Encountering Violence: Media and Memory in Asia

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One may say that violence and the emergence of modernity were significantly interrelated at both the macro and micro levels. Establishing modern political systems and defining the borderlines of modern polities inevitably accompanied large-scale confrontations, which were reconfigured into a modern type. Various forms of violence—colonial, interstate, and internecine—necessarily paralleled the restructuring of time, space, and human mobility in the emerging capitalist system. Why does studying violence in Asia matter? What insights can the region's violent past and present bring into our discussion of the modern world?

This special issue of *positions: asia critique* originated during a collective endeavor in response to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Scholars, mostly from the region, gathered at a workshop titled "Sight and Sound: Challenges and Ethics of Visual Representations of War and Con-

flict in Asia," hosted by Singapore University of Technology and Design, to present their ongoing research into the still evolving lineages, forms, and discussions of violence in the media. The editors believe that the ongoing Rohingya crisis continues to share the entangled structures stemming from Asia's violent trajectories, and its media representation can be interpreted with careful reference to past cases from Asia. The "Rohingya war," if we may call it that, is a long-twentieth-century conflict embedded in postcolonial obsessions of race, ethnicity, religion, and nationhood. At the time of the gathering in Singapore in 2018, investigations into the Rohingya crisis and analyzing its relationship with the media had not been fully developed by academics. The studies are still evolving—now compounded further by the forcible seizure of the nation's administration by the junta. To welcome developing voices and ideas, to have some basis for discussion based on ground realities, and to provide a theory/practice balance to academic studies of war, we had invited journalists who were in the middle of covering the atrocities to join the forum. Drew Ambrose (Al Jazeera) discussed how shifting ground realities affected the tone and depth of media reports emerging from Myanmar. Taimor Sobhan (Fortify Rights, Bangkok) delved into the ever-increasing state of "compassion fatigue," positing that the public today is so inundated with gory news reports that our ability to react, sympathize, and politically galvanize has receded in recent years, especially with the overexposure and commodification of news and social media. Soren Kittel (Funke Media Group, Berlin) discussed the disturbing issue of the somewhat arbitrary standards held by journalist in their reporting in Rakhine, especially in situations where it becomes almost impossible to corroborate many of the stories being narrated by individuals. According to Kittel, the invariable errors made in the process of instantaneously relaying such stories in the era of social media may have grave consequences. The startling proximity of the ongoing killings, even as we somberly gathered around to read our papers in a safe environment, created a sense of futility as to what academics can do to help in such situations. The presenters did agree, however, that studying the visual and aural representation of violence in Asia will provide us, in the long run, with some insight into ways in which we can gauge the interaction, complicity, and mutual anchoring effect between the violent past in the media and the violent present.

This special issue explores the ways in which the violent experiences in Asia's past and present—including colonial rule, imperial expansion and mobilization, wartime massacres and exploitation, cold war conflicts and divisions, and state violence and oppression—are remembered, represented, and reproduced in the media. Discussing violence in Asia might have certain distinctive qualities or properties. Most explorations we found, typically involved some level of engagement with two considerations: the way various legacies of external and indigenous colonialisms have shaped power structures, and how the relatively late arrival of several forms of mass media to Asia (with the notable eruption of social media in the early twenty-first century) make it possible to track some of their effects in engendering conflict and violence. Is this sufficient to merit a case for looking at violence and its relationship with the media in Asia, as different from how its manifests in the Global North? The editors argue that it might help us understand the relationship between violence and modern political systems and its intersections with media in a way that is more relevant to Asian societies that embraced widespread visual and aural media around the same time they plunged into processes of state formation, whether colonial or postcolonial, and started developing certain social identities. (Yet, as we prepare this volume, breaking news of the Russian invasion of Ukraine reminds us that problems of identity and border delineation remain incomplete, even in Europe, and the conflict of reportage over propaganda is being fought zealously across a larger mediascape than ever before. While these articles focus on Asia, we concede that modern war tests the limits of the efforts to create, disseminate, and intercept narratives in the media, regardless of location.)

