

**Introduction:  
Engaging Dominant Discourses  
in the Asian Context**

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As a journal which represents a treatise on Cultural Studies in the Asian context, one of the scholarly challenges for *Situations* is how to engage the dominant discourses which dictate the public understanding of issues in society in Southeast Asia, or Asia. The subject matter may range from macro issues such as terrorism, migration or refugees, including religion and popular culture, to everyday social micro-struggles of youth over questions of identity and agency. Or it can also re-examine certain taken-for-granted epistemologies of knowledge such as Orientalism,<sup>1</sup> or colonial knowledge,<sup>2</sup> or assumptions pertaining to so-called “area studies” constructs.<sup>3</sup> In essence, the presence of such dominant discourses, i.e., the Foucauldian “regimes of truth,” in our midst, testifies to the classic correlations in cultural studies, among meaning, power, and knowledge. In a nutshell, it alludes to the power to define and interpret in a certain discursive field, the outcome of which will have far-reaching implications for both the scholarly and public understanding of certain critical issues in society. Whilst the public may often be easily swayed by such persuasion (for instance, the all-too-familiar pronouncement which correlates Islam with terrorism), the task of scholars is more privileged. Through their tools of research and inquiry, they must engage in critical scholarship, to contest, to provide a credible empirical database, and ultimately, to deconstruct these knowledges and narratives that have been elevated as “dominant discourses” or “regimes of truth.” Ultimately, through critical research and inquiry, and with the utilization of appropriate methodological tools, Cultural Studies seeks to unravel alternative ways of “seeing the world”—i.e. to discover the “subjugated

discourses” that have been submerged or hidden in this ongoing “struggle over meanings.”

This special edition of *Situations* includes four thematic scholarly contributions, with each being based on a particular field of research. Whilst the empirical focus by each contributor in the volume may differ, the *problematique* that underlies the analysis in all these articles is the same. Indeed, notwithstanding the fact that the contributors appear to represent two different scholarship orientations, Anthropology and History, the rules of engagement remain similar: to identify, interrogate, or contest a dominant discourse in a particular field of knowledge, with a view to empowering, through research, its counter-narrations and ultimately to develop an alternative narrative.

The first article, “Malay Metalheads: Situating Metal Music Culture in Brunei,” jointly written by two anthropologists, Amalina Timbang and Zawawi Ibrahim, elucidates the tensions experienced by “Malay metalheads” in forging a distinct subcultural identity in relation to the Malay Islamic State of Brunei and its relatively soft forms of disciplinary surveillance, while explaining what distinguishes this subculture from its analogues in the region. The authors argue that these metalheads are essentially connected to the globalization “technoscape,” but in the particular context of the Bruneian form of cultural governance, they are at once subjected to a public domain which is regulated by the state philosophy of MIB (Malay, Islam, and Monarchy). As a consequence, Bruneian metalheads retreat into the private domain to carve out their own social space of accommodation and potential for resistance. In this ongoing terrain of contestation between the state and popular culture, the authors articulate Giddens’s notion of “agency” and the relation between “creativity” and “the privatization of metal” as a *modus vivendi* by which Malay metalheads engage with the dominant Islamic state ideology, though without necessarily rupturing its existing framework. The Bruneian case study provides its own template of ethnography with which the authors analyse the practice and struggle of metal music in the context of a dominant discourse, mediated by the state philosophy embedded as it is in the values of Malayness, Islam, and the monarchy.

In “Dominant Discourses of Refugees, Recognition, and Othering in

Malaysia: Regimes of Truth versus the Lived Reality of Everyday Life,” the author, anthropologist Gerhard Hoffstaedter, researching with refugees in Malaysia, argues that notwithstanding the Malaysian official rhetoric and social realities on multiculturalism, there is a particular Malaysian identity with which newcomers or refugees have to align or juxtapose themselves. After problematising what the notion of “refugeeness” actually entails in the specific context of Malaysian *realpolitik*, the author sets out to unravel and elaborate several “regimes of truth” governing the discourse on refugees in Malaysia. In conclusion, the author elucidates some of the practices refugees themselves employ that circumvent, challenge, and acquiesce with these discourses, including poetry.

The article by historian Syed Khairudin Aljunied, “Reconceptualizing Islam in Southeast Asia: Cosmopolitan Public Intellectuals in Perspective,” is an attempt to seek out an alternative breed of Islamic scholar in Southeast Asia, whom the author designates as “Cosmopolitan Muslim Public Intellectuals.” As Khairudin elaborates the attributes of these public intellectuals, we learn that, among other things, they are neither ivory-towerish nor armchair theorists, but are glocalists, activists, and communitarians who draw from Islam the ideational resources and inspiration “in advocating universal values, inclusivity and social justice in society.” Intellectually, they maintain a critical distance from the dominant “official” and “bureaucratized” Islam that has been consolidated by the state; they transverse the interactive world between Muslims and non-Muslims in the context of a multicultural and global society. Always critical of institutions, policies or politics which are contrary to the common good, these intellectuals are also able to transcend the parochial paradigms in their own society. Being opposed to a puritanical interpretation of Islam as well as to both “extreme secularism” and “oppressive liberalism,” they instead advocate public debate on the issues of religion. But as the author asserts, they are cosmopolitan most of all “because they demonstrate a judicious fusion of what is relevant from the intellectual heritage of Islam with what is best from other traditions to devise new solutions to the challenges affecting Muslims.”

