

Cultural Hybridity in Southeast Asia: Locating What's Local and Specific as also Comparative and Global

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Introduction

This paper looks at recent reconceptualisation of center-periphery relations to break down the view of these relations as hierarchical and unidirectional, making possible a conceptualization of the global and the local as simultaneous processes without privileging one over the other. I will make my arguments in two sections. First, I will identify recent scholarship of the modern condition that has reworked theory from the margins – both within the West as well as outside the West – to highlight the exclusionary and hierarchical discourses of center-periphery relations that obliterate complex genealogies and currents of the modern outside the West into a linear narrative structured by the principle of human reason and capitalist rationality.

Second, I will explore how recent literature on contemporary Southeast Asian societies that have taken up this theoretical space to explore the problem of globalization/localization from local perspectives – which emphasized the agency of local agents within specific historical cultural contexts and priorities and their interaction with outside forces to break down the global/local divide. By localizing struggles over new meanings and power in contemporary Southeast Asia, binary relations can be shown to lose their componential references, as the colonial, global, and local became entangled with each other in constantly new ways.

Center-Periphery Relations Reconsidered

The postmodernist repudiation of meta-narratives and revolution against meaning and representation have contributed to an increasing rejection of the assumed primacy of the category of the “West”, its history and culture.¹ While a deconstructive turn poses a danger in making all theories partial and local, some scholars have instead harnessed its liberating dimensions to rework theory from the margins rather than succumbing to a total dissolution of subject-positions and a paralysis of comparisons often associated with deconstructive approaches. The studies that I have in mind are those characterized by the need to scrutinize narratives of center-periphery relations, particularly, in terms of their exclusionary and hierarchical discourses that obliterate complex genealogies within the West and subordinate alternate narratives outside the West into a linear narrative structured by the principle of human reason and capitalist rationality.² This does

¹ For an elaborate discussion on the poststructuralist and postmodern critiques of the primacy of Western History and culture, see Robert Young, *White Mythologies. Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 11, 19-20.

² Anthony Giddens is one of the theorists of modernity who conceptualizes modernity as a “Western” project and views capitalist modernity as a western phenomenon before its expansion beyond the boundaries of the West. See Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 1174-5. An analysis and critique of the Western experience of modernity is found in Marshall Berman’s, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Verso, 1983).

not however mean that the rethinking of center-periphery relations requires an abandonment of Western history and theory. Rather, the aim is to call into question existing conceptions of global-local interactions to find a way to transcend the East-West or universal-particular binary in order to bring about a more meaningful understanding, comparison, and translation across different social boundaries.

Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is concerned precisely with a formulation of a theory of Euroamerican modernity from a view of a marginalized people – the Black diaspora - to unsettle the conception of Euroamerican-periphery relations along with its territorial and cultural assumptions.³ In his study of the history of movement and cultural expression of the African diaspora across Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wrought by slavery and imperial conquest, Gilroy challenges the idea that modernity is solely the achievement of white Euro-American bourgeois society. Arguing that a genealogy of modern formations in the West must take into account slavery and colonialism, Gilroy suggests that blacks in the West are integral to the unfolding of the modern condition.⁴ Gilroy's study illuminates how the modern condition is inevitably a transcultural, international, diasporic and hybridic formation that arose in part from the interstice position of Blacks as a people lodged between the local, the national, and the global/universal⁵. Other scholars have similarly questioned the assumption of a homogenous West. Joel Kahn, for instance, points out that western modernism has been “multicultural” and global, encompassing the West and the non-West, from its inception. He shows how an expressivist discourse on cultural difference and alterity emerged in the form of a general critique of techno-rationalist, bureaucratic and evolutionary modernism during the nineteenth century in Europe.⁶ Ann Stoler has also contributed to this debate by showing that modern forms and practices did not necessarily originate within the boundaries of the West.⁷ In her work on colonial practices in the Dutch East Indies, Stoler shows how the emergence of a bourgeois identity in the Netherlands was the result of racial practices of Dutch colonialists endeavoring to distinguish themselves from the mixed-blood population and the “poor whites” in the colonies. In relocating the emergence of modern forms of identity in the colonies instead of Europe, Stoler's work demonstrates the importance of the colonial project in constituting the modern experience. Several other scholars such as Paul Rabinow, Anthony King, Timothy Mitchell, and Gwendolyn Wright have also shown how techniques, practices, and institutions of urban planning and architecture associated with the West were first developed or experimented with in the colonies.⁸

For a critique of Berman's analyses, see Perry Anderson “Modernity and Revolution,” in *New Left Review*, 144 (1984), pp. 16-113.

