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HOUSE of GLASS

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Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia

edited by
YAO SOUCHOU

ISEAS INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES, Singapore

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Preface

The idea of this book was first explored in a two-day symposium organized at the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, Singapore, in 1994 with financial support from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The purpose of the symposium — entitled "Problematizing Culture: Media, Identity, and the State in Southeast Asia" — was to examine the nature of media representation and politics of identity in the various nation-states in the region. However, by the end of the symposium, it became clear that two key issues had emerged as the central preoccupations of the participants: the predominant role of the state in the cultural and discursive realms, and the deployment of post-modern and post-structuralist theorizing in analysing local processes. I took the idea — and the inspirations — with me when I moved to the University of Sydney in October 1996, and commissioned additional contributions from among my new colleagues. On the whole, I have tried to maintain the critical vision as formulated in the symposium. The 1997 financial meltdown in Southeast Asia forced most of us to do another round of revisions to reflect recent developments.

The strength and insight of the book owe much to the contributors, and their goodwill and humour in graciously accepting my editorial suggestions and demands. I would also like to thank Chua Beng Huat, Ariel Heryanto, Michael Van Langenbach, and Sharrad Kutton for their stimulating input; and David Birch and Brian Shoesmith, who first planted in my mind the seed of a Southeast Asian Cultural Studies project. In Sydney, Mark Berger, Ien Ang, Helen Grace, and Richard Basham have been invaluable "fellow travellers". I am most grateful to Ashley

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Yao Souchou
Editor

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Introduction

YAO SOUCHOU

> My life was as straight as a piece of wire pulled taut, without twists and turns. … And now it was not just bent, but tangled. And I could not see how I could unravel the tangle. Every day I feel my throat in the tighter and tighter grip of an outside power …
>
> I would now have to be on the lookout, like looking for a needle in a pile of paddy stalks. The needle must be found, even the paddy stalks have to be destroyed. All this even though it was a small piece of pure steel, without the rust of evil, except for that speck of idealism, that history of love of people and country, that seed of patriotism and nationalism whose final flowering could not yet be clearly seen. And that you are careful that you are not pricked by that needle yourself. For the government and I as its instrument, must, however, look upon such idealism as criminal. (Toer 1992, pp. 50–53)

Thus begins Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer's magisterial meditation on the fate of one living under the spell of the colonial state in his *House of Glass* (1992). The time was 1912; the place, Netherlands East Indies. The narrator Jacques Pangemanann is a former Commissioner of Police. Educated in Lyon, France, he is indeed like Conrad's Kurtz, a flower of European civilization. But what confronts his heart of darkness is an enterprise far more insidious than those of economic plunder and military conquest by colonialism. He has been asked by the

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Dutch colonial authorities to investigate the "textual activities" of the anti-colonial radicals:

> My new assignment was to study the writings of the Natives that were being published in the newspapers and magazines. Analyse them. Interview the authors. Compare them. And make some conclusions about their calibre, the direction of their thinking and their attitude towards the Government of the Netherlands Indies. (Toer 1992, p. 52)

These "texts" are not merely trails which Pangemanann follows assiduously to monitor the growth of anti-colonial activities. As he carries out his master's deed, such "texts" offer the oppressive possibility of betrayal. In the hands of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, texts and textual production are to have a crucial existential significance. As it gives central voice to Pangemanann, *House of Glass* charts his complex desire as he confronts the seduction of — and his inner contempt for — his own authority and a secret admiration for his nemesis, the Islamic revolutionary Minke.

Betrayal and secrecy, however, are not the only fate of text. As a radical and a writer, Pramoedya cannot help but invest a crucial emancipatory potential in text and its production. What gives *House of Glass* its ambivalence are the circumstances in which the work was written: on the prison island of Buru in eastern Indonesia where Pramoedya was imprisoned without trial for fourteen years until his release in 1979. The oppressive inner world of Pangemanann becomes a spatial metaphor for the island prison. In this inner world and on the island, words are whispered in secret. The title of the novel must have been a literal rendering of the conditions of the prison: the policing and surveillance of inmates, the division of day and night, secrecy and openness, what is allowed and what is forbidden. In these horrendous conditions, textual production became for Pramoedya, a desperate act of resistance. However, if writing is a personal act of defiance in the Buru Island prison house, it is also through the contemplation of text, Pramoedya reminds us, that the narrator Pangemanann is able to accomplish his task for the colonial authorities. In this sense, the ultimate fate of text might lie precisely in its fragile promise of release. For textual production is as much about emancipation and liberation, as it is an enterprise to which the state turns to realize its hegemonic aims.

