



Adeline Koh and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow

*Women and the Politics of
Representation in Southeast Asia:
Engendering Discourse in Singapore and
Malaysia*

Oxon: Routledge, 2015

ISBN: 978-1-138-78647-9 (hbk), x + 195

reviewed by [Alexander Michael Wolff](#)

1. In their edited volume, *Women and the Politics of Representation in Southeast Asia* (2015), Adeline Koh and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow draw together an array of interdisciplinary essays that contribute important insights to a growing body of research on issues of representation and discourses of gender in contemporary Singapore and Malaysia. Situated in fields such as gender and sexuality studies, socio-cultural anthropology, and media studies, these analyses pose much-needed questions about constructions and contestations of gendered and sexual difference in both nations, as well as their intersections with ongoing issues of race, religion, and nation.
2. As Koh and Balasingamchow describe in their introductory chapter, two of the main concepts utilised in the theoretical frameworks of these essays are those of discourse and representation; the former stemming from Michel Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge*^[1] (and the latter from Gayatri Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'^[2]). Discourses here are loosely understood as discursively constructed (and sometimes contradictory) regimes of knowledge, images, statements, representations and language that form and structure particular orders of 'reality' or 'truth.' They delimit certain modes of subject formation and experiences of social relationships. Many of the essays can also be understood in reference to Spivak's delineation of representation as an act of portraying a subject on the one hand, and as a process of speaking for the supposed 'needs and desires of someone or something' on the other (p. 5). Each chapter is individual, addressing topics as varied as gendered forms of Singaporean Chinese wedding photography (Heng), the politics of gender in the Islamic propagation activities of an exclusively female Malay-Muslim NGO in Malaysia (Frisk), and family discourses articulated by the Singaporean government's 2009–10 anti-dengue health campaigns (Lazar). But what unites each work in this collection is a common focus on the ways different institutions, social actors and groups produce, circulate and negotiate 'appropriate' forms of gendered self-conduct through acts of representation, which are themselves informed by varied discourses of sexuality, gender, nation, race and religion in both nations.
3. Chapters 2 and 3 of this collection bring to light the historical production and contemporary status of figures (or constructed social categorisations) of gendered and sexualised difference within Singapore—namely that of the 'Sarong Party Girl,' (SPG) (Hudson) and the 'Singapore Girl' (Obendorf). Chris Hudson's chapter 'Dangerous Sexuality in Singapore' outlines the historical production of the 'Sarong Party Girl' figure as a stereotype of pejorative sexual and racial difference

throughout the 1990s and 2000s in distinction to more socially 'acceptable' and state-promoted forms of sexuality that emphasise reproduction, two-partnered heterosexual relationships, and have in the past discouraged exogamy (p. 19). Hudson provides a brief history of the construction of the SPG figure as a young heterosexual Singaporean Chinese woman, sexually liberal and 'with scant ambition beyond marriage to an *ang moh* [referring here to white or 'western' male],' tracing its propagation to Orientalising and sexist books penned by a male Australian expat and subsequent 'moral panics,' publicised by popular Singaporean media outlets (pp. 18–19). Hudson then contends that the self-identified 'Sarong Party Girl' and Singaporean blogger Isabella Chen's appropriation of these stereotypes can be seen as an act of subversion and an assertion of moral autonomy. This is because many of her lurid blog posts criticise and deflate Orientalising, sexist and racist notions associated with the stereotype. The argument surrounding this claim becomes a bit problematic as the essay does not seek out multiple voices of self-identified SPGs or Singaporean women engaging with, commenting on, or resisting this stereotype in their everyday lives online or offline. As such, it becomes reductive when she establishes Chen's very specific mode of asserting her moral autonomy, which has involved posting nude photos, starring in semi-erotic films, and frankly recording her sexual experiences online with commentary, as one that can single-handedly 'transform and recover their [women designated as SPGS] individual and collective voice and their humanity' (p. 28). These and similar arguments deny the voices of other Singaporean women and self-identified SPGs who generate alternative positions of agency and negotiate their subject positions by other means (p. 28).

