

A woman in traditional Thai attire, including a headband with red flowers and a dark top, is shown from the chest up. She is holding a t-shirt with a graphic design that includes the word 'PUNK' and a photo of a band. The background is a solid red color with a faint, stylized image of a Thai temple and a boat on a river.

PUNKS, MONKS' AND POLITICS

AUTHENTICITY IN THAILAND,
INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

EDITED BY
JULIAN CH LEE AND
MARCO FERRARESE

Punks, Monks and Politics

Authenticity in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia

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Introduction

Julian CH Lee and Marco Ferrarese

Authenticity is much sought after; being described as inauthentic is an insult or an embarrassment. The quality of authenticity is a virtue (Martin 2012: 51–63) and its attainment desirable. One might think that authenticity, relating as it does to that which is true and genuine, should be easily acquired or achieved, and yet doing so everywhere is often difficult or fraught. And furthermore, it would be considered by many as impossible to achieve. There was never a time when a society existed without the influences of people of other cultures. There is no self that isn't conditioned by the demands of society to be true to. Why then is authenticity sought after?

Figure I.1 was taken in 2016 in a supermarket in Melbourne, Australia. On the shelves and above them were signs advertising the presence of 'Authentic International Food'. Mexican, Japanese and Indian food products tempted shoppers who walked down the aisle. Like the signs at the supermarket, the previous sentence deliberately avoided the phrasing 'food from Mexico, Japan and India', because many of the products on those shelves, despite being for example 'Mexican', were not imported from Mexico. Therefore, in what sense could a product be Mexican?

In a discussion about authenticity and transcultural interactions, Elizabeth Kath describes a similar dilemma. She was once a 'member of a band that played Cuban music' in Australia, but recalls seeing a flyer produced by a member of the band to advertise one of its gigs.

Upon seeing the words 'Cuban band' written across the flyer I felt immediately uncomfortable with the description. Could a band that plays 'Cuban' songs really call itself a 'Cuban band' if most of its members were not Cuban? . . . One band member's view was that this was a non-issue because the band had a Cuban musical director. Another member felt that the 'Cuban' in 'Cuban band' referred to the music, not the band members. (Kath 2015: 23)



Figure I.1 Photograph taken at Coles supermarket in Melbourne, Australia. Photograph by Julian CH Lee.

What the supermarket and Cuban band examples indicate is that there is no certainty as to what constitutes something as duly carrying a particular label, but that at the same time, such labels are valued. The fact that there are differences in meaning behind terms such as ‘Product of Australia’, ‘Manufactured in Australia’ and ‘Packaged in Australia’—differences which would not be intuitively apparent (Clemens 2015)—demonstrate both the desire for attribution and the difficulties around it.

Compared to the hurdles to accurately describing the origin of products, determining the authenticity of cultural practices is infinitely more difficult. In reality it is impossible. Despite the fact that, by contrast to reality, ‘cultures are imagined as discrete, bounded units, each unique’ (Handler 1986: 2; see also Palmer 1992: 32), societies in our era of globalization cannot but be influenced by neighbours, by exposure to the languages, or by the ideas, behaviours and products of people far away. Therefore, as Kath notes with respect to Latin dance and music,

the theme of cultural authenticity, one that frequently arises directly or indirectly in conversations and interactions in the world of Latin dance and music, is one that transculturation calls into question. In short, if culture and cultural practices are by their very nature always hybrid, reconfiguring and transmuting, how can there be ‘authentic’ culture? (Kath 2015: 26)

And thus we return to our question of ‘Why is authenticity sought after?’

The question is difficult, but one that this volume addresses by examining case studies from three Southeast Asian countries: Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. We chose these countries for several reasons. First is that they are located in Southeast Asia, a region of intercultural contact as a result of a long history of intra-regional human mobility for reasons including, but not limited to, trade. Anthony Reid (2004) has described how cities such as Melaka, Majapahit and Ayutthaya, in what are now the territories of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, respectively, were each a cosmopolis—‘an urban formation’ which is ‘plural in culture’ (2004: 1).

Second, while located in one part of the world, they each have commonalities and differences that mean that they make for interesting comparisons. While Thailand was never subject to European colonization, Malaysia and Indonesia were, by the British and Dutch, respectively.¹ While Malaysia and Indonesia share a similar language, Thai is a very different language with a different script. Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and other religions occur in each country, but each has a very different relationship with the religion of the majority and the religions of minorities. While Malaysia and Thailand are on the Asian mainland, Indonesia is an archipelago. Whereas the majority of the people in Indonesia and Malaysia speak Austronesian languages and share cultural origins, the majority of those in Thailand have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (LeBar et al. 1964).