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Theory and the politics of representation

This book examines the relationship between discursive practices, modernity, and state power in Southeast Asia. For such a project, it is irresistible to begin by drawing on Pramoedya's bitter contemplation of the ambivalence of text. If the metaphor "house of glass" has served Pramoedya in describing his paradoxical feeling about the potency and futility of writing, it also foregrounds our major analytical concern and sense of unease in this project. The contributors have, for the most part, turned their attention to the discursive and representational realms of state processes. For some, the moving away from political economy as a site of intellectual engagement has been, at the most immediate level, something to do with the excitement of reading and writing "theory" in Southeast Asia. The contributors in this volume are either located in or have worked for a long period in the region. This has been an enabling factor in our attempt to subject local state processes to the theoretical scrutiny of, mostly notably, post-modernism and post-structuralism. Of course, the idea of "writing theory" in/from Southeast Asia may already raise a difficult question: one about its feasibility in a social-cultural context in which the "traditional", colonial, and pre-colonial pasts still demand reckoning. In the first planning workshop for this volume, held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, in November 1994, the feasibility of a Southeast Asian Cultural Studies was brought up in the discussion. We could not but note the irony of the fact that our discursive engagement, with all its nuances of post-colonial resistance, still draws on theoretical formulations developed in the "West" — out of the post-1968 crisis of French Marxism, out of the Western disillusionment with the Enlightenment and Hegelian dialectics (Young 1990, chap. 1). How can such theorizing be deployed in Southeast Asia, with its different histories, its different locations in the structure of global capitalism? The question is — we have all read Aijaz Ahmad's classic *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) — difficult to resolve. Nonetheless, one thing seems certain: that in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, knowledge of theory and the ability to write it are unevenly distributed, even among university academics. Writing theory — Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan — in Southeast Asia is one of the markers of academic

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cosmopolitanism, which is for us at once empowering and self-marginalizing.[1]

If "doing cultural studies" in the local context indeed has a different resonance from similar activities in the West, our major interest goes beyond that which comes from engaging in new innovative interpretive practices. It also lies in the subversive potential of deconstruction, which puts the ideological orthodoxy of the state under a new and less alluring light. That the state in Southeast Asia has invested much energy in self-representation and in the active production of its discourses is a fact that underlines the common concerns of the contributors to this volume. It is conventional theoretical wisdom that the discursive realm is never purely "representational", but has emerged from and consolidated into real power by legislative framing and legal enforcement. Our position is one that views texts and representational events as inseparable from the conditions of their production and reception in a particular historical juncture. Discursive practices form a part of the complex processes of the making of culture. If cultural meaning is, in the final analysis, political meaning, then struggle in the field of text becomes highly significant. The struggle for the certainty of meaning is the struggle for the right to evaluate the past and present, and the right to remember things that we, as subjects of nation-state, are obliged to forget (Renan 1990). In this sense, cultural politics in Southeast Asia and elsewhere is about the all-important prerogative to imagine differently, and to "envision" an alternative political future, a prerogative for which lives and limbs have been lost, and personal and civil liberties curtailed.

Two faces of state power

I. Globalization, capitalist development, and the nation-state

In Southeast Asia the nation-state is, except for Thailand, a fairly recent phenomenon, existing only since World War II. As McVey notes, "only recently have Southeast Asians grown to adulthood entirely within the ambience of the national state, though among those of family, kindred, and religion" (McVey 1984, p. 3). In spite of their recent histories, nation-states in Southeast Asia — of both the socialist and liberal democratic kinds — are endowed with awesome coercive power to impose

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their iron will on their societies. In this context, state power is not merely an abstract entity but a sharp reality which permeates everyday experiences. From the time we pick up the morning paper, the moment we turn on the radio or television, the state is there with its busy pronouncements of another achievement of economic and national development, of another victorious crushing of political dissent which threatens national security or misleads the public about the doing of the government.[2] Thus, those of us in Southeast Asia may be forgiven for overstating, out of experience and habit, the totalizing and systematic quality of the state and its power. In so doing, we are not unmindful of the warning of Guha (1989, p. 283), who speaks of the "spurious hegemony" of the (colonial) state as a "fabrication". It is bourgeois nostalgia, Guha has argued, which grants state power a coherent and transcendental attribute, giving it an "abstract force" and invulnerability in the ordering of daily life (see also Stoler 1992).

Be that as it may, it is surely equally "spurious" to think of state power as fragmentary and always precariously exposed to subversion and resistance by the subaltern. If neither "spurious hegemony" nor "fragmentation" captures all the fluid qualities of the state and the different modalities of power under its command, what is needed is an approach that captures the tangible and yet fluid processes of state power as we experience them in Southeast Asia. It is an approach premised on the possibilities of state power in a social totality without being subsumed under it, or separating them from specific historical conditions.[3] State power, I argue, is characterized by a comprehensive structure of hegemonic design, just as it is frequently marked by significant structural weakness and ideological crisis. In this book, some contributors are inclined to focus on representation as a moment in the articulation of state power and desire, while others direct their analyses to the intricate interlocking of power and ideological uncertainty. Nonetheless, the differences belie a unifying vision which denies an absolute demarcation of the "mask" and the practices of power (Abraham 1988). It is a vision which sees the state as always marked by the dialectical qualities of strength and vulnerability, domination and dependence, qualities brought into even sharper relief in the context of globalization.

