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MALAYSIA

Edited by YEOH SENG GUAN

Malaysia's entanglement with Western modernity has a long, agonistic, and ambivalent history. During the age of empires, the region now known as Malaysia became more closely linked to Europe through sea trade. From the standpoint of postcolonial nationalist history, however, the "golden era" of entrepot commerce is traced back to the fifteenth-century Malacca Sultanate before it fell to a succession of European powers beginning in the early sixteenth century. The Portuguese and Dutch rulers concentrated their colonial possessions on the ports of the Malay Peninsula. But from the late eighteenth century onward, the British progressively expanded their hold into the hinterland, crafting their rule in order to relay wealth extracted from cash crop plantations and mineral resources back to the metropolitan center of the British Empire. For this capitalist enterprise, they instituted liberal migration and land policies to attract a diverse influx of peoples from around the region as cheap and passive labor. To mitigate the religious uprisings faced in other parts of the British Empire, the British publicly accorded a special status to Islam and the sultans, while creating a new class of modernist English-speaking locals through Western education to fill up both the colonial and commercial bureaucracies. By the time of political independence in 1957, the combination of laissez-faire economics and racial divide-and-rule administrative policies coupled with the entrepreneurial drive of migrants had produced a culturally variegated but politically segregated ethnoscape. Foreign companies and local Chinese capitalists exerted strong commercial control, while the majority of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other minority ethnic groups were largely mired in comparative poverty. In short, imperialist and colonialist projects have produced shifting "structures

of feelings,”[1] which in turn have created (and elided) new modernist figures and social types over time.

In the postcolonial milieu, Malaysia’s dalliance with Western modernity has continued with a different ensemble of social actors. Arguably, under the long premiership of Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003), the very concept of modernity became significantly more comprehensive, far reaching, and vernacularized. Building on the gains and patronage networks cultivated through the epochal New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971–1990), when the economy witnessed an impressive average yearly growth rate of 8 percent,[2] Mahathir radically oriented the country’s economy toward manufacturing, construction, and finance. These economic gains legitimized more comprehensive attempts to guide and control the social meanings of modernity as well. For example, in 1991 Mahathir promulgated the grand narrative and catchphrase of Wawasan 2020 (“Vision 2020”), a social, political, and economic agenda that prescribes aspirational changes to the social body of Malaysia in order to become “developed” by the year 2020. Its futuristic, neoliberal, and entrepreneurial themes particularly resonated with the elites, the politically well connected, and the aspirations of a sizeable middle class of the two largest ethnic groups in the country, the Malays and the Chinese.

Malaysia’s polychromatic and largely harmonious ethnoreligious populace, often touted as a multicultural exemplar for other countries, has nevertheless attracted close surveillance and tight management by the government. As an antidote to the pathological problems of “race” and “religion” undermining social cohesion and wealth generation, the Mahathir administration constructed the transethnic figure of Bangsa Malaysia (“Malaysian Race”), supposedly to supersede the ethnosegregationist ethos stemming from the colonial period. Paradoxically, this project also envisaged the Malay component of the composite Bangsa Malaysia transfiguring into a Melayu Baru (“New Malay”). The Melayu Baru was both an individual and a class, revolutionized through the social and cultural capital of cutting-edge skills, abilities, and—most important of all—a can-do mindset approximating those of the entrepreneurial Malaysian Chinese commercial and educated class.

The Malaysian government resists overt “class analysis,” which remains stigmatized due to its association with the robust (but eventually failed) communist insurgency that unfolded in the aftermath of World War II. Before the collapse of the USSR, the ghostly figures of the “Marxist” or the “Communist” were thus viewed as radical threats to national security, to be vigilantly weeded out. In October 1987, while facing political opposition and mounting public criticism, Mahathir infamously invoked the Internal Security Act to detain a total of 107 individuals without recourse to trial. Many of

the victims had been critical of Mahathir's brand of authoritarian leadership and the kind of economic trajectory being crafted, while groups expressing Malay-Muslim supremacist sentiments were not reined in for fear of political backlash. Referring to centuries in which Malaysia's population of various religious and ethnic ancestries have lived in peaceful coexistence, observers note that deepening intraethnic class divisions are a consequence of the intense resource competition created by Mahathir's neoliberal economic and privatization policies but inflected through a racialized grammar.

Another cornerstone of the great leap forward lay in recalibrating the relationship between the secular and the sacred for Malay-Muslim citizens. In addition to punitive actions against "deviant" Islamic sects, a key amendment to Article 121 (1A) of the Federal Constitution removed the jurisdiction of the civil courts over Islamic affairs and in effect created two spheres of jurisdiction between the civil and the Shariah criminal courts.[3] For critics, it signaled a hollowing out of the secular state (guaranteed by the Federal Constitution) on the one hand and a "nationalization of Islam" on the other.[4]

Even after his official retirement as premier in 2003, the imprints and ethos of Mahathir's distinctive pugnacious and visionary authoritarianism remain palpable. At the ocular level, the many iconic structures in Kuala Lumpur (the hypermodern KLCC Twin Towers in particular) and megaconstruction projects around the country launched during his administration stand out as emblems of an explicit engagement with a globalizing modernity. More subliminally, the specter of "Mahathirism" pervades the collective psyche of Malaysian politics, whether as an ethos of governance to be emulated or to be mitigated by future premiers. His chosen successor, Abdullah Badawi, lost Mahathir's favor after stopping or stalling some of his pet megaprojects and was replaced by Najib Abdul Razak. Keenly exploiting new media and modern communication technologies, Premier Najib has once again reasserted the motifs of modernity that have long framed Malaysian political discourse. While the slogans of Wawasan 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia have not vanished from the landscape, the strong visuals and populist discourse of "1Malaysia" have come more forcefully to the foreground. The rationale for all this aspirational activity is explained, in typical fashion, as enabling all Malaysians of finally grasping the prized holy grail of development and modernity.

If entangling with changing forms of modernity is the long thread running through Malaysian history, the figures in this section explore and clarify Malaysia's own vernacularized version of modernity and its corresponding proponents and critics. Schottmann's piece provides a convenient starting point, offering insights into the imaginary of an irrepressible National Leader largely responsible for shifting much of Malaysian ground realities in recent

times. Against this shift, or perhaps because of it, Hoffstaedter's portrait of the Reactionary gives us a close-up view of a vociferous segment of the Malay-Muslim population that has viewed their privileged position as under attack with the emergent policies of the ruling government and opposition front. The persona of another kind of critic in the mold of a "public intellectual" is sketched by Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied: in this case, the Scholar-Musician is a well-known Malaysian anthropologist and a musician.

