Pop Culture Formations across East Asia

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The Look of Love: New engagements with the oriental in Indonesian popular culture

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One woman, aged 29, a wife and mother of three small children, even went as far as saying cynically: I wonder why a lot of girls like this boy [Dao Ming Tse] ... It's funny. Girls like F4, but they still don't like Chinese [in Indonesia]! ... They only like seeing a Chinese male on TV.

(Ida 2008, p. 106)

Female students began to look at men of Chinese ethnicity, and coined all sorts of terms such as *cica* (*cina cakep*) [good-looking Chinese], *cihuy* (*cina uhuy*) [cool Chinese].

(Pravitta 2004, pp. 18-19).

One manifestation of the diversity and unevenness of what scholars have referred to variably as a process of "Asianization," "intra-/inter-Asia," or "trans-Asian" moments (Chua 2004, 2008; Iwabuchi 2002; Otmazgin 2007) in the contemporary production, distribution, and consumption of popular cultures is the dominance of East Asia in international scholarship on the subject in English, and in particular American 'Hollywoodization' has not suddenly eroded by a diffusion of diverse non-Western alternatives across the globe. Rather, this long-standing supremacy meets its rival in a new set of hierarchical and unequal relations and politics of recognition, owing to the rise of Asian counterparts—initially from Japan and subsequently from Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and potentially China.[1] Even within East Asia, there

emerges a further layer of hierarchy, diversity and unevenness in the production, distribution, and reception of pop cultural products (Chua 2008).

Two things protrude from the above broad observation. First, the history and the hierarchy of the increasingly globalized flows of popular cultures appear to devoutly follow the dynamics of capitalism over the past century, with Japan emerging as the first modern industrialized country in Asia to challenge Western-dominated global capitalism. Several East Asian countries followed suit as "Newly Industrialized Countries" ("NICs") before the 1997 economic crisis. Despite its loss of credibility and fashionability, the classic Marxian thesis of the material condition of a social order (base) determining consciousness and its ideological apparatus (superstructure) here appears well vindicated.

Second, two distinct streams of inter-/intra-Asian pop cultures have largely escaped the attention of international scholarship on the subject in English. These are the globally spread and locally reproduced and consumed Bollywood products (Gopal and Moorti 2008) and, more recently, cultural products with Islamic content.[2] While a serious and detailed analysis has yet to explain the significance of these two streams of popular cultures and their exclusion from or marginalization in the existing literature, one could be forgiven for suspecting that this pertains to the economic standing of the nation and the class position of the transnational social groups that directly become involved in their production and consumption. These nations and social groups do not economically compete with those in strongly industrialized East Asia. However, more importantly for our discussion here, this exclusion also indexes an ideological bias in the existing scholarship. This does not by any means suggest the existence of any systematic or conscious attempt by anyone

to exclude or discriminate against non-East Asian popular cultures, but neither is the exclusion ideologically innocent.

This chapter does not aim to rectify the imbalance. Rather, it aims at something much more modest. It will raise three areas of interest with regard to the recent popularity of television dramas and films from East Asian popular cultures. First, it will discuss the problems of what may expose the simple or natural popularity of East Asian pop cultural products in contemporary Indonesia. This relates to the country's specific history of ethnic tension, particularly between the self-appointed "indigenous" (*pribumi*) Indonesians and the Chinese minority on the central and western islands of the archipelago. Second, this chapter will examine elements of these popular cultures that Indonesian viewers found so appealing. In particular I refer to both the metropolitan setting of the storylines of the East Asian television dramas and the sexual appeal of the male protagonists among young urban middle-class women in Indonesia. Third, as a conclusion, the chapter will return to the other two (overlooked) streams of intra-Asian popular cultures mentioned above, and will briefly compare their popularity with their East Asian counterparts. It will argue that despite some remarkable differences in the cultural imports from South Asia, East Asia and those with Islamic contents, one notices something common in the general consumption of all of these, namely the middle-class cultural disposition and desire for a comfortable and elegant life style.

Following most observers of East Asian popular cultures in Indonesia, this paper primarily addresses the Taiwanese television drama *Meteor Garden* (2002), which marked the beginning of this new phenomenon, as well as several South Korean television dramas and films in subsequent years that tend to repeatedly star the same actors. According to a public relations officer at Indosiar (the pioneer network for popularizing East Asian popular cultures), no other television drama reached as many viewers in Indonesia as *Meteor Garden* (cited in Mariani 2008). Of the South Korean popular culture products that followed the success of *Meteor Garden*, Merdikaningtyas considers the popularity of the drama series *Endless Love*, responsible for opening the pathway for the success of subsequent titles including *All About Eve*, *Friends*, and *Hotelier* (all

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[1] Put differently, the power relations of a Western-led globalization, at least in terms of the production and consumption of pop cultures, have been "decentered" (Otmazgin 2007) or "recentered" (Iwabuchi 2002: 104-5) since the rise of Japanese pop culture in the region.