In the Southeast Asian context, such a conception of the state is

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necessary to take account of the remarkable — and at times tragic — historical experiences that the region has undergone since national independence. In the first place, a singular focus on the brutal absolutism of the state is a matter of doing justice to history, of accounting for what is happening at the local societies. We recall here that two state-sponsored programmes of killing of genocidal proportion after World War II took place in Southeast Asia: in Indonesia and in Cambodia. Presently, from Vietnam to Myanmar, from Singapore to Indonesia, beyond their different political systems, official ideologies, and stages of economic development, state power has a fundamental presence perhaps not witnessed in the liberal regimes, East and West. Ray Langenbach's chapter on Singapore, Mark Berger's chapter on Indonesia, and Loong Wong's chapter on Malaysia point precisely to the complex ideological and legislative framework, and effective enforcement, which support and ensure the state's continuance. These chapters contribute to the discussion of the massive capability of the state in Southeast Asia and its permeation of the social, economic, and cultural life in the region. They certainly complement, for example, Michael Leifer's monumental ***Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia*** (1995), which points out, somewhat mildly, that "resistance to democratization is a common feature of many states in the region justified in the name of economic development and social and political order" (p. 1).

However, if state absolutism is often underlined by structural and ideological uncertainty, it is the conditions of globalization and transnationalization which offer the best argument for such a viewpoint. In his studies of the "post nation-state", Ohmae (1991) predicts the erosion of state power in the face of the onslaught of economic internationalization and informational and cultural flows across national boundaries. According to this kind of thesis, as Linda Weiss summarizes, "states are now virtually powerless to make real policy choices; transnational markets and footloose corporations have so narrowly constrained policy options that more and more states are being forced to adopt similar fiscal, economic and social policy regimes" (Weiss 1997, p. 3). The sheer volume of the transnational and transregional traffic of people, products, cultures, and capital is undeniable even in Southeast Asia. However, the overall process can be subject to different ideological

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readings. For Ohmae (1991), Reich (1991), and Horsman and Marshall (1994) among others, transnationalization is the sign of the global convergence of neo-liberalism and market economy in which locational and institutional — and thus, national — restrictions are no longer important. The demise of the nation-state, in short, announces the triumph of global capitalism. Others, on the other hand, are likely to see diminishing state power under globalization as providing conditions for democratization and liberal reform. This tempting vision, espoused particularly by radical democrats, attributes a political vanguardism to the rising middle class — the *nouveau riches* of transnational capitalism — who are "rational, individualistic, democratic, secular and concerned with human rights, the environment and the law" (Robison and Goodman 1996, p. 2). "Democratization" in Southeast Asia, it is argued, will be brought about by the political demands of a middle class that puts pressure on the state to achieve its agendas (Anek 1997).

The response to the effects of globalization and transnational capitalism typifies the ambivalent nature of state processes in present-day Southeast Asia. However, the fact remains that globalization is not likely to bring about the weakening of state power in any straightforward way. To be sure, the impact of the rising middle class on liberal democratic reform has been unpredictable and varied. If the affluent *mob mua thue* — the mobile phone mob — of the bloody demonstration of May 1992 brought down the Thai military government, and if students of various backgrounds had forced the resignation of President Soeharto in Indonesia, it is notable that the middle classes in other countries are seemingly directing their energy into massive consumption and/or frequently, religious fundamentalism.[4] For liberal democrats, the rising middle class holds the only hope of challenging the awesome power of the state in Southeast Asia. Working from the fondly held orthodox model of the role of the middle class in transforming European society since the French Revolution, Western liberals are likely to suffer impatience at the discovery that "the new rich in Asia appear as likely to embrace authoritarian rule, xenophobic nationalism, religious fundamentalism and *dirigisme* as to support democracy, internationalism, secularism and free market" (Robison and Goodman 1996, p. 3).