³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁴ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, pp. 221.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127

⁶ Joel S. Kahn, *Culture, Multiculture, Postculture* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 10-15; *Modernity and Exclusion*, London: Sage, 2001.

⁷ Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).

⁸ Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1989); Anthony King, *Global Cities. Post-Imperialism and the Internationalisation of London*

Indeed, social scientists and historians have, for a long time, sought to grapple with the origins of modern consciousness and forms and its exclusive association with the West. A case in point is Donald Lach's, *Asia in the Making of Europe* which appeared in 1965.⁹ In this four-volume book, Lach demonstrates that non-European/Asian elements have a place in the making of artistic and intellectual ideas in Europe. The book paints a complex story of the making of Europe by detailing how Renaissance ideas in the West were not wholly constituted from within the spatial and cultural realms of the West but informed by ideas and knowledge gathered from the Western encounter with Asian civilizations. The idea that modern consciousness did not originate in the West alone might also be inferred from Benedict Anderson's remarkable book, *Imagined Communities* as several scholars have pointed out.¹⁰ In this book, Anderson suggests that the first truly modern nationalism developed in the various creole-led independent movements throughout the Americas in the latter half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries rather than in Europe.¹¹ For Anderson, while the nationalisms of Western Europe may have, in some instances, prefigured the development of nationalisms in the new world, their allegiances were to the *ancien regime*. It was in the Americas that a populist version of imagined communities of nation-states, common citizenship, and popular sovereignty emerged which later became developed in Western Europe, then Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world. More recently, Perry Anderson makes a somewhat similar argument in his critique of postmodernism by suggesting that the idea of modernism and postmodernism were first conceptualized in the distant world of Latin America and not in Europe as would be expected.¹² According to Perry Anderson, "modernismo" was a term coined in 1890 by a Nicaraguan poet in proclaiming Latin American writers' cultural independence from Spanish literature.¹³ What is more, he argues that the idea of postmodernism appeared in the interstitial world of Latin America around 1930s before its appearance in England or America¹⁴

If the origins of the modern condition can no longer be associated solely with the West, then it might no longer be meaningful to speak of globalization as a process that emanates only from the West. Neither would it make sense to take the western narrative of modernity as the normative against which to understand all other non-western modernities although their histories may be intertwined. Critics argue that a privileging of the western narrative of global modernity, would render the efforts of non-Western people – along with their notion of autonomy – and their new categories and meanings of the modern as insignificant – or worse, as simply derivative. Instead, such meanings should force a rethinking of the conceptions and categories of the global and the local. Recent attempts at developing theories of modernity relevant to non-western cases

(London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge, Cambridgeshire and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991)

⁹ Donald F. Lach. *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965).

¹⁰ See Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, Cambridge, UK, Melbourne, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 129.

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 47-65,

¹² Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1998).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-6.

insist that a recognition of the non-West as a producer of knowledge and theory must take the multiple histories and cultures at work in the world as parallel to existing “theories” rather than as mere responses to universal forms.¹⁵ They have suggested that tropes such as “translation, hybridization, and even dislocation” might be more useful for comprehending non-western modernity than the existing notions of imitation, assimilation (forced or attempted), or rejection.”¹⁶ In keeping with such orientations, scholars have endeavored to approach the making of non-western societies in their own terms and priorities in order to highlight the immense differences in the way in which narratives of modernization can take form in different cultural and historical contexts. This is not to say that these studies ignore the global flows of capital, goods, people, and culture that are associated with modernity. Rather, they have gained a new understanding towards the relations between centers and peripheries that underwrite modernity - that is, the currents that determine modernity do not flow only in one direction. The divergent manifestations of modernity that emerged in different parts of the world are seen as interconnected and dependent phenomena. The global and the local are seen as simultaneous processes without privileging one over the other. Thus, what’s local and specific is also comparative and global.¹⁷

Rethinking Global-Local Dynamics in Contemporary Southeast Asia

Here, particularly, the Southeast Asian quest for modernity characterized by the greater role of the state in disciplining capital as they adopt rules of technical rationality from the West while recovering “traditional” elements of their culture provides grounds for a theorization of the global-local interaction. Recent studies have largely explored Southeast Asian modernity against the backdrop of nation-state formation, anti-colonial/imperial nationalism, and globalization. In

