

# Rereading Leftist Writings from Southeast Asia

## Introduction

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Southeast Asia has a long and rich history of leftist movements that opposed colonialism, contributed to building new nations, and brought about changes in the political configuration of the region. A number of leading figures in these movements dedicated their works and lives toward those aims, such as Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam, Tan Malaka of Indonesia, and Crisanto Evangelista of the Philippines. While some worked within their own cell or group, many were connected through underground political networks, experiences of travel, or regional and international organizations such as the Comintern (see Hau and Kasian 2011). Although a number of important studies have described the socio-political contributions of leftist activists (see, for example, Cheah 2002; Richardson 2011), little has been done to examine their writings, particularly as literary products. Discussion tends to focus on the nature of their work and activism, treating their writings as supplements to their life stories.

Interestingly, some of these texts have recently reemerged in the public sphere. While the global trend of commercializing “leftist nostalgia” as a cultural product may have provided the impetus for this comeback, a number of young researchers in the region have a genuine scholarly interest in looking deeper into the contents of these texts as a reflection of their present. Since historical research of the Left inevitably intersects with questions of national identity and socio-political change, examination of leftist texts can be a means of investigating the origins of contemporary problems and analyzing the concept of nation that is often taken for granted as “natural.”

This special issue therefore presents a number of texts by figures once active in leftist movements in the region as a way of rethinking political progress and national identity beyond the official histories of nations. Often neglected or banned in the course of writing of a nation’s official history, these texts offer interesting insights into the complexities of state-society interactions. The authors—socialists, Communists, student

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activists, and political dissidents—represent a wide range of political stances. The texts were written during periods of the authors' active political engagement (ranging from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s) and were shaped by the authors' personal experience.

The articles in this issue not only examine the contents of Southeast Asian leftist texts but focus on elucidating the social and political contexts within which they were written and published. Understanding such historical contexts can help to clarify the messages the authors wished to convey and to interpret their relevance to our present time.

### **Between Historical Lacunae and Cultural Recognition**

Why do we need to read these leftist writings, and why now? To answer these questions, we need to consider three socio-political conditions that shaped modern Southeast Asian leftist texts. First, it is important to recognize the demise of the Left within the context of the Cold War. The Left—both Socialist and Communist Parties—was a significant force that exerted deep influences on societies and national identities in Southeast Asia, especially during the early period of the Cold War. However, with the exception of Vietnam and Laos, the Left never became dominant in any country in the region. On the contrary, it lost the battle for political authority in both parliaments and guerrilla warfare (see Hewison and Rodan 1994). The Partai Komunis Indonesia (Communist Party of Indonesia), once the third largest Communist party in the world after those of the USSR and China, was crushed after the 1965–66 purge that followed a military coup. Left-wing organizations were banned and quickly diminished in Singapore after the city-state separated from the Federation of Malaya in 1965. The Communist Party of Thailand grew in membership during the early 1960s, but in 1965 it launched a guerrilla war against the ruling government. Although it managed to survive for more than a decade, many of its members had become disillusioned and abandoned the movement by the early 1980s. In the relatively short period of the early 1920s to late 1970s, leftists vigorously produced texts. Subsequent policies of economic development pursued by anti-Communist governments, however, halted and erased (most often, by force) this important period in the life of several regional nations—a period when notions of national identity, development paths, and artistic sensibilities were articulated, actively debated, and experimented with. Leftist texts (or those labeled as such) were forced underground, excluded, rejected, and banned, eventually disappearing from official history and the public. This created historical lacunae vis-à-vis the various ideas and achievements that the Left had contributed.