Other neglected issues in the "post nation-state" argument have been

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the variety of state responses and, more importantly, the different capacities of the state in responding to the forces of transnationalization. To quote Linda Weiss again:

> … evidence in Japan and the East Asian NIC's [newly industrialized countries] indicates that strong states — that is, those with fairly firm control over socio-economic goal setting and robust domestic linkages — are often facilitating the changes identified as "globalization". Thus, rather than counterposing nation-state and global market as antinomies, in certain important respects we find that "globalization" is often the by-product of states promoting the internationalization strategies of their corporations, and sometimes in the process "internationalizing" state capacity. (Weiss 1997, p. 4)

In other words, state power and globalizing trends are not simply opposites in a zero-sum game of influences. In both the domestic sphere and the international arena, states like Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia have indeed enhanced their positions in the context of rapid capitalist development over the last two decades. The "post nation-state" argument becomes highly circumspect when we are reminded that not only are these states deeply committed to free market ideology and policies, but also that their economic fortunes have significantly depended on the inflow of foreign — largely Western and Japanese — capital and the global export markets. Turning to the post-1997 economic crisis, it is a good reminder that easy credit and the lack of rational investment guidelines, rather than "greedy fund managers", have been the primary reasons for the current problems in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Domestic processes associated with intense speculative activities and frenzied over-investment in the property sector are more likely explanations than unruly global movements of currency speculation. Ironically, what makes such movements possible has been the configuration of state power itself. In Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, or Bangkok, political leaders selectively grant commercial privileges to their close associates and loyal supporters, for whom "political connections" are crucial social capital for acquiring generous credit from financial institutions both at home and abroad. Even in the present situation of economic downturn, international financial bodies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have been unable to uniformly impose their demand for economic reform and budgetary restraint on the recipient countries. If Indonesia and Thai-

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land have conceded substantially to IMF pressure, Malaysia has rejected altogether the IMF rescue package in order to avoid restructuring long-standing national political framework and ideological priorities. In this complex scenario, it is only the analytically foolhardy who would unequivocally predict the withering of state power under international pressure and global economic forces.

II. Modernity and the culture of national crisis

The relationship between transnationalization and state power is obviously more diffuse than what the proponents of globalization would have us believe. Speaking of Southeast Asia, the most tenable conclusion is that globalization has overdetermined both the state's consolidation of power and its structural and cultural vulnerability. Transnationalization and regionalization remain a crucial consideration simply because they have been the major features of state economic policies which saw a significant change from import-substitution to export-orientation. Predictably perhaps, it is those rapidly developing economies — Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and post–*doi moi* Vietnam — that have more actively facilitated the overall processes of "opening up". In this context, if nation-states like Malaysia and Singapore have most substantially benefited from global and regional markets and foreign capital inflow, they are also the most exposed to external economic and cultural forces. Transnationalization is thus a double-edged sword with regard to the rewards and costs it brings to the local economy and society. This is the rule of the game of transnationalization, as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and perhaps Singapore had discovered in their struggle to lift themselves out of the economic crisis.

On the issue of cultural impact, it is important to highlight a singular fact, which is that, besides seeking a greater role in global capitalism in the international division of labour, the state is also concerned with the need to find its place in the modern world. The need is primarily about satisfying a social and cultural desire for the aura — and symbolic capital — of capitalist modernity. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, capitalist modernity constituted a maelstrom of fervent and yet ambivalent experiences, traceable to a myriad of factors, including:

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> the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creating new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new form of corporate power …; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the more diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful nation states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; … finally, bearing and driving all these institutions along an ever expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market. (Berman 1988, p. 16)

Clearly, there has been something of this whirlwind of changes in Southeast Asia over recent decades, particularly since the 1980s. Like Berman's rendering of the life of European modernity, what took place at the height of the "Asian economic miracle" can be similarly described in terms of a general experience, a pervasive cultural mood of confidence and progressivism which infected most people, especially the professional middle classes. For the men and women among the industrial workers — many of them foreigners or rural migrants — the abstractive "Asian economic miracle" would be more simply the ability to find work and the enjoyment of consumer goods and other services previously not affordable to them and their families. If the rewards of development remain unevenly distributed among the poor and disenfranchized, the culture of Asian modernity is dramatically resolute in other realms: in the architectural wonder of the Petronas Twin Towers — currently the tallest building in the world — in Kuala Lumpur, or in Indonesia's helicopter manufacturing project under the then Minister of Science and Technology Dr Habibi, to give two examples. Projects like these exude a magic of high modernity so dramatically described by Berman, yet going much beyond. What they express is a mixture of narcissistic "Asian pride" and an anxious desire to "match" Western achievements; thus the sheer speed, density, and dramatic spectral quality of these urban construction and industrial projects. The engagement with the Western Other, as the chapters by Ien Ang, Yao Souchou, and Lee Weng Choy demonstrate, "incites" much of the discursive and representational energy of the state in Southeast Asia in an increasing pace of global exchanges.

However, for Berman, the experience of Western modernity propelled by industrial capitalism has not been all optimism and progres-

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sivism. In the dramatic changes where nothing seems to stand still and even the most profoundly sacred and traditional "melts into air", the culture of modernity simply "loses its capacity to organize and give meaning to people's lives" (Berman 1988, p. 17). Out of these sea changes, highly rationalized and routinized bureaucracy emerged as powerful instrument of the state. State bureaucracy is as much a means of management of social life as an institutional order for negotiating the promises and nightmare of modern utopianism. Bureaucratic rationalization, as Bauman (1989) has so brilliantly argued, is the impeccable logic of modernity, one which was to find its final realization in the efficiency of the Jewish holocausts in Nazi Germany.

