency Rule, and ISA (identified as the beginnings of authoritarian rule in Malaysia). I theorize that expressions of disbelief in the “big Other” in contemporary independent film are commensurate with other recent democratic actions undertaken by civil society groups and oppositional politics. Ten years after *Reformasi*, with the release of Anwar Ibrahim and his reentry into politics, and with the substantial losses of the Barisan Nasional in the March 2008 elections, civic empowerment and disbelief in race politics have again resurfaced. Anwar Ibrahim’s new platform advocating a non-racialized politics unites those who desire equality, social justice, and an end to corruption, like the Islamic party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS), the Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM, Socialist Party of Malaysia), the Democratic Action Party, and Anwar’s People’s Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, or PKR) under the Pakatan Rakyat (People’s Pact). Pointedly, to mark the tenth anniversary of *Reformasi* on September 20, 2008, Amir Muhammad held a one-day screening of his latest film about the day when *Reformasi* began, entitled *Malaysian Gods*.

Although the immediate impact of the Cold War was the eradication of the radical Left and its substitution with communal politics, noticeable, sadly, in the ethnically differentiated Peace Villages, nevertheless, as the lyrics of the song above warn, “there will come a time of retribution” when what is repressed can resurface, and “when the people will be the judge.” The ending sequence of *The Last Communist*

⁵⁸ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), p. 88.

⁵⁹ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the big Other or symbolic order refers to language, a term that encompasses the whole social network of laws, ideologies, and other modes of communication that socializes individuals.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

seems to say that if the celebrations of fifty years' independence fail to deal with the repressed, fail to acknowledge the contributions of the communists towards achieving independence, and do not consider the exiled Chin Peng, then these festivities must ring hollow. As the film focuses on the Merdeka bell that has been tolling for fifty years, every August 31, it strikes us that time is also running out for the aging CPM members.

DIALOGUING ACROSS HISTORY

I personally am interested in the issues of the authorship and ownership of history. I suppose many Malaysians do not feel ownership of Malaysian history—it is dismissed as boring, or history is seen as facts that are cast in stone. So I suppose there is an interest in re-presenting and reorganizing, not just recording history. I am interested in exhausting the facts of history, and using these facts of history as a starting point for dialogue. Because very often, the facts of history are used as full stops in dialogues. — Mark Teh, working artist⁶¹

Lastly, these films seek a way to connect Malaysians' past and present, they try to provide continuity between two temporal spaces that seem fragmented by two completely different ideologies and struggles. They do this by suggesting that reflecting on the national past may shed light on our present and provide direction into the future of the nation.⁶² For example, *10 Tahun* addresses what Malaysian nationhood means by showing the mass participation and organizing accomplished by the radical Left even before independence, and in this way it disputes the authoritarian Mahathirist view that Malaysia is a young nation, and its citizens, unlike their Western counterparts, are not ready for full democracy in the form of street protests. Too often, thanks to the conservative historical perspective constructed over decades, political demonstrations are considered "not our tradition."⁶³ Yet *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* shows archival documentation of peaceful mass demonstrations by UMNO members against the Malayan Union and suggests that the collective desire for social justice (e.g., workers' rights) and freedom has always existed. The *hartal*, as Fahmi notes, involved "all the *rakyat* and was a form of participatory democracy."⁶⁴ Indirectly, viewers of this documentary may ask themselves how the spirit of taking to the streets has been diminished by the introduction of postcolonial laws that stifle dissent, such as the Police Act of 1967, which criminalizes a gathering of three or more people who come together in a

⁶¹ Kam Raslan, "Fine Young Communists," *Kakiseni.com*, July 12, 2005. <http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/reviews/MDcwMg.html/all#top>, last accessed January 29, 2010.

⁶² Surin, "The Untold Story of the *Hartal*," interview with Fahmi Reza, p. 8.

⁶³ Ibid. Also, blogger David Tan writes: "For those who try to pull the wool over our eyes saying demonstrations are not a part of our culture, or who are deliberately rewriting history to serve myopic ends, this documentary is an eye-opener." David B. C. Tan, "Looking Back to the Past to Build Our Future," *Blogspot: On the Shoulders of Giants*, November 15, 2007. http://dbctan.blogspot.com/2007_11_01_archive.html, last accessed January 29, 2010.

⁶⁴ Surin, "The Untold Story of the *Hartal*," interview with Fahmi Reza, p. 5.

public place without a license.⁶⁵ While *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* is about history and, as Mark Teh informs us above, history in Malaysia is often perceived as boring or dismissed as mere facts, Fahmi combines interviews, archival footage, a savvy pop-art DIY aesthetic, along with 1970s music from punk bands like The Sex Pistols, to appeal to young Malaysians. Although anachronistic, the choice of music succeeds in lending an air of revolutionary *semangat* (spirit) and enhances the romantic ideals of the 1940s, an era when “there were more freedoms, and political consciousness was higher.”⁶⁶

The attempts to connect the political past and the apolitical present are evident in Amir Muhammad’s two documentaries. In *The Last Communist*, Amir tracks the geographical and political journey of Chin Peng through Peninsular Malaysia (thus making a “road movie”), using musical sequences, text, and talking heads. The facts of Chin Peng’s biography are delivered as written text and imposed over the modern-day landscape of Malaysia to ask: how is history relevant to the daily lives of Malaysians today? Unlike Fahmi, Amir eschews the use of archival footage. Instead, on his road trip tracing Chin Peng’s footsteps, he focuses on the present-day people he meets in the small towns: working class Indians (an *ais kacang* [ice dessert] seller, two friends who sell *petai* beans, some women who work spraying pesticide), a Chinese charcoal-factory owner who explains the charcoal production process in English, a hardworking *Orang Asli* (indigenous Malaysian) petty trader, a local historian who explains the folklore behind the lotus bun of Taiping, Capt. Philip Rivers, a former riot squad member in Singapore,⁶⁷ Malaysians who had survived the Japanese Occupation, and, eventually, when the film crew reaches Thailand, veteran CPM members. The interviewed subjects who have no memory or little awareness of the past talk about their everyday lives, defining their identities very specifically in terms of their towns and of localities embodied in local fruit and different types of food and industries: the Cantonese pomelo seller of Ipoh, the *Petai* Boys of Bidor, and in Taiping, folk historian Lee Eng Kew, who tells the story about the young communist whose mother started the tradition of the lotus flower bun, now famous throughout Malaysia.

Many of these stories share a common thread that ties together the landscape through diverse stories in various languages, telling of ordinary Malaysians adapting, integrating, and making a living with their families, fellow workers, and neighbors. Work is a central aspect of all their lives. Hokkien-speaking Tajuddin Mohd Mustaffa talks about the kinds of jobs he has taken on: as a durian picker and vendor by day and tow-truck driver by night. Bahari Bahgunung, who collects *petai* beans and other forest products, narrates how he rose from working for a boss to buying his own small-goods van and being in charge of his own destiny. Much like in Fahmi’s film, there is a populist sentiment in *The Last Communist*, for the

⁶⁵ Josef Roy Benedict, “Malaysia: Fifty Years After Merdeka,” *Amnesty International Malaysia*, August 31, 2007, at http://www.aimalaysia.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=264&Itemid=46, last accessed January 6, 2010.

⁶⁶ Surin, interview with Fahmi, p. 7.

⁶⁷ I would like to thank historian Geoff Wade for this clarification and for raising other thoughtful points for consideration while reading a draft of this essay.

interviewed subjects become living testaments in a vibrant pluralist landscape “peopled by a new Malaysia that accommodates those legacies on their terms.”⁶⁸

However, at times the disconnect between the politics of the past and the people of the present is reflected by the fact that the young people interviewed do not even know who Chin Peng is. The sense of disconnection is intensified by the static use of historical texts that viewers have to read over the moving images. Amir attempts to enliven history by interspersing the film with musical sequences that satirize the musical numbers included in the old Malayan Film Unit public service reels, which featured topics such as the dangers of malaria and the introduction of the Identity Card (IC) during the Emergency. In one rock number, the singer sings, “Bang bang... this isn’t a game, bang bang ... But for a guaranteed kill, lob a grenade with all your skill.” Although the musical numbers are obvious parodies, the song’s lyrics and their placement in the sequence of shots seem jarringly distasteful. The “bang bang” rock number is interposed between a scene of the aged CPM members singing a revolutionary song on stage at the Peace Village, and another where an old communist tells us how he lost his leg when he stepped on a mine. It is such moments that reflect the filmmaker’s detachment from his subjects, suggesting that, although the film may document their stories, Amir perhaps remains critical of revolutionary violence.