4. On a related note Simon Obendorf's piece 'Consuls, Consorts or Courtesans? "Singapore Girls" Between the Nation and the World' examines the figure of the 'Singapore Girl,' as a racialised and gendered image of 'Asian femininity.' He highlights that this image was invented for female Singapore Airlines' (SIA) flight attendants by both Singaporean and non-Singaporean advertising executives and policy makers. Obendorf's analysis is well structured in the way it considers the complex entanglements between the self-Orientalisation determining the creation of this 'brand icon' for the state-owned airline in the 1970s, its role in the post-colonial project of nation-branding, and its relation to national gender discourses that 'reinforce essentialist understandings of gendered behavior' (p. 35). He then looks at the ways the 'ideal' heterosexual and economically productive femininity symbolised by this representation has become mobilised in Singapore's projection of a national image to the world and in 'nationalist narratives of global success' within the nation (pp. 34, 36). Obendorf's essay provides a short but important section featuring an account from a former attendant on how this service-oriented and beautified image was enforced and policed by the airline, but I found myself wishing more time was spent exploring the ways SIA flight attendants negotiate their own gendered subject positions in reaction to this ideal.
5. Continuing the discussion on the Singaporean state and representations of gender, family, and sexuality, the chapters by Catherine Gomes and Michelle M. Lazar, explore the ways in which state-produced representations circulated by media-like museum exhibition material, and health campaigns create contradictory ideals for citizenship. Gomes' lucid and engagingly written chapter looks at the ways in which the Singaporean state has created official rememberings of the Cantonese *amah* (female domestic worker) in exhibitions at the National Museum of Singapore, in efforts to extend its nation-building project and present 'proper' models for emulation 'in its creation of an imagined and good citizenry' (p. 102). Through a detailed address of various narratives from *amahs* themselves and members of the households who employed them in colonial Singapore, Gomes develops the *amah* as a complex figure that dually reinforces and unsettles state discourses on ideal citizenship for women (p. 110). As Gomes convincingly argues, her dedication to work, family nurturing, and self-sacrifice are presented as model characteristics, but the fact that *amahs* generally returned to China after their employment, and abstained from marriage and bearing children directly contrast the Singaporean state's emphasis on 'marriage and procreation as a

significant and ideal gendered indicators of Singaporean women's allegiance and commitment to both nation and society' (p. 113).

6. Continuing an examination of government positions on gender and family planning, Lazar's chapter "'What will it cost you today?' The Gendered Discourse of Parenting,' textually deconstructs pro-natalist messages ensconced in the state's 2009–10 anti-dengue health campaign advertisements to examine the gendered expectations it generates for mothers and fathers on parenting. Lazar locates the existence of this campaign's messages within larger social issues in Singapore such as changes in 'societal and gender expectations,' which have resulted from increased educational opportunities and workforce participation for women since the 1970s, and the national furore over declining birth rates since the 1980s. Noting the state's continued emphasis in media campaigns for men to become active fathers, and for women to both increase the fertility rate and economic development through becoming mothers and participating in the workforce, she examines the role of these narratives in a 2009–10 anti-dengue health campaign. With much clarity and focus, Lazar then dissects the minutiae of language, plot and visual imagery within the advertisements to identify a duality between a 'conservative discourse' and an 'egalitarian discourse'; the former encouraging dichotomised gendered duties, roles, and desires within parenting, and the latter encouraging shared and equal roles in child rearing.
7. Chapters 5, 8 and 9 in this volume address issues of gender in Malaysia, focusing on melodrama and Malaysian Cinema (Mokhtar-Ritchie), the Islamic propagation activities of a female Malay-Muslim NGO (Frisk), and interrogations of state discourses on race and gender in Malaysian theater (Philips). Hanita Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie's essay examines images of the Malaysian 'modern, independent heroine' in the films of Yasmin Ahmad and Shuhaimi Baba, arguing that the forms of melodrama within these films contrast older more 'traditional' portrayals of women and instead create messages about Malaysian women's changing social and economic roles since the 1980s (p. 80). Mokhtar-Ritchie explores Baba films like *Selubung* (1992) and *Ringgit Kasorrga* (1995) to argue they present varied representations of heroines as modern women who are English-speakers, career-oriented and socially mobile. Her analysis then focuses on Ahmad's film trilogy *Orked* (2004, 2006, 2007) contending they articulate images of 'modern' women negotiating tensions within Muslim-Malay and Chinese-Malaysian racial politics, and patriarchal standards. Susan Philip's chapter researches issues similar to those brought up by Ahmad's films, providing in-depth interpretations of English-language works by Malaysian theatre practitioners Marion D'Cruz, Jo Kukuthas, Charlene Rajendran and Leow Puay Tin. Philips provides a brief history of state-sanctioned Malay racial privilege in post-independence Malaysia, and then details how each of these practitioner's works of visual, spoken and non-spoken theatre seek to unsettle and complicate national positions on gender and race that dually promote a rhetoric of 'multiculturalism' while racialising and categorising citizens.
8. While each chapter provides well researched, clearly argued, and historically conscious analyses of gendered representations and their construction, one of the weaknesses of many essays in this collection is their larger focus on textual interpretation. This relates to my bias as an anthropologist, but I believe this focus tends to sideline concerns about the reception and counter-production of these narratives and representations by different women in Malaysia and Singapore. As a result many of the essays focus only on discursively constructed norms of ideal heterosexuality and binarised gender roles without exploring how varied femininities and masculinities are constructed vis-à-vis these representations. Also missing here are considerations on their possible reception by those with trans, queer and non-binary gender identities or those with non-normative sexualities. Volumes like *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures* edited by Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow in 2012^[3] have generated some research on similar issues in the Singaporean case, but there is still a need for more studies on media representations, reception, and non-normative genders and sexualities in Malaysia.