In Southeast Asia, the ambivalence — and terrifying logic — of modernity is no less relevant an issue, I am sure. Pol Pot's genocidal policy to clean the new socialist state of any traces of its past, to restart the history of the new Maoist state from Year Zero, has all the features of bureaucratic routinization and state utopianism. What took place in Pol Pot's Kampuchea is an extreme aberration of the massive exercise of state power. For less spectacular examples of the fetishization of state, we turn to the liberal regimes in the region. And there, the valorization of state power is articulated in the more innocuous terms of "political stability", "internal security", and "regional peace". In Southeast Asia, these terms have always had a sense of self-evident truth about them, and there are important historical reasons for this, as we shall see. While the terrifying scenario of societal chaos may belong to the common social imaginary, it is also repeatedly featured in the official pronouncements of the state. Ideologically, the preservation of "societal peace" has been singularly emphasized by the state as the primary political objective for providing conditions for the achievement of individual happiness and national prosperity. And the state's magic in the delivery of personal and national happiness cannot be realized without a significant degree of fantasy.

The spectre of political chaos and regional instability

The "reality" of national crisis in Southeast Asia is a classic example of what Zizek has called the "the fetishistic supplement" of the Real (Zizek

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1994, p. 20). For Zizek, the social and emotional appeal of any ideology does not lie in its mystificatory falsehood, but rather in the very dialectics between the "spiritual element of corporeality" and the "corporeal element of spirituality" (ibid., p. 21). The futility of the ontological distinction between the (historical) real and (ideological) illusion goes to the heart of what I have called — in relation to the Singapore state — the ideological model of perpetual crisis (Yao 2000). The spectral supplement of "the real" is crucial in understanding the other face of the dialectics of state power in Southeast Asia: its vulnerability and perceived danger of collapse. The "substance" of this self-imaginary is the fear which has haunted the region ever since the days of struggle for national independence. Hall has described Southeast Asia as a region characterized by "a chaos of races and languages" (Hall 1985, p. 5). Historically, Southeast Asia lay in the strategic sea route for the southern movement of peoples, trade, and religions from the two major civilizations of the northern land mass of India and China and, a thousand years later, for the diffusion of Islam along the route pioneered by Muslim spice traders (Withington and Fisher 1963). European designs on the region began with the need in developing a base for trade links with China, but from the eighteenth century onwards, the great agricultural, mining, and entrepôt potential of Southeast Asia also became major interests of European colonial powers. Colonialism — with its policies of economic extraction and "divide and rule" — created the pre-conditions for a troubled process of decolonization after World War II — particularly in French Indochina and Dutch Indonesia, which experienced civil war and armed separatism, respectively. When Mao came to power in China in 1949, the Western fear of the eventual spread of communism southwards produced probably the most salient and dramatic attempt to contain a perceived political contagion of the region in the Cold War era — the result being the Vietnam war and its spillover into Laos and of course Cambodia, with devastating consequences.

The other fear which haunts many Southeast Asian states is ethnic conflict. In the region, no less than thirty-two ethnolinguistic groups can be found, and each state contains at least four major ethnic communities. And

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> superimposed on this mosaic of ethnicity is the fact that Southeast Asia is the host to all the world's major belief systems, that is, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Communism. (Sukhumbhand and Chai-Anan 1984, p. 30)

One of the major problems here is that many of the ethnolinguistic groups, particularly the "hilltribes" in northern Thailand and Myanmar live in areas that extend beyond national boundaries as they stand. Their failure to negotiate recognition of their ethnic aspirations within the nation-state often lead to armed-separatist movements which are extended to the immediate neighbouring state(s). The Karen and Kachin liberation movements, and Islamic separatism in southern Thailand, for instance, are built upon the need for ethnic-national independence aided by friendly states and ethnic communities along the borders. Inter-state conflict of this nature has been much reduced in recent years through regional bodies such as ASEAN, which always has, among its agendas, military and security co-operation among member states.

Within the nation-states themselves, there has been the equally worrisome problem of communal conflict. Much has been written about the colonial policy which created major cleavages among ethnic communities along economic, cultural-religious, and social lines. It is sufficient here to say that these cleavages were a crucial instrument of "divide and rule", in which specialization of labour and distinctions between immigrant and "native communities" were built upon real and imaginary social-cultural differences. The import of Chinese and Indian labourers and other immigrants, and subsequent questions about their status in newly independent nations, have proven to be an entangled political issue. While the nation-states inherited from European colonialism a political system that legally guarantees equal citizen rights to all, few governments in Southeast Asia are able to carry this principle to the full. Practically all Southeast Asian states "ethnicize" their governance in one form or another: from the implicit and often informal policy preferences for one ethnic group to the more extreme structural discrimination based on legislatively defined "racial categories".