Apa Khabar Orang Kampung strives for a more seamless and traditional narrative than that of its predecessor, though the disconnect between past and present still exists. Here, instead of musical sequences, the director introduces scenes from a Thai radio serial loosely adapted from Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*. It is a quiet film that captures the peaceful, bucolic, current reality of everyday life in the Malay Peace Village, guided by the lilt of Pak Kassim’s voice giving an account in Malay of his life, of how and why he joined the party and remained a member until the 1989 negotiations, in which he was involved. Interviews and visual scenery are periodically (and randomly) disrupted by video effects that include grinding urban sounds and blurred slow-motion imagery, to jolt us out of passive viewing, as if to remind us that peace was not always present in the history of this place. Only children under the age of fifteen and old people are now left in this village because the guerillas had to give away their children when they were still fighting in the jungle. Pak Kassim’s estranged son, with whom he reestablished contact when the boy was nineteen, lives in another Thai province and prefers an easier life: “He refuses to touch a hoe or machete. He’d rather earn a regular salary ... Drive a car and sell merchandise.” It is sad enough that parent–children relationships have been sacrificed, and unrecorded oral histories lost, but the damage continues to mount, for the exiled CPM members’ relationship with the third generation of children growing up in these villages is also marked by language loss, as the children become integrated into Thai society through Thai schooling. Indeed, the film opens with a young boy from the village Awie who introduces himself in Thai.

The disconnect is made clearer when communists like Pak Kassim measure their idealism, their motivating ideology and dreams, against changing local and global conditions. When he returned to Malaysia, Pak Kassim was confronted by relatives who taunted him by saying that if he had not joined the party, he would have a nice

⁶⁸ Benjamin McKay, “*The Last Communist: A Documentary about Chin Peng without Chin Peng*,” *Criticine: Elevating Discourse on Southeast Asian Cinema*, October 23, 2006, at http://www.criticine.com/review_article.php?id=19, last accessed January 6, 2010.

timber contract by now. Yet, he remained staunch in his ideology as he explained to Malaysians that his selfless sacrifice to free Malaya from colonialism and imperial interests went against petty Malay patronage and crony capitalism:

I said, "You don't understand politics at all!" Getting rich in that way would be selfish. But our country was a colony. We wanted to be free. That's why we took up arms. If I were selfish, I would not have gone into the jungle.

I said, "Look at you! You weren't in the jungle. That's why you now have a big house and car and pension."

But I didn't want any of that. I wanted Malaya to be free. He thought I was stupid or something. [chuckles]

These contemporary independent films are important in starting a conversation with the past, an intergenerational dialogue across Malayan history, say, between Chin Peng, who "would like to be involved in a forum," and Mark Teh, who uses the "facts of history as a starting point for dialogue." This dialectic encounter may yield alternative possibilities for the social good and empowerment of citizens to, as Chin Peng insists, "ultimately mov[e] the world."

In conclusion, cosmopolitan independent filmmakers and working artists ask critical questions about the gaps in modern Malaysian history, thereby testing the boundaries of art and free speech, as well as the nation's maturity and its claims to modernity (achieved through a "forgotten tradition" of protest!).⁶⁹ While Amir's documentaries were banned, Chin Peng's published memoirs continue to be sold in Malaysia. And a multi-arts festival organized around the Emergency was held at the Kuala Lumpur Central Annex, featuring theatre, exhibitions, film screenings, and daily interactive presentations, and extending from October 16 to 26, 2008. Fahmi Reza's sequel, *Revolusi '48*, was screened at this festival.⁷⁰ So, despite the successful erasure of an earlier generation of cosmopolitan patriots whose "bodies are in the wilderness, [but whose] hands embrace the motherland and eyes see the whole world," such humanist qualities have withstood time, corrupt power, and state repression to resurface in the new millennium in a younger generation, whose members are equally at home in Malaysia and the world. For although banned at home, Amir's documentaries have been traveling the globe and Fahmi's documentary is not only available on YouTube, but he makes a concerted effort to screen it for school children and make himself available for discussion afterwards.

⁶⁹ Surin, "The Untold Story of the *Hartal*," interview with Fahmi Reza, p. 8.

⁷⁰ See revolusi48.blogspot.com

RECALLING AND REPRESENTING COLD WAR CONFLICT AND ITS AFTERMATH IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN FILM AND THEATER

Barbara Hatley

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the New Order regime's long period of control in Indonesia, from 1965–98, a single interpretation of Cold War politics and its meaning for the nation held sway—the total vilification of communism as the cause of Indonesia's violent conflicts and social chaos in the 1960s, and the veneration of President Suharto's military regime for saving the country by eliminating the communists, restoring order, and building prosperity. With Suharto's resignation in 1998 and the gradual dismantling of the regime, that dominant narrative began to be contested. Finally, it was possible to question the circumstances of Suharto's Cold War "victory" of 1965–66, involving the massacre and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Communist Party members and suspected sympathizers. After 1998, a number of former leftist figures, imprisoned or exiled during the Suharto years, published their memoirs. Likewise, writers previously associated with the left-wing cultural organization Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, People's Cultural Institute) have published poetry and fiction illuminating the experiences of victims of the events of 1965. There have also been visual arts and photography exhibitions portraying the anti-communist violence of that time.

Among the cultural texts recalling the events of 1965–66 have been a number of theater performances and films telling the story of the events of 1965–66. Cinema played a particularly powerful role during the New Order era by promoting the regime's version of this history. The infamous propaganda film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The Treason of the September 30 Movement/PKI), screened as compulsory viewing for school students and broadcast on television each year to commemorate the events it depicts, traumatized generations of Indonesian citizens with its scenes

of brutal violence waged by communists against innocent, unprepared victims.¹ Tranquil domestic scenes in the homes of the soon-to-be-kidnapped generals, as parents and children retire to bed, are shattered by the invasion of menacing armed men, who force the pajama-clad military men into waiting jeeps, or callously shoot them in front of their families if they resist. The film then shifts to show wild celebrations at the communists' base at Lubang Buaya, with festive bonfires, dancing, and chanting. Next come horrific, gory scenes of torture, with camera shots of bloodied faces and eye gouging, before viewers witness the bodies of the generals being stuffed into a well around which communist women dance. With the renowned theater and film director Arifin C. Noer as its director, the film is chillingly convincing. Many Indonesians recount the terror they experienced watching it as school children, and the intense fear of communism it produced. Countering this potent propaganda clearly motivates those who produce feature films and performances that present an alternative picture of the events of that time.

Such films and performances differ significantly, however, from their literary counterparts. Both the fictional works written during the New Order, set partly in the 1960s, making cautious mention of the political upheaval of 1965,² and the novels, stories, and memoirs of former political prisoners and exiles that have appeared since Suharto's fall,³ are grounded overwhelmingly in personal experience. The writings of former leftist authors reveal the story of the 1965 killings, tortures, and imprisonments as understood by their survivors, and detail the suffering, injustice, and absurdity of life in New Order detention centers. In some cases these written works reflect on experiences prior to 1965, augmenting the constrained depiction in texts produced during the New Order of cultural life in the 1950s and 1960s.

Almost all of those who make films and performances about the 1965 conflict, on the other hand, come from different backgrounds. They are overwhelmingly young, and had no direct involvement in the events depicted. An exception to this pattern is the first, and seemingly only, treatment of this topic by a nationally recognized director, Garin Nugraha's *Puisi tak terkuburkan* (Poetry Does Not Die). In this film, the Acehnese poet Ibrahim Kadir, who was jailed for three weeks and witnessed great violence and trauma at the time of the 1965 upheaval, plays out his own experiences and interactions with fellow prisoners. His spoken narrative is overlain

¹ "PKI" in the film's title stands for Partai Komunis Indonesia, or the Indonesian Communist Party. Ariel Heryanto gives a detailed and skillfully nuanced account of the film and its role as "a 'master narrative' in Indonesia's official history and political discourse" (p. 8) in Ariel Heryanto, *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 5–15.

² Novels such as Ajip Rosidi's narrative of a young writer caught up in pre-1965 cultural politics, *Anak Tanah Air* [Child of the Motherland] (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1985); Ahmad Tohari's account of the disaster that strikes a dancer when her village is labeled PKI, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* [The Dancer of Paruk Village] (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1982); Putu Wijaya's allegorical evocation of the systematic yet often mindless violence of the 1965 killings, *Nyali* [Guts] (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1983); and Yudhistira ANM Massardi's tale of a family's suffering and impoverishment after the father is arrested as a supposed communist, *Mencoba Tidak Menyerah* [Trying Not to Surrender] (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1979).