[2] My preliminary attempt to analyze the novel phenomena of Islamic pop in Indonesian films is "Upgraded Piety and Pleasure: The New middle-class and Islam in Indonesian Popular Culture," to appear as a chapter in *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*, edited by Andrew Weintraub.

broadcast on the Indosiar network), and *Glass Shoes* (on TransTV) (Merdikaningtyas 2006). Many Hong Kong films and a few Japanese television dramas and manga already had achieved popularity, but as I discuss below, neither their popularity nor their impact had the intensity and widespread appeal of *Meteor Garden*, as well as the most recent South Korean television dramas on which this chapter focuses.

1. The oriental look

The legacies of hostility, against anything that bears the attributes of Chineseness—particularly an oriental appearance—distinguish these East Asian popular cultural products in contemporary Indonesia (and perhaps to some extent in Malaysia) from their counterparts. Indonesians are aware of the distinct nationalities of a plural East Asia. However, on a day-to-day interaction basis all oriental-looking people—including those who appear in Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Japanese, or South Korean films—inescapably become stereotyped and associated with the "Chinese" ("them") in the perception of the majority ("us") in the racially divided mindset of twentieth-century Indonesia. Most whites become casually referred to as "Landa" (literally Dutch). Though its history has longer and more complex elements than this, the 'them versus us, division became further politically accentuated during the Cold War, when people often associated Chineseness with Communism (as were post-2001 Middle Eastern looks, names and texts with Islamic terrorism) in Western media and state propaganda. The economic success of many East Asian countries solidified even further the general perception and prejudices in Indonesia toward ethnically Chinese people as the "Jews of the East," and narrow-mindedly greedy for wealth.

Observing the significance of pop cultures from East Asia in Indonesia in the 2000s, this chapter illustrates another case of the non-uniform and specific historically-bound impact of the spread of East Asian popular cultures in the region. Until 1998, when the rule of Indonesia's militarist New Order government terminated, characters of Chinese ethnicity hardly

ever appeared in the country's television programs and films. In the extremely few cases in which they did appear, they did so as little more than stereotyped caricatures: business people, whose life revolves around the accumulation of wealth, clinging together exclusively with people of their own ethnic background, a laughing-stock as they spoke poor Indonesian with a strong Mandarin accent.

The situation has changed dramatically since 1998 (see Allen 2003; Cohen 2002; Heryanto 2004; Hoon 2004; Samudera 2002, Sen 2006). As I have shown elsewhere (Heryanto 2008a), the factors influencing this change may relate more to a backlash against one of the worst incidents of racialized state-sponsored violence directed at Chinese Indonesians in May 1998, than (as most observers believe) the fall of the New Order government in the following month. Apparently, in indignation at the government's overall political repression over the past three decades, and specifically the blatantly racist measures against an ethnic Chinese minority, the burgeoning middle-classes felt it necessary to demonstrate their sympathy for the cultural and political plight of this minority group.[3]

To appreciate the sedimented racialized sentiment, particularly for the benefit of readers not familiar with Indonesia, it becomes necessary to step back for a moment from the main concerns of this chapter and consider the scope and scale of the anti-Chinese policies of the New Order government, as well as the selected works on the subject that most directly relate to the concerns of this chapter.

The New Order's discrimination against this ethnic minority is best understood as a paradox (see Heryanto 1998 for details). Rather than consistently and genuinely expressing a racist hatred towards the Chinese ethnic community, the New Order government adopted what at first appears a contradictory policy: severe repression of the cultural and

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[3] Anti-Chinese violence has been both regular and regulated in the twentieth century in Java, with thinly veiled state endorsement. While there are important differences in the contexts, the backlash following the 1998 violence is comparable to the enthusiasm and determination among American voters to elect Barack Obama as President in November 2008. As with all comparisons, there are limits to their comparability. Obama's victory is more and also less than a story of the politics of racial difference. Just as Obama's electoral victory does not imply the end of racism in the USA, neither does the new public recognition of Chinese Indonesians signal an end to the discrimination against members of this ethnic minority.

political activities of the minority group as a whole, combined with special favoritism for selected members of this group's business elite within its pertinent economy. As exemplified below, it becomes unfortunate that most writings on the subject emphasize only repressive discrimination against the Chinese as a community. Although most analysts recognize that Chinese business elites held a privileged economic position, they tend to understand the apparent contradiction (repression vs. favoritism) as separable phenomena and not as mutually inter-dependent components of the same phenomenon. This was namely a most effective policy of divide and rule that the Dutch colonial administration originally devised but that the New Order government elaborated to its full extent.