The tragic irony of all this is that the ethnicization of political power and social and economic policies has always been justified by the state as

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necessary for creating lasting "ethnic peace". Whatever the administrative logic, it is clear that the continuing fetishization of the colonial categories of "race" helps to consolidate the class and social-spatial divides of communities. Rather than being an instrument for achieving ethnic harmony, ethnic policy sustains the seeds of communal tension. This is so especially when the state is prepared to tacitly support if not openly unleash, for its political ends, the outrage of the major community against what they see as the sources of their social deprivation and economic backwardness.[5] The 13 May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur and the attack on ethnic Chinese and their properties in Medan and Jakarta immediately following Soeharto's downfall are just two painfully relevant examples.

Asian modernity and its betrayal

The nature of the ethnic policies in Southeast Asia thus helps to bring forth a major point. It is that the legendary regional conflict and societal instability in Southeast Asia are products of a dramatic mixture of history, geo-political rivalry, and the state's own political strategy and ideological imaginary. If the spectre of national collapse and regional disintegration has been the "socially real" that justifies the terrifying posturing of the state, such a scenario of doom is also a major discursive invention. By turning the absolute dominance of the state on its head, the continuous valorization of the idea of "nation under threat" allows the state to seek and prosecute real and illusionary subversives, ethnic and religious extremists and, more frequently, opposition parties and progressive non-government organizations (NGOs). The notion of "nation under threat", selectively drawing from the tumultuous events over the last half a century following World War II, creates a unifying history, a "single ideological base time" (Althusser 1969, p. 105). In this discursive totality, different histories and different specificities of national struggle are transformed into a singular and self-serving narrative about a nation's triumphant achievements and its coming of age.

The narrative is being rewritten by the reality of the 1997 economic meltdown and its after-effects facing many of the newly industrialized economies (NIEs) in Southeast Asia. Here it is possible to make the point that a pronouncement like Mahathir's much publicized accusa-

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tion of the international conspiracy of a "Jewish fund manager" wrecking local economies has all the marks of national sensitivity over uncontrollable external forces (*South China Morning Post,* 5 November 1997). If globalization explains all sources and degrees of national pain, then state discourses must be staged in a way that helps to manage problems and anxieties in an age of global exchanges. If in the first decades after independence it was armed separatism and big power rivalry that plagued nation-states in Southeast Asia, now it is cultural flow and the secular trends associated with post-modernity that present an issue of concern (see the chapter by Yao).

Right from the beginning, however, local responses to transnationalization have been primarily concerned with the economic (Deyo 1987; Stubbs 1994). They are about finding a greater role for the national economy in the system of global capitalism. Such an objective has meant the provision of economic and labour policies which facilitate capital's pursuit of low costs of production, mass market, and investment returns. It is, in short, the active courting of transnational capital and its rewards which explains many state practices. Nevertheless, the serving of global capital is not to suggest a surrender of national interests and cultural agendas. Indeed what has emerged, particularly in rapidly developing Singapore and Malaysia, is the (re)drawing of local and regional agendas on the wider canvas of globalization. The underlying assumption has been, as put forward so powerfully by Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir and Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, that industrial modernity is no longer the exclusive domain of Western achievement, a special purview of Western history. What political leaders like Dr Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew propose is the vision of an alternative modernity, an Asian modernity no less, as Wee (1996; also in this volume) has argued.

The notion of an Asian modernity is always an ambiguous mixture of local needs and global ambitions, national/communal aspirations and a desire for their transcendence. Complex and varied discursive efforts have gone into the making of such a modernity, a theme which underlines the preoccupation of many of the writers in this volume. What such an enterprise suggests is the attempt by the state — and some sections of civil society — to maintain the social and moral integrity of Asian

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national communities while they actively seek the fruits of global capitalism and find a place in the modern world. For the nation-state, the pursuit of Asian modernity thus implies several things: economic development, the consumption of Western goods and services with a cosmopolitan aura, and seeking a greater profile on the international stage, among others. However, this modernity too (going back to Berman's argument outlined earlier) will carry its own betrayal. For what nation-states in Southeast Asia have been made to realize is the fact that the fruits of global capitalism will always have their social, cultural, and financial costs. It is near impossible to execute the agile double move of harvesting the benefit while selectively shutting out culturally and politically undesirable influences. Against such a complex background, what we witness in many Southeast Asian states has been the evocation of another round of "anti-West cultural imperialism" rhetoric, the common ideological diet of the Third World in the 1960s, as Ien Ang's chapter shows. Articulating now different sources of tension, the new "anti-West" discourse highlights the moral dangers of a range of "Western" products and values, from *Playboy* magazine to the Internet, individualism to consumerism, urban crime to sexual promiscuity. These are invested with an awesome power of corruption which, if not effectively controlled, would bring Asian communities to their knees.