³ See, in particular, works by Putu Oka Sukanta and Hersri Setiawan. For example, see Putu Oka's autobiographically based novel *Merajut Harkat* [Weaving Threads of Dignity] (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Rakyat, 1999) and collections of short stories and poems; and Hersri's volume of reflective essays, *Aku Eks Tapol* [I Am an Ex-Political Prisoner] (Yogyakarta: Galang Press, 2003), and collection of poems, *Inilah Pamflet Itu* [This Is the Pamphlet] (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Pondok Rakyat and Yayasan Tifa, 2007).

with verses of the traditional sung poetry, *didong*. In making the film, Nugraha, as director, researched the topic for several years and immersed himself in Kadir's story and its context. For the young, less-experienced filmmakers whose work is discussed below, however, the events of 1965 represent a remote, myth-shrouded subject. Several documentary films produced under the auspices of NGOs explicitly announce that "this is the work of young people relatively distant from the Indonesian humanitarian tragedy of several decades ago."⁴ These works have been researched, scripted, and shot by students still in high school, with the intention that through this experience the young filmmakers should learn about, then convey to viewers, the basic facts of the events of 1965.⁵

What's of interest about these filmic and dramatic texts stems not from any revelations of new content, but rather their aims and the processes of their production and reception. Films produced by NGOs to convey to the public, particularly young people, an alternative view of the events of 1965, and performances staged with similar aims by youthful theater groups, give insight into ideas being promoted among the younger generation on these issues. An active force in filmmaking is the group Syarikat (Masyarakat Santri untuk Advokasi Rakyat, Community of Muslims Advocating for the People), linked to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, Association of Muslim Scholars), which works for reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of the anti-communist violence of 1965. Its films, based on research into the causes and consequences of the conflict and interviews with survivors, seek to further the group's mission "to eliminate stigmatization of followers of the PKI and their descendants"⁶ by presenting alternative interpretations to New Order stereotypes. Showings of these films at film festivals, on television, and to particular social groups, plus the involvement of young people in their production, work to extend the alternative story into the community. Theater performances reach a more finite, limited public than do films. But given the longstanding role of theatrical performances in Indonesia, particularly in Java, in marking important events and celebrating group identity, plays about the events of 1965 seem likely to draw actors and audience members alike into a shared consideration of the themes presented.

The city of Yogyakarta is a particularly active center for producing films and plays. The organization Syarikat is based in Yogya, with eighteen branches in other cities. The Centre for History and Political Ethics (Pusat Sejarah dan Etika Politik, Pusdep), at Sanata Dharma Catholic University, also focuses on reconstructing the history of past political violence and promoting reconciliation; it has worked together with Syarikat in organizing and supporting theater performances, film screenings, and other cultural events. Yogya's identity as a major university center with a history of student activism encourages interest in political themes among campus theater groups. In traditional theater, several children of famous *ketoprak*

⁴ Those words are displayed at the commencement of several of the films included in the DVD *Putih Abu-Abu: Masa Lalu Perempuan* [Grey on White: Women's Pasts], to be discussed below.

⁵ Interviews with ex-political prisoners are interspersed with students' discussions of their understanding of terms such as "communist" and "Gerwani" (a women's organization aligned with the Communist Party), and with comments by academics on the appalling lack of political knowledge among Indonesian young people, due to the education system's inadequacy.

⁶ Farid Wajidi "NU Youth and the Making of Civil Society," in *Indonesia in Transition: Rethinking Civil Society, Region and Crisis*, ed. H. Samuel and H. Schulte Nordholt (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2004), p. 81.

(Javanese-language historical melodrama) actors who were imprisoned or killed in 1965 are now prominent performers, and one, Bondan Nusantara, works with Syarikat and stages politically oriented *ketoprak* performances. Performances engaging with the theme of the 1965–66 political conflict and anti-communist stigmatization may well take place in other cities, along with the production of films on these topics by NGOs and other groups. But without firsthand knowledge of a given local cultural scene, information about performances in particular would be difficult to access.⁷ My own familiarity with the Yogya cultural world, along with the wealth of Yogyakarta's activities, mentioned above, has prompted me to focus on Yogyakarta-based films and performances as a single, related body of work, that is, to undertake a specific case study rather than attempt to compile and review a broad, representative range of examples.

The following discussion reviews a number of documentary and feature films, then performances by three theater groups. It explores the way "communism" and "communists" are conceptualized, how the events of 1965 and their aftermath are seen to connect with contemporary experience, and in what ways the "Cold War heritage" is recalled today. How do small-scale, individual productions attempt to combat the ongoing might of the New Order propaganda machine—what kind of stories, images, and dramatic strategies do films and stage plays employ to counter the master narrative long burned into the memories of millions through the all-powerful text of the G30S film?⁸

DOCUMENTARY FILMS

The documentary *Kado Untuk Ibu* (Present for Mother), produced by Syarikat in 2004, opens with a written dedication to "all women victims of the violence of 1965–

⁷ The ephemeral nature of performances, and their often informal venues and publicity networks, make information about them difficult to obtain unless one knows the theater group or manages to be present at the event. Moreover, since the theme of communism and the 1965 killings remains politically sensitive, theater groups tend to avoid reference to such content in publicity about their plays and discuss it openly only with trusted people. Thus, inside knowledge and personal contacts are crucial for accessing and documenting such shows. A notable deviation from this pattern at the national level, however, was the 2004 production at the Jakarta Arts Centre of *Anak-Anak Kegelapan* (Children of the Dark), by controversial playwright and political activist Ratna Sarumpaet. The play openly addressed the theme of the suffering of children of the victims of the anti-communist violence. In the program notes, Ratna issued an invitation/challenge to all participants in the presidential election of 2004 to attend the show and acknowledge the ongoing traumatic legacy of the events of 1965–66. Films, of course, can circulate more widely and achieve greater exposure than do most plays. It was through the Syarikat group in Yogya, for example, that I obtained a copy of the Balinese-made film *Kawan Senja Tiba* (Friends as Night Falls) that I mention later. Yet with films, too, personal contacts can bring to light independently made works (sometimes written and produced by a single individual) unknown outside small circles. A student in Yogya, for example, gave me a copy of a film he had made of his explorations with a group of friends of caves south of the city—caves where the bodies of victims of the 1965 violence had been dumped.

⁸ Audience members did not necessarily absorb the film's propaganda messages exactly as intended by the filmmakers. There are accounts, for example, of some viewers finding the film tedious and others expressing sympathy for victimized PKI members. See Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (London: Zed Books, 1994). Yet, invariably the lesson that communism was dangerous and threatening and its very mention should be avoided came through loud and clear.

1966" and brief shots of old newspaper reports of the 1965 events and of the prisons where women political detainees were held. Then, immediately, two women interviewees speak of their former involvement in communist-linked women's organizations and the ideals they were striving for. One woman states firmly: "I was active in Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, Indonesian Women's Movement)⁹ because its programs were very appropriate ... raising up women, addressing women's rights, very concerned about the family." The other woman asks passionately, "While women were in chains, how could I not be involved? While women were still suffering like that when Indonesia was free, how could we not do more?" For she was young then, "full of dreams."

A voiceover recounts how the activities of these women's organizations came to an end with the events of September 1965. Text from newspapers of the time and shots of the monument erected by the military to commemorate the deaths of the generals killed in the coup attempt¹⁰ illustrate the vilification of Gerwani for their involvement in the barbarous acts supposedly perpetrated by the communists. Images from the monument reliefs are shown depicting Gerwani members dancing sensuously, half-naked, as the generals are being tortured and killed. A narrator explains how sensationalized media accounts of these supposed events led to the capture and imprisonment of thousands of women accused of being Gerwani members. The history of the women's prison established at Plantungan near Semarang is recounted, followed by several former detainees' personal accounts of their experiences.¹¹ The camera returns to the woman who spoke earlier of her youthful idealism. She recalls being repeatedly sexually violated, in acts which were justified by the perpetrators as appropriate treatment for women whose political deviance equated them with prostitutes. On one occasion she was forced to perform oral sex on a group of interrogators, sitting in line, her head forced down onto their genitals. "They said they were the founders of Pancasila," she remarks bitterly. "They said they were religious people. But how could that be? ... I don't believe that people of faith could act in this way." The film ends with this powerful indictment of

⁹ As noted earlier, Gerwani was aligned with the Indonesian Communist Party, while maintaining its independent structure and activities as a women's organization.

¹⁰ The monument is situated on the site of the well in the Lubang Buaya area near Jakarta where the bodies of the murdered generals were found. Its name, *Panca Sila Sakti* (Sacred Panca Sila), suggests how the sacred values of the national constitution, the Pancasila, were endangered by the (putative) communist coup, but saved and strengthened when Suharto and the military defeated the plotters. See Katherine McGregor, *History in Uniform: Military Ideology and the Construction of Indonesia's Past* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), pp. 68–96, for a detailed description and analysis of this monument and its accompanying museum. McGregor comments perceptively on the contrast between the sensual, abandoned bodies of the Gerwani women in the reliefs and the figures of two modest, pious women situated on the right side of Suharto (pp. 78–82). She makes the point that this contrast confirms the argument first put forward by Saskia Wieringa that the debauched bodies of Gerwani were used as a metaphor for the disorder of society in the Guided Democracy period. The order restored to the nation by the Suharto regime was then symbolized by women's return to their "natural" roles as wives and mothers, accompanied by the depoliticization of the women's movement.

¹¹ After the site became an internment camp for women in 1971, a clinic was established, staffed by doctors among the prisoners. At first the clinic served only camp inmates, then services were extended to local people. Mention in the film of the community's benefits from the presence of the camp and its inmates arguably helps convey a positive image of the women detainees.

the sexual abuse of women political prisoners.¹² It exposes the hypocrisy of the New Order military's portrayal of itself as the savior of the nation, which was threatened by the moral disorder fostered by communism, and as upholders of religious faith and propriety.