Other renditions of how Malaysian identity cultural politics are contested in this particular historical moment can be gleaned in the cluster of pieces by Khoo Gaik-Cheng (the Political Satirist), Rusaslina Idrus (Hang Tuah, Revisited), and Julian Lee (the Supra-Ethnic Malaysian). In all of them, we see the utility of satire, humor, and fictional (and quasi-fictional) figures in the rhizomatic medium of cyberspace in reworking foundational identity or truth claims. Hang Tuah, Revisited clues us into creative speculations as to the true ethnic origins of the legendary seventeenth-century warriors, Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, long held up as role models for modern Malay politics. Whereas the singularity and authenticity of ethnic origins is the bone of contention in Rusaslina's piece, the Mak Bedah theatrical figure sidesteps these concerns (Julian Lee). Played by various women of different ethnic origins (albeit with identical signature dressing) during the campaign period of the 2008 general elections, her youthful appeal lay in the cosmopolitan and culturally hybrid sentiments of Internet-savvy urbanites based in the capital city. On a similar key, but perhaps much more damaging to the status quo, is Khoo's discussion of online satire and parody mocking the hypocrisy of Malaysian politics. As elsewhere, the power of laughter has invited threats by the current government to legislate and enforce cyber laws despite assurances by the Mahathir administration several years ago that Internet censorship will be abhorred.

The last cluster presents figures that narrate the intersections between urbanism, modernism, and local-level entrepreneurialism. The Squatter (Yeoh Seng Guan) tells of the radical transformation of modes of housing in Kuala Lumpur set in motion during the Mahathir administration and the attempts by those afflicted to preserve more familiar ways of living. Although the Returning Urbanite (Matthew Amster) is situated in the isolated highlands of Sarawak, it is evident that the pervasive imaginary of "curricular urbanism" has wrought its magic, motivating its young residents to migrate to the urban centers for work and more.[5] In this particular instance, we read of a rare reversal and the unsettling disjunctions experienced in returning to his homeland. Finally, the Timber Entrepreneur (Michael Eilenberg), focusing on an individual who has seemingly mastered the art of border crossings

for economic gain, is perhaps an apt metaphor for this collection. In attending to the myriad governmentalities of a globalizing world, the many figures who inhabit the space of the postcolonial moderns have to learn to be conversant with cultural complexity or else cease to exist in the same ethos as during Western colonial rule, when emergent "structures of feelings" beckoned new modern figures into being even as older ones were ruled out of favor.

National Leader

SVEN ALEXANDER SCHOTTMANN

"I have always been convinced by the teachings of Islam, but I have also always been very critical of how Muslims interpreted them," Malaysia's former prime minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad told me when I first interviewed him in his study at the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Putrajaya in 2008. The ornate Qur'anic calligraphy (Ayat al-Kursi) and the leather-bound tomes (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*) on the wall behind his desk served as visual cues to the particular type of modernity that he had sought to encourage among Malaysians. "I asked myself: *Why do Muslims fail?*" Mahathir continued. "Wherever Muslims are, they lag behind others. . . . People around me said that this is because this world is not for us, but I never accepted that sort of escapism."

Along with Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and Indonesia's longtime ruler Suharto, Mahathir is one of Southeast Asia's most important late-twentieth-century statesmen.[6] The political biographies of these leaders amalgamate into one of the most iconic figures of Southeast Asian modernity: the postcolonial nation builder. Himself a product of the social change that had taken place over the previous fifty years, the national leader tended to be driven by visions of social transformation through economic growth. The frequently authoritarian national leader sought to accelerate his country's economic modernization while maintaining its cultural distinctiveness, with the underlying belief that modernity was attainable through conscious borrowing from East and West even as the "redeemable" aspects of local cultures and traditions could be retained.

Mahathir sought to lay out the path by which Malaysians could *menjadi moden,* or "become modern." He held that religion could help the Malay majority population (all of whom are assumed and asserted to be Sunni Muslims) discern those aspects of the modern world that could profitably be adopted from those that should be rejected.[7] All national leaders had to grapple with the need for reconciling tradition with political, social, and economic modernity, but Mahathir (who actually had little formal religious education)

went further than others in making the point that religion could provide an inspiration for Southeast Asian modernities, and that it could provide a shield from the ravages of the modern age.

In Mahathir's view, there was nothing in Islam itself that would have prevented the eventual emergence of "modernity" among Muslims. At times, he even appeared to hint at the possibility of "multiple modernities," arguing for instance that the particular mode and trajectory of modernity as experienced by Western Europe after the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was not universal.[8] Modernity in the Muslim world, Mahathir hypothesized, might well turn out to be of a very different nature altogether.[9]

The two-pronged objective of Mahathir's engagement with Islam (demonstrating that what he invariably referred to as "correctly understood Islam" remained within the Sunni orthodoxy *and* that there was indeed such a thing as a "modern Muslim") marks him as someone seeking to find a synthesis between Islam and the Western-articulated status quo. He was an enthusiastic advocate of modernization, at least in its economic and scientific-technological guises, but he also appeared to be genuinely convinced that the wholesale adoption of the Western model of modernity was unlikely to be successful in the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa more generally and in the Muslim world in particular.[10]

Mahathir argued that Islam would help modulate modernity in predominantly Muslim countries such as Malaysia—in much the same way Islam had acted as a conduit for new ideas, art forms, and technologies in previous centuries. Like other modernist-oriented Muslims before him, Mahathir argued that all the faithful had to do was to return to the pristine understanding of their religion and cleanse their beliefs and practices of the superstitions, heterodoxy, fatalism, and irrationality that had led to the current intellectual, economic, and cultural impasses. Mahathir argued that a return to "correctly understood Islam"—and there was no doubt whose interpretation of Islam was correct—would help resolve what he increasingly saw as the "Muslim dilemma" of poverty and political subjugation.[11]

Mahathir stands emblematically for the embrace of economic but not cultural modernity that seems characteristic of the generation of leaders that came to power after the 1960s. His engagement with Islam and his attempt to articulate a "proper understanding" of the religion's teachings certainly reflect this line of thought, which also underlay the "Asian values" debate of the early 1990s. Mahathir and other socially conservative but economically liberal-oriented leaders argued that "Asian" values such as consensus-mindedness or communitarian thinking had played a major role in bringing about the economic transformations of East Asia.

Like his counterparts in Singapore or Jakarta, Mahathir's vision of modernity can be simplified as the enthusiastic embrace of skyscrapers, motorways, and shopping malls and the resolute rejection of hedonism, individualism, and permissiveness. As prime minister, he repeatedly made the point that Malaysians and Muslims "were not ready" for what he saw as the excessive social freedoms he linked with the Western model of modernity.[12] After retiring in 2003, Mahathir continued his engagement with the questions of Malaysian modernity—multiculturalism, democracy, progress—through his distinctly modern medium of choice, the blog.[13]

The specific path that Mahathir charted for Malaysia's modernization—and in particular his answers to questions as to the compatibility of Islam and modernity—set him apart from Southeast Asian's other modernizer-statesmen, a handful of late-twentieth-century leaders who have been given great leeway in reshaping entire societies. Parallels with Lee Kuan Yew or Suharto's attempts to identify "authentic" trajectories toward modernity are reminders of the usefulness of approaching Southeast Asian modernity in terms of figures. At the same time, each national leader himself is of course the uniquely configured composite of many other figures of Southeast Asian modernity. In the case of Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir, these might be the colonial subaltern, the Muslim modernist, the nationalist, or even the blogger. The multiple temporalities and sometimes contradictory qualities inhering in these figures underscore the eclecticism and complexity of the vision of modernity articulated by one of Southeast Asia's best-known national leaders.