Access to state education and the public service was restricted through quotas for Chinese Indonesians. Entry to professions other than in the trade and industry sectors was limited or impossible. Various government and non-governmental statements regarded 'Chineseness' not only as foreign, but also politically and morally undesirable and often harmful to the officially constructed 'Indonesian Self'. Until near the close of the 20th century, the Chinese script occupied the same category as explosives, pornography, and narcotics on the customs declaration forms that all visitors had to complete when entering the country. Chinese names of persons, organizations, and businesses all required 'Indonesianization'. The country also effected the prohibition and elimination of Chinese language, mass media, and organizations.

In Central Java, the extensive war against any signs of Chineseness extended to the sphere of popular cultures. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a prohibition of popular Chinese physical exercises, Mandarin songs in karaoke entertainment centers, and the sale of certain Chinese cakes existed (see also Indrakusuma 1993, McBeth and Hiebert 1996, Subianto 1993, Suryadinata 1985, TAPOL 1993). In 1990, in Central Java province, a prohibition of Mandarin songs during the New Year's Eve celebration (*Kedaulatan Rakyat* 1990) occurred. All of this occurred on the pretext that the New Order state committed itself to assimilating the minority into the Indonesian body politic by purging it of foreignness (i.e. Chineseness) and by fully immersing Chinese people in *pribumi* (indigenous) culture and society.

This assimilation program doomed itself to failure because success would have undermined the interests of its own sponsors. As I have noted elsewhere, to dissolve Chinese identities in an effective program of assimilation means to annihilate the division of labor by race, upon which the status quo depends (Heryanto 1998). Even as this minority was publicly humiliated and blamed by various state policies and officials (for bearing the marks of Chineseness), and discriminated against (for being 'un-Indonesian'), the New Order government actively manufactured the stigmatized Chineseness. Thus the so-called 'Chineseness' was always already a social construct under erasure.

Despite the extent to which a Chinese Indonesian, especially male, assumed or enacted a 'native' identity, the state apparatus would ensure that traces of the person's past or already assimilated Chineseness returned to the fore for further cycles of discrimination. In many important legal documents such as birth or marriage certificates, a special code number exists for those citizens with Chinese ethnic backgrounds. This practice continued at the time of writing (Dharmasaputra 2007), ten years after New Order rule formally collapsed. Those who have dutifully complied with the official pressure to renounce their Chinese names and adopted 'Indonesian'-sounding alternatives must still declare their old names when completing forms. They must present an official document indicating the registered change of name, thus distinguishing themselves from other citizens and rendering themselves subject to a series of extra requirements, both legal and illegal.

At a day-to-day level, discrimination against "Chineseness" operated arbitrarily toward a person's physical appearance from the perspective of others. Given the sensitivity of the issue, plus the severe and multi-layered censorship of all public expressions, one can appreciate the difficulty of any casual or realistic portrayal of this minority in popular cultures. While the fact that the few actual portrayals of Chinese Indonesians appear as nearly all stereotyped caricatures does not entirely offer surprise, the fact that such portrayals remained absent from nearly all literary fiction and commercial feature films for decades requires further examination. This chapter is not the first to examine this topic. I include below a brief

review of preceding works on the subject.

In the mid-1990s I examined the absence of ethnic Chinese from the official corpus of Indonesian national literature and the absence of any mention of the social tensions related to this ethnic minority (Heryanto 1997). In 2004 I revisited the subject by investigating what appeared as a reemergence of the portrayal of Chinese Indonesians in fictional narratives. Rather than focusing exclusively on printed literary works, however, I began to consider the more prominent changes occurring in feature films (Heryanto 2004).

I emphasize that my concern in the above, and below, pertains to the presence or absence of Chinese Indonesian characters in fictional narratives. This distances itself from the fairly substantial number of studies on the longer history of the production of such narratives by the Chinese minority group, especially in printed literary forms. Some of these studies (Nio 1962; Salmon 1981; Sumardjo 1983; Toer 1982) have also addressed the issue of the long years of denial of such literary works in the official history of Indonesian literature.