In 2006 Syarikat, together with the women's organization Komnas Perempuan (Komisi Nasional Anti-Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan, National Committee against Violence towards Women), produced a series of short films with content and format similar to *Kado Untuk Ibu's*.¹³ The films focus on the stories of women victims, and school students were involved in the production process in the ways referred to earlier. As with *Kado Untuk Ibu*, there are interviews with former women prisoners, some of whom endorse the efforts of Gerwani in working for the rights and welfare of women and families, while others disclaim any knowledge of Gerwani's connection with PKI or politics—all these women did was dance. If their dancing and the traditional folk song accompanying it, "Genjer-Genjer" (an edible plant that grows in rice paddies), later banned because of its association with Gerwani, were really so evil and immoral, one woman asks, why didn't people say so at the time? A male former political prisoner observes that the New Order myths about Gerwani are nonsense and the younger generation must be told the truth. The daughter of imprisoned parents, holding her own plump baby, talks of the need to eliminate discrimination against the descendants of those labeled communist.

The discrimination and hardship suffered by children of victims of the 1965 violence form the central theme of the documentary *Tumbuh Dalam Badai* (Growing Up in the Storm), filmed by cinematographer IGP Wiranegara for the human-rights organization Lembaga Kreativitas Kemanusiaan (Institute for Creativity and Humanity).¹⁴ A woman dancer and *dalang* (*wayang* puppeteer) Wangi Indriya, and Bondan Nusantara, director, script writer, and driving force in *ketoprak* popular theater in Yogyakarta, talk of their childhood pain and bewilderment as they were ostracized and stigmatized as *anak PKI*, children of communists, not knowing what the term meant. Eventually, through their art, they found a way to survive, to develop skills, and to contribute to society.

As a whole, these documentary films strongly emphasize the injustices experienced by those accused of communist involvement in 1965—the manipulation of facts by the authorities, the absence of legal due process, the barbarism of the killings and ongoing cruelty of prison torture, and the stigmatization and suffering of family members deprived of their rights to education and employment. As the victims speak, the words "former PKI organizer" or "member of communist youth group" (Pemuda Rakyat) appear on the screen beneath their image—the image of an ordinary person, not an alien monster, who is describing firsthand experiences of confusion and suffering with which viewers can readily empathize. Yet, in general,

¹² Annie Pohlman, who has researched the experiences of former Gerwani political prisoners for her PhD thesis, reports that accounts of sexual violence are very common. See Annie Pohlman, "A Fragment of a Story: Gerwani and Tapol Experiences," *Intersections: Gender, History, and Culture in the Asian Context* 10 (August 2004), available at <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue10/pohlman.html> (as of December 22, 2009).

¹³ These films, five about the 1965 events and a sixth concerning the anti-Chinese violence of 1998, appear sequentially in the DVD *Putih Abu-Abu: Masa Lalu Perempuan* [Grey on White: Women's Pasts] (Syarikat and Komnas Perempuan, 2006).

¹⁴ The renowned poet and novelist Putu Oka Sutanta, former member of the cultural organization Lekra and political prisoner, also contributed to the making of this film.

nothing is said about the work of these people or the aims of their organization prior to 1965.¹⁵ Moreover, all the survivors who are interviewed in detail about their lives are women.

FICTIONAL FILMS

Jejak Darah

The short film *Jejak Darah—Surat untuk Adinda* (Trail of Blood—A Letter to the Beloved) was produced by the film community DeJavu in Yogyakarta in 2004. It reimagines the experience of a young *ketoprak* performer seized as a suspected communist sympathizer and brutally dragged away for “interrogation.” The young man, Harjono, is seen writing a letter to his sweetheart, Wi, the daughter of a village *ketoprak* director, and glancing fondly at her framed photo. Harjono had been an actor in Wi’s father’s troupe before coming to the city to join a larger troupe and perfect his skills. The words of the letter, conveyed in voiceover by the young man in Javanese and Indonesian, reveal that the events of the 1965 coup have taken place; generals have been killed and the communists have been blamed. At the local level, killings have occurred, and many people have fled. Harjono ponders whether the communists were really at fault. He talks of the aim of his acting, developed under the guidance of the city troupe’s director, Pak Gito, and recalls advice from his own father: one should not merely distract audience members from their empty stomachs but fire them up to do something about the conditions causing their hunger. Harjono wants to work with and for ordinary people. Some say these goals are similar to those of the PKI, but he doesn’t know. A friend rushes in, reports that Pak Gito has been seized, along with others, and cries that “they” are coming. A neighbor then appears, and also urges Harjono to flee. But insisting he knows nothing and has done nothing wrong, Harjono stays. A group of men—some villagers, some in army uniform, one wearing a Muslim fez marking his Islamic identity—burst into the house, shout questions, and assault the young man. Harjono’s voiceover is heard repeating that he knows nothing and has no connections with communism. “*Aku dudu PKI!*” (I’m not PKI!) As they strike and kick him, the voiceover asserts: “God does not sleep, He will decide what is true.” Pools of blood that are visible as

¹⁵ A partial exception to the norm can be seen in an opening segment of the film *Kawan Senja Tiba* (Friends as Night Falls), funded collaboratively by two Balinese NGOs, which reviews the 1965 events; the killings; the arbitrary, inhumane treatment of prisoners; and the urgent need for restitution and reconciliation. In describing the political scene in Bali in the mid-1960s, a former PKI member explains the party’s strength in terms of its successful redistribution of land to poor farmers: “It was a concrete program, reaching the people.” A Pemuda Rakyat member who led a *janger* (form of popular music-and-dance theater) group at that time mentions performances about confrontations with landlords. But these are passing references only, like the comments by former women activists about Gerwani in the film *Kado untuk Ibu*, quoted above. They are not followed up in more detailed interviews with the speakers. A 2008 film entitled *Yang Bertanah tapi tidak Bertanah Air* (Those with Land, but no Homeland), produced by a Yogyakarta-based film collective named Kotakhitam (Blackbox), notably breaks from this pattern by explicitly addressing the activities and aims of the communist-associated cultural organization Lekra. Former members of Lekra, along with academic commentators, discuss such issues as artists’ work in villages and the nature of the relationship between Lekra and the Communist Party. These comments about the organization are not combined, however, with any detailed discussion of the speakers’ personal experiences. There is no discussion of their life stories.

Harjono's body is dragged away, and an army boot's bloody imprint on the floor constitute the *jejak darah*, the trail or footprint of blood of the title.¹⁶

The violence to which the young man is treated by his captors, shown using graphic slow-motion shots, and the trail of blood left behind, recall the scenes depicting the kidnapping of the generals by the communists in the film *Pengkhianatan G30S /PKI*. Where documentary films about 1965 tell a factual story through the voices of actual victims, *Jejak Darah* engages New Order film techniques to "write back" to ideological constructions of the regime. Its emotional tone arguably invites viewers to think about the young man's ideals and their possible similarity to communist thought, question whether he has done anything wrong, shudder at the crude, unjust violence of his punishment, and note where the bloody trail of responsibility leads.

Sinengker

Sinengker (The Unrevealed), produced by Syarikat in 2007, is a longer and more complex film than *Jejak Darah*, covering an extended time period. It opens several years before the events of 1965, in a Javanese village home, as the son of the family, Mas Wigati, returns for a visit and is warmly welcomed by his parents and two younger sisters, Sri and Asih. Dialogue among the characters and a voiceover by Asih, explaining that her clever, much-loved brother is studying in the city, are expressed in Javanese with Indonesian subtitles. Scenes of the sisters learning dance from their mother in the big *pendopo* (pavilion) at the front of the house, grain being winnowed in the yard, and the family eating a celebratory meal together on mats convey the feeling of life in a comfortable but unpretentious village household. Extending the sense of familiar Javanese family interaction, the father, played by famous veteran *ketoprak* actor Pak Wahono, asks his son if he is intent on the goal he has previously expressed of developing people's art (*ngembangke kesenian rakyat*). If so, his role as a father is simply to pray for his son's success, asking only that Wigati does not stray from the ideas of Bung Karno (i.e., Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, revered by the loyally nationalist father), and that Wigati seek the blessing of his grandfather.

As Wigati, Sri, and Asih, at the time a child of ten or eleven, walk through a mahogany forest on their way back from visiting their grandfather, a layer of symbolic reference is introduced into the imagery of the film. Wigati performs for his sisters a story from the *wayang* shadow-puppet repertoire, using as puppets figures made from grass; as he does so, dry seed pods fall from the bare branches of the trees and whirl in the wind over the heads of the siblings. Perhaps human life is like this, states Asih's character in voiceover—like mahogany seeds blown by the wind, some people rise up to the heavens, some fall to the earth, and some are swept away by the river's currents. As Wigati speaks of noble knights banding together to defend their country and of the cataclysmic war that follows, Asih catches and tastes one of the floating seedpods and declares it *pahit!*, "very bitter."