¹⁵ Some scholars, particularly those who draw on insights from “postcolonial criticism” - a genre of writing that examines the exclusionary and ambivalent practices of colonialism - have refused to conceptualize modernity predicated on Western derived concepts or priorities. Instead, they have worked towards recovering peripheral or subaltern histories and experiences of the modern. By focussing on local conditions and agency, yet fully cognizant of the larger global forces at work, these scholars argue that modernity can only be understood with a re-conceptualization that takes into consideration multiple social agents in complex interactions that integrates the center and the periphery. Some of examples of this kind of intellectual pursuit can be found in the works of Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Indian Historiography is Good to Think,” in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 66-104; Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity. On ‘Japan’ and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?” in *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 263-294; Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State. Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Lila Abu Lughod, ed. *Remaking Women. Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, (Princeton, New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1998); Henrietta L. Moore, *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Aihwa Ong, “Anthropology, China and Modernities: The Geopolitics of Cultural Knowledge,” in *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, ed. Henrietta Moore, pp. 60-92; and Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing. Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, p. 18.

¹⁷ For an argument on the theoretical contribution of local knowledge in critique of the pervading universalism in Western social sciences that exclude or obliterate forms of rationality and modes of experience outside the time-space of the West, see Henrietta Moore, *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, pp. 1-15.

line with the larger theoretical developments, these scholars have called for a need to eschew a western- and capitalism-centered view of modernity to focus on the specific economic, cultural, and national interests within which these societies make their own modernities after their own priorities. Increasing attention is placed on local histories, cultures and structures, and their relations with national and global forces to understand the different unfolding of the nation, rationality, and capitalism in ways that may embrace, reproduce, translate, as well as transform, or transcend western forms. To make my point, I will briefly discuss three debates that emerged from these new approaches to understand the cultural transformations of Southeast Asian modernity.

First, in seeking to explain Southeast Asian modernity, some studies assert that a conception of modernity in terms of the workings of capitalism and the spreading of Western forms and ideas cannot fully bring out what it means to be modern for Southeast Asians. These studies recognize capitalism as a powerful force of change responsible for aligning Southeast Asian modernity with western forms of the modern but insist that the interactions of capital are always cultural. The works of Adrian Vickers and Michel Picard on Balinese modernity are specifically concerned with recuperating the cultural agency and history of the Balinese people to show how they translate and find similarities with universal ideas of the “modern” rather than being “passive recipients of Western initiatives.”¹⁸ However they are careful to show that the emergent modern forms are not to be understood in terms of the survival of cultural forms and practices relevant to former times. Rather their studies highlight the fundamental issues of power and cultural production operating under modern conditions within Balinese society. They show that there is no one single form of the modern for the Balinese but that discourses of the modern are part of a set of power relations in which some are more authorized to act than others. Vickers contends that Balinese cultures, as other Southeast Asian cultures, have a long history of translating and making outside forms anew and local. He suggests that the universal ideas of the “modern” only came to be accepted and translated in Balinese society precisely because there were local precedents and experiences of the Balinese version of the “*moderen*.”¹⁹ Picard’s study demonstrates that the Balinese notion of being modern involves a sense of holding on to tradition in which the category of religion/*agama* or the sacred becomes integral to the process of being modern as the Balinese people endeavor to gain control of their lives amidst the rapid forces of tourism and change.²⁰ Recent volumes that attempt to build a theory of the rise of the new middle class in modern Southeast Asia have also endeavored to develop an understanding of the new rich through historical and cultural perspectives on class and power rather than via a narrow political-economic reading of the phenomenon.²¹ If ordinary people struggle to establish control over the

¹⁸ Adrian Vickers, ed., *Being Modern in Bali. Image and Change*, Yale University Southeast Asian Studies Monograph 43 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6 (its emphasis).

²⁰ Michel Picard, *Bali: Cultural Tourism and Touristic Culture* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1996); and Michel Picard, “Cultural Tourism, Nation-Building, and Regional Culture: The Making of a Balinese Identity,” in *Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*, ed. Michael Picard and Robert E. Wood (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), pp. 181-214.

²¹ See Michael Pinches, ed., *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Richard Robison and David Goodman, eds., *The New Rich in Asia. Mobile Phones, McDonalds and Middle-Class*

intrusion of global forces on their lives, so do the nation-states of Southeast Asia. A volume on *Asian Forms of the Nation* asserts how the development of nations in the region are shaped by their individual pre-national histories.²² The argument here again is not to recuperate cultural essentialism or primordialism but rather to assert the historical experiences and cultural priorities of societies that invariably influence the contemporary forms and narratives of the nation and their contestations.