More relevant to my current project is a recent publication by Krishna Sen (2006) which investigates the curiously rare appearances by Chinese Indonesians both in the existing literature on the history of the production of Indonesian films (despite having played leading roles since the inception of the film industry in the 1930s) and as fictional characters on screen (despite the ongoing participation of ethnic Chinese in the production and distribution of films). Sen correctly claims that no substantial research on the place of the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesian cinema has yet been published (Sen 2006, p. 171). While acknowledging some openness of current Indonesian culture and politics, Sen observes that such openness "does not ensure a radical shift in a politics of representation" (p. 171). Drawing from her analysis of the film *Ca-bau-kan* (2002), Sen concludes that "[if] in post-Suharto Indonesia, if the son of a Chinese man can now be recuperated into Indonesian citizenship via love for his indigenous mother and his son's indigenous mother, then it is still only a permanently second-class, politically muted, citizenship" (p. 182).

In a more recent work on the subject (Heryanto 2008a), I elaborate

my previous findings. In a sense, that work begins where Sen's article ends. I have re-examined Sen's (2006) assessment of *Ca-bau-kan* and a more recent film that came into circulation after Sen's manuscript had gone to press, entitled *Gie* (2005). Indonesians remember the two films as the first two titles produced by some of the most prominent figures in the Indonesian film industry after the 2000s, and where Chinese Indonesians perform the roles of the central protagonists. By and large I agree with Sen, but my analysis indicates that the politics of representation in Indonesian cinema becomes much more complex than Sen suggests. Basically, my analysis of *Ca-bau-kan* and *Gie* leads me to the provisional conclusion that despite the public acknowledgment that Chinese-Indonesians have heterogeneous qualities, and that many have no less acculturation to the local living traditions and/or global cultures, such awareness does not usually effect the next step and does not interrogate the dualism of the indigenous/non-indigenous divide, and hence the fictiveness of ethnicity that becomes socially constructed in specific and historically bound situations.

The two films *Ca-bau-kan* and *Gie* do not represent the broader picture of Indonesian cinema in the 2000s. As indicated in the concluding section of my previous work (Heryanto 2008a), several more films have featured Chinese Indonesians unproblematically. These include the light-hearted teenage films *30 Hari Mencari Cinta* (2004) and *Brownies* (2005), which have not enjoyed significant prestige among film critics but have gained a fairly large audience nonetheless. From the viewpoint of this chapter, these films become fascinating for the casual manner in which they portray Chinese Indonesian characters. These characters appear as ordinary and yet likable Indonesians, despite (if not because of) some of their distinctively 'Chinese' features in terms of appearance and/or speech and behavior. They do not appear as the highly romanticized heroes (such as Gie in *Gie* mentioned above) or corrupt and selfish caricatures (as in *Ca-bau-kan*) that have become standard types in Indonesian media, especially during the New Order rule. This refreshing change in the portrayal of Oriental-looking Asians as racially unproblematic continued to appear on screen, including in some high-profile, award-winning titles, such as *Berbagi Suami* (2006) and *Photographs* (2007), which feature

a Chinese Indonesian protagonist played by Chinese Singaporean actor Lim Kay Tong. In contrast to *Ca-bau-kan* and *Gie*, these more recent films do not erase ethnicity—but this does not emerge as a marked issue, either positive or negative.

In light of the recent changes outlined above, the Korean Wave in the 2000s, and its Japanese counterparts in the previous decade, have unsurprisingly found a warm welcome in Indonesia. However, given the long history of anti Chinese-Indonesian feeling, one cannot presume that this would necessarily become the case simply because Asia and beyond have well received Japanese and South Korean popular cultures. The remarkable (re)appearance of Chinese Indonesians in domestic films and the popularity of Oriental-looking characters in East Asian films and television dramas present two distinct but simultaneous and related processes of a broader change.[4]

2. *Meteor Garden* and the K-Wave

It is important to note the differences in the media and genres in which the various pop culture products of East Asia have come to Indonesia. The Japanese popular culture embraced by youth in contemporary Indonesia has mainly taken the form of manga, anime and music.[5] No one of these forms features realistic visual representations of ordinary oriental-looking Asians in a narrative of contemporary life that Indonesians can easily identify or associate with people (such as the Chinese minority) that they know and admire, or suspect and prefer to avoid. Likewise the majority of the much-loved Hong Kong and (later) Chinese films employed

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[4] The inter-textual relations between these two processes may prove to be more significant than can be seen at face value, but that lies outside the scope of this present chapter. In the full-feature teen comedy *30 Hari Mencari Cinta,* for instance, one of the four female protagonists, a Chinese Indonesian named Olin, is a fan of F4 (the protagonists of *Meteor Garden*) and in one scene of the film she sings excerpts from the Taiwanese boy band's song.