At the village home some years later, the symbolic images of this scene are recalled and reinforced with others. Asih observes that the winds of change have blown her siblings in new directions (Sri's wedding photo hangs on the wall), while life for her goes on as before. But great changes are underway. Father listens to Sukarno's speeches on the radio, broadcasts that his wife shuns, tense with fear

¹⁶ The word *jejak* can have both meanings, either "trail" or "footprint."

about the political situation. Why has Wigati not come home in months? Why has Sri's husband, a government official, been so often absent even though his wife is seven months pregnant? Mother wields a large knife, cutting cabbage, with a troubled face; Asih pricks her finger while putting on earrings, drawing blood. She picks up the grass puppet, symbol of the "little people," made for her by Wigati, which she has kept lovingly in memory of her brother, and asks in voiceover: "Who can tell the mysteries of time?" A river is shown flowing swiftly, turning red with blood.

As father lights the lamp one night, a raven caws ominously. Later, there is violent pounding on the door; when Asih opens it, Sri rushes in, shrieking hysterically that her husband has been taken by a mob. Asih runs out into the night crying, "Mas Wigati! Mas Wigati." Encountering walls painted with slogans denouncing the PKI, she sobs into the pouring rain: "My family are not criminals! My brother is not a thief!" and attempts to cover the words with mud. Sri is dragged by soldiers from her parents' home to an interrogation center, where a menacing military figure shouts at her to strip. When she refuses, we hear the sound of her dress being torn from her pregnant body. Asih returns home to find her father comatose, unresponsive; apparently the shock of what has happened has been too much for him. Some time after the father's death, Asih's mother dies of a sudden stroke. Asih has been seen tending several young frangipani trees, presumably commemorating her father, brother Wigati, sister Sri, and Sri's unborn child. Now she plants another, symbolizing her mother, and breaks down, crying, in the pouring rain.

Years pass as Asih lives on alone in the old house. She states that she nurtures her memories of the past just as she maintains the frangipani trees, even though this creates a wound that will never heal. Ahmad, a devout young man in a Muslim *pici* (fez), who has long been shyly attracted to Asih, comes to the house and asks her to start a new life with him. But she recalls that during the years of her anguish and isolation he offered no help. Indeed, we saw him turn his bicycle away upon encountering Asih splattered with mud near the wall with PKI slogans. Ahmad protests that it was too dangerous to interact with her at that time, when suspected communist involvement could bring death to anyone. But Asih's mind is made up. She will spend the rest of her life waiting for the pain and suffering of the events of the past to end. She will keep her memories, like the mementos locked up in an old cupboard in the house, a hidden secret. The hands of power want to control the cupboard, to keep it locked, and to throw the key into the ocean. A close-up camera shot of a key turning in a lock brings the film to an end.

Sinengker is considerably more difficult to interpret than *Jejak Darah* in terms of its intended meaning and possible audience reception. The careful construction of the Javanese village setting at the beginning of the film and scenes of Wigati interacting warmly with neighbors, speaking respectfully to his father, and showing intimacy and affection with his sisters, seem likely to convey to Javanese audiences the image of a fine, young man by Javanese cultural standards. The use of Javanese language throughout, along with song and music, reinforces this effect. Drawing symbolic reference and philosophical meaning from nature is a traditional Javanese/Indonesian cultural strategy also likely to create a sense of familiarity and identification among viewers. But might not the image of human lives as seed pods blown in the wind convey a sense of arbitrary, random fate at odds with the message

that the killings and imprisonments of 1965 were very much the responsibility of the human actors who carried them out?

One wonders at the reasons for and possible impact of the shift in filmic idiom, from the restrained realism of the early scenes to the dramatic emotionality of later ones. The images of Asih sobbing uncontrollably in the pouring rain at the slogan-covered wall, and again as she tends the frangipani trees, exemplify this heightened emotionality. A group of women, all 1965 victims, viewing the film *Sinengker* reportedly saw in these scenes a woman's weakness and helplessness quite at odds with their own experience. "We didn't just cry," they observed, "We had to keep going."¹⁷ Asih's action in cutting herself off from society, living alone in the big house, likewise differs from the usual experience of 1965 survivors who had to battle to make a living amid the turmoil of contemporary life. Yet the final image of the film perhaps explains and justifies Asih's stance. Asih's locking up of her memories parallels the authorities' refusal to open up the truth about 1965. Her refusal to return to society, to resume normal social life, and to marry Ahmad is a strong statement of resistance.

A stated aim of *Sinengker* is to tell the story of the violence of 1965 from the perspective of women.¹⁸ Yet critics have pointed out that the female characters in the film are portrayed as passive, without political awareness or involvement. It is the men who are active (like Wigati, whose very name means "important") and knowledgeable (like the father, who listens to Sukarno's speeches on the radio). The mother turns the radio off as the news is too disturbing; men are the ones who understand politics rationally, while women simply react emotionally.¹⁹ Likewise, in the film *Jejak Darah*, the *ketoprak* player Harjono is the active figure, writing to his sweetheart, Wi, at home. On the other hand, in *Sinengker* we hear nothing about what Wigati or Sri's husband actually does. *Jejak Darah* does give viewers a picture of Harjono's ideals of using art for the betterment of ordinary people, and even raises the possibility that these ideals resemble the cultural aims of the PKI. Yet this is only what others have said: Harjono himself does not know whether it is true and he emphatically denies any connection with the PKI as an organization. Like the documentaries, the feature films are silent about the nature and meaning of male communist involvement. In contrast to the documentaries, politically active female figures are absent as well.

STAGE PERFORMANCES

Compared to film, live theater performances, involving groups of actors working together over an extended time period and often staged to celebrate a particular

¹⁷ Bondan Nusantara, personal communication, June 2007.

¹⁸ The producer of *Sinengker*, Imam Aziz, is quoted as stating at the launching of the film in 2007: "We want the violence experienced at that time, particularly by women, to be more widely discussed." The launch was held in April, the month for celebrations of the birth of Indonesia's "first feminist," Kartini, and a feminist artist, Arahmaini, was one of the invited discussants. See "Sinengker, Menggali Luka Lama" [Sinengker, Digging up Old Wounds], *Syarikat Indonesia*, May 3, 2007, available at www.syarikat.org/content/launching-dokudrama-sinengker (accessed August 9, 2008).

¹⁹ Budi Irawanto "Jerit Lirih Kesunyian: Mencoba Menafsir Film Sinengker" [Soft Cries of Loneliness: Trying to Interpret the Film Sinengker], *Ruang Budi Irawanto*, June 17, 2008, available at <http://budiirawanto.multiply.com/reviews/item/7> (accessed August 9, 2008).

event, involve more direct connection with their social milieu. It is easier for an observer to gauge the director's intention and audience reception of a theater performance than to analyze these same elements during the screening of a film. Regarding the events of 1965, on occasion theater has been performed and watched by groups of people personally involved in those events, in order to strengthen the sense of identity of survivors and promote social reconciliation.²⁰ The following analysis, however, focuses on performances staged for a general public, with the producers' aim of presenting alternative perspectives to standard, stereotypical interpretations of both communist and anti-communist activity. My first example is a grand historical spectacle; the other two are contemporary plays with an earthy, populist aesthetic.

Bang-bang Sumirat

On August 11, 2005, a huge *ketoprak* show, *Bang-bang Sumirat*, "The Red Light of Dawn," played out in allegorical form the events of the so-called communist coup of September 1965 and its aftermath. Celebrating the anniversary of the founding of the regency of Bantul, south of Yogyakarta, it was performed by three hundred local actors, dancers, and musicians before about one thousand people, and was later broadcast on Yogya state television. The play is set in the fictional kingdom of Bantala Warih,²¹ where conditions parallel those being experienced by Indonesia in 1965. The scriptwriter and director was Bondan Nusantara, the well-known *ketoprak* figure mentioned above. During the New Order years, he worked as a director for elite patrons, staging many *ketoprak kolossal* (colossal, spectacular *ketoprak* shows), a few of which were cautiously critical of the regime. Now, with Suharto gone and with the populist-minded *bupati* (district head) of Bantul giving tacit agreement, he dared to perform the long-forbidden narrative of the events of 1965.

After an opening display of strength by the troops of Mlayabumi (Malaysia), Malaysia's ally, Prabu Singa-singa, representing the United State's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), speaks of the threat represented by Bantala Warih and enjoins Malaysia to attack its neighbor. In Bantala Warih, Prabu Tuk Gunung (President Sukarno) sits in state in glittering robes and bejeweled epaulets, accompanied by two beautiful consorts and a troop of female guards. Figures

²⁰ These include a meeting of women survivors of 1965 organized by Syarikat and PUSDEP in Yogya in 2005 and a performance involving former communist and anti-communist villages in Blitar in 2003. The Blitar event is discussed by Farid Wajidi, quoting an account by Asvi Adam, in Farid Wajidi, "NU Youth and the Making of Civil Society," in *Indonesia in Transition*, pp. 67–88. Tri Subagyo describes the performance at the meeting of women survivors in Tri Yunus Subagyo, "Breaking the Silence: *Ketoprak* Social Healings of the Past Violence in Rural Java," paper presented at the Workshop on Art, Culture and Political Change since Suharto, University of Tasmania, December 2005, online at: www.utas.edu.au/indonesia_workshop/ (viewed January 12, 2010). Both performances are discussed in Barbara Hatley, "Recalling and Re-presenting the 1965/1966 Anti-Communist Violence in Indonesia," in *Asia Reconstructed: Proceedings of the 16th Biennial Conference of the ASAA*, ed. Adrian Vickers and Margaret Hanlon (Wollongong: ASAA, 2006); and "Social Reconciliation and Community Integration through Theatre," in *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*, ed. Birgit Brauchler (Oxon: Routledge, 2009). I have drawn on some performance descriptions from these publications for this essay.