Second, the various forms of leftist texts in Southeast Asia—from newspaper arti-

cles, reference books, and textbooks to short stories and novels—reflect a desire to cement popular support. Contentwise, the texts discuss issues considered important to the public at the time they were published. Interestingly, many leftist figures in the region did not produce any theoretical writings. Ho Chi Minh, for example, wrote many letters, essays, and speeches but never a complete book of his own original thinking (see Quinn-Judge 2002). Tan Malaka wrote *Madilog* (Materialism, dialectics, logic) (1943), a primer on ways of thoughts, and was well known for his autobiography (see Mrázek 1972), but he did not propose a theory or provide philosophical analyses. This is not to say that Southeast Asian leftist figures were not interested in theoretical questions. Instead, they offered different ways of communicating socialist and Communist ideals to attract support and advance their movements. This leads us to contemplate how leftist ideas are transmitted, translated, and distributed for people in the region.<sup>1)</sup>

Third, the Left in Southeast Asia has left different yet enduring traces of activism. Fleeing suppression, some leftists—many involuntarily—left the countries where they were born and once worked. Living overseas, many continued their activism and produced different kinds of texts. The works of the “exiled and diaspora Left” include diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies (see Hill 2010; Teo and Low 2012), with the dominant theme of experiences of “injustice” (see Watson 2006). Their narratives provide a window not only to past events in their home countries but also to their activism in exile, illuminating the socio-political conditions that attracted them to and kept them working for leftist causes. As personal testaments, these texts fill the gaps in official records and other published writings. They also constitute part of the experience of “commodifying Marxism” (see Kasian 2001).

These three socio-political conditions highlight the importance of rereading leftist writings in order to recognize their cultural contributions to defining a society that was open to debate, proposing egalitarian social ideals, and developing the basis of national identity. They also point to the timeliness of addressing some of the legacies of the Cold

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1) In Thailand, Kasian Tejapira (2003, 257) notes an interesting reflection: “Historically speaking, the Thai radicals and communists were at a disadvantage as far as the politics of translating Marxist-Communist words were concerned. From the 1920s to the mid-1940s, while the ruling elite, state ideologues, and intelligence officials were busy translating and coining these new words for the purpose of surveillance and repression of political subversives as well as economic policy debates, the first-generation *jek* communists were still largely speaking Chinese. . . . It was only after the Second World War that a new generation of radicals and communists, consisting of both Thai-literate *jeks* and native Thais, saw the necessity of, as well as having the interest and language proficiency to begin, their own independent translation and coinage of Marxist-Communist words in earnest. But by then, the strategic commanding heights in the discursive field had already been occupied by the anti-communists.”

War that created political tensions during the latter half of the twentieth century and social confusions that still linger up to the present. It is important to note that being, or being accused of being, “leftist,” “Communist,” or “red” is still dangerous in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. Contemporary rereading of leftist texts therefore holds an important key to disclosing the dark episodes of national histories in order to heal past wounds and formulate steps for ensuring justice toward reconciliation. Free from the political baggage of the past, young scholars from the region now have the social opportunity (and academic facilities) to appreciate these leftist texts and contribute a better understanding of them in contemporary national debates.

### New Insights

As noted above, the experiences of the Cold War not only shaped the texts but also left their mark on social and political events in the countries where the authors resided, wrote, and distributed their texts. The articles in this special issue look at texts from five countries: the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. History records the presence and the influences of leftist movements in these countries, but they were not strong enough to dominate the political scene or become ruling governments. Under the Cold War the Left in these countries was defeated, and these texts were branded as leftist writings. Although ruling governments rejected and banned the texts, they have nonetheless impacted the historical trajectory and social formation of the nation. Rereading these texts in our present time allows us to identify the points of divergence between what happened in the past and official history, situate “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) in the nation’s history, and reinterpret their meanings beyond the conventional formulation of the nation.

In “Blood-Brothers: The Communist Party of the Philippines and the Partai Komunis Indonesia,” Ramon Guillermo traces the early works of Jose Maria Sison as a young leading Filipino Marxist radical in the 1960s. Sison traveled to Indonesia on three occasions, and upon his first return in 1962 he published a translation of three of Chairil Anwar’s poems.<sup>2)</sup> Guillermo’s reading of Sison’s earlier works is particularly important in light of the current controversy over Sison’s alleged plagiarism in the late 1960s–early 1970s (especially in his *Philippine Society and Revolution*). By comparing Sison’s translation of Anwar’s poems against the original Indonesian text, Guillermo shows how Sison

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2) Anwar (1922–49) was a leading Indonesian poet during the revolutionary period (1945–50). For a discussion on Anwar’s literary works, see Teeuw (1967).

