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Contents

List of Figures vii
List of Tables ix
Preface xi
List of Abbreviations xvii

Part I: Economics, Development and Government 1
1 South Korea and Asean: Strategic Partnership for Building an East Asian Community 3
   Bong Ryull Yang and Norma Mansor
2 South Korea's Trade Intensity with China, the US and Japan (2002-2011) 23
   Seung Jin Kim and Gi Seung Kim
3 The Impact of State Capacity and Leadership Changes on National Development: Drawing Comparisons between Malaysia and South Korea 43
   Norma Mansor, Keum Hyun Kim and Md. Nasruldn Md. Akhir
4 Components of Social Protection: A Comparison between South Korea and Malaysia 69
   Norma Mansor and Nur Fakhrina Ab. Rashid

Part II: Media, Culture and Linguistics 91
5 A Study of Al-Jazeera's Framing of Tragedies Flight MH370 and the MV Sewol Ferry 93
   Fatina Mohammed Al-Majdhoub, Azizah Hamzah and Mohd. Yahya Mohamed Ariffin
6 Watching South Korean Soap Operas: Malay Women Strike a Balance between Malaysian Modernity and Tradition 111
   Azizah Hamzah and Md. Azalanshah Md. Syed
This chapter seeks to position soap operas as a popular vehicle for Malay women to engage and negotiate their structured daily lives with an increasingly global form of transnational modernity. In the new Malaysian landscape of middle-class affluence and consumerism, popular culture via media has emerged as one of the most important sites for Malay women to appreciate people and places from a distance and engage with the new ideas embedded in the notions of foreign modernity. The introduction of non-Western soaps particularly from South Korea to Malaysia began in the 1980s as a strategy to offset Western influence. But now, along with other non-Western soaps, South Korean soap operas have completely overtaken other genres as the most popular television genre with astronomical viewership ratings, particularly among Malay women, who are the main audience of this genre (Bidin 2003; Hamzah 2006; John, Damis and Cheivi 2003a).

Due to the immense popularity of these soaps among local audiences, public anxiety has emerged over the exposure of women to the images and ideas portrayed in these foreign soaps. Certain public discourses have condemned them for compromising the integrity of Malay cultural life by imparting values that are contrary to Islamic and traditional Malay teachings. They have been labelled a frivolous waste of time for leading Malay women to ignore their duties in the private and public sphere, addictive behaviour with the potential to corrode women's role within the state's vision of modernity for the nation and to undermine the role of female citizens within that plan. For example, as reported in the local newspaper, "the unconscious humming of the theme from Winter Sonata as we cook and clean." The diligence and devotion with which audiences...
watch these soaps is quite staggering. As the reporter notes, "Many give the "are you crazy?" look at the suggestion of making a phone call during soap (viewing time)." Furthermore, the daily family routine is altered to facilitate time for these segments. Not only are other social activities such as gatherings interrupted, "many hosts are in disbelief when guests magically vanish from the party just before a soap is due to start." (John, Davis and Chelvi 2003). At the same time, the assertion that all imported programmes including South Korean soaps will be evaluated by the appointed local television panel of evaluators indicates the ambivalence toward the foreign cultural influences. As stated by the Information Ministry, "this is to ensure that their content and message are suitable and not contrary to local culture" (Bernama 2007b).

Contrary to the charge made by the authorities, we argue that Malay women are not passive consumers of non-Western soaps. They actively engage with the challenges of transnational content. We suggest that Malay women do not employ their soap-viewing activities as a site of overt resistance against the hegemonic patriarchal state structure. They are aware of their secondary status in the Malay cultural order and largely accept this officially sanctioned place in society and respect traditional mores. They work within the boundaries of the social system and institutionalised hierarchies. Our respondents engage in a mode of negotiation where they consistently position the ideological discourses of Malay customs or adat, and Islam as their referent and cultural support. They have therefore developed a set of embedded watching competencies as a form of protective behaviour.

THEORETICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research is grounded in concepts from contemporary audience studies and key theories of cultural flows. Audience studies have emerged as an important source of information on the penetration of non-Western soap operas in the Asian region. Audience studies attest to the realignment of cultural tastes and allegiances and give support to a counter-narrative which rejects the perception of a unilinear flow of content from the West to the rest. Global mapping of the network of media flows requires consideration of a complex weave of interacting factors. Manuel Castells argues, "society is constructed around flows: flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organisational interactions, flows of images, sounds and symbols" (Castells 2000: 442). Every aspect of social life in the modern world is shaped by such multiple flows of information, goods, images and capital. At the end of last century, Appadurai (1996: 32) rejected a polarised model of transnational cultural flows, postulating that, "the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models." Roland Robertson (1995: 32) argues that successful trade depends upon a two-way transaction - 'globalisation' - where the complexities of a global economy require media producers to adapt global products to cater
to local audiences and simultaneously to reinvent local products according to
global trends to make them competitive.

Marwen Kraidy (2001) focuses on the role of media institutions in shaping
experiences of modernity and considers reality television (including the soap
opera genre) as a laboratory where various modern scenarios may be vicariously
elaborated, contested and appropriated for local use. Soaps have an ability to
synthesize the local and global in startling ways, whether in terms of local soaps
that imitate a global format or from the cultural after-effects of the consumption
of global products in local ways. Kraidy's work goes further to suggest that
glocalisation is an outcome of the new policies of mutual benefit and critical
transculturalism, reflecting the politics of post-colonial and contemporary
international relations. In the engagement with modernity the object of desire is to
initiate reasonable change in society; namely progression through a "softly, softly" approach. Kraidy's new world is characterised by, "technological developments,
linguistic creolisation, cultural hybridisation, social decentralisation and political

Audience reception studies by Chua and Iwabuchi (2008), Thussu (2007),
Iwabuchi (2002a; 2004a), and Iwabuchi, Muecke and Thomas (2004) amongst
others increasingly demonstrate the limited usefulness of a centre-periphery model in this age of new technologies and communications. They suggest that the popularity of non-Western soaps across diverse locations illustrates the multipolar flows of popular culture. The concept of a transnational web is reinforced; for example, Japanese and South Korean soaps are watched in many
Southeast Asian countries including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand
and Philippines (Chua 2004; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Iwabuchi 2002; 2004; Suh,
Kwon and Choi 2006). Global networks tend to produce a ubiquity of content and
simultaneity of engagement. Nowadays the field of 'audience studies' has evolved
into the more complex discipline of 'audience ethnography'; a term adopted by
many media scholars (Ang 1985; Bakardjieva 2005; Brown 1994; Hobson 1982;
Ida 2006; Iwabuchi 2002a; Liebes and Katz 1993; Moores 1993; Morley 1980;
Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner and Warth 1989; Spence 2005). Audience ethnography
researches how audiences read, decode and make sense of cultural texts like films
and other programmes circulated through the televisial medium.

Hall's theories of encoding and decoding (Hall: 1980) are foundational to
any contemporary analysis of audience reception and open a window to both
the transnational imaginary and the acquiescence in powerless groups in society.
Recent feminist studies however explore the situated and gendered position of
women and focus on the specific ideological conditioning received by women
through television. Mankekar (1999), for example, examines the role of television
in the reconstruction of postcolonial womanhood and the hegemonic control of
popular consciousness around issues of social justice, nationhood and identity.
She also attempts to understand the 'assertive historical bloc' pushing the agenda
of policies and practices in constituencies, recognising that discourse is not simply
abstract ideology but that rhetoric has a conditioning influence and a material
effect on the daily lives of women.