²¹ The term "Bantala Warih" in Old Javanese translates into Indonesian as *tanah air*, literally, "water and earth," the term used for the Indonesian native land or homeland. Also, perhaps that name was chosen because "Bantala" resembles the word "Bantul," the local regency whose anniversary the performance was celebrating.

representing foreign minister Subandrio and the heads of PKI (Aidit) and PNI (Partai Nasional Indonesia, Indonesian National Party), as well as generals Nasution and Yani, discuss Bantala Warih's position vis-à-vis the CIA. Pangeran Karna Sabrang (Aidit) and the PNI leader endorse ongoing alliance with China and the Soviet Union despite CIA disapproval. When the character representing General Nasution warns against opposing the CIA, Karno Sabrang advocates resistance to the CIA's efforts to weaken Bantala Warih and other Eastern-bloc countries. The king reaffirms his policy of maintaining independence from any outside forces. Then news comes of troops from Malaysia massed on the nation's borders, and the king sends Karno Sabrang and military forces to confront them. Male troops practice combat in pairs; female cavalry dance with hobbyhorses; a troop of women archers parades with miniature bows; and a group of village women wields plates and spoons. The women troops of Mlayabumi and Bantala Warih exchange challenges. A Bantala Warih female leader asserts dramatically, arms outstretched: "Right or wrong, this is my country, the land of my birth. I am prepared to die for it!" Then the battle begins.

A dispute within Bantala Warih's military has resulted in the deaths of several top generals. A high-ranking military officer, Haryo Tratap (Suharto), announces that there has been a coup, and that Karno Sabrang is to blame. Different groups of soldiers fight one another. Prabu Tuk Gunung blames the CIA in part for the unrest, but finally he reluctantly appoints Haryo Tratap to restore order. Haryo Tratap appears on a raised platform at the back of the stage as crowds of ordinary people, looking up, mill about in confusion below. He gives an order; ordinary people start attacking one another, and soldiers drape a huge red cloth over them, creating a seething red mass. When the *mêlée* dies down and the cloth is removed, bodies lie strewn across the stage. A madman appears, singing and dancing, and announces that the country is in total disarray. He points to the Suharto figure (Haryo Tratap), still standing on high, now facing the back of the stage, and exclaims: "Those who portrayed themselves as *satria* heroes²² have transformed into monsters." Haryo Tratap turns around, his face now a hideous, demonic mask with fangs and wild hair. "Wake up!" yells the madman, "Learn from what has happened!" Taking revenge will bring only ongoing suffering, the wakening masses are told. They should look to the bright light of dawn—the *bang-bang sumirat* of the title. Finally, the madman declares "A new time has come, a time full of glorious hope." Actors flood onto the stage as the performance comes to an end.

Just how widely appreciated and understood the allegory of the performance was is impossible to tell.²³ Those who did pick up the historical reference would have seen pre-1965 Indonesia portrayed as an important force in world politics and its leader, Sukarno, as a powerful and respected leader. Aidit, the Communist Party

²² The word *satria*, originating from the term for the Indian warrior caste *ksatria*, indicates literally the noble "warrior knights" of past Javanese kingdoms. With its connotations of bravery and heroism, it is invoked on occasion in reference to contemporary political leadership, and members of the military claim special affinity with the *satria*.

²³ Actors would have understood the characters and events they were representing, and the *bupati* of Bantul, a politically astute former newspaper editor, surely knew and approved. Many with connections in artist and activist circles would have heard in advance about the content of the show. Journalists would have known, although they made only oblique reference to the play's social lesson about reconciliation in their reports on the show. Half a century after their occurrence, the events of 1965 evidently are still surrounded by an aura of fear and secrecy that inhibits journalists from mentioning them directly.

leader, is portrayed as handsome and strong, like the other *satria* figures advising Prabu Tuk Gunung. Aidit is also loyal to his leader and astute in his assessment of the CIA. The depiction of the internal conflict among Bantala Warih's leaders is murky, its dimensions unclear. What is clear is the transformation of Suharto from loyal military officer to tyrant. Theater-goers would have been shocked by the sight of a noble warrior morphing into a monster, with accompanying commentary from the madman underlining the damning implications for Suharto and the military. Even those unaware of the specific allegorical reference of the performance would have gained a sense of the greatness and grandeur of Indonesia in the past, its recent descent into communal conflict (suggesting post-Suharto ethnic and religious violence, as well as the 1965 killings), and the need for tolerance and reconciliation to bring about a prosperous future. Another impressive aspect of the show is the prominence of women as defenders of the nation: voicing patriotic commitment, displaying martial skills, and fighting energetically.

In contrast to the courtly grandeur of *ketoprak kolossal*, two student theater groups staged modest productions of *ketoprak lesung*, a form of *ketoprak* accompanied by the rhythmic pounding of wooden poles in a rice-husking trough, *lesung*, performed in the past by Javanese villagers at harvest time.²⁴ Those productions are described in detail in the following section.

Jaran Sungsang (Upside Down Horse)

In the first play, *Jaran Sungsang*,²⁵ staged in 2005 by the group Teater Gajah Mada, the loud, frenetic beating of the *lesung* underlines the theme of violence, and its wooden poles are the instruments of the final, climactic murder. Gati Andoko, the play's director, reports that its inspiration was a real-life story of a young man deranged by the killing of his parents during the 1965 violence. During the 1980s, at the time of the so-called "mysterious killings" of people with criminal associations,²⁶ this disturbed man was murdered by his own neighbors who regarded him as a dangerous outsider and threat to the community. In fact, the neighbors were incited by a powerful local figure who wanted to take over the man's land. Gati had known the young man well and suffered greatly from feelings of guilt about not having spoken out against his killing.

As the play opens, a group of village youths in black knee-length pants and bare torsos and girls in tee-shirts and pants are pounding vigorously with long poles on a small *lesung* in the center of the stage. One young man, Sugeng, strikes at his face

²⁴ *Ketoprak lesung* reportedly appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, presenting simple dramatic skits about farming life. The original form was then developed and elaborated, first under court patronage then on the commercial stage, into a full theatrical performance.

²⁵ The term means literally a horse born in an unnatural position, a breach birth. Figuratively, it suggests in various ways the situation of the young man, Sugeng, as a misfit in his community who derives a sense of pleasure and identity through performing the hobbyhorse dance, *jaran kepang* or *jatilan*. Gati Andoko mentioned the origin of the play to me in conversation in July 2005.

²⁶ These killings, given the acronym Petrus, took place between 1983 and 1985 and resulted in the deaths of over five thousand people. They were sponsored by the state and carried out as a military intelligence operation. See David Bourchier, "Crime, Law, and State Authority in Indonesia," in *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*, ed Arief Budiman (Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), p. 177.

intermittently, flinches, and howls as he clutches to his chest a rattan hobbyhorse. Others argue about how to deal with Sugeng. Disagreements are not simply verbal but involve physical aggression: there is much pushing, slapping, and kicking, with gymnastic leaps, somersaults, and handstands in response. Sugeng goes berserk, screaming hysterically at the comment "*Dasar PKI*" (Just what you'd expect of a communist!). He is not a communist, he insists; his father was a member of BTI (Barisan Tani Indonesia), the farm-laborers' union, and his mother was an Islamic teacher, *guru ngaji*. "Same thing!" others yell, since BTI was controlled by the PKI. There is so much argument and speculation about these issues that one young man sits the others down in a row on the *lesung* and recounts to them what had actually happened to drive Sugeng crazy.

Sugeng's mother and father were both killed by a crowd of villagers, and their severed heads were impaled on bamboo poles in front of their house. In order to find out the full story, the group summons the wife of the village headman (*lurah*). She is more interested in developing the village for cultural tourism, featuring their *jatilan* (hobbyhorse) dance troupe with Sugeng as a star performer, than in talking about the past. One member of the group denounces her failure to speak out about the horrific events, accusing her, in English, of the "crime of silence." As she sits, head bowed with shame, Sugeng speaks up, endorsing the need to forget rather than recall the horrors of the past, and comforts her. After much loud altercation the group agrees to play the *lesung* while Sugeng performs a stunningly wild, acrobatic dance with the hobbyhorse. He becomes entranced, a standard part of the performance, but things get out of control: he eats flower and vegetable offerings and staggers wildly through the audience. When he finally falls in an exhausted heap onto the *lesung*, the village headman states that Sugeng must be "dealt with," that is, killed. One girl resists, but the others listen, mesmerized. A young man, who has fallen asleep from exhaustion, is roused by the *lurah*: "Look, watch out, there's a snake!" he says, pointing in Sugeng's direction. The sleepy, dazed youth strikes at Sugeng with one of the *lesung* poles, and the others join in, to chaotic yelling and beating sounds. When they come to their senses the group is horrified, but it is too late. The performance concludes with the words of a young girl, her face smeared with her own tears and the blood of the murdered Sugeng: "All events have witnesses. What I regret is that I witnessed this event."