Reactionary

GERHARD HOFFSTAEDTER

I met Taib at a PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) fundraiser in Klang in Selangor. PAS is an Islamist party that draws its support mainly from Malay Muslims, making it the key opponent of the ruling UMNO (United Malays National Organisation). Nik Aziz, the spiritual leader of PAS, spoke at the event about how to further Islamize the Malaysian state and society. Taib and I were seated at the same table, and a conversation around Islam and its role in politics and everyday life ensued. He informed me that he was not a PAS member but was interested in their views and that he was setting up an NGO himself, tentatively called "Brothers in Islam." The name (wrongly) suggested an affinity with Sisters in Islam, a prominent progressive women's rights organization. We agreed to meet later in the week to discuss his plans.

Reactionaries in Malaysia are difficult to define as a group. What are they

reacting against? To what status do they want society and the state to revert? These make for difficult questions. One thing is clear, though: reactionary forces are on the rise and, despite their small numbers, are exerting disproportionate influence on the country's future. They have managed to define a series of battlegrounds against the progressives and have made their stand vociferously enough to be noticed. Thus, the federal government is meeting many of their demands. The main battle lines are around Islam and Malayness, traditionally sacrosanct identifiers for the majority of Malaysians, which remain at the heart of Malaysia's continuing racialized politics.

Taib is Malay but has a Chinese mother who converted to Islam for marriage. Thus his heritage exemplifies the ethnic fluidity and hybridity of maritime Southeast Asia. However, Taib's life experience and political-cum-social outlook locate him within the current simmering tension of identity politics. He sees himself as someone straddling the border between competing identities, a position that has led him to even more fervently affirm one identity over the other. His zealousness should at least in part be understood as a response to this ambivalence, as his social position is by no means "natural," "organic" or "given." Taib's Malay and Muslim identity thus demands constant clarification and performance.

Taib, recently retired from a management role with a major multinational company, devoted his spare time to studying the Qur'an. With an early retirement age in Malaysia, many middle- and upper-class retirees devote some time to study groups, lectures, and private study. His wife is a sharifa, a putative descendant of the prophet Muhammad. While Taib argued that she had previously neglected her religious bloodline, she was now also retired and attending classes on Islam. Her mother's side descended from a cadet branch of Perak's royal family, and marrying into her family offered Taib a dual gateway into Malayness and Islamic identity.

Taib recounted that his wife takes being Muslim for granted, whereas he was "fortunate" to be a Muslim and described it as a "treasure that has been given to him." Thus he sees it as his duty to protect this treasure and make others aware of their duties as beneficiaries of the gift of religious truth and certainty. On another occasion, he described faith as a gift (*hidaya*) bestowed on the believer that brings with it the responsibility to protect it. This conceptualization is shared among many reactionaries who claim that Muslims have neglected their religious duties and adopted Western ways.

Like other reactionaries before him, Taib blamed the government for a string of failures to protect and promote Islam properly, provide Malays with adequate help, and institute Islamic law. Taib's emphasis on current failures best illustrates the reactionaries' project of restoration: their wish to return

to an often imagined past where Malay rulers were sovereign and people were subject to *adat* (customary, especially religious, laws) rather than a secular constitution. The restoration thus differs from previous modernist and reformist movements such as the *kaum muda* (young generation) in the early 1900s that sought to reform Islam in the face of tradition and contained an emphasis on equality. Taib and his organization are part of an elite that feels ignored. Thus, he sees it as his role to push the government into his way of seeing things. The purity of Islam and the defense of Islam as the supreme religion of the land feature strongly in his vision of what his organization stands for. This makes apostasy/conversion a key battleground to maintain a numerical supremacy of Muslim followers. Taib turned out to have been a pivotal figure in filing the police report against the church that christened Lina Joy, or Azlina Jailani as she was previously known. This case of a Malay converting to Christianity shook the nation through 2006, with the High Court ruling that it had no jurisdiction over Muslims—making apostasy from Islam legally impossible in Malaysia. Malayness is featured too, as Malays enjoy special rights as enshrined in the constitution and economically through the NEP (New Economic Policy) and its successor programs. Malayness is thus a potent identity marker of difference against non-Muslims on the one hand and other ethnic groups on the other.

In the end, the organization Taib founded was called Muslim Brothers (which recalls the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt), and it is a prime example of how Islam and Malay rights intertwine and have become almost synonymous in contemporary Malaysian identity politics. Reactionaries are potent because they can stir unrest among Malays over issues such as the special position for Malays, staging protests, and demanding that UMNO politicians agree to their demands. Reactionaries aim to maintain the racial privileges the postcolonial nation-state gave them, while seeking to forget the plural past and silence the multicultural present as alternative visions. Perkasa, for instance, a nongovernmental organization that has hit the headlines recently as protector of the Malays and their political as well as economic rights, remains couched in a thoroughly Islamic imagery and symbols.

Having melded Islam to Malayness in this way makes any debate around issues of affirmative action for Malays, the role of Islam in politics, or the place of Islamic law nearly impossible. That is precisely what the reactionaries, defending an unstable status quo, want. The Malaysian body politic thus remains rooted in silences about its past, present, and future, with reactionaries fiercely guarding Malay and Islamic supremacy as both become ever more challenged and untenable.

Scholar-Musician

SYED MUHD KHAIRUDIN ALJUNIED

Wan Zawawi is no ordinary professor of social anthropology. Charming, cheerful, outgoing, with his radical side symbolized by his longish hair, he is known to many as a scholar who has written influential works about peasants, indigenous peoples, and subalterns at the periphery of Malaysia's development.[14] What is less well known is that he is a man of culture with refined literary tastes. A poet and a musician, his poetry reflects the anxieties of daily life in modern Malaysia, while his passion for music stems from his belief that he was endowed with musical talent at an early age. But it was life in the villages of eastern Malaysia and the many years of study in suburban Australia that instilled in him a conception of life as both a journey and a struggle to alter the conditions of his society. Today he often performs in concerts and gigs, not for the money but because he believes that he can reform society through his music. "There is no social space or physical space to perform these days," he says. "Music performances get raided every time by the authorities. But we need these spaces for the young people to perform, to express themselves, because music cuts through the races. It is a multicultural fox. Just like the independent film scene. You see Malays, Chinese, and Indians performing together, and this is good for Malaysia."