These "entangled structures" of imperialization, colonization, and the cold war (Chen 2010: 212) have made the mediascapes in Asia a specter for recurring confrontations with the past in distorted ways. Unresolved traumatic conflicts repeatedly return from the colonial past to haunt the visual and auditory imaginations of current audiences, their effects lingering in current postcolonial states' national imaginary. The sensory practices utilized by imperial regimes reconstitute themselves to be compatible with seemingly benign postimperial states in the control of friends and foes. Asia's cold war, which, in fact, is still ongoing despite the "idea of the end" from the Western perspectives (Kwon 2010: 15–36), and other sources of

conflicts have made the region continuously draw and redraw the border lines. These lingering cold war conflicts as well as various other dissensions resulted in an incubation of physical and psychological geographies which "emerged as a national trauma" to the audiences of many postcolonial states (Sarkar 2009: 2). Many parts of Asia encountered the modern world order and modern ways of life by being occupied, colonized, and segmented in close association with external forces. Chen Kuan-Hsing (2010: 212) draws attention to the "tripartite problematic" in the region—namely, "decolonization, deimperialization, and de–cold war." His point is that these three processes have become mutually entangled structures, so that the historical experiences in the regions are not fully explained by the knowledge produced outside Asia—specifically, Europe and America (211–16).

Violence in post–World War II Asia was born out of a system of complex divisions. This system refers not only to geographical divisions but also to those of ethnicity, religion, and/or ideology in the concurrent, superimposed procedures of decolonization/recolonization and the emergence/continuation of the cold war order. For Asians situated in postcolonial state formation, the new conditions fostered through the emergence of the cold war system were crucial to their identity formation, adding to their derivative identity as the formerly colonized. The formation of a division system made it necessary and possible to blend colonial systems with the new objectives of the cold war in Asia. Violence in Asia, in this sense, defined the leverage of the emerging dominant political entities on state levels and the supranational system that ruled the region. As Kim Min-hwan puts it, a series of mass killings at the edge of World War II and the late 1940s in Okinawa, Taiwan, and Korea—the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, the February 28 incident in Taiwan in 1947, and the April Uprising in Cheju, South Korea, between 1948 and 1954—can be described as the "lawmaking violence" (G. *rechtsetzend Gewalt*) that constituted a new legitimate order in East Asia (Kim 2012: 32–35; Benjamin 1986: 283–88). Similar, but more entangled with the reactionary waves of recolonization in a cold war setting, circumstances lasted in former French Indochina, British Malaya, and Dutch East Indies, through such continued armed conflicts as the First Indochina War from 1946 through 1954, the Malayan Emergency from 1948 until 1960, and the Indonesian War of Independence from 1945 to 1949. These series of law-

making violence drew the boundary between the legitimate same and the disorderly other, dividing population by ethnic, religious, and/or ideological differences. With such events in the region, the postwar system of division was established and has been still lingering nearly three decades after the end of the Cold War in the West. Violence in Asia, however, demonstrates its sociohistorical specificity at more than just the macro level. Divisions have manifested in hearts and minds, political identities, and everyday social and cultural practices—notably through audiovisual mediascapes. Violence stays extant in various forms of microaggression, such as institutional racism, guilt-by-association systems, and stigmatization of certain minority groups. The media in Asia have been the locus of such banal but sophisticated micro-victimization, as well as countering the tactics thereof.

But are the analyses of violence documented by visual and aural media, whether macro or micro, unique to situations occurring only in the colonized worlds? Or are they merely reiterations of episodes that have been observed and unpacked elsewhere? Christopher Pinney has lamented that any study of photography in a non-European setting (in his case, often India) is typically considered to be "belated," as it would almost always be classified as "commentary" rather than as theory—a footnote pointing to an original observation made in Europe. He hankers for an original "paradigm-changing" study would emerge from the "periphery" (Pinney 2012: 141–42). We believe that some of the arguments made in this issue may be instrumental in providing us with those tools. Han Sang Kim's persuasive contention after examining recent controversies over the evidentiality of camera images, that an archival camera image's indexical informative capability is limited and vulnerable to distortion as an effect of the archive's positionality in the global hierarchy, is revelatory about the peculiarities of camera images as "qualitative data" when studying violence. Of course, this is not an entirely new observation, as Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2005: 156) argues that what defines the "pursuit of historical truthfulness" in both photography and film is the "relationship between past events, the people who record those events on film, and the viewer who sees, interprets and remembers the recorded images." However, the fact that Kim's study took the layered, investigative reading of colonial and postcolonial era events, of still and moving images, to abet the argument seven decades after the atrocities sug-

gests that we are still grappling with basic theories about the documentary value of camera images. Emerging information from World War II that had remained somewhat opaque due to cold war optics helps us better situate images and their uses. Both the recovery of images lost in archives and their disentaglement from decades of swift, limited analyses that relegated them to certain ahistorical categories constitute scholarship that has come alive in the research of academics focusing on Asia.