The list of commonalities and differences is great, but a key further point is that all are thoroughly engaged in political, economic and cultural aspects of globalization. Global economic integration means that development depends upon accessing and being accessed by global capital. The countries in question have endeavoured to signal their openness for global business in various ways. These include free trade deals such as that between Thailand and numerous countries including Australia (Athukorala and Kohpaiboon 2011), the construction of major landmarks such as the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur (Bunnell 1999; Lee 2014a) or the promotion of tourism such as that advanced by Indonesia (Adams 2008; Hall 2011). But while global interconnections are intended to draw in prosperity, some in the countries in question are concerned about the impacts of foreign exposure on their societies and cultures (Peletz 2003). The ways that these concerns are manifested and sometimes contested in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand are explored in this book’s chapters.

Authenticity has, however, been the subject of philosophical criticism (e.g. Adorno 1973), psychological critique (Ferraro 2015) and general polemic (Potter 2010). Some might suggest that discussions of authenticity are misguided because, as suggested earlier, there can be no genuine authentic behaviour or culture to be discovered. But the critiques of authenticity

continue because it remains important to many people. In view of the emphasis placed on authenticity in tourists' comments which she examined, Mucha-zondida Mkono has argued that 'calls to dismiss the notion [of authenticity] and discourage future research on the phenomenon are premature' (2012: 480). In the arena of music, Allan Moore also disagrees with the concept being abandoned for reasons including that 'identify[ing] the authentic with the original is only one understanding', and that one understanding 'should not be allowed to annexe the whole' (Moore 2002: 210). Moore seeks to focus attention away from the thing that is or isn't authentic, but the persons and processes involved in the processes of authentication.

That Moore's discussion of authenticity takes place with respect to music is unsurprising. Much of the writing that draws on the term authenticity revolves around music. Whether it relates to *Lukthung* or 'Thai country music' (Jirattikorn 2006) or rock music in Israel (Regev 1992), music provides fertile ground for investigating the dynamics of authenticity. A large part of this is because, whereas social and political concerns about authenticity often revolve around what truly belongs in and to a particular locality, with respect to music a further anxiety can exist, which is that performers and consumers should be true to a foreign musical form, seeking to reduce the influence of local cultural practices and influences in their representation of that musical form, sometimes far from its place of origin. Thus it is the case that in this book we have especially sought contributions relating to music.

Furthermore, to explore the dynamics of authenticity, we have sought to focus even further on specific genres of music—punk and heavy metal. The sonic extremes of punk and heavy metal music might initially seem unsuitable, or rather inauthentic, to the peoples of Southeast Asia. However, it is precisely because it seems so clearly foreign that punk and heavy metal are fruitful genres to explore the ways in which authenticity is sought and deployed. Furthermore, these noisy, visually daring music genres have lent a sense of empowerment to some young Southeast Asians, enabling them to become active players in global networks of grassroots subcultural production (Baulch 2007; Martin-Iverson 2012; Wallach 2011, 2014). The pursuit of authenticity which is visible in Southeast Asian underground music scenes, as portrayed for example in the book *A Labour of Love and Hate* (Resborn and Resborn 2013), brings into view the tensions that can surround authenticity which are local and global, subcultural and mainstream.

Popular culture and music have been thought of as instruments of Anglo-American cultural imperialism (Crothers 2014; White 2012). Western influence, whether intentionally imperial or not, has manifested in numerous ways. Colonizers have been followed by others including drifters and dreamers, young adventurers who were drawn to South and Southeast Asian shores by an alluring, carefree 'Hippie Trail' filled with promises of exoticism and

drug-induced bliss (MacLean 2007). But while the soul-searching of those travellers continues in other forms, Southeast Asians today, like others across the world, are often faced with the choice of either cleaving to the cultural traditions associated with their places of birth, or participating in that which is foreign. These choices are often imbued with moral valence.

Conundrums are clear in the realm of punk and heavy metal. In the West, their vigour and authenticity seems to be waning as it is drawn into globalized and standardized 'mediocrity' (Kahn-Harris 2015). The earlier ideals of youthful rebellion which constituted the 'authentic' grounds of subcultural affiliation have been domesticated into the 'corporate cultivation of the rebel consumer' (Frank and Weiland 1997). Indeed, many contemporary Western subcultures have morphed into leisure activities (Spracklen 2015) whose members dwell in real and digital sub-worlds characterized by a globalized and 'pervasive brand content for "alternative" banking, clothing, soft drinks, and music' (Halnon 2005). Meanwhile, in the countries focused on in this volume, punk and heavy metal are emerging as novel identities that confer a significant level of agency to young people who, more often than not, have to fight against authorities—such as in the case of Malaysian black metal—to construct and negotiate the 'authenticity' of their chosen identities (AP 2005; Azmyl Yusof 2009).