[5] See Otmazgin (2007) for an insightful discussion on the spread of Japanese popular cultures in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia.

mythical action narratives set in the 'olden days', which created enough distance to disassociate the fictional characters dressed in traditional costumes from the stereotyped Chinese Indonesians off-screen who dominated Indonesia's modern economy. Not until Chinese Indonesian characters appeared in more than a few Indonesian films in the 2000s, and simultaneously in the series *Meteor Garden*, followed by South Korean television dramas, did the significant change in the society become pronounced.

In this section, I will draw from the work of others who have undertaken the first few grounded studies of the reception of East Asian popular cultures in the 2000s. Young women with university degrees authored nearly all published writings by Indonesians that I know on the reception of East Asian pop cultures in Indonesia in the 2000s (Ida 2008; Merdikaningtyas 2006; Pravitta 2004; Setijadi 2005). These authors conducted ethnographic study among, and interviews with, other Indonesian women with more or less the same demographic background. Ida's work (2008) emerges as an exception, as she focuses her investigation on the reception of *Meteor Garden* among more economically disadvantaged urban residents (*kampung*). She compares the reactions to the television dramas between the younger residents (who also enrolled in a tertiary institution) and slightly older viewers (full-time housewives from the same neighborhood).

Interestingly, in contrast to the studies on the transnational reception of East Asian pop cultures in other South-East Asian countries that focus on the national capital city and the second most industrialized city,[6] nearly all the studies on the situation in Indonesia occurred outside Jakarta, and they include more cultural centers and less industrialized cities. The locus of Ida's study is Surabaya (2008), while Merdikaningtyas (2006) and (Pravitta 2004) conducted their research in Yogyakarta. Only Setijadi (2005) included Jakarta-based respondents in her study, which also included Bandung and Medan.

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[6] Siriyuvasak and Shin (2007, p. 112) self-consciously focus on Bangkok and Seoul; Otmazgin (2007) on Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Seoul; and Chua (2004) pays special attention to the dynamics of the East Asian pop culture in Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai, Singapore, Seoul and Tokyo.

Despite these differences, however, existing studies on the case in Indonesia reach many conclusions that barely differ from the general observations noted elsewhere on the basis of cases in the neighboring countries. The most important of these is identification of the major sources of attraction of these televised drama series: the good physical appearance of the actors (especially the males), beautiful scenery, glamorous lifestyles, and the characters' successful engagement with the conditions of modern living in big cities. The one important exception that distinguishes the case of Indonesia from most of its neighboring countries, as noted above, becomes the legacy of anti-Chinese sentiment ingrained deeply (if with varying degrees) in the consciousness of many Indonesians, especially those aged 40 or above in the 2000s.

Based on her fieldwork, Pravitta reports that several of her respondents admitted their surprise when realizing they adored the looks of Dao Ming Tse (played by Jerry Yan) in *Meteor Garden*. They reasoned that, "one does not usually find a good-looking man in a Mandarin film" (Pravitta 2004-5, p. 7). As the opening quote of this chapter suggests, this adulation does not necessarily venture beyond television viewing, let alone alter the inter-ethnic relations. In Surabaya, for instance, Ida found no positive correlations between fandom of oriental-looking, Mandarin-speaking heroes on television and visible impact on inter-ethnic relations (Ida 2008). In contrast, Pravitta (2004) found a significant change in attitude among young women viewers towards Chinese males as a result of viewing South Korean television dramas. Before the screening of *Meteor Garden*, she notes,

> One does not usually see 'indigenous' [sic] Indonesians dating an ethnic Chinese. ... You don't usually hear an 'indigenous' [sic] girl referring to a Chinese guy with endearing terms. This has all changed. Female students started to look at men of Chinese ethnicity, and coined all sorts of terms such as *cica (cina cakep)* [good-looking Chinese], *cihuy (cina uhuy)* [cool Chinese]. (pp. 18-19).

Other common factors among viewers across Asia, as reported in Pravitta's study, include their appreciation for the somewhat restrained sexual activities of the characters in the story, and the demonstrated preservation of some familial piety in the midst of conspicuously Westernized modern lifestyles. The display of these two last features supposedly distinguishes these East Asian popular series from their American counterparts. This latter point has led some to consider the so-called "cultural proximity" thesis that most of these recent authors have commonly criticized.