One is struck by the powerful drama of this performance and the complex themes encompassed within the play's short duration and simple, spare thematic elements: the horror of the 1965 violence, the suffering of its victims, but also the pain of remembering, and the contestation and confusion over the past among later generations, leading to repetition of its inhuman cruelty. The central image of the violently beaten *lesung* and the sustained idiom of verbal and physical aggression among the actors creates an intense focus on these themes. Director Gati identifies strongly with the expressive potential of *ketoprak lesung* as a people's art form. Yet in conversation he also spoke of the inherently violent character of the *lesung* and its use in expressing the pent-up anger and rage of women of the household as they pound rice. There have been instances, he reported, in which the *lesung* has been used as a weapon.

Lenggok (Turns of the Dance)²⁷

The play *Lenggok*, performed in mid-February 2008 by the student group Retorika from the Gadjah Mada Philosophy Department, also employed the *lesung*. When not involved in the onstage action, the actors joined other performers in lively percussive *lesung*-playing to mark scene changes and emphasize moments of dramatic tension. The play's director, Topenk Zuqma, views of *ketoprak lesung* as a symbol of resistance by ordinary people to the refinement of court culture, and thus sees it as a form particularly appropriate to the themes of this play. Interestingly, while in both this production and that of *Jaran Sungsang*, the style of *ketoprak* accompanied by the *lesung* is interpreted as explicitly, even aggressively, populist, a former Lekra leader with intimate knowledge of village cultural activities reports that, in the 1950s and early 1960s, *lesung* music had no such intentional ideological significance. Village people performed whatever music they had available. Poor communities that had no access to a gamelan orchestra used the *lesung* for percussive musical expression.²⁸

Meanwhile, the *lesung* is not the only musical accompaniment used in *Lenggok*. A band comprising members of Retorika's musical division introduces the performance with a song in *kroncong* style (Portugese-influenced Indonesian popular music). Later, they play rock music accompanied rhythmically by the *lesung* and finish with *dangdut*, a hybrid of Malay/Middle-Eastern music with a heavy beat. This musical variety parallels a shift in settings in the performance, from an isolated village home to a busy *warung* food stall, where a range of characters interact in differing speech dialects, and serious discussion is mixed with rough humor.

In *Lenggok*'s first scene, Shodiq, a young man in black, loose-fitting farmers' clothes, dances to a tape-recording of the infamous "Genjer-Genjer," banned because of its association with Gerwani. Then the music suddenly stops. Ratih, the young man's sister, has turned it off, unable to bear the sound. She rejects Shodiq's efforts to maintain the legacy of their parents, killed in 1965 as suspected members of Lekra, by practicing traditional dance in folk performances such as *jatilan* dancing. Ratih, who wears a Muslim head-covering (*jilbab*) and has a Koranic teacher as her boyfriend, sees *jatilan* as sinful in its connection with spirit beliefs. Moreover, she has suffered great discrimination and isolation as a child of parents branded as communists. Now that someone loves and accepts her, she wants the shameful family legacy suppressed. Wulan, her older sister, the second child in the family, attempts to help Shodiq understand Ratih's position. But Shodiq is unable to agree to the one thing Ratih wants, that he give up performing. So he leaves the family home.

Lively band music creates an intermezzo between this scene and the next, which is totally different in style. Lengthy statements about serious, painful issues are replaced by brief, abrasive, earthy conversations among the people who gather at Yu Cangik's food stall: Yu Cangik herself; her husband; her assistant, Sarah, who is a young *banci* (transvestite homosexual); a pickpocket-gambler; and a quarreling, middle-aged couple. There are arguments about money and gambling numbers and

²⁷ *Lenggok* means, literally, "twist and turn." The director of the play explained it in terms of the movements of a dancer, with reference to the dance performed by Siddiq and his parents. The English title I have suggested is not a direct translation of the term but an attempt to capture some of the connotations of the word. "Dance Turns" would be another option.

²⁸ Hersri Setiawan, personal communication, October 2008.

crude jokes about whether Sarah's fried bananas are "hot." The arrival of an attractive, young *dangdut*²⁹ singer (Wulan), come to town to perform, attracts great attention, particularly from the men. Wulan asks if anyone knows of a man called Shodiq from Ponorogo, her older brother who left the family home some years ago after a difference of opinion with her sister, Ratih. Now Ratih regrets her harsh stance, and both sisters want to be reunited with their brother. After questioning Wulan about Shodiq's appearance and physique ("What size underpants does he wear?," Sarah asks, to suggestive sniggers from the others), the actors go into the audience to search for him, but return to the stage without success. Eventually they decide that Shodiq's description fits the man they know as Kartolo, a rough-mannered loner but skilled performer who has been teaching dance to the village children.

When Kartolo visits the *warung* and is told of Wulan's story, he first angrily denies he is Shodiq. Then he says it is better for his sisters if he doesn't acknowledge any connection with them. Yu Cangik argues eloquently that people of all kinds can and should accept one another. But as she is speaking, the *lurah* arrives, agitated and apologetic. The *lurah* reports that a crowd of people, having learned of Shodiq's background and fearing that he has been teaching their children communism, has gathered and is protesting at the village offices, destroying furniture, and threatening to burn the building. Unfortunately, some religious leaders, labeling Shodiq as an atheist, tacitly support the protestors. The *lurah* himself and his staff recognize and value Shodiq's activities in sustaining traditional culture through his teaching, but, under these conditions, what can they do? The *lurah* pleads with Shodiq to leave the village for a while. Shodiq asserts angrily that the crowd's actions show that they, not he or the PKI, are uncivilized and brutal. Is this what all their praying has produced? He doesn't look for enemies, but when he is challenged he doesn't run away. As the others cry out in alarm, he leaves the stage to confront the mob.

In a complete shift of register, the band plays lively *dangdut* music. Then Ratih is seen sitting in the half dark, talking to someone offstage. Her voice and that of the man talking to her are soft, indistinct; she is expressing to her husband dissatisfaction about arrangements concerning his second and third wives.³⁰ Wulan arrives home. Shodiq appears standing on the *lesung* as two figures, his dead parents, dance on the stage in front of him. The other characters beat the *lesung* slowly as Shodiq expresses poetically his love and respect to his parents, then faster and faster as he asks angrily what sin they and he have committed:

Did our ancestors rape Fatimah or commit adultery with Aisyah?
 We never urinated in the mosque or wiped our bottoms with pages of the Koran.
 Never!
 So why are we always and forever branded as enemies?

²⁹ *Dangdut* music is frequently played by a band of male musicians accompanying young women performers who dance provocatively as they sing, attracting huge crowds of male viewers.

³⁰ I learned about the content of the inaudible, soft-spoken dialogue from the play's written script.

As the pounding reaches a furious crescendo, Shodiq screams and falls to the floor. The band starts playing loud pop music as the names and roles of the actors are projected onto a screen. The performance is over.

I found the play difficult to interpret, with its dramatic shifts of mood and idiom and puzzling, confronting ending. Does Shodiq go mad or berserk, or is he killed? I was very grateful, therefore, for the opportunity to consult the performers about their work. Director Topenk explained that the ending of the play symbolized Shodiq's killing by the masses. Figuratively, rather than literally as in *Jaran Sungsang*, the *lesung* constitutes the murder weapon. The symbolic rather than realistic representation of Shodiq's death was intended, Topenk reported, to encourage the audience to think about the murder's deeper implications. Shodiq had contributed to his own death by going to do battle with the mob. "When the strong opposes the strong, they can't meet, there will be trouble." What the play advocates is tolerance and adaptation. The lively interaction in the *warung* reflects the plurality of Indonesian society and the capacity of groups of different backgrounds to get along. The rock band and *ketoprak lesung* playing together, and the fact that some characters use nonstandard, marginalized speech dialects, reinforces this idea. The inclusion of characters such as the transvestite shows that by not vilifying difference or branding others with labels, such as "PKI," it is possible for all kinds of people to coexist.

I suggested that the depiction of orthodox Muslims in the play seemed to conflict with the ideal of inclusive tolerance. Ratih rejects her family background and Javanese folk performances in keeping with strict Islamic values; Muslim leaders support Shodiq's expulsion from the community because he may be an atheist. Topenk confirmed feeling disappointed by the attitude of fundamentalist Muslims who have not yet opened up to objective discussion of the events of 1965. Given the domination of Islamic religion in Indonesia, the general population, too, is reluctant to contemplate the 1965 issue. Topenk also commented that, apart from 1965, there are aspects of Islamic life itself that need to be looked at critically, like polygamy.

