

Editorial Foreword

To mark five years of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*' new editorial course we bring you a special issue devoted to the visual and performing arts. Containing eight articles and a note (but no book reviews due to the lack of space), this issue is the outcome of a call for articles made last year to remedy this journal's insufficient coverage of art-related topics, which contrasts with the local and increasingly international appreciation of the region's diverse and sophisticated art forms.

Ranging in subject matter from funerary artefacts to various performing arts (music, dance, theatre), and from cinema to architecture and painting across a timespan of several centuries, these articles are representative of the diverse methodological and disciplinary perspectives that are currently deployed in the study of Southeast Asian art practices and its products. Common threads run through several of the articles, the main one being the pursuit and perception of cultural authenticity and its relation to ethnic identities. This is therefore a special issue by virtue not only of its editorial planning and thematic unity, but of its multidisciplinary contribution to the study of the visual and performing arts — a contribution scholars and curators outside of the 'fence' of Asian Studies will also hopefully appreciate.

The two initial articles are concerned with ritual performances. Rebecca S. Hall brings together ethnography and art history in her examination of the material dimension of Buddhist funerary rituals in Northern Thailand, specifically banners and cremation structures, whose purpose is to ensure a successful transition from death to the next rebirth. The ephemerality of such funerary artefacts, most of which are burnt in the cremation pyre, is consistent with the Buddhist tenet of impermanence whose ultimate exemplification is death itself; yet it is through their materiality that these artefacts exert social agency by beautifying the cremation ritual, connecting the deceased's afterlife and the living's worldly concerns, and mediating between the attendees' physical experience and their spiritual beliefs.

This latter dynamic matters also in Nathan Porath's study of a shamanic ritual, called *dikei*, which is practised by the Orang Sakai of Riau (Sumatra). The *dikei* is a healing ritual as much as an acting performance whose aural and kinetic aspects allow the audience to 'physicalise' the intangible world of spirits. In addition to the chants and percussive sounds and dances performed by the shaman, his attendants and the drummers, the ritual often presents two additional components: the staged removal of the patient's illness, whose meaningfulness is premised on what the author calls the 'performance of credulity' along with the audience's suspension of disbelief; and comedic relief in the form of sexual jokes and mock martial art combat. Based on his field observations, the author proposes in closing a conceptual typology of 'fakery' that engages the literature on ritual and cultural performance.

In the following two articles the focus shifts from ritual to stage performances while still addressing the question of cultural authenticity. Josh Sternberg examines *wayang potehi*, a glove puppet performance of southern Chinese origins, in relation to the definition of a Sino-Indonesian diasporic identity. After providing a summary of its Fujian origins, transfer to Indonesia by itinerant troupes of puppeteers, and subsequent development throughout the late colonial and early independence eras, the article provides a detailed account of performers and their repertoire since 1965 through the present. As demonstrated by the Roadshow Wayang Potehi, which in 2013 toured Javanese villages with no sizeable ethnic Chinese presence, the glove puppet theatre has by now acquired the status of a Javanese folk art by bridging the gap between autochthonous and diasporic cultures, and forging links with new patrons besides the customary association to Chinese temples in urban centres.

In her article Sharyn Graham Davies considers avant-garde theatre director Robert Wilson's production based on the Bugis epic from South Sulawesi, *La Galigo*, as a site for the analysis of cultural authenticity. Both the acclaim and criticism received by Wilson's *I La Galigo*, which premiered in Singapore in 2004 but made its debut in Indonesia in 2005 and in Makassar itself only in 2011, have focused on the production's feeling of authenticity as transmitted by its Indonesian acting troupe and musicians, musical repertoire, choreography and costumes. By reviewing what critics and academics have written about Wilson's production, and discussing it with Bugis people, the author assesses different conceptions of authenticity as singular or rather plural, innate or hybridised, and concludes that authenticity's performative nature allows it to respond to different social needs and to serve disparate ends.

From theatre to cinema, Lan Duong's article pushes the analysis of the representation of ethnic identity in a different direction by discussing two recent Vietnamese films whose female directorial gaze informs the fictional gaze of their films' ethnic minority characters. The impression of a shared experience of oppression between Vietnam's women and ethnic minorities is belied by cinematic Othering that reflects the continuing marginalisation of minorities, notwithstanding the post-Đôi Mới policy of multiculturalism. The author proposes to understand the persisting Kinh ethnocentrism in light of Vietnam's recent joining of the global economy whereby the commodification of women's bodies is mirrored by that of ethnic minorities in support of the state's discourse of national unity, which precisely obscures their exclusion from political and representational power.

The next two articles offer complementary examinations of art practice in late colonial Malaya/Singapore with special attention to its underlying ethnic politics.

Yvonne Low examines the professionalisation of painting within the political and cultural context in which it took place. This process reflected the wider attempt to forge a common 'Malayan' identity during the 1950s and early 1960s that would unify the autochthonous Malays and the immigrant South Indians and Chinese as citizens of a postcolonial state under the aegis of the erstwhile colonial power. As a result of the establishment of public and private academies as well as art societies and informal artists' circles in Singapore, Penang and Kuala Lumpur, which provided wider access to art education, the amateur-professional divide became clearly demarcated. This demarcation served, in turn, Malaya's national self-affirmation in the cultural domain.

The argument that postcolonial Malayan politics was the engine of cultural development is challenged by Jim Sykes, who surveys the 'sonic geography' that via the live and mass-mediated performances of diasporic Indian musicians unified late colonial Malaya's South Indian immigrant communities into a single cultural space. Focusing on the activity of South Asian musicians from the 1920s through 1965, when Singapore's separation from Malaysia opened a new chapter in their political and social history, the article situates Indian music in Singapore as a domain that partook of postcolonial sociopolitical dynamics, but did not just articulate communal identity — one reason being that 'Indian' music manifested the fluid cultural and even ethnic boundaries prevalent in Malaya and Singapore up until the mid-1960s.

Finally, Swati Chemburkar takes a longer historical perspective on the localisation in Southeast Asia of Indian music and dance by proposing an intriguing reading of the female dancer motif of Angkorean architecture's sculptural decoration. Focusing on the halls decorated with the bas-reliefs of dancers that are a distinct feature of the temples built under Jayavarman VII (Ta Prohm, Preah Khan and the Bayon), the author suggests that these halls worked in tandem with ceremonial performances to provide spaces for encountering the divine presence that legitimated the ruler's authority as upholder of the cosmic order. Even though epigraphic records do not mention specific spaces for the staging of dance performances within temple compounds, the presence at the Khmer court of Indian Brahmans versed in art and music underpins the author's hypothesis about the 'hall with dancers' within temples as spaces for the staging of festivals, celebrations and ritual dance.

The concluding note returns us to Indonesia by mapping the art world of Yogyakarta. By talking to locally based visual and performing artists and attending the annual ArtJog fair, Denise Tsui provides a first-hand account that highlights the passion and community spirit of local artists as the driving force of the Yogyakarta art scene, with Internet and social media having also become critical in providing access to information and connecting artists among themselves since the 1990s.

In closing, grateful acknowledgement is made of the invaluable input of our anonymous readers in adding to the cogency of the articles published in this as in any other issue of *JSEAS*. Last but not least, let me introduce two new editorial members: Portia Reyes as associate editor; and Ho Chi Tim, who inherits the position of book review editor from Peter Borschberg, to whom goes our utmost appreciation for the great work done in making *JSEAS* the premier publication for reviews of Southeast Asian scholarship. The renewed editorial team shall endeavour to make the contents of *JSEAS* even more relevant to the current academic debate in a fast-evolving field.

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