Lack of space does not allow me to elaborate my perspective on the "cultural proximity" debate. Suffice to note that although the term "cultural proximity" opens itself to misunderstanding, misuse, and criticism, most critics of the "cultural proximity" thesis express disquiet more with the modifier "cultural" than the noun "proximity." The concept has some validity when one uses "culture" to refer to a contested field and set of signifying practices that structure and are structured by our dispositions, tastes, and sense of being in the world marked by unequal relations of power in both material and non-material terms. Put differently, the concept of "cultural proximity" has some value as long as one does not subscribe to an idea of "culture" as something static, unchanging, and inertly or naturally belonging to a clearly bounded social group of people. Such an essentialist idea has already been abandoned for decades in anthropology and is unlikely to find an entry into cultural studies. In the remaining brief space that I have, I wish to comment on only two further issues. The first concerns sexual fantasy among the mainly female viewers. The second is social-class positioning.

Siriyuvasak and Shin (2007) aptly note that the Korean Wave currently sweeping Asia emerges as an "industry [that] has created ... male idols for young female consumption" (p. 124). In their study of the consumption of South Korean pop cultures, particularly music, in Bangkok, they add that

> Thai girls are no longer shy in expressing their sexual desire through their 'imaginary idol'. In reality, however, they are so shy that most of them cannot even dance along to the music. They never express themselves in any public arena except to greet their idols at the airport or at the concerts. Despite their shyness, it is truly extraordinary that Thai girls from a middle-class socio-economic background find liberation through K-pop and Asian-pop. (p. 124)

Mariani (2008), too, observes that Indonesian men are "indifferent" to the Korean series mania. But what exactly constitutes "the beauty" of the stars of the East Asian pop cultures in the eyes of millions of Asian females? Just like any other beauty, this is socially constructed within specific historical moments. No single, unchanging or pre-determined and objective set of attributes of beauty exist. The features of the four male protagonists in *Meteor Garden* that appealed to some Indonesian female viewers include: style, long hair, intelligence, no tattoos, no body piercing, and non-smoking (Pravitta 2004). If such a view has a broader resonance than the scope of Pravitta's study, one is tempted to make two speculations about the profile of a major segment of Indonesian fans of East Asian pop cultures. First, it becomes likely that these viewers occupy—for want of a better phrase—a middle-class position. Second, such tastes in physical male beauty distinguish themselves from those discerned among both the disadvantaged segments of the population (see more in the next section) and from those commonly projected as ideal male physical features in the American television series and films that have prevailed across the globe.

In Indonesia, where the middle-classes have a relatively small (if growing) size, but are endowed with political, economic and cultural privileges, such conservative views are unsurprising. This is not to say that the Indonesian middle-classes have an inherently conservative ideology.[7] Like most middle-classes elsewhere, the Indonesian middle-classes have ideological diversity and internal contradictions. Many young members of middle-class families have taken risks in their bold struggles for their political convictions (ranging from liberal democracy, gender equality, and environmental protection to religious supremacy). Notwithstanding this, compliant, unprotected, and poorly paid housemaids often service the day-to-day household chores of many urban, well-educated professionals in this country. This is possible owing to the abundant supply of cheap labor, a wide gap between the few rich and the poor masses, and the lingering feudalist values that mitigate or gloss over their

fundamentally conflictual positions. This distinguishes the Indonesian middle-classes from their counterparts in most industrialized and liberal democracies in Asia and the West.[8]

Another point of contrast exists with the current commonalities among mainstream Western male fictional characters. Dao Ming Tse has attracted at least some urban Indonesian middle-class young females with a trait that might appear politically incorrect in the West, namely his macho quality, including his roughness, toughness and even mildly violent character, not just to other men, but also to women whom he loves so much so that some viewers expressed disappointment with the second series of *Meteor Garden*, where Dao becomes much gentler-mannered (Pravitta 2004). One viewer explained why such macho traits attract her and her friends: "it gives us a greater satisfaction to conquer the heart of such men. ... it is more challenging" (pp. 21-2).

One commonly reported remark among viewers concerning the attractiveness of the fictional characters in East Asian pop cultures and their behavior is their minimal or restrained sexual activity. The characters barely lip kiss, and no pre-marital or extra-marital sex, including in scenes where the main lovers in *Meteor Garden* spend the night together in bed. Indonesian female viewers in much of the existing literature (see especially Merdikaningtyas 2006 and Pravitta 2004) repeatedly emphasize this. This becomes another feature that they do not find in either American television series or films or in the generally adultery-focused Indonesian soap operas (*sinetron*).