These words tell us much about the tensions in Zawawi's mind and in the minds of many Malaysians like him in the face of what is now commonly termed "Malaysian modernity," a concept that involves the fusion of Malay communalism and the Islamic ethos with selected aspects of Western developmentalism.[15] The effects of this hybridized version of modernity have been felt most strongly by those active in the creative arts scene, because the cosmopolitan ideals that inform the arts are curbed and stifled by an ethno-Islamicized bureaucracy determined to steer Malays toward political predominance at the expense of Malaysians of other races. The bureaucracy sees musical performances as crucial influences in the lives of young Malay-Muslim-Malaysians—influences that must be controlled and prevented from being tainted by the "Western" and "liberal" music promoted by Zawawi.[16]

Impediments put in place by the state breed resistance by the citizenry. Zawawi pulls no punches in his criticism of all agencies that oppose his beliefs. Little wonder then that, like most organic intellectuals, he has never stayed for long in any Malaysian university. When the *Malaysian Idol* winner Jacelyn Victor was accused in 2005 of being "morally decadent" and turning youths away from "Asian values," Zawawi responded by using the same discursive tools used by the majority Malay-Muslim populace. A singing competition,

according to him, serves "as a powerful tool to promote the *muhibbah* [goodwill] spirit among Malaysians. *Malaysian Idol* is an example of pop culture which has created social spaces for youngsters of different ethnic groups to come together."[17]

And yet for all his criticism of the limiting of space for the arts, Zawawi remains committed to other prevailing imaginings of what "Malaysia" is. This deeper tension arises partly from his own background as a child of Malaysian modernity and a "Malay" whose roots can be traced to the coast of Trengganu, which plays out in Zawawi's writings and in his music. He accepts the categorization of "Malays," "Chinese," "Indians," and "Orang Asli" to describe the Malaysian ethnoscape. Fully aware that these reified identities were born out of the colonial experience, Zawawi's approach to dealing with what has been invented is not to reinvent but to level off and syncretize differences between differing groups and between the haves and the have-nots through pop culture, an approach that is reminiscent of his musical idols—Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen.[18]

Nor does Zawawi deny the reality of Malaysia as a geobody. In fact, his energies are directed toward affirming that the nation-state and its borders hold true and must always be remembered. Here, Zawawi agrees with many nationalists who share the same thematic concerns and premises of the colonialists, despite the problems inherent in these premises. While opposed to the rule of difference and the capitalist economy imposed by the Europeans, Malaysian scholars and artists embrace the notions of progress and territorial borders that are essential to the colonial and postcolonial projects alike.[19]

But we must not take this argument so far as to lose sight of the nuances in Zawawi's appropriations of the colonial inheritance. For Zawawi, it is futile to romanticize about the glories of the Malay past and downright irresponsible for any Malaysian to forget the array of changes, transformations, and problems that colonialism has wrought upon the contemporary moment. Postcoloniality is here to stay, and the task of a scholar and a man of the arts is to make known these subjectivities and chart the possible pathways for the future by deriving lessons from the past. He sees anthropology as a discipline that can capture the lived experiences and voices of peoples consigned to the margins of the nation, and he sees his music and poetry as the means to popularize his aspirations and his feelings about the world and its forgotten spaces and locations. In his words, "I've always regarded my music as a way of anthropologizing and as a way to get away from the formalized language of academe—where I can use adjectives and express emotions—although to some extent my postmodernist anthropology gives me the space to let my informants speak."

Although Zawawi makes no claims to success, he is convinced that being a scholar-musician in Malaysia with a heart for the people is a perilous passage worth taking.

Hang Tuah, Revisited

RUSASLINA IDRUS

For several years now, an e-mail titled "The Truth Revealed" has been circulating in the Malaysian cybersphere. As the title implies, the e-mail tells of a conspiracy, a government cover-up concealing the "true" identity of Malaysia's most famous folk hero, Hang Tuah. There are several versions circulating, but the story pretty much goes like this: In 1998, the Malaysian government commissioned an international team of scientists to analyze the graves of Hang Tuah and his compatriots. DNA analysis conducted by a "team of scientists, archaeologists, historians, and other technical staff from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, Yemen and Russia" revealed that the much-revered fifteenth-century Malay warrior was actually . . . Chinese! The e-mail claims that the Malaysian government concealed this shocking revelation and since then has erased Hang Tuah from history textbooks. The author of the e-mail further explains that Hang Tuah and his compatriots were Muslim Chinese who had been sent by the emperor of China to Malacca to protect "the ungrateful Malay Sultanate" from the Kingdom of Siam. In one version, to further bolster the "scientific" authority of the alleged research, a reference is made to the "Federal Association of Arc and Research of Michigan, USA."[20]

Hang Tuah is the quintessential Malay warrior. First mentioned in the seventeenth-century court document *Sulalat al-Salatin,*[21] Hang Tuah is also the central figure in *Hikayat Hang Tuah,* a literary work believed to have been written about the same time.[22] The mythical legend of Hang Tuah has had an everlasting appeal, told and retold in many forms, from theater productions to children's comic books to box-office movies. As the legend goes, Hang Tuah was a warrior who not only had great strength and mystical powers but displayed unwavering and unquestioning loyalty to the sultan. In a Malay feudal society, Hang Tuah epitomizes the perfect subject.

Hang Tuah's famous statement, "*Takkan Melayu hilang di dunia*" (Never shall the Malays cease to be), is the rallying cry for the Malay nationalist party, UMNO.[23] Hang Tuah had been written into the narrative of Malay special rights by *keris*-wielding,[24] ultra-Malay nationalists, who reinterpret his staunch defense of the Malay Sultanate as a defense for the special position of the Malays as the "sons of the soil" (*bumiputera*) versus the non-*bumiputera*

(namely, the Chinese and Indians). Designed to ease the deep tensions made so clear in the racial riots of 1969, the special position of the Malays was asserted through acts like the New Economic Policy instituted in 1971. Originally intended to operate like an affirmative action policy meant to balance economic disparity among the racial groups, this policy has over time been misused to argue for innate special privileges for the Malays, causing tension among the different groups.

The lore that Hang Tuah is really Chinese is actually not new. I heard this as a child growing up in Malaysia, and it has also been referred to in popular culture, as in Yasmin Ahmad's 2004 movie, *Sepet.* As many have pointed out, the name "Hang Too Ah" sounds uncannily Chinese and suggests that he might have been related to Hang Li Po, the famous Chinese princess who was sent to Malacca to marry the sultan. Working with Orang Asli (non-Malay indigenous groups) communities for my dissertation research, I also became aware of a different Hang Tuah origin story, in which he came from the Orang Laut clan that was instrumental in helping Parameswara build the Malaccan Empire.[25]

In this cyberlegend, Hang Tuah, the accidental spokesperson for Malay rights, is appropriated as the hero of the non-Malay Other. While open discussion challenging Malay rights is illegal in Malaysia, the e-mail, facilitated by the anonymity of e-mail monikers and the "safe" space of the Internet, has generated heated debates wherever it has been posted on online forums. In one online forum, 599 comments have been made since 2007, and the thread remains active three years later. The comments range from explosively racist remarks to ones that try to inject reason into the conversation.