What the chapters in this book thus seek is to not describe practices and products that are in some way genuinely authentic, but rather to explore the dynamics of authenticity in the sociopolitical field. Although authenticity is often discussed in the context of individuals seeking to act in line with their authentic inner selves (Martin 2012), the chapters in this book are largely focused on the dynamics of authenticity in the social and political realms. How people understand what is authentic, why they value it or why they work to protect it—whether motivated by personal interests or as part of political manoeuvrings—are the subject of the chapters. Interrogations into the concept of authenticity recur in the chapters according to the demands of their empirical contexts, but these discussions occur in service of understanding and analysing those observations, not the other way round.

The chapters in the book have been gathered into national groupings with each country containing at least one chapter that addresses the sociopolitical dynamics of authenticity and one chapter that examines a rock or punk music scene as a recurring case study. The editors of this volume believed that such a recurring theme would hold enlightening potential because, just as it is useful in scientific studies to fix one variable while adjusting others, we could see how the dynamics of authenticity played out in similar scenes across countries. We believe that this approach has proved fruitful.

This volume begins in Malaysia, and in chapter 1, Marco Ferrarese engages with George Ritzer's concept of 'the globalization of nothing' to examine

the reception of global metal music culture in Malaysia. Ferrarese describes how metal music fans in Malaysia pursue authenticity by seeking to acquire material, and consequently cultural capital in the form of paraphernalia from authentic foreign metal bands. Whether it is vinyl records, T-shirts or patches, foreignness is personally important and coveted. Thus, whereas Ritzer regards global cultural forms as empty forms into which local culture can be infused, Ferrarese shows how the orientation towards foreignness restrains the localization of metal culture in Malaysia.

Frederik Holst's discussion in chapter 2 similarly explores the quest for the authentic except in the spheres of religion and politics. By focusing on high-profile and politicized issues of 'genuine' Islam, deviancy and apostasy, he explores the intersections of the politics and ethnic identity to show how religion has become the key anchor point for ethno-political identities in the highly contested political domain of Malaysian politics where it has become politically crucial to be seen to be adhering to 'authentic' Islamic practice.

These political realities form a key background to conceptualizations of sexual authenticity examined by Joseph N. Goh. By deploying a constructivist grounded methodology to analyse and interpret selected narratives of six gay-identifying Malaysian men, Goh focuses on intersecting personal, religio-political, sociocultural and legal realities that give rise to their meaning-makings of love, sex and intimacy. Hence, he argues that rather than being a fixed, personal trait, sexual authenticity is a process that is highly unstable and contingent.

Sexuality and gender form concerns for Julian CH Lee as he explores in chapter 4 the political deployment of authenticity in the political sphere, which has resulted in consternation and suffering for many people, and some more so than others. In his chapter which is personal in style, Lee reflects on the ways that he as an academic and an activist has sought to intervene in discussions of authenticity. These interventions sought to contest claims made by politicians and other actors who have claimed that certain categories or persons and behaviours are the result of undue foreign influence and whose presence must be eliminated. In a context where non-heterosexual behaviours are demonized and criminalized, Lee describes some of these interventions in which he seeks to debunk accusations levelled at homosexual communities by drawing on academic research, but shares how he has been haunted by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins' criticism of academics who undertake contestations just like his own.

Lee's discussion then forms the basis of an exchange of views between Nikola Mikocki-Bleeker and Lee. This final chapter in the section on Malaysia is a postscript to Lee's preceding chapter and takes the form of a series of correspondences that examines the ways in which issues of authenticity specifically impacts women's rights activists in Malaysia. With the assistance of Ceridwen Spark who chimes in with her observations of similar activists in

Papua New Guinea, Mikocki-Bleeker and Lee explore how some Malaysian women's rights activists respond to the notion that feminism as a label and perspective is an inappropriate foreign import.

In the first two chapters of the section on Indonesia, we return to punk and heavy metal. In Erik Hannerz's discussion of punk in Indonesia in chapter 6, the dynamics of contestation are central. But of interest to Hannerz is the role of place and emplacement in this. Drawing on fieldwork in four Indonesian cities, Hannerz affirms the importance of place in this. He describes the ways in which specific places impact on understandings of group identity and authenticity, and how different subcultural groups challenge the authenticity of others. The 'realness' of one's punk practice is then taken up by Sean Martin-Iverson who examines the theme of Do It Yourself (DIY) as it is realized in the hardcore punk scene in Bandung, Indonesia. Martin-Iverson illustrates the value that comes from engagement with punk as a global practice, but whereas Hannerz highlights the importance of place in understanding Indonesian punk authenticity, Martin-Iverson focuses on the production of punk performances and records according to DIY principles.