injected his literary skills in translation. Textual analysis of Sison's writings shows that the author was very well versed in the "revolutionary *lingua franca*" of the day as part of his activism as founder and chairperson of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Guillermo suggests that the plagiarism controversy worked to "shame" Sison as an author and to discredit him intellectually in order to undermine his leadership in the Party. Guillermo also points out how other political actors, especially his political opponents, who had poor creative literary skills and lacked historical comparisons in their political rhetoric remain free from controversy. Guillermo's paper illustrates how leftist writings are often judged out of context and seen as copied versions of a certain original despite the author's creativity and literary skills. Furthermore, the Sison case demonstrates the political weight of leftist texts, regardless of whether the author is a political leader or merely a young writer concerned about social injustices. It is precisely this political weight that induces the exclusion, rejection, and banning of leftist writings.

Loh Kah Seng reads articles from the *Singapore Technocrat*, the English-language organ of the Singapore Polytechnic Students' Union (SPSU), to examine the limits and possibilities of student activism in 1970s Singapore. In the mid-1960s, the SPSU was one of the main forces in student activism and the *Singapore Technocrat* was instrumental in airing students' perspectives on social and political problems in the country. But throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the SPSU continually faced state charges of Communist subversion. In 1976 the SPSU's president, Foo Chin Yen, was arrested by the government on the allegation that the SPSU editorial board was under the control of the Malayan New Democratic Youth League, an affiliation of the Communist Party of Malaya. In reading the *Singapore Technocrat*, Loh notes how the SPSU shared similarities with earlier left-wing socialist groups, such as the University of Malaya (later Singapore) Socialist Club.<sup>3)</sup> Their activism was inspired by radical egalitarian and socialist ideas, despite efforts by the ruling People's Action Party to restructure and depoliticize the student community, including the SPSU, in order to socialize them to support the official state policy of economic development. The students were not ignorant of this policy; indeed, contrary to the common assertion of their political apathy, they were critical about it as well as other social issues. In addition to their interventions in national issues, the *Singapore Technocrat's* articles also constituted a transnational endeavor to speak to historic developments and to like-minded students in other countries. Going beyond the written narratives, Loh supplements his readings of *Technocrat* articles with interviews with a number of former students to better understand the contours of their activism as part of their lived experiences. Loh's paper elucidates the mental and discursive spaces

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3) For discussion on the University Socialist Club, see Loh *et al.* (2012).

of the students' social and political activism in producing their writings under the Singapore state's robust political surveillance and instrumentalist view of the students.

Teo Lee Ken discusses the notion of liberational justice in the works of Ahmad Boestamam (1920–83). Although known as a Malaysian freedom fighter, Boestamam was also a key person in the leftist network during the late 1930s to early 1940s, before the Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1942. In 1946, he founded the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API, Awakened Youth Movement) and published the *Testament Politik API* (Political testament of the API) as its political manifesto. It was in this organization that Boestamam began his political campaign to demand independence, and as a result he was detained by the British, without trial, for seven years (1948–54). In reading Boestamam's *Testament Politik API*, Teo finds the political narrative of Malaya (Malaysia) as a nation free from the subjugation of British colonial capitalism and Malay feudalism. *Testament* contains Boestamam's socialist ideals for revolutionary struggle to achieve freedom. "Radical youth" are seen as the main force to achieve political and social change for the nation. In this context, it is important to note that after Malaysia gained its independence, Boestamam founded the Socialist Front, a left-wing coalition of socialist parties, and became its first chairperson (until 1961). In 1963, he was arrested on an allegation of collaborating with the Partai Komunis Indonesia and the Socialist Front was dissolved. Teo also read Boestamam's novel *Rumah Kacha Digegar Gempa* (Glass house shaken by tremors) (1969) to discuss how Boestamam saw the political and social landscapes of postcolonial Malaysia in relation to his revolutionary ideals. As such, Teo's paper highlights the importance of rereading texts by a leftist figure to honor his intellectual contributions and activism as an opposition force beyond the official history that reduces his work as simply anticolonial.