While this can be dismissed as yet another viral e-mail, its persistent circulation and the heated discussions it solicits suggest a more important story being told here. As folklorist Alan Dundes argues, "Myth may constitute the highest form of truth, albeit in metaphorical guise."[26] This cyberlegend or myth, like other urban legends and folklore, reflects the "hopes, fears and anxieties" of the society it circulates in.[27] The debate over the ethnic origins of Hang Tuah reflects the deep sense of frustration and anxiety among non-Malay Malaysians responding to the rise of ultra-Malay nationalists in recent years. It also can be read as an ongoing act of rewriting history by politically marginalized communities whose pivotal contributions to nation building have been increasingly sidelined. In textbooks, the Malay-centric history (that starts with the glory days of the Malaccan Empire, of which Hang Tuah is part) has become the official national history, silencing the role of the diverse community in making Malaysia what it is today.

Another fascinating twist to this legend is not only the reinterpretation of

a traditional symbol of Malayness but the use of science in making the argument. The evocation of "scientific evidence" and the authority of international scientists tap into a modern Malaysia where science is highly valued. In a transnational world where American technoscience television dramas like *CSI* and *Bones* have entered Malaysian popular culture, the lingo of DNA analysis is no longer foreign.[28] The same people watching these shows tune in to alternative political news on their laptops. This techno-savvy generation of young Malaysians grew up knowing Malaysia as their only homeland and is invested in making their sense of belonging known. The legend of the ethnically ambiguous Tuah reveals the struggles of non-Malay Malaysians in asserting their place in a country they call home. Hang Tuah, the traditional Malay icon, the loyal, unquestioning subject, ironically becomes a space to challenge the hegemonic narrative of the state—a vessel for assertion of belonging and citizenry rights.

Supra-Ethnic Malaysian

JULIAN C. H. LEE

Six of us were piled cheek-by-jowl in a grey Hyundai, zooming through the night along the back streets of Kuala Lumpur, chasing a moving target. That target was a well-known female politician on the campaign trail during the 2008 general elections. Of the six people in the car, only two of us were male. The other four were women—the same woman: Aunty Bedah.

When a stream of honking and cheering motorbikes and cars went by in the other direction, the Aunty Bedah who was driving did a hasty U-turn and followed the red taillights of the candidate's entourage. We arrived at last in the heart of Little India. Aunty Bedah parked the Hyundai illegally and out tumbled four women, each in a loose purple head covering that is frequently, though not exclusively, worn by Muslim women, and each with a T-shirt sporting the slogan "Shopping for a Real Candidate." While each woman was a women's rights activist with her own identity, when she was attired this way and sporting banners calling for women to be better represented in politics, each was also Aunty Bedah. Two male supporters followed Aunty Bedah: her videographer and me, generic provider of moral support.

Aunty Bedah was the creation of members of the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) in 2008. WCI is a loose organization of women's rights activists who seek to increase the proportion of women in Malaysia's parliament and who are willing to pursue women's rights and not be distracted by Malaysia's overbearing ethnopolitics. WCI principally regards its work as rendering practical help in the campaigns of independent female candidates.

However, just a few days before the beginning of the 2008 election campaign period, WCI's candidate, Zaitun "Toni" Kasim, withdrew her candidacy owing to health problems. Failing to find a replacement at short notice, WCI members developed a voter education campaign revolving around the character of Aunty Bedah.

According to the campaign story, Aunty Bedah entered the political scene because Zaitun's withdrawal compelled her to speak up for women's rights and to improve women's participation in Malaysia's parliament (which has hovered around the 10 percent mark for the last ten years). Aunty Bedah was crafted as an "average Malaysian woman" who spoke in *rojak,* a term that means "salad" but also refers to a kind of speech that blends any number of the languages in common use in Malaysia.

Although constructed as a single character, Aunty Bedah was played at any given time by a multiethnic mix of female WCI members. Importantly, the composition of these members served to make her public appearances a theatrical event and to turn Aunty Bedah into an ethnically hybridized Malaysian woman. The ethnically, religiously, and linguistically ambiguous character of Aunty Bedah was a product of urban Kuala Lumpur, where practices that traverse identity markers are relatively common and where political concerns that go beyond ethnic politics may more easily congeal.

The Malaysian public became aware of Aunty Bedah through numerous newspaper articles and front-page features bearing her image. YouTube videos featured Aunty Bedah singing spoofs of various pop hits such as "Bedahlicious" (from "Bootylicious"), "Bring Democracy Back" (from "Bringing Sexy Back"), and "Dontcha Wish Your MP Was Good Like Me" (from "Dontcha Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me"). These videos were seen as important ways to engage with younger and otherwise depoliticized Malaysians and as a way of attracting media attention to the views of WCI.

Aunty Bedah's principal activity, however, was to approach candidates while they were campaigning and publicly seek their views on issues relating to sexism in Parliament, women's rights, and political representation. She presented herself as ostensibly "shopping" for an appropriate candidate on whom to "spend" her vote. Aunty Bedah (and her male supporters) would then make candidates' answers a matter of public record by describing them on her blog or uploading videos onto YouTube so other voters could make their own judgments.

On some occasions, Aunty Bedah and her multiple avatars received very positive reactions from candidates. On other occasions she was gruffly ignored or delivered beguiling sophisms and rhetorical spin by practiced politicians.

She was also shouted at and jostled, and in one instance hostile supporters of a candidate well known for making sexist remarks snatched away and broke a political placard she was carrying. On the night that we spilled out of the grey Hyundai in Little India, we were not sure what reaction Aunty Bedah would receive. Would the five-hundred-strong crowd have patience for a few women's rights activists?

As it happened, things went well. Probably mistaking us for part of the candidate's entourage, the crowd parted to give Aunty Bedah an easy path to the stage. Once there, one of the Aunty Bedahs spoke with the candidate while other politicians addressed the crowd. Aunty Bedah's report of the discussion indicated that the candidate seemed genuinely surprised by some of Aunty Bedah's revelations. Whether it was owing to this encounter or not, this candidate's party later instituted a policy ensuring that at least 30 percent of decision-making positions in the party would be reserved for women.

Although Aunty Bedah is a fictional creation uniquely associated with the 2008 WCI political campaign, her persona manifests the stereotype of an urban, ethnically hybridized Malaysian. Indeed, her fictionality probably realizes this stereotype better than any real person could. Aunty Bedah appears to come from every major ethnic group in Malaysia, while belonging to none. While Malaysian politics have historically been strongly marked by ethnoreligious concerns, recent scholarship in Malaysia suggests that ethnic identities are losing some of their strength in defining urban political agendas. The electoral advances of two avowedly ethnically unaligned parties in the 2008 general election appear to support this contention. So too does an informal campaign (on Facebook and elsewhere) encouraging Malaysians of all ethnic groups to use the word *macha,* which approximately means "mate" and is otherwise confined to minority Tamil-speaking Malaysians. The phenomenon of Aunty Bedah, a supra-ethnic Malaysian whose activism prioritizes women's rights over any identifiable ethnic agenda, is one more symptom of this shifting political ground.