An advantage of stage productions is the possibility of gathering together members of the theater group after the event to discuss how the production originated, developed, and affected those involved.³¹ *Jaran Sungsang*, as mentioned above, reflected the personal experience of the director as a witness of the events portrayed. The play afforded him the chance to assuage his guilt at not speaking out at the time about what he had seen. Such unresolved feelings had caused Gati to become unstable and rebellious, he noted, but during the play's production he experienced a form of catharsis. He started praying again regularly and felt a new sense of direction. Other members of the group reported having their eyes opened to the experiences of the victims of the 1965 violence; some cited cases of involvement of their own family members, either as victims or perpetrators, which they now understood better. All said they had learned the vital lesson to not stigmatize and stereotype others.

³¹ I talked with a group of actors from *Jaran Sungsang* on the Gadjah Mada University campus on July 15, 2007, after a long meeting with Gati Andoko, the director, at his home outside Yogyakarta a few days earlier. I am very grateful to Muhammad Anis Ba'asyin, one of the actors, for organizing these meetings. I talked with the director and the producer of *Lenggok*, Topenk Zuqma and Jovanka Edwina, and five of the actors from the production also on the Gadjah Mada campus on August 6, 2008, and later exchanged emails with Topenk. Many thanks to Jovanka for facilitating this contact.

The play *Lenggok* grew out of the involvement of Topenk, as both scriptwriter, and director, in writing short stories based on interviews conducted by Syarikat members with former women political detainees. Many more ideas came up than could be encompassed in the short-story project, so Topenk got the idea of writing a play. I asked the theater company how the content of the play related to real-life experience, having in mind the experiences of women prisoners. But Jovanka, the play producer, and other participants talked of their own situation as students at Gadjah Mada University, with its past involvement in radical student politics and reputation as a leftist university. Like the characters in the play, some students maintained the leftist connection, some resisted its “stigma,” and others tried to ignore the issue. As an organization, Retorika includes students of different political backgrounds and attitudes. The cast talked long and hard before and during rehearsals about whether *Lenggok* was too political and decided it was not. Some identified with the theme of the play, others just wanted to do theater. It is this kind of pluralism and ability to work together that the play tries to celebrate, Jovanka and Topenk reported. Yet when I asked about the origins of their own commitment to pluralism as an ideal, perhaps through political study and activity, there was an awkward pause. Both have a background of political activism, but this was not involved in any way in the production, they said.³²

While the actors themselves might have been comfortable performing in the play, this by no means meant their families approved. The young man playing the role of the village head had to go against the wishes of his father, who had been traumatized by the loss of his own father in 1965. Another actor said his parents, fervent anti-communists, would never have agreed to his performing in the play if they had known about it. Most of the young actors, studying away from home, simply didn’t tell their parents about the show.

There seems to be some inconsistency between the account of pluralist tolerance among participants in *Lenggok* and the felt need among activist students to keep their political commitments strictly separate from the production. Within the play itself, the conversations in the *warung*, intended as a display of acceptance of differences in everyday Javanese life, contain numerous harsh insults and demeaning, stereotypical jokes about homosexuals. Yet audience members and actors seemed greatly to enjoy such humor, and overall *Lenggok’s* surprising mix of popular music, comic interaction, and serious political message was enthusiastically received by its large, youthful audience. (Ironically, by comparison, the artistically and thematically unified *Jaran Sungsang* may not have impressed Yogya audiences as much as might be expected.³³) Particularly puzzling and intriguing, I feel, is the striking contradiction between the play’s stated message of pluralism and tolerance and its dark portrayal of Muslims. To what extent did audience members perceive the

³² Topenk is the head of Jaringan Kerja Budaya (Jaker, Network of Cultural Workers), a “leftist” cultural group, for the District of Yogyakarta. But those involved in *Lenggok* wanted no connection with Jaker. Similarly, members of Jaker were not satisfied with the production, arguing that it didn’t go far enough in its defense of Lekra.

³³ Friends and acquaintances who had seen the production talked only about its technical aspects, particularly its acrobatic movement, not its themes. Asked whether he found the play *mengerikan*—“frightening” or “horrifying”—an experienced theatre analyst said he had been fearful that the actors might injure themselves in their violently energetic moves. Of the violence of the actions being depicted, however, nothing was said. For further discussion of these issues see Hatley, “Social Reconciliation.”

disjunction and comprehend Shodiq's confrontational references to Islam in the final scene? How did the actors, particularly the young woman playing the part of *jilbab*-wearing Ratih, who, reportedly, is a devout Muslim in real life, feel about this issue? On the night of the performance, actors mentioned their fears that the theater might be attacked and the play disrupted by an anti-communist organization, Front Anti Komunis, that had links to some fundamentalist Muslim groups. The anticipated attack didn't happen. But *Lenggok* makes reference to a context of religious and political difference, a confrontation between conservative Muslims and liberal secular forces in Indonesian society, to which the play itself might arguably be said to contribute.³⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Various patterns of representation of the 1965 events found in documentaries and fiction films are paralleled in the stage performances analyzed above. All three plays confirm the association of the Left with traditional arts and popular performance. The *ketoprak kolossal* performance recalls through its dramatic medium the glory of pre-1965, leftist-linked *ketoprak* activity. In the other two plays, the protagonist is a child of parents with communist connections and a performer of traditional dance. Political concerns are depicted as the domain of men, as the party leaders and military men of the Sukarno era plot strategies, Shodiq defiantly maintains his parents' artistic and political legacy, and the political stains of the past engulf the hapless Sugeng. The *ketoprak* performance, however, supplements this picture of male "core business" with scenes where women display military skills and patriotically defend their country in battle.

Sustaining traditional arts and promoting the advancement of women are activities highly regarded today that can also be praised and celebrated as past strengths of the Left. Other goals of communist-affiliated groups and the broad ideals of the movement are not mentioned, however. One assumes they are seen as too sensitive to explore. Perhaps the positive value placed today on women's advancement helps explain why, in documentaries, only women former political activists are interviewed in detail and are shown speaking positively about their work. Ironically, the fictive propaganda images depicting Gerwani as sexualized, sadistic murderers that worked so effectively to demonize the communist party in 1965 are now being used in reverse. As the absurdity of those images is exposed, the reliability of New Order propaganda as a whole comes into question. Yet despite the centrality of women in this process, with aging Gerwani members telling their moving stories of political commitment and survival, fictional reflections on the 1965 issue depict young males in leading roles, while women—beautiful, emotional, apolitical—remain in the background. Entrenched stereotypes die hard.

The representations of the events of 1965 and recollections by members of the Left in recent Indonesian films and performances reveal a limited recovery of these events and their meanings. The message of the injustice suffered by the victims and

³⁴ In recent years, this conflict appears to have increased in severity and, certainly, in public visibility. Fundamentalist Muslim groups have attacked activities they regard as immoral or religiously deviant; in 2009, a controversial anti-pornography law was finally passed after years of heated debate that included street demonstrations by both Islamic supporters of the bill and secular groups opposing it; and the Islamic practice of polygamy has been both celebrated and critiqued in popular media such as films.

their families, and the need to guard against a repetition of such inhumanity, are clearly conveyed, albeit with the ideological inconsistencies and artistic surprises analyzed above. Live theater productions provide specific examples of the way these narratives of the past resonate with the experience of young people today. The issue of communist stigmatization provides a warning against present-day social stereotyping, promotes tolerance and pluralist ideals, and, ironically, provides an "armory" in support of pluralism in a contest with religious fundamentalism. But the issue of what the communist movement was and what it stood for remains unexplored. In a social context where anti-communist sentiment remains so strong, where the communist party and its ideology are still banned, and where there is no official support for recovery of the past, small-scale filmmakers and theater groups arguably lack both the conceptual resources and the political security to tell this larger story. Yet the very difficulties of the situation give added importance to what these young people are doing. Documentary films provide the chance for former political prisoners, previously marginalized, silenced and stigmatized, to tell their stories, to have their voices heard, to be *diwongke* (made human again).³⁵ For the young people who conduct those interviews, then work on editing and producing the film, the experience can be enlightening and transformative. Plays and films provide a vital corrective to the ongoing stereotypes of communist menace instilled in young people by their families. While the young actors in *Lenggok* may not yet dare to tell their anti-communist parents about the play, the view of communism and communists they convey to their own children will likely be very different from that passed on to them. Hopefully, one day Indonesia's political leaders and socio-religious groups will feel secure enough to encourage full exploration of the nation's past, including Cold War relations and the history of the communist movement. At that time, a big, officially endorsed epic feature film or major stage production may narrate this story to the nation. In the meantime, in piecemeal fashion through the activities of independent filmmakers and small theater groups, the stereotypes are beginning to unravel, the unspeakable is starting to be spoken.

³⁵ Farid Wajidi, "NU Youth and the Making of Civil Society," p. 80, reports that the notion of being made human again is a theme commonly mentioned by former political prisoners who are invited to join reconciliation activities after many years of stigmatization and isolation from their neighbors.

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