In "Independent Woman in Postcolonial Indonesia: Rereading the Works of Rukiah," Yerry Wirawan discusses the literary works of Siti Rukiah (1927–96), a pioneering female writer from Indonesia who published a number of important works in the 1950s and early 1960s. Her first novel, *Kedjatuhan dan Hati* (The fall and the heart), was published by Balai Pustaka in 1950.<sup>4)</sup> Two years later she published her second book, a collection of poems and short stories, *Tandus* (Desert), and the following year it won the prestigious national literary prize. Her literary achievement brought her close to national politics, and she was elected as a member of the Central Committee of the Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakjat (LEKRA, Institute of People's Culture) in its first national congress in January 1959. Formed in 1950, LEKRA was an organization of progressive artists that had links

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4) For an English translation, see Rukiah, *The Fall and the Heart* (translated by John H. McGlynn) (Jakarta: Lontar, 2010).

to the Partai Komunis Indonesia.<sup>5)</sup> Due to her involvement in LEKRA, Rukiah was detained as a political prisoner by the New Order authoritarian regime. Her career was abruptly halted, and she never raised the pen again. Wirawan rereads *Kedjatuhan dan Hati* and *Tandus* to locate Rukiah's position in modern Indonesia's literary world, and he identifies how the crafting of her literary skill represents a progressive leftist female writer of the time. Wirawan's paper highlights the need to consider the path of women's liberation beyond the politics of identity, as Rukiah herself suggested in her works, and, as such, the pressing importance to resume her liberation project in literature as an inspiration for women's political empowerment in Indonesia.

Lastly, Piyada Chonlaworn reads the work of Jit Phumisak (1930–66), one of the most radical and influential thinkers in Thai modern history. As a young man, Jit wrote essays; and in 1957 he published an important critique of the contemporary Thai political system, *Chom Na Sakdina Thai* (โฉมหน้าศักดินาไทย, The real face of Thai feudalism). Branded a Communist by the anti-Communist military junta of Sarit Thanarat, he was arrested and spent six years in jail. Upon his release in 1965, he joined the Communist Party of Thailand in the jungles of Phu Phan. In 1966, he was arrested again and killed by a local rightist in northeastern Thailand. Chonlaworn rereads Jit's classic work to shed light on the impact it had on his changing image through the 1970s to the present. She shows how his image was and is constructed (and popularized) by different political actors to suit their respective interests. Chonlaworn's paper illustrates how Jit, whether a true leftist or just an idealistic young man, represents, as a man of literature, a forgotten past and a hope for the future of Thailand. Remembering him is therefore key for the nation to heal from its social and political wounds in order to face the future. Interestingly, despite the lack of discussions on how relevant his literary works are to the present, the anniversary of the death of Jit Phumisak (allegedly on May 5) is always commemorated and reported in Thai media.

## Challenges Ahead

As Walden Bello notes in his reading of Ho Chi Minh's texts, to reread leftist writings is "to experience how a committed revolutionary with an agile mind sought to translate the concepts and ideas he was coming across as an international activist in Marxist-Leninist circles into the strategy, tactics, and organization that would successfully liberate a colonized country" (Bello 2007, xi). The texts discussed in this special issue also demonstrate

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5) On LEKRA, see Foulcher (1987).

the commitment of the authors and the relevance of their ideas today. They come to us not simply as testaments of their work and activism, but also as reminders of how the current state of affairs in Southeast Asia's nations is partly shaped by their writings. Although acts of banning, suppressing, and moderating these texts have created some historical gaps, the texts have not been completely forgotten. On the contrary, they remain to remind us of the diversity of thoughts, ideas, and artistic expressions that were once debated and experimented with in the shaping of Southeast Asian nations.

This special issue shows us that leftist writings are more than "alternative histories." They were written with a purpose to engage with the contemporary issues of their time and to offer critical reflections of those issues as a means of seeking solutions. The authors were not merely exercising their rights of expression but were aware of the social responsibility of their writing to debate and address contemporary problems. The writings were widely read and discussed by the public when they were first published and worked as catalysts for public discussion. As such, these works cannot be read in isolation from the social-political concerns these authors raised and their engagement in becoming part of the movement. With these writings we can see how the history of the nations in Southeast Asia was shaped, constructed, and imagined by the people who offered progressive thoughts for social change and political liberation in the region. These are the insights that young scholars in the region can draw lessons from for their works in today's society.

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