Political Satirist (*Lawak Educated or Lawak Pakai Tie*)

KHOO GAIK CHENG

On February 19, 2009, satirist blogger Hassan Skodeng quietly posted his first hilarious article, "Perak MB [Chief Minister] tussle to be decided in shootout" on a Web page that had a picture of a long-nosed Pinocchio with the caption, "The truth is out there (Not in here)." It featured pictures of real politicians who were battling over who had the political legitimacy to lead

the Perak state government and was written like a news article, not unlike mock features in the American satirical "newspaper," *The Onion*. Its humorous exaggeration plays on the farcical reality that is Malaysian culture, qualifying Hassan Skodeng as part of a new breed of *lawak educated* to have emerged since the twelfth general elections in March 2008, when the Opposition made its first substantial political gains against the UMNO, which had controlled politics since 1969.

Despite the presence of individual satirists like Hassan Skodeng and political cartoonist Zunar, *lawak educated* is not the sole monopoly of individual satirists but is deployed by various cultural actors and commentators when necessary. Coined by blogger Tokjeng to describe the satirical online news program *That Effing Show, lawak educated* means "educated humor/buffoon" or "humor for tie-wearers," as the alternative term *lawak pakai tie* suggests. Established by a group of twenty-something liberal Malaysian men in early 2010, the ultra-hip show is based on cutting humor and sober observations about the weekly news in politics, culture, and entertainment. A casual low-budget program carried out in a small studio conducted mostly in English with a smattering of other Malaysian languages, the show speaks to urban, Internet-savvy young Malaysians who are cosmopolitan, cynical, and looking for creative and entertaining ways to discuss local affairs. *Lawak educated* connotes a mature audience able to divine the line between fact and creative license and to understand fine nuances of irony often lacking in the mainstream discourse of Malaysian politics. More importantly, it works on the assumption that its audience consists of critical-minded, rational individuals able to see through the morally vacuous pronouncements by politicians in the mainstream media. *That Effing Show* reflects the changing face of Malaysia and a renewed sense of democratization.

But *lawak educated* is not a new phenomenon, nor is the *lawak pakai tie* a twenty-first-century Malaysian figure. The political satirist is a modern Malaysian figure who emerged first from a secular British colonial education system and who continues to be open to the influences of cultural globalization. The specifically Malaysian *lawak educated* is a hybrid creature premised on bilingualism (English and Malay) and multiculturalism.

Historically speaking, as early as the 1930s Malay language newspapers such as *Utusan Melayu* and *Lembaga Melayu* published cartoons that satirized the economic and political conditions under British colonial rule.[29] After independence, political cartooning reached its height of popularity in the late 1980s during intense political and economic times.[30] The 1987 crackdown on dissent under Operation Lalang,[31] failed government projects, and government-linked corporate fraud provided fodder for more satire on stage.

Operation Lalang inspired Kee Thuan Chye's play *The Big Purge* (1988) and gave birth to Instant Café Theatre (ICT), a company of multiethnic performers and theater activists who "used clowning and singing as a means of questioning key issues of cultural identity and trauma."[32] ICT lampooned the politics of the day throughout the 1990s, particularly the megaprojects and corruption scandals that accompanied Mahathir's nationalist ambitions. Additionally, the political satire sparked by the Reformasi in 1998 and the numerous controversies leading up to the 2008 elections prove that the genre thrives under sociopolitical circumstances perceived as unjust and repressive.

Compared to the heavily controlled mainstream media channels and numerous layers of bureaucracy and policies that limit dissent,[33] the rise of Internet technology and the promise of a censorship-free democratic space under Mahathir's Multimedia Super Corridor facilitated the migration of the *lawak educated* from small Kuala Lumpur theaters onto the Internet, where it commands a larger and newer audience. Thus the Internet becomes the space for asking searching questions and a place where information can supposedly freely flow from peer to peer instead of top-down or bottom-up. Although satire takes the form of cartoons, theater productions, stand-up comedy, literature, and art, the introduction of do-it-yourself digital technology has given rise to new forms of online satire. For example, there are satirical blogs or political culture jamming, such as doctored film posters and the twice-parodied film clip of *Downfall* on YouTube.

Online satire and parody is exempt from censorship under the Communications and Multimedia Forum of Malaysia content code (Article 7.3). But this does not prevent the government from arresting and threatening to prosecute satirical bloggers and cartoonists under the Official Secrets Act, Sedition Act, Penal Code, or even the above Multimedia Act.[34] Indeed, Hassan Skodeng was charged for posting misinformation with malicious intent for his 2010 April Fool's Day prank, "TNB to sue WWF [World Wildlife Fund] over earth hour."[35]

The Malaysian satirist is unlikely to disappear. Current politics have become farcical, making it difficult to distinguish between serious fact and the stuff of fiction, as the National Alliance government sacrifices long-term national goals for short-term irrational policies that address form but are devoid of content and potentially destructive. Despite the disclaimers on their Web sites, the *lawak educated* and their audience recognize the power of satire to speak truth to power and to draw humorous attention to state hypocrisy and political absurdities. This speaks well of the intellectual maturity of the Malaysian audience, which, while still limited to the urban middle class, may well be expanding.

Squatter (*Penduduk Setinggan*)

YEOH SENG GUAN

Since the middle of 2009, Subramaniam has been sending me mobile phone text messages, sometimes on a daily basis over a short duration of time. Usually they are aphorisms and prayerful statements on counting one's daily blessings. Occasionally, they are updates on the status of his urban *kampung* (village, sometimes spelled *kampong*) earmarked for demolition by Kuala Lumpur City Hall.

His *kampung* was situated within a former railway township now undergoing rapid redevelopment and gentrification. Thousands of modest railway workers' quarters built several decades earlier—some at the beginning of the twentieth century—have been progressively demolished over the last few years. After the residents had been displaced, the vacated land was reappropriated to build high-rise luxury condominiums and carve out landscaped parks. The reason for the redevelopment of the locality was not hard to fathom—its strategic location near the city center and the quickly dwindling stock of "undeveloped" land within the Kuala Lumpur city limits made it a prime tract of real estate.

I had read about the plight of his *kampung* in the daily newspaper one weekend morning. It was not difficult to locate the small and nondescript *kampung* tucked largely behind a Catholic missionary school and a large monsoon drain. The other villagers had quickly led me to Subramaniam's home and acknowledged him as their representative voice. I explained to him that I have a research interest in the few remaining "squatter *kampung*s" that are still found within the Kuala Lumpur city administrative boundaries, and that I had also briefly resided in the locality nearly two decades earlier as an undergraduate student. Subramaniam was intrigued with my narrative, and not long afterward he had included me in his presumably selective communicative network of mobile phone text recipients.