This, in turn connects with a second type of study that seeks to denaturalize and historicize the nationalist formulations of the modern by showing how they are created from a complex intersection between colonial ideas and knowledges and their postcolonial effects. These studies are influenced by postcolonial theoretical approaches that explore how colonial categories of race and culture return, in renewed forms, in the postcolonial era.²³ Abidin Kusno's recent study that seeks to foreground an active relationship between post-Independence architecture and colonial and postcolonial social effects in Indonesia is an example of this line of enquiry.²⁴ Focusing on the particular histories and cultures of Indonesia, Kusno shows how the discourses of colonial architecture and urban planning continue to influence the politics of time and space in postcolonial Indonesia. In addressing the interconnections between past and present, Kusno demonstrates how the production of architecture and space are constituted by the cultural politics among various groups of individuals and political and social reformers in ignoring or representing the empire. In contrast to postcolonial theorists who presume that colonialism displaced indigenous cultures, Kusno's work demonstrates how colonial cultural frameworks become the productive ground for the reworking and the reproduction of new ideas of the modern in the postcolonial era. In addition he observes that modern architectural discourses in Indonesia are not necessarily constructed vis-à-vis the West alone but are also produced in relation to other regional forces from the neighboring countries of Southeast Asia. A volume edited by Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz that explores the reworking of gender in Southeast Asian modernity has equally endorsed the need to uncover the webs of knowledge, power processes, and cultural politics created from the intersection between the ideologies of globalization, postcoloniality and nationalism.²⁵

Third, there is a group of studies that explore the workings of state hegemony and power in the making of new subjects in the Southeast Asian pursuit of modernity. It has been well noted that the projects of modernity in Southeast Asia involve not only state attempts to transform the economy but also to construct new identities for their citizenry²⁶ Some studies have pointed to the

Revolution (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); and Richard Tanter and Kenneth Young, eds., *The Politics of Middle Class Indonesia*, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 19, Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990.

²² Stein Tonneson and Hans Atlov, eds., *Asian Forms of the Nation* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996).

²³ For an example, see Phyllis G. L. Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl, eds., *Reading Culture: Textual Practices in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999)

²⁴ Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial. Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

²⁵ Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, eds., *Bewitching Women, Pious Men. Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

²⁶ See Maila Stivens and Khrishna Sen, eds., *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia* (London: Routledge, 1998); Alberto Gomes, ed., *Modernity and Identity: Asian Illustrations* (Victoria: La Trobe University Press, 1994); Joel S. Kahn and

contested nature of these national projects of modernity. While recognizing the power of various Southeast Asian nation-states in shaping, representing and enforcing their economic and cultural formulations of modernity, these studies also seek to emphasize the historical complexity of social formations in these societies to show that state hegemony is always more fragile than it appears as there are always aspects of people's lives and practices that are never wholly subjected to the regimes of control. Two volumes; *Modernity and Identity: Asian Illustrations and Southeast Asian Identities* and *Southeast Asian Identities. Culture and the Politics of representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, demonstrate just how state-sponsored programs of modernity in Southeast Asia often involved political and cultural domination of some groups over others within complex intersections of national and global forces of economic modernization. This has resulted in the resurgence and revivalism of ethnic identities in the region as marginalized groups and classes construct different identities to create a constituency to further their own interests as they struggle against economic, political, and cultural domination.²⁷ Southeast Asian modernity, as the contributors to the volume show, is strongly characterized by national integrationist policies but the drive to uniformity based on a dominant ethnic culture has resulted in disunity and a new resuscitation of traditional forms and the revivalism of ethnic identities within a nexus of local, national and global tensions.

From the above discussion we can see how recent studies have sought to give agency to local agents by uncovering their specific cultural contexts and priorities to better understand the ways in which outside forms and ideas are reproduced, imbued with local meanings and contested in contemporary Southeast Asia. These studies challenge the fixation with colonial and global domination and the binary relations they produced in understanding contemporary Southeast Asian societies. By localizing struggles over power and meanings, the binary relations between the colonial, global, local, and national become entangled with one another in constantly new ways. Against this backdrop, pressing questions emerged centered on the need to denaturalize and historicize the ways in which ideas and forms of the modern come about and are made meaningful, authoritative, and resisted within the complex nexus of the local-national-global.

Loh Kok Wah, eds., *Framged Vision. Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992); and Joel S. Kahn, ed., *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998).

²⁷ For accounts of how gender and class have become important sites for the reworking of the modern in the Southeast Asian context, see Stivens and Sen, eds., *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia*; Aihwa Ong, "State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies and the Body Politic in Malaysia," in *American Ethnologist*, 17, 2 (1990), pp. 258-76; Laurie J. Sears, ed., *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Saskia E. Wieringa, "Sexual Metaphors in the Change from Sukarno's Old Order to Suharto's New Order in Indonesia," Working Paper Series No. 23, The Hague Institute of Social Studies, 1996.