E. Douglas Lewis, meanwhile, considers in chapter 8 the language around 'authenticity' in Eastern Indonesia. He examines the ways in which weavers of the village of Sikka Natar on the island of Flores evaluate textiles made in their community. Authenticity in the sense that the word has come to be used in the phrase 'cultural authenticity' does not enter into their judgments, whereas concepts of source and descentance are central to Sikkinese aesthetic. The result is that, while the designs of Sikkinese cloths may be attractive to foreigners, comprehension of their aesthetic requires knowledge of the history and social organization of Sikka.

The place of traditions and customs—or *adat* in Indonesian—is the core concern of the final chapter on Indonesia. However, not only have the practices that constitute *adat* changed over time, as Greg Acciaioli explores, the very role that *adat* plays in society has shifted. In the past, writes Acciaioli, '*adat* provided the cosmological order' that 'rendered the world intelligible'. Later, *adat* involved ceremonial and ritual practice which was regarded as valuable, but primarily for aesthetic reasons—as 'a delight in the play of form and skilful execution'. Acciaioli describes his observations of how this transformation manifested itself in Central Sulawesi in interaction with central government attempts to impose a national culture.

Pablo Henri Ramirez Didou begins the section on Thailand by returning us to the ways in the global DIY ethics are manifested in the rock 'n' roll subcultural scene in Bangkok. Ramirez Didou describes the importance of scene member's cultural capital, and that adherence to DIY principles is crucial in order to be regarded as authentic by peers. This in turn is critical when individuals seek to establish businesses that service the scene.

But whereas authenticity in Ramirez Didou's case study is derived from adherence to a foreign cultural influence, in the chapter on the musical genre of *lukthung pleng* that follows, Viriya Sawangchot describes how a sense of Thainess within this hybrid genre led to its popularity, as well as endorsement by the Thai state. Sawangchot charts the birth and the fortunes of *lukthung pleng* and the contexts—political and economic—that led to the Thai state supporting the genre, and describes the rural-urban dynamics at play for proponents and audiences of *lukthung pleng*.

The Thai state is then the focus in chapter 12 of Alessio Fratticcioli's exploration of the May 2014 Thai coup d'état. In his exploration of the dynamics of this coup, he reveals how 'Thainess' was important. Coup makers framed their activities as preserving Thainess, a quality that revolves around nation, religion and kingship. However, Fratticcioli goes on to outline how the ongoing stability in Thailand speaks to the ways in which these claims to authenticity have become successfully contested along with the Thainess of socio-economic inequalities.

Such centre—periphery concerns are foremost in Sean Matthew Ashley's chapter which looks at the ways in which the Buddhism practised by the Dara'ang of Northern Thailand is often considered as being an inferior form of Buddhism—a 'hill tribe Buddhism'. Important for Ashley is understanding the impact of the Thai state in framing understandings of authentic and inauthentic cultural and religious practice, but that, at the same time, those on the margins, such as the Dara'ang, are by no means passive in accepting those discourses that frame them as inauthentic or as inferior emulations of a more authentic original.

In a fittingly touching final chapter to this volume, Rebekah Farrell describes the ways in which a remote Thai village has sought self-preservation of their society and culture by connecting with foreign tourists. With their social structure imperilled by, among other things, rural-to-urban migration of young people and cognizant of the ways in which tourism can damage cultural practices when 'performed' for tourists, Farrell describes how the village has, in pursuit of self-preservation, pursued not eco-tourism but edu-tourism, which seeks to emphasize a shared humanity and vulnerability without turning culture into a commodity that is inauthentically enacted and consumed.

Together, the chapters in this book reveal the sometimes contradictory ways in which the dynamics of authenticity—its pursuit, its deployment, its politics—play out in different contexts. Whether authenticity inheres in the local or the global, among the majority or within a subculture, on the outside of or within people, or in the past or the present, authenticity is nevertheless valued. And Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand are, as we shall see, especially enlightening for revealing the diversities and commonalities in how this value can be made manifest.

NOTE

1. It should be noted that colonial powers other than the British in Malaysia or the Dutch in Indonesia had interests at different times in these countries.

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Section 1

MALAYSIA