

*Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia.* By Craig A. Lockard. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1998. 390 pp.

This book focuses on the social context of popular music in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and, to a small extent, Singapore. The methodology is framed within a larger discourse on popular music and politics in so-called “Third World” regions. As Craig Lockard himself suggests, this book relates to another work of his that addresses a “similar subject matter in non-Asian contexts such as Jamaica, Trinidad, Chile, Brazil, Nigeria, and South Africa” (p. ix). This theoretical framework is evident in the narrative of the individual ethnographic chapters, and reveals an orientation towards representing Southeast Asian popular music as a largely anti-structural, non-mainstream expressive culture. In so far as music is the focus of this study, it is the contents of popular songs that structure the main arguments, specifically, the political motivations reflected in, and further generated by these songs as they are created, performed, and consumed in varying ways by different social agents.

The first chapter is exemplary in its theoretical breadth, incorporating varying discursive modes from Frankfurt theorists, Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, ethnomusicology, media, and popular music studies. Lockard draws on different ethnographic examples to substantiate his discussion of the popular culture phenomenon in the contexts of modernity, post-imperialism, and technological mediation. He defines “popular music” as a musical phenomenon that is “disseminated largely by the mass media”, and that functions as a social commodity, the production and distribution of which depends on “a clientele able and willing to purchase the commodity” (pp. 18–19). This chapter explores the current situation of popular music studies and examines the significance of such studies (or the lack of it). More importantly, it summarizes the prevailing academic trends in popular music and popular culture research, and serves as an excellent introduction to this field of cultural studies.

The book consists mainly of focused descriptions of the state of popular music in Indonesia (Chapter 2), the Philippines (Chapter 3),

Thailand (Chapter 4), Malaysia and Singapore (Chapter 5). A standardized narrative structure gives a coherent train of thought. Lockard provides a well-informed social context in each chapter, and illuminates the historical and contemporary political junctures that have characterized each country from approximately the 1940s to the present. With this rich contextual background, he then proceeds to trace the historical significance of various popular music forms, such as the *Kroncong* and *Dangdut* in Indonesia, *Pinoy* in the Philippines. He pays particular attention to the emergence of the mass media and state control of the media in each country, and also explores various political movements in which musicians played decisive roles. In the process, Lockard examines the social complex created by the intersection of popular music, dictatorship, regionalism, nationalism, religion, mass mediation, and cultural imperialism. For instance, in Chapter 2, he describes the *Dangdut* as practised by Rhoma Irama, and explores the historical emergence of the genre, as well as the Islamic and nationalist ideals reflected in his song lyrics, practices, and performances. Furthermore, Lockard examines the convergence of, and contradictions between, Rhoma Irama's Islamic messages and the revival of Islam, as well as his political participation in Indonesia (pp. 94–105).

Lockard's narrative analyses popular music in local and transnational contexts, and demonstrates the political potential of popular musical forms. An example of the former approach is his discussion of Freddie Aguilar and the *Pinoy* in the context of the Marcos political regime in the Philippines. He examines how Aguilar recontextualized the song *Bayan Ko* ("My Homeland"), written in 1896 and associated with the Philippine revolution against the Spanish, and redefined its significance as an anthem in the anti-Marcos campaigns in the 1980s. The issue of transnationalism frames Lockard's brief discussion of the *Phleng Phuachiwit* ("Songs of Life"), as popularized by Carabao, a widely known rock group in Thailand during the 1980s. Carabao's *Phleng Phuachiwit* reflects major social issues in Thailand, and describes "the plight of Indochinese refugees, corruption, rural indebtedness, drugs, the exploitation of women, the plight of prostitutes, and unresponsive government" (p. 203). More importantly, in 1988 Carabao was politically

involved in a controversy between Thailand and the United States over an ancient religious artefact stolen from a Thai temple in the 1960s, and later found in the Art Institute of Chicago. He released a hit single about this issue, which gain widespread popularity in Thailand, criticizing America for possessing an important Thai cultural symbol. According to Lockard,

the controversy may have been part of a Thai willingness to finally embrace the legacy of the ancient Angkor empire of the rival Khmers, which once ruled much of what is now Thailand. (p. 204)

Viewed in this way, Carabao's musical practice constituted the social complex that reflected, as it simultaneously effected, a redefinition of Thai national culture and identity in an anti-American context that embraces historical, contemporary, local, and international social dynamics.