Subramaniam's persona, in many respects, was not typical of other "grassroots" local leaders whom I had encountered in my fieldwork with urban "squatters" in Kuala Lumpur over the years. In his late forties, he was well mannered, articulate in English (besides Malay, Tamil, and a smattering of vernacular Chinese dialects), and a government employee. More strikingly, he had created a dossier meticulously archiving a range of fragmentary documents (such as bills and newspaper clippings of visiting dignitaries) together with oral histories charting the genesis of his *kampung* in order to substantiate the longevity and legality of the settlement. Besides making them available to journalists, Subramanian deployed these documents to garner sympathetic

support from any politician or legislator who might care to listen to stories about their plight. Subramaniam explained that he had specifically appealed for the help of key politicians of the Malaysian Indian Congress, a member of the ethnic-based ruling coalition party (Barisan Nasional, or National Front), as well as the current local member of Parliament who hails from the official opposition front, Pakatan Rakyat, or People's Coalition.

Subramaniam was alert to shifts or trends in political rhetoric and emphasis. He highlighted to me that the harmonious multicultural mix of Indian and Chinese families residing in the *kampung* was squarely in tune with Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's trope of "1Malaysia," launched early in his premiership after a nearly disastrous general elections outing for the ruling coalition the year before (the "political tsunami" of March 2008). Although I was skeptical, he believed that his letter to Najib outlining all the laudable aspects of his *kampung* would be appreciated and that there would be a miraculous intervention by the powers-that-be. Against all odds, at the time of finalizing this essay (December 2010), the *kampung* as a physical entity is still intact. But many of Subramaniam's neighbors, seeing the writing on the wall (literally sprayed on their front porches by City Hall and metaphorically viewed as a lost cause), have already opted to move out to other places of accommodation elsewhere. Sadly, the *kampung*'s demise as a living community seems inevitable.

The fate of this particular *kampung* vis-à-vis the mutating Kuala Lumpur cityscape is not unique. Indeed, one could plot the generic fortune of the squatter to changing notions of progress, development, and national security. During British colonial rule, new definitions of land tenure displaced indigenous usufruct land practices in the push to "open up" land to facilitate a host of capitalist enterprises—cash-crop plantations, resource extraction, new urban centers, and so forth. The figure of the squatter stood out as an antithesis to this logic. While this justified a battery of legal and moral actions against the squatter when deemed expedient, there were also historical instances (such as in the aftermath of the Second World War) when they were judged as necessary aberrations because of the state's inability to provide humanitarian alternatives.

Official surveys conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s lamented that up to a third of the city's resident population was comprised of "squatters." In the late 1970s and 1980s, the Prime Minister's Department and City Hall lobbied for and incrementally devised a more explicit "squatter policy." Certainly, within the context of neoliberal developmental models promoted during the long premiership of Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003) and subsequent administrations, the squatter began to take on a more menacing anti-utopian and

antidevelopment persona. Besides being a lawbreaker, the squatter became increasingly judged as a serious impediment to the nation's collective progress and to aspirations to carve a hypermodern "world-class city" out of Kuala Lumpur. The recurring discourse of a "squatter-free" city has normalized this imagery not only to other city administrations in the country but also in the popular imagination.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was thus a dramatic categorical transformation of the squatter. The debilitating effects of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s slowed down this onslaught for several years before its resumption in more recent times. While many squatters chose to flee outside the city limits to escape punitive action, several thousands of those without financial means were also reconstituted vertically into blocks of high-rise, low-cost flats that were usually substandard in design and construction, had poor maintenance facilities, and suffered from high rates of vandalism. To detractors, many of these monoliths have approximated the material and psychological attributes of slums. Indeed, one can argue that while the legal category of *penduduk setinggan* may be a dying vernacular breed within the Kuala Lumpur city limits, it is now replaced by another less familiar kind of socio-spatial existence. Like so many others before him, Subramaniam does not relish the prospect of living in a high-rise, low-cost flat when his *kampung* is eventually demolished. In providing legal security of tenure, these modernist structures have also taken away much more in exchange.

Returning Urbanite

MATTHEW AMSTER

Christian is not a typical returning urban-rural migrant. Unlike most men who come back to the Kelabit Highlands after living in town, he did not return having struggled to make a decent living, nor did he return expecting to get married and start a family. Christian had already done both, leaving behind a good job and returning with his wife and children. What he did not anticipate is how out of place and misunderstood he would be once back home.

I first learned about Christian's return to the remote Kelabit Highlands of Malaysian Borneo in 2002. He had e-mailed me from the newly opened Internet kiosk near the airstrip at Bario—the unofficial center of the Kelabit rural community—asking if I knew anything about growing asparagus and whether I thought it was a good prospect as a new idea for a cash crop. The next year, when I came to do research about the Internet, I saw firsthand both Christian's ambitions and his difficulties as a return migrant.[36] In the 1990s, during my dissertation fieldwork, I knew Christian as a sophisticated town

dweller. As is typical of his generation of Kelabit, he first moved to town to complete his schooling and remained there to work. Among those few who do return to the rural homelands, almost all are young unmarried men who have found it difficult to achieve success in town. For these men, returning home is also linked to the opportunity to marry women from related indigenous communities across the adjacent international border in Indonesia.[37] Such men are categorized locally as "Form Five failures," indicating their low level of educational achievement,[38] while their cross-border wives are known for their industriousness as rice farmers, work that few Kelabit women today will readily do. From the perspective of urban Kelabit, marriages between these marginalized young men and their economically poorer Indonesian wives are instrumental in keeping rural communities in the Kelabit Highlands alive.[39]

So, what motivated Christian to move back? By all appearances he was doing well in town, working as an electrician in the oil and natural gas industry. He was happily married to a woman from a related indigenous group, and they had four children. When I had last visited the family in 1999, I was struck by Christian's entrepreneurial spirit and his seemingly stable and well-adjusted middle-class life. He owned a modest house, a car (the ubiquitous Malaysian-made Proton Saga), and maintained a small plot of land outside town with gardens and fishponds—potential small-business ventures. The decision to return to the highlands took me by surprise. As Christian commented, "Most people talk about going back, but nobody actually does it." He explained that his primary motivation to return was a strong desire to provide his children with a similar experience to that of his own childhood, which he looked back on nostalgically.

When he returned in 2000, he chose not to focus on growing rice, which he considered economically unviable—estimating that rice farmers earn only about fifty cents a day. Instead, he began planting elaborate gardens, growing asparagus, papayas, and bananas, and trying, unsuccessfully, to raise ducks. He still has plans to build fishponds for commercial fish production. All these endeavors have yet to pay off. Undaunted, Christian claims to have progressive ideas about how one can make a living in the highlands by being efficient and choosing the right high-yield crops. In the meantime, he spends most of his time doing paid construction work to maintain a basic income.