It is hard not to recognize the multiple significance and conflicting desires in this round of "anti-West" struggle. And it is post-modern and post-structuralist theorizing which enable us in this project to work through some of the ambiguities and impulses of the state-discursive activities we describe. Of course, the point is that in the conditions of post-modernity and transnationalization the foundational premises of "cultural imperialism" are not no longer tenable — if they were in the past. The perceived virulent influences of global exchanges come precisely from the fact of rapid and multi-directional flows of information, products, values, and peoples, such that the traditional assumptions about the unilineal hegemonic flow from the West to the East and the passivity of "Asia" as victim of the West become too simplistic to be readily acceptable without question. However, the analytical spirit here is not to give in to the easy temptation of writing out the continuing Western dominance in many spheres of cultural and economic life, and simulta-

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neously projecting a romantic vision of "Asian resistance". Rather, it is to engage with the crucial problematic of state discourses which all too often cast "Asia" against "the West", "Asian victimization" against "Western perpetration", "Asian moral authenticity" against "Western decadence", and so on.

The so-called Asian Values debate in recent years offers a perfect example of the state enterprise of inscribing a notion of "Asian particularism". Leaving aside its philosophic underpinnings, the discourse of Asian Values is a Janus-faced effort in the attempt to negotiate the complex fluidity of post-modernity and globalization. In the first place, it is about the rewriting of Western liberal priorities — democracy, human rights, social justice, and the environment — with a unique "Asian point of view" (Bartley and others 1993; Mahbubani 1995*a*, 1995*b*). The ideological effect is to present these priorities as those from another history, another place, priorities not necessarily relevant to an "Asia" keen to strike out its own path of social and economic development. At the same time, the Asian Values discourse is as much one of political instrumentality as a voice of desire. Lodged in the dialectics of power, the discourse silently recalls the other side of the state's absolutism and domination: its panic in a globalized world and longing for the fruits of economic development which only Western, including Japanese, foreign capital can bring. In the final analysis, the notion of "Asian uniqueness" may be primarily about the pursuit of certainty, and the (re)claiming of moral authenticity based on tradition and communal solidarity, in the condition of post-modernity.

In the face of all this, it is useful to remember that the Asian Values discourse is no mere shadow of state power in the realm of representation. As the contributors in this volume make clear, discursive enterprises in this and other instances are carried out against the state's might and the symbolic violence which conceals and euphemizes the severity of its actions. The discursive and representational energy of the state, its legislative instruments, and legitimate means of physical violence are enmeshed in, and emerge from, the same cultural and structural framework. If the Asian Values discourse has all the credentials of anticolonialism, of the struggle against the domination of Western agencies ranging from the media to the IMF, one point is worth stressing. It is

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that the state's rewriting of liberal values also undermines the very foundational ideas that had been the basis of anti-colonialism and the struggle of national independence. This must have been the bitter realization of political dissidents like Pramoedya. For if economic growth and personal prosperity can only be achieved at the expense of democratic ideals, then both the political vision of the state and the means by which it is achieved have to be subject to public debate and analytical scrutiny. The failure of the nation-state in Indonesia, for someone like Pramoedya, may lie in its inability to live up to the Western liberal ideals in providing a legal and ideological framework that delivers a minimum guarantee of personal freedom and democratic rights against violation by the state.

Conclusion

The "cultural resurgence" in Southeast Asia, I have argued, is primarily a state project that celebrates the moral and utilitarian qualities of the "Asian tradition" of which the contemporary states and their peoples are the proud inheritors. But such a cultural-ideological enterprise cannot be seen purely from the view of cynical manipulation by the state, or that of the mystificatory effects on the individual subject. The consideration of cultural and structural domination must also take account of the active participation and tacit complicity of political subjects. Perhaps for this reason, the contributors to this book have refused to turn to a form of Occidentalism which constructs highly elaborated contours of the "West" in order to describe all that is taking place in Asia. If the dramatic events in the region over the last decade or so can be recast against the wider canvas of globalization and post-modernity, they also engage local energies, just as they are "produced" by local demands and priorities. The local and the global, as the cliché of post-modernism goes, are not polarized differences which privilege one against the other. What these chapters have in common is a commitment to a critical engagement with the seamless narratives of the state regarding its central ideological visions and representational strategies. The contributors represent diverse disciplinary backgrounds — cultural studies, anthropology, political science, sociology, art criticism, and literary studies. The chapters that follow will attempt to deconstruct the many proc-

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esses and events, the criticality of which has been rewritten and "normalized" by the state and the public media.