But having noted this, we should not rush to assume that Indonesians in general, and Indonesian female viewers of these Asian popular culture products in particular, are any less active sexually than the implied audience in Western pop cultural products. Media and surveys have for years repeatedly reported the university city of Yogyakarta, where Merdikaningtyas (2006) and Pravitta (2004) conducted separate studies,

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[7] I have discussed this elsewhere (Heryanto 2003); see also Heryanto (1996, 1999), Kahn (1996a, b), Lev (1990), Robison (1990), Tanter and Young (1990), and Wright (1987, 1989).

[8] Many Westerners who are inclined to frown when hearing about the institution of employed live-in housemaids in Indonesia have been unable to resist the convenience of hiring several housemaids when living in Indonesia. Although increasingly more families in Singapore and several other East Asian countries hire Indonesian housemaids, the absence of royal court culture and feudalistic values in these places make the employer-employee relations significantly different.

to be home of promiscuous youths with a high rate of pre-marital sexual activity, shocking the local government and the general public alike. Even in her own study, Pravitta includes a section (pp. 13-19) discussing the many testimonies of sexual fantasies that these female viewers had after watching *Meteor Garden*, ranging from imagined petting to having sexual intercourse with the fictional character Dao Ming Tse.

What distinguishes the implied audience of these East Asian pop cultural products from the avid viewers of the American films or television series (although these may comprise the same people) is not less or more desire for sexual activity and fantasy, or even private discussion of these. Rather, the Indonesian female viewers studied appear less prepared for or appreciative of confrontation with explicit presentations of such activities on television. This may partly stem from the fact that television viewing in Indonesia generally occurs collectively with friends, guests, and neighbors. Watching explicit sexual scenes in the presence of this company would cause embarrassment. Reservations on the part of the audience may also be partly a consequence of sexual conservatism in society generally and the recent increase in moral policing and legislation that censures female sexuality more than that of males. Critics see the ratification in late 2008 of the highly controversial anti-pornography law as part of a larger process of conservative Islamization of Indonesia. The controversy has not subsided with the ratification of the law, and it continues to threaten to split the nation. This leads us to the final section of my chapter and a return to where the chapter began, namely the absence of Islamic popular cultures from many discussions of intra-Asian popular cultures.

3. Questions of religion and class

As I have noted elsewhere (Heryanto 1999), a decade before the spread of East Asian popular cultures, Indonesia witnessed the dawn of a new cultural politics of Islam, involving the gentrification and commod-ification of Islamic lifestyles. However, unlike the popular cultures from East Asia that came to prominence so dramatically, the growth of Islamic popular cultures has occurred in a more gradual manner, and has yet to reach the level of popularity of pop cultures from East Asia.

Three factors may influence this slow and limited growth of Islamic popular culture. First, as speculated at the beginning of the chapter, one contributing factor to this discrepancy is the difference in economic positions of the countries responsible for the production and consumption of the popular cultures in question. Another likely reason is the continued ambivalence and contradictory set of views among Muslim leaders with regard to the moral merits of pop culture as a mode of mass communi-cation to convey religious messages, or as a source of entertainment for the religion's followers. The proposal in 2006 to enact the controversial anti-pornography law emerged as a response to what the law's supporters saw as the alarming spread of moral decadence, widely disseminated through the popular culture entertainment industry. Finally, and the one possible factor in which I am particularly interested in this chapter, is the issue of class position.

Despite the impressive growth of a cosmopolitan-seeming Muslim middle-class, producers and consumers of Islamic popular culture remain a minority in Indonesia, where the majority of Muslims live in rural areas and the disadvantaged areas of cities. Two events that created major controversies vividly illustrate this class division among Indonesia's Muslim communities. In the first of these, around the 1980s, Indonesia witnessed a major increase in veiling among university students in major cities as an expression of political dissent against the New Order's ban on girls wearing veils at school or women in the workplace. As has been persuasively argued by others, the political act of veiling among urban and well-educated middle-class women is distinct from the old practice of veiling among their mother's generation (Brenner 1996) as well as among students of the more conventional Islamic boarding schools (Smith-Hefner 2007). In just a few years, the political act of veiling among urban middle-class student activists of the 1980s was transformed by the more entrepreneurially-inclined Muslims into a major fashion industry. Fashion shows of women's Muslim dress occurred annually in Jakarta's five-star hotels, emphasizing and celebrating an elaborated

beauty and trendy refinement instead of the chastity, modesty, abstinence and self-restraint of a pious Muslim woman (see Heryanto 1999; Smith-Hefner 2007).