Sadly, Christian has struggled to be accepted by other men in the village, as he does not fit the common pattern of male migrants who return home to maintain the family farm. Nor, on the other hand, does he serve as a mediator to wider structures outside the village, a "model and a guide," as Geertz once described urban-oriented elites in rural Java.[40] Christian's presence simply seemed anomalous, caught in a marginalized space between highland and

lowland, the village and town. While the rural Kelabit people certainly rely on urban-based relatives to help mediate between the village and nation and to articulate and defend local interests, such urbanites are effective allies in part because they do not live in the village. Thus, urban-based Kelabit often act as important regional and global cultural brokers, spearheading projects like bringing the Internet and telephone service to the Kelabit Highlands and mediating between the local community and outsiders, such as tourists, researchers, and government officials.

One day I saw Christian coming back to the village on his motorbike, the engine straining under the weight of rice sacks. Watching as he weaved precariously to avoid potholes and muddy patches on the road, I realized that there was something odd about the scene; I had never seen sacks of rice moving *in this direction* along the road, since nearly everyone in the community grows their own rice. That night I asked Christian why he needed to buy rice outside the community. He explained that after three years he was still not accepted and nobody was comfortable selling him rice, not even close relatives. He believed, correctly, that people found his ideas too progressive and his way of expressing himself too direct. Rather than being embraced for his urban orientation, "a man able to comprehend both the village and the city,"[41] he was shunned for trying to do things in new ways.

"It was not that easy to resign my job and come back here," Christian lamented, adding, in a somewhat patronizing way, that "people in the *kampung* (village) are not able to fully develop themselves, as they are too busy with everyday tasks." Meanwhile, Christian keeps a meticulous journal of his agricultural experiments, recording intricate details with the hope of increasing his yields. He acknowledges his awkward position in the village and hopes it improves, yet he is also pleased that his children can experience growing up immersed in Kelabit rural life. In the meantime, he continues to travel outside the village to buy his own rice.

Timber Entrepreneur (*Cukong Kayu*)

MICHAEL EILENBERG

One late afternoon in 2003, I was sitting with a few loggers at one of the small ramshackle coffee shops in Indonesian Borneo, along a gravel road near the border crossing to Malaysia. The degraded forest in the background and the hastily erected wooden houses and bustling sawmills that lined the road (all covered in a thick layer of dust stirred up by the continuous flow of logging trucks) created a certain frontier atmosphere. However, the scene abruptly changed when a brand new Toyota Land Cruiser with Malaysian license

plates stopped at the coffee shop. My companions assumed an air of respect and obedience when the three passengers settled at the side table. Their gaze turned especially toward the most senior passenger, a Malaysian Chinese man named Tung Pheng. Pheng politely greeted my companions in the local ethnic dialect, then turned toward me and whispered with a smile, “Are you a government spy or a timber buyer?” These were apparently the only rational reasons why a westerner might be hanging about in the lawless borderland.

The loggers later told me that Pheng was among the most renowned Malaysian *cukong kayu,* or timber entrepreneurs, operating in the Indonesian border region.[42] According to Indonesian police, Pheng was the “brain behind illegal logging” (*otak pembalakan liar*) in the border area and consequently the most wanted criminal throughout the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan.[43] In late 2000, the first reports on Malaysian *cukong* engaging in cross-border timber extraction began to appear in the Indonesian media. These entrepreneurs were vividly depicted as tough “gangsters” who worked in tandem with corrupt officials and terrorized local communities.[44] When I returned years later, locals told me that the *cukong* had carefully monitored my movements during my previous stay.

At the time of fieldwork, Pheng, a former member of the Royal Malaysian Marines, was in his late forties and married to an Indonesian woman. He is the youngest of three brothers running a business empire based in the Sarawak town of Sibu, where his family clan has been engaged in the lucrative timber business since the British colonial era and, more recently, plantation development. Pheng is regionally known as a man of prowess, whose expertise as a financial broker and entrepreneur within the Sarawak (and Indonesian) timber and plantation sector is highly esteemed, particularly among his employees, business partners, and local communities. His main area of expertise is logging old-growth forests in frontier regions, especially in remote and demanding border regions outside the formal control of the central state. He obtained his experience during the heyday of the Sarawak timber industry from the 1970s until the 1990s, when he worked closely with forest communities along large rivers in the Sarawak interior. However, his reach extended beyond the boundaries of Borneo into other forest-rich regions of Indonesia and Southeast Asia such as West Papua, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. He even worked as a timber contractor in Cameroon and the Congo. State borders do not seem to limit Pheng’s reach. He is a real cosmopolitan.

The ethnic Chinese communities in Sarawak, especially in the Sibu area, have a long tradition of close political, economic, and social relationships with upland forest communities. The ethnic Chinese communities in the Sibu area arrived in Sarawak from southern China during the reign of the British

colonialist Charles Brooke in the nineteenth century, when some entrepreneurial *cukong* created small business empires based on trade with inland communities.[45] Their personalized leadership rests foremost on their long-rooted history as economic mediators for upland communities, their patron-client loyalties, and their renowned ability to perform in extremely difficult situations. The term *cukong* itself has recently gained a more negative connotation, as these men are depicted as working between legality and illegality.

In the 1990s, Sarawak had largely exhausted its own forest resources and was therefore pressed to expand its large timber-based industry across the border. The political turmoil after Indonesian president Suharto's resignation from power in 1998 created new opportunities for the *cukong* to expand their business across the border to Indonesia. The Indonesian news media described Pheng as a small king (*raja kecil*) of the border area. There was some truth to this depiction. He was the leading employer and economic investor during the timber boom that lasted until 2005, when the Indonesian government initiated a large crackdown on logging in the province. Originally invited by Indonesian district governments and local communities who encouraged the logging of local forests, Pheng felt secure operating in the area. He did not attempt to hide or conceal his operations, despite having several Indonesian arrest warrants hanging over his head.

While the media portrayed him as a mere gangster, Pheng enjoyed wide popularity among the rural population where he conducted his business. His great successes depended partly on his combined ability as a patron to get things done and provide needed services where governments had failed.[46] Besides creating local jobs in his sawmills and timber camps, he maintained local networks of roads and more generally sustained a booming economy. Many locals often referred to him as a "brave (*berani*) and generous man (*bermurah hati*)," a "rescuer (*penyelamat*)" of the local economy who had made the area prosper in a way that state-owned companies and the government had failed to do.

While extremely generous toward loyal clients, he was ruthless toward competitors and those who broke the bonds of trust. As a small "king," he increased his prowess through the rules of reciprocity, stewarding flows of wealth, favors, and support. The enduring popularity of the *cukong* working at the intersection between legality and illegality along the margins of the state cannot be underestimated; they are seen by many as local benefactors and wealthy patrons in these out-of-the-way places, where national development programs are lacking and formal state laws often collide with local livelihood practices.