While the book focuses on a rich amount of ethnographic details, it leaves many broader issues unexplained. For example, Lockard recognizes that Filipino popular music is modelled upon and derives from Anglo-American songs (pp. 131–34). He briefly describes performances in pubs and *karaoke*, where Filipino singers imitate American pop stars, and highlights the Filipino domination of nightclubs and lounges in Asia, “playing jazz, rock, pop, country and western, and other ‘international’ styles, but rarely Filipino music” (p. 133). However, he does not continue to assess this phenomenon, which raises important issues concerning musical preference, cultural affiliation, and national identity. Likewise, Lockard acknowledges an anti-American movement that began in Thailand during the 1960s (pp. 181–82), but does not satisfactorily explore why Carabao, whose music and image has startling similarities to American rock singers, was so popular and politically effective in Thailand during the controversy between Thailand and the United States in 1988 (pp. 203–4).

Chapter 5, which is on Malaysia and Singapore, appears to be the least rigorous in theoretical discussion and ethnographic illustration. After a brief survey of musical genres such as *dondang sayang*, *asli*, and *ghazal*, Lockard concludes:

Although many of these popular and traditional forms derived from a synthesis of the foreign and the indigenous, all are considered today to be part of the Malay cultural tradition. (p. 213)

Lockard then explores the “roots of Western music in the region” (ibid.), but does not examine the historical processes or the social implications of assimilating foreign musical processes. In the section on “Popular Music in the 1960s and Malaysia-Singapore Separation” (pp. 224–28), he states:

Since the 1960s Singapore has increasingly moved in sociocultural as well as political directions different from those in Malaysia. Popular culture in Singapore more and more came to reflect Chinese and Western orientations, perhaps because of a very small market for local music and little possibility of foreign sales. (p. 227)

Such an explanation for the state of popular culture in Singapore negates fundamental issues concerning the concept of “being Chinese”, and the social significance of Westernization and modernization in the process of nation-building. Although Lockard briefly examines the process of cultural construction in Singapore, he makes little attempt to discuss these social issues in the context of popular culture, leaving readers puzzled and unsatisfied. Further, statements such as “Singaporeans have tended to denigrate or ignore the struggling Malaysian Chinese record industry ... and Malaysian Chinese singers”, and “Singapore gradually became in many respects a graveyard for Malay popular culture” (pp. 227–28), assume direct cultural relationships between Singapore and Malaysia, and dismisses important socio-political differences. In any case, exploring the state of popular music in Malaysia and Singapore under one heading is misleading. Numerous unsubstantiated comparisons occur, and the predominance of discussion on Malaysian popular culture further confuses the logic of this chapter.

Broadly speaking, there are many sections in the book that raise intriguing questions not thoroughly examined by Lockard. For example, he briefly describes the heavy metal group, Stomping Ground, in Singapore, and notes that “like heavy metal generally, [it] appealed mostly to a Malay audience” (p. 225). Why is that the case? Likewise, Lockard compares rap groups in Malaysia and Singapore with those in America,

Rio de Janeiro, and Capetown, and claims that rap in Malaysia and Singapore “seems pretty tame stuff” (p. 259). What is the meaning of “tame” and what is the significance of such cross-cultural comparison? When describing popular musicians throughout Southeast Asia who have made political impacts through their musical practices, he notes that

much of their music is also danceable, despite the political themes, raising the question about how much of the political message actually reached the audience. (p. 267)

Is “danceable” music necessarily apolitical? Or, to put it another way, should political music be “undanceable”?

In a similar way, Lockard conflates the concept of “political” with notions of being “militant”, and in opposition to the dominant culture, and implies that a particular political state produces a corresponding type of political music. For example, he notes that

compared to its neighbors, Malaysia has had relatively relaxed political conditions. ... This, combined with a fairly high level of public satisfaction with — or apathy concerning — political and economic developments ... has meant that Malaysia would not produce militant or fearless counterparts to a Rhoma Irama, Freddie Aguilar, Caravan, Cui Jian, Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, or Fela, who emanated from more politically turbulent and economically fragmented societies. (p. 261)

Such a statement predicated upon the notion of an objectified society and culture implies a unidirectional link between society and popular culture. Lockard also essentializes the concept of culture that constitutes the “Third World”. More importantly, he trivializes the social significance of mainstream popular music, that is, music that embodies and generates dominant mainstream values. Perhaps because of his narrow definition of “political”, Lockard does not thoroughly explore the popular culture phenomenon in Singapore and Malaysia, where social politics are vastly different from those Lockard identifies as being characteristic of the “Third World”.

The layout of the book is interesting in many ways. Text insets throughout the book provide useful information on the demography of a particular country, brief description of musical genres, and the back-

ground of specific artistes, among other details. Detailed footnotes offer good resources for further research, and the bibliographic section is carefully divided into general, topical references and materials related specifically to individual countries. In general, this book contains much ethnographic detail, and serves as an excellent introduction for students of popular culture in Southeast Asia.

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