But perhaps nothing better demonstrates this class division than the second event, namely the controversy of Inul Daratista's *dangdut* performances in 2003. Dangdut generically refers to a uniquely Malay/Indonesian music style that mixes elements from Arabic, Indian and Malay traditions. Over many years, dangdut has generated a wide range of music genres and sub-genres, from the more Islamic proselytizing kinds to sentimental pop, and to more genitally-focused dance music performance (see Pioquinto 1995; Weintraub 2008). Mainly sung and enjoyed among the urban poor, dangdut was considered by the urban middle-classes to be markedly low-class, irrevocably crude, and artistically distasteful until the 1970s when Rhoma Irama transformed it into a highly respectable music genre. Equipping himself with western musical instruments, and inspired by contemporary western pop music, Rhoma Irama created a whole new history of dangdut music, and indeed of Indonesian pop culture (Frederick 1982; Lockhard 1998). In doing so, Rhoma also made himself the first important pop star with an explicitly Islamic identity, and eventually earned the title of King of Dangdut.

In 2003 the then little-known Inul Daratista stirred up a nationwide controversy with her sensual singing and dancing of dangdut. Although professing Islam herself, Inul represents a new cultural icon of an old tradition of non-aristocratic Javanese practice that celebrates bodily pleasure and sexuality with a nominal Islamic slant. When *Time Asia* covered the Inul controversy, its reporter described her debut as follows: "[v]irtually overnight, Inulmania swept Indonesia, and within weeks, Inul was bumping and grinding on the cover of major national magazines and appearing on television more often than the country's President" (Walsh 2003). To her critics, Inul epitomizes the moral corruption and decadence, and of the global Western-styled modernity that Indonesia had wrongly adopted. Her unique style of dancing, *ngebor* (literally drilling) as locals dubbed it, fascinated many, and was an object of disgust for many others who saw it as sexually vulgar. Several cities in Indonesia banned her performances, as did many in Malaysia, but others warmly welcomed her.

Those who censured her included Rhoma Irama, the King of Dangdut. As I have discussed elsewhere (Heryanto 2008b), the dispute became a conflict among several things, of which a clash of class-based cultural tastes, of moral values, and religious orientations were a part.

Observers have correctly recognized East Asian pop culture as an alternative expression of modernity and pop culture to those produced in the major centers of entertainment industry in the West. Likewise, Rhoma Irama's elevated dangdut music in the 1970s and the more recent stylized nasyid music (Barendregt 2006), as well as the new movement of veiling in the 1980s, can be seen as contemporary expressions of Islamic popular culture that also offer an alternative model of modernity and pleasure in Muslim-majority nations of Indonesia and Malaysia alike. Dangdut, widely popular among the Indonesian underclass, offers yet another major stream of modern pop culture that prevails in Indonesia (and to some extent in neighboring Singapore and Malaysia) and has a long history of transnational flows of sources and inspiration from Bollywood films and music (David 2008).

Yet, neither the Islamic-inspired pop cultures of Rhoma Irama and nasyid singers nor the Hindi/Bollywood-inspired dangdut of Inul and the like have enjoyed prestige in public discussion or adequate attention from analysts. David (2008) contends that this is clearly a case of a class bias. Middle-class Indonesians did not seriously respect Bollywood movies and music, as well as dangdut. This was until recently in the late 1990s when Bollywood movies began to receive gentrification, focusing on romantic dramas (instead of masculine action and suspense as in the previous decades) with beautiful scenery, songs, and good-looking actors and actresses, in ways highly comparable to the East Asian films and television dramas.

In early 2003 the four boys who starred in *Meteor Garden* visited Jakarta. Observers have discussed at length the excitement that their visit stirred among their fans. Accounts of their visit, and of the screaming young women who welcomed them at the airport, do not fail to mention and compare the event with the mass rallies on the same date in the capital city, protesting against the Megawati government's proposal to raise the prices of electricity, fuel and telephone connection. But to the best of

my knowledge, none of these accounts includes the fact that, at more or less the same time, the nation had just discovered Inul Daratista among the economically disadvantaged segments of the population.

For the cultural taste and moral sensibilities of the middle-classes, both in Indonesia and presumably in the neighboring countries in Asia, Inul's sensuality appears too raunchy. She just did not belong to the world of *Meteor Garden* or *Endless Love*. Inul had to be sidelined by the middle-class and the elite. But as soon as the entertainment industry saw the huge potential profit in investing in her debut nationally on television, it transformed her into a new pop star. As soon as it became clear that she was too important to be overlooked, some members of the nation elite moved in to officially ban her, while others proposed an anti-pornography law. To many urban middle-class young women, however, these political tussles, with their dangerous twists, constitute just an undesirable irritant which they wish to evade while they indulge in the pleasure of watching East Asian television images and narratives of fictive characters enjoying a materially comfortable and elegant life style.

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