

Popular Music in Southeast Asia

Popular Music in Southeast Asia

Banal Beats, Muted Histories

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AUP

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Introduction

Not bound by national borders, popular music has been flowing across the world for over a century. It has been consumed and produced by many, including Southeast Asians. This book offers a concise history of popular music and its social meaning in Southeast Asia. It focuses on the Malay world; that is, present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, with an occasional sidestep to other parts of the region, such as the Philippines and Thailand. The period stretches from popular music's beginnings in the 'Jazz Age' of the 1920s and 1930s, to the first decade of the twenty-first century, with phenomena such as modern Muslim boy bands and digital music sharing.

Popular music matters. Besides offering people leisure, it also has deeper social meaning, and this deserves to be studied. The main thread of this book is how locally produced popular music came into being as a token of modern life, and as a terrain where people, performers, and audiences enjoyed as well as reflected on both the blessings and downsides of modern life in the twentieth century.

Each generation has its stock of cultural heroes and favourite popular tunes. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s the Javanese singer-actress Miss Riboet was one of the most popular performers in island and peninsular Southeast Asia and the first trans-local female celebrity in the Malay world. Her fame reached from Penang to Manila. She performed and recorded on gramophone an eclectic song repertoire from Javanese folk tunes to Arabic songs. In more recent times, the popular boy band Raihan attracted large crowds in Malaysia and Indonesia during the first decade of this century. Guided by beliefs on Islamic piety, moral purity, and facilitated by the latest in recording technologies, and admired by the rising orthodox middle classes and Muslim activists alike, Raihan merged Western popular music with Malay and Arabic music styles.

Miss Riboet and Raihan may be separated in time by more than fifty years, they have in common to have married the old with the new and to have connected local traditions with foreign cultural forms. In doing so, they transformed music into something that people conceived as novel and modern, yet at the same time as sufficiently recognizable. Moreover, their songs contained moral lessons, albeit based on different convictions, aimed at educating listeners in order to improve the human condition and to achieve a just society. While Riboet took a secular position, for Raihan religion was clearly a starting point. It is this mix of popular music's novelty *and* social relevance that appealed to large groups of people.

Muted sounds, obscured histories

We must bear in mind that, in spite of its long and persistent presence, popular music is ill-defined. The term 'popular' originally designated the notion of 'belonging to the people', but has been used pejoratively to mean 'low' or vulgar culture. Such qualifications indicate that the cultural and social meaning of the popular is questioned and even contested. A more neutral meaning is that of 'widely appreciated', and 'away from a top-down perspective', referring to people's own views. The term is also associated with the spread of mass media. Yet, such taken-for-granted connotations and generalizations tell us little about what popular music contained or meant to people in specific times and places. Popular music has been treated as trivial and banal. Its performers are often muted, and music-loving publics ignored. To gain an understanding of the meaning of popular music, it needs to be contextualized. *Popular Music in Southeast Asia* situates popular music in the specific socio-historical settings of Southeast Asia's cosmopolitan urban centres.

We can search historical textbooks in vain for mention of popular stars like Miss Riboet and Raihan, their careers, their songs as well as their audiences. Their social and cultural significance

has largely escaped academic attention. This is no doubt due to deeply ingrained elitist preconceptions of pop music as vulgar and meaningless entertainment for the masses, not worthy of study. Moreover, readings of the past that emphasized the nation and national cultural identity have subdued if not obscured the cross-border practices of innovative actors and their audiences. Hybrid popular music tends to blur or even challenge national identities, rather than enhance or consolidate them. Hence, popular culture habitually becomes the subject of discussion and confusion or, in the case of nationalist historiography, might even evoke opposition or even historical amnesia.

The publication *Dance of Life* (1998) by American historian Craig A. Lockard stands out as one of the few attempts to seriously consider Southeast Asian popular music as a political, social, and cultural force in its own right. Lockard's project was geared heavily towards popular music as a channel of political protest for Southeast Asian artists under post-colonial authoritarian regimes. *Popular Music in Southeast Asia* expands on his pioneering work while taking on the dynamic interplay between audiences, artists, and the culture industry. Its focus is on the lure of modernity in post-colonial as well as colonial settings.

The elusive phenomenon of modernity can be understood as a set of ideas about or even desire for the new, progress, individual choice, innovation, and social and cultural change. Modernity tells us how people thought about and dealt with life in a changing urban environment. Due to its innovative, hybrid, and cross-border nature, popular music, par excellence, has solicited discussions in Southeast Asia about what pertains to modern life.

Living the modern life

Southeast Asia's centuries-long history of trade, labour migration, and cross-cultural encounters in cities such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila yielded highly diversified