The final article by historian Rommel A. Curaming, “Beyond Knowledge Decolonization: Another Look at the Internalist Perspectives in/on

Southeast Asia,” revisits the familiar dialogue on the question of epistemology in relation to decolonizing perspectives on Southeast Asian studies. Variants of this discourse (for instance, Shamsul A.B.’s problematising the question of “producing knowledge of Southeast Asia,”<sup>4</sup> or in the form of S. Farid Alatas’s “alternative discourse”<sup>5</sup> and G. Beng Lan’s “decentering” and “diversifying” Southeast Asian Studies)<sup>6</sup> have of course been expressed and discussed before, but perhaps some of the core laments and questions that Rommel has brought to the table may be new. At the heart of the problem, it is still about engaging with Eurocentricism as a dominant template governing the epistemology of Southeast Asian/Asian social science or cultural studies discourses.<sup>7</sup> But the issue goes beyond an “area study” concern, and indeed extends itself into the global epistemic community, or adapting from Appradurai, what I have called the social science “knowledge scape.”<sup>8</sup> I argue that whilst a dominant paradigm may take the center stage at one time, this “scape” is also located on a terrain of ongoing epistemological contestations, in which there are no permanent winners or losers.<sup>9</sup> It is here, however, that the question raised by Rommel becomes relevant. In his critical review of the so-called “internalist” and “progressive” scholarship on Southeast Asia, he is adamant that the scholarship that has remained limited to “coloniality” and “decolonization” has not made any structural dent in altering “the fundamental logic of power/knowledge relations” which “remains unchanged.” Whilst he would perhaps acknowledge the ability of these new-found “internalist”/“progressive” templates to contest in this epistemic playing field, he also recognises that “while they sought out a shift in standpoint, agents, objects, contexts, locus of power, concepts and approaches.... [K]nowledge assumes life of its own as it circulates in a social space, soon enough, the newly decentred or decolonized knowledge is re-‘imperialized,’ re-centred once again, hijacked by yet another power including unscrupulous local elites, religious authorities, NGOs, etc.” I recognise Rommel’s intervention as part of an evolving dialogue that will be “long and winding.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978). Said's critique of "Orientalism" was preceded by S. Hussein Alatas's eloquent critique of the British colonialist "myth of the lazy native." See Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London: Frank Cass, 1977). For further application of Alatas's perspective in Malaysian anthropological studies, see Zawawi Ibrahim and NoorShah M.S., "Indigenising Knowledge and Social Science Discourses in the Periphery: Decolonising Malayness and Malay Underdevelopment," in *Social Science and Knowledge in a Globalising World*, ed. Zawawi Ibrahim (Bangi: PSSM & Petaling Jaya, 2012). See also Zawawi Ibrahim, "Return of the Lazy Native: Malay/immigrant Labour Transition in Terengganu Plantation Society," in *Local and Global Social Transformation in Southeast Asia: Essays in Honour of Professor Syed Hussein Alatas*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Form of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). For a critique of colonial forms of knowledge and its attendant methodology in non-Western anthropology, see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed, 1999). For a critique of Eurocentricism in Asian social science, see Syed Farid Alatas, *Alternative Discourse in Asian Social Science* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006). For a "world-system" and "centre" vs "periphery" approach, see Takami Kuwayama, "The 'World-System' of Anthropology: Japan and Asia in the Global Community of Anthropologists," in *The Making of Anthropology in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Shinji Yamashita, Joseph Bosco, and J.S. Eades (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004). For an extension and critique of the "world-system" approach, see Zawawi Ibrahim, "From a World System to a Social Science Knowledge 'Scape' Perspective: Anthropological Fieldworking and Transnationalizing Theory-making in the Periphery," *Journal of Glocal Studies* 2 (2015): 45-68.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, A.B. Shamsul, "Producing Knowledge of Southeast Asia: a Malaysian View," in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat (New York: Routledge, 2007). See also Goh Beng-Lan, *Decentering and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region* (Singapore: ISEAS Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Shamsul, "Producing Knowledge of Southeast Asia."

<sup>5</sup> Alatas, *Alternative Discourse*.

<sup>6</sup> Goh, *Decentering and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies*.

<sup>7</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen, ed., *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Zawawi Ibrahim, "A Missing Scape: Discoursing Social Science and Knowledge in a Globalising World," in *Social Science and Knowledge in a Globalising World*, ed. Zawawi Ibrahim (Bangi: PSSM & Petaling Jaya, 2012), 1-19. See also Ibrahim, "From a World System."

<sup>9</sup> Zawawi Ibrahim, "Commentary of 'Rethinking Modernity and Capitalism: Add Context and Stir' by Jan Nederveen Pieterse," in *Sociopedia Colloquium* (Sociopedia ISA, 2014).