Ien Ang's chapter examines the analytical ambiguities of the "cultural imperialism" argument as deployed by Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir and his then deputy Anwar Ibrahim. By focusing on the entry of satellite television, Ang suggests that the pan-Asianism expressed by the state discourse in Malaysia should be seen as an active response to the "deconstructive effects of global capitalism". Globalization is also a preoccupation of Yao Souchou's discussion in Chapter 2. Clearly informed by post-structuralist theorizing, Yao deconstructs Dr Mahathir's aggressive posture against the West by showing the increasing difficulty of maintaining systematic and polarized differences between Asia and the West in the context of globalization. The chapters by Ray Langenbach and Lee Weng Choy turn to examine specific modalities of state desire in Singapore. A performance artist, Langenbach charts the reification of the state by examining its valorization of biologically and economically productive sexuality. The dialectics of this process, he argues, is articulated in the representation of marginalized Others: women, artists, and so forth. Lee deals similarly with the state's desire in the imagining of an Other — in his case, the United States — which can help to constitute Singapore's arrival in the world of capitalist modernity. The problematic of post-modernity and globalization is examined by Kasian Tejapira and Ashley Carruthers with reference to, respectively, the processes of identity formation in Thailand, and among Vietnamese in the homeland and diaspora. Kasian Tejapira's chapter deconstructs the "desolate semiotics" of the notion of Thainess as defined by the state. The cultural flows in contemporary globalized conditions are crucial to Ashley Carruthers' analysis. Focusing on the phenomenon of music video culture, he shows the uncertain consequences that ensue when exiled Vietnamese and the state are brought into an uneasy intimacy as a result of globalization and *doi moi* (economic and cultural liberalization) in Vietnam. The next three chapters deal with state power and nation-building, giving special attention to the issue of the role of culture. Loong Wong's chapter examines the vocal militancy of Malaysia in the global arena. He argues that this militancy in the articulation of the post-colonial concerns of human rights, sovereignty, and culture has to be seen within

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the new social space created by the reconfiguration of post–Cold War geo-politics. In Mark Berger's analysis, we see how the patrimonial state in Indonesia has over the past decades experienced both the consolidation of its power and periodic crises arising as a result of both internal and external forces, and how the continuous reinvention and re-entrenchment of *Pancasila* has been crucial in managing the overall processes. T.N. Harper, a historian, focuses on state censorship by the colonial regimes in Southeast Asia in the year immediately following World War II. The political use of communications technology, Harper argues, is an important legacy of the media policies of the post-colonial states in the project of nation-building. That the entangled relationship of state power and national politics requires a particular representational strategy is clearly expressed in the final four chapters. Wee is concerned with the enunciation of a specific sense of "Asian modernity" in Singapore by the pop singer Dick Lee. Marian Pasor Roces, an art critic and curator working in the Philippines, tracks the ambiguity in her project: an exhibition of the sugar industry in the Negros Museum. The chapter by Mandy Thomas and Russell Heng deals with a new representational object in the new media culture in Vietnam: pop celebrity. The eager reception of the media icon, they suggest, constitutes not so much a challenge to state power as a shift in the ideological landscape — one over which the state can no longer maintain its dominance. Lastly, James Ockey, a political scientist, examines the conventional interpretation of the major role of the middle class in the democracy movement in Thailand, such as the May 1992 demonstration. He contests such a view by turning to look at a protest organized by working-class residents against the construction of an expressway over their community.

Overall, the chapters articulate the different intellectual-disciplinary positions of the writers. Nonetheless, what unites their efforts has been a shared sensitivity to the historical and regional specificities of the processes they have described. They highlight the complex recasting of "old" political concerns and ideological anxieties in the heady conditions of globalization and capitalist development. In these conditions, the contour of state power is inscribed by the consolidation of its hegemonic hold in many spheres of social life. However, this is not the only reality of the state in Southeast Asia. What is so aptly captured by Pramoedya's

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powerful metaphor — House of Glass — is precisely the central irony that in the midst of its aggressive posture, the state experiences a crucial ambivalence and vulnerability as a result of the very conditions that contribute to its potency, wealth, and political legitimacy. The current economic crisis in Southeast Asia merely affirms the uncertain rewards of transnationalization to which the state has — perhaps against its will — staked all its commitments. It is in this geography of longing and resentment, strength and vulnerability, global transactions and local priorities that we have attempted to re-examine the nature of power and desire of the state in Southeast Asia.

NOTES

1. We might think of "writing theory" as complicit with Western modernity which has "universal geographical significance" (Appiah 1997, p. 427). Dirlik (1997) also expresses scepticism in the feasibility of the project of post-colonial critique.
2. Relative freedom of the press is found in Thailand and the Philippines; see Lent (1971, 1989).
3. For a most succinct formulation of this position, see Coronil (1997) and Garon (1997).
4. In Malaysia, for instance, Islamic fundamentalism remains an essentially urban-based movement; see Shamsul (1989).
5. For a most succinct analysis of such a situation in Malaysia, see Munro-Kua (1996).

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