9. Sylva Frisk's chapter 'Gendered Dimensions of Islamisation: The case of IMAN' is one of the few in this volume to utilise an ethnographic approach to address head-on the ways some women in Malaysia negotiate discourses of gendered-difference and create acts of self-representation. Frisk focuses on 'IMAN,' an NGO formed by Malay-Muslim women exclusively for Islamic women in Malaysia. As Frisk explains, they negotiate a space between normative models of femininity and masculinity in order to 'support Muslim women and other powerless Muslims who face social or legal injustices' and to change understandings 'of Islam in general and policy-making in Malaysia' (p. 8). Through first-hand interviews, she details the ways IMAN's members use their knowledge from 'religious studies and disciplined religious practices' to challenge interpretations of Islam set out by many male Islamic religious authorities in Malaysia through debate and contestation over the meanings of the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* (p. 8). Fascinating in this chapter was Frisk's dialogue with IMAN members, in which they conceptualised their mission apart from images of other more recognised female Malaysian Muslim NGOs, by claiming they work outside of a framework of 'western' feminism and instead operate on the belief that God granted men and women equal rights, but that men have distorted this meaning through time. Though related to a very different subject matter, Chitra Sankaran and Chng Huang Hoon in 'Interrogating Gender in a Singapore Classroom' also utilise ethnographic methodologies to provide an excellent exploration of their own experiences developing and implementing a feminist pedagogy in a college setting, and their students' encounters with each other and vis-à-vis their coursework and methodologies.
10. Although this volume is in some ways premised on holding Singapore and Malaysia in the same analytic framework, none of the essays (save for the introduction) fully explore this proposition. As Koh and Balasingamchow accurately state in their introductory chapter, this framework is productive, as both nations share similar histories of colonialism and racialisation (largely due to the fact that Singapore was a part of Malaysia up until 1965), which has created intertwined 'historical tensions and continuities between the two nations in terms of gender and representation' (p. 2). It is not necessarily negative that pieces in the collection do not provide this type of analysis explicitly, as the volume is valuable and informative on its own; providing generative starting points for future works to address these and other matters. Koh and Balasingamchow also acknowledge that the collection focuses more heavily on Singapore than Malaysia, which they attest to the lesser amount of academic research on gender and representation in Malaysia (p. 6). This leads me to hope that future collections will utilise the diversity of perspectives contained in this volume to further research into more issues of gendered representations and media in Malaysia, such as Islamic television programming and Muslimah fashion shows, as well as relations between Singapore and Malaysia, which could address transnational imaginaries and media flows enabled by new media technologies (p. 6).
11. In closing, for interested students, each of the essays contained in this collection will serve as an excellent introduction to issues of gender and representation in contemporary Malaysia and Singapore, and will prove valuable and informative to scholars across a variety of fields. Though this collection leaves more to be desired in regards to research on non-normative sexualities and genders, more contemporary media forms in Malaysia, and studies of reception and negotiation, it creates inroads for future research on each of these issues, and also for work considering connections and tensions between Malaysia and Singapore. By illuminating previously unaddressed or underrepresented topics in research on Malaysia and Singapore, and complex interactions between gender, representations, national discourses, sexuality, religion and race, this collection is impressive for its clarity, range and depth of focus.

Notes

[1] Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Pantheon Books: New York, 1972.

[2] Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, pp. 271–313, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

[3] Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow (eds), *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 2012.

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Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue39/wolff_review.html

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Last modified: 16 August 2016 1354