The contributors of this special issue cover a wide swath of time—from the late colonial period to the present day—exploring theatrical and nontheatrical film and radio, many of which are recent findings from audiovisual archives in Asia and beyond, and museum exhibitions showing the reconstruction and proliferation of narratives enabled by new digital technologies. Rather than focusing on a specific sociopolitical moment, this issue considers a variety of approaches to the histories of violence and confrontation in Asia through the long twentieth century. Nonetheless, there are three broad time frames that the reader will encounter: the late colonial period, the bottleneck years of Asian decolonization, and the emergence of postcolonial nation-states in a cold war framework. Much of the critique hovers on the reimagination of those periods, the past refracted through debate and contextualization of a wide array of visual data.

Peter Bloom brings the reader to the Malayan Emergency in the late 1940s, when colonial propaganda had become far more sophisticated than the early efforts evidenced in numerous empire outreach campaigns. Rather than narrate entire films or radio programs produced by British media agencies, the British counterinsurgency plan subtly introduced voice-over commentaries in their radio and documentary programs produced by the newly expanded Malayan Film Unit and Radio Malaya. English was used as a lure of narrative staging, giving the broadcasts authority and a veneer of legitimacy. The phenomenon of the emergence of new nation-states and the various political bodies jockeying for internal power is explored over several articles. Juyeon Bae discusses entangled histories depicted in Wei Te-Sheng's films that focus on the contestation of Taiwanese citizenship through Indigenous Taiwanese people's cinematic memory of events in the Japanese colonial era. The last vestige of this period is discussed in Han Sang Kim's exploration of the newly discovered archival footage of Korean

"comfort women" in the Japanese Imperial Army in China. What is the use of film when photographs of these horrors already exist? With this baiting question, Kim delves into the rationalizations of Siegfried Kracauer to help us contextualize camera images as something beyond evidence. If photographs have often been the mainstay in depicting colonial-era excesses, Chung-Kang Kim goes against the grain of this trend by tracing the gradual rise of other nonphotographic "marketing of memory" via virtual reality and other digital media in newer trends in sensory history. She argues that these approaches have produced a generalized and reductive representation of past traumas and yet have the potential to be much more nuanced and personal. Sandeep Ray's exposition of the propaganda film *An Unavoidable Internment* made by the Films Division of India to justify the Indian government's internment of Chinese Indians in reaction to the Indo-China War of 1962 establishes, through evidence provided by more recent, independently produced films, that the measure was draconian and avoidable. Drawing on research in the last decade that has seen a resurgence on the part of survivors, journalists, activists, and filmmakers in reinvestigating that harrowing history, the article attempts to raise questions about the roles of the state and civic society in the "othering" of a marginalized group during wartime. Malinee Khumsupa and Sudarat Musikawong take this approach in a contemporary time frame by examining the Thai government's current impunity in silencing dissent among scholars and researchers who have been providing counternarratives to the state's authoritarian excesses by curating and researching independently made films. Taking a cue from James Scott and categorizing these records as a weapon of the weak, their work highlights both the meticulous and perilous nature of activist-based research aiming to substantiate a counternarrative in a top-down dominated state.

By focusing on audiovisual mediascapes, this special issue underpins new scholarship generated in Asia and foregrounds the imaginative and sensory specificities of such encounters with violence, which have long been regarded subservient to the reading of formal and written records. All the articles in this issue encounter the depictions of violence in Asia through varied critiques made by historians, media scholars, activists, and filmmakers. The Thai scholarship looks at representational politics in contemporary society, Bloom observes subtle syntax in 1940s Malayan radio broadcasts, Han Sang

Kim justifies why it is worthwhile to obsess over a few fleeting seconds of film footage, Ray calls to account the Films Division to task for being a propagandistic mouthpiece for the Indian government in the fallout from the Indo-China War, Chung-Kang Kim discusses the pitfalls of high-tech yet simplified museological productions of past atrocities, and Bae's article looks at Japan's imperial legacy in Taiwan through the reception and perception of nationalisms created through fiction. Collectively these articles aim to impress upon the reader that encountering the visualization of violence in Asia can be manifold in form, intent and interpretation, and lends itself to multidisciplinary scholarship across numerous archives and sites of memory, mostly located in Asia.

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