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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Position of the researcher vis-a-vis the Asian audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Ang, Ien</td>
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<td><strong>Rights</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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POSITION OF THE RESEARCHER

VIS-À-VIS

THE ASIAN AUDIENCE

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Keynote Address to
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Position of the Researcher vis-à-vis the Asian Audience

By Ien Ang

I must begin this talk with a disclaimer. I have to say, from the outset, that although I have published several books on the topic of media audiences, I have not been actively engaged in the study of Asian media audiences. My comments, then, will generally be of a speculative nature, based on very superficial empirical knowledge about Asian media and media research, but I am hoping that my talk will contribute to some of the more general theoretical and political issues under discussion at this conference.

I have been asked to speak about the position of the researcher vis a vis the Asian audience. Of course, the first thing we need to ask is, what or who is this ‘Asian audience’? In asking this question, the meanings of both terms, ‘Asian’ and ‘audience’ will have to be problematised and clarified.

We can be relatively brief about the term ‘Asian’. Is the category ‘Asian’ a useful abstraction from the wide-ranging particularities of diverse national and cultural contexts of the Asian region? Do these diverse contexts have enough in common, or do they constitute an entity with sufficient coherence to warrant the continued use of the singular label ‘Asian’? Or is the term ‘Asian’ invoked here mainly as an oppositional concept, deriving meaning only from its presumed difference from ‘the West’?

The debate about Orientalism does not have to be replayed here. Nor do I want to repeat the by now tiresome mantra, especially common in postcolonial studies, that ‘Asia’ does not exist (because, so the argument goes, it is ‘only’ a figment of the European colonial imagination). The point is, of course, that as ‘Asia’ has become an entrenched, if continually contested, discursive category in our understanding of geographical, cultural or ‘civilisational’ divisions within the world, it operates as an
imaginative marker which has real force and real effects on people’s experience of themselves and the world, as well as on the geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations of governments. Just as the idea of ‘Europe’ has produced and continues to produce real social arrangements and relations, so does the idea of ‘Asia’.

As the rhetoric of ‘Asian values’ exemplifies, in Singapore, in particular, as we know, state investment in the discourse of Asianness has been a significant ideological conduit in enhancing the symbolic coherence and distinctiveness of its national culture and identity. The meaning of ‘Asian’, in this regard, is primarily instrumental and derived relationally and oppositionally, based upon and motivated by its presumed difference from Western culture. The term ‘Asian’ then becomes a rhetorical tool to legitimise cultural policies aimed at combatting (or at least containing) the world hegemony of Western culture, in the name of the protection or promotion of some notional Asian cultural identity. In this respect, the term ‘Asian’ operates imaginatively to shore up state control in its nation-building efforts. To put it differently, some states may feel the need to capitalise on the ideas of ‘Asia’ and ‘Asianness’ to provide a symbolic grounding from which the confront the spectre of ‘the West’. Perhaps this is one thing that Asian countries as diverse as China and Indonesia, Japan and Malaysia have in common: whether they have been heavily westernized or less so, and whatever their political and economic systems, in symbolic terms ‘the West’ is inescapably the dominant signifier for a powerful Other, with which the nation has no choice but to forge some kind of more or less accepting or resistive relationship. In other words, while for people living in the West the very particularity of ‘Western culture’ (whatever this may be) is generally not experienced as such because of their immersion in it, in Asian countries, as in other countries which are categorised as ‘non-western’, the prominence of ‘the West’ as an external force with a huge penetrative power can never be completely erased from the national consciousness.

In this regime of consciousness, the media are of particular concern. The mass media of communication, in and of themselves vehicles and products of Western modernity,
have an uneasy place in non-western societies because they are centrally implicated in
the process of modernisation, and the road to modernity itself is, in Asian contexts as
elsewhere in the developing world, an uneven, conflictive and, above all, involuntary
and inorganic, historically imposed process (Ang & Stratton 1996). Indeed, in many
Asian countries, the mass media have traditionally been seen as a key potential source
and site of undesirable cultural influence from the modern West, from which the
nation needed to be protected in its search for its own mode of modernity. Hence, the
salience of discourses of media and cultural imperialism, as well as attempts on the
part of (national) governments to put restrictions on the international inflow of
(western) media inside their borders (through censorship, the banning of satellite
dishes, and so on). Here then the issue of the ‘audience’ comes to the fore. For
anxieties about the impact of the media are by definition anxieties about its audience.

Canadian communication theorist Martin Allor observed about a decade ago that ‘the
question of the audience remains at the center of mass communication research, not
only as a core of research questions but as an underlying theoretical problematic’.
(Allor 1988: 217) As Allor put it, the concept of audience is ‘the underlying prop for
the analysis of the social impact of mass communication in general’. (ibid). He is
right. The audience, especially the television audience, has in the past half century
served as a perfect metaphor for the trials and errors of a modern society in which the
mass media – epitomised by broadcast television – have taken on a central, powerful
place. Thus, it is not surprising that audience research has been one of the key foci of
media and communication studies since its inception as a (quasi)discipline. The TV
audience – or at least the imaginary figure of the TV audience, the audience as it
appears in the epistemology of the researcher – is where the social implications of
modern mass-mediated culture can be gauged. In this sense, a look at what is
happening to the media audience, especially the television audience, can provide us
with crucial insights into the current condition of modernity in Asia.

To be sure, despite their central role as instruments of socialisation and social
integration in the modern world, the mass media have always also been, in way or
another, imagined as the site of potential danger and risk in society at large. In the US
and other western countries, concern with the effects of media violence, for example, has been a persistent feature of public debate. Thus, the fact that there is a lot of Asian concern about the mass media and its potential hazards is not altogether unusual: it reiterates a mode of societal self-reflexivity which may articulate an inevitable ambivalence in the culture of modernity: the mass media hold the promise of enlightening, educating, or disciplining their audience, but they may also present a danger in corrupting or perverting it.

However, the kind of dangers imagined are different. In the West, especially the United States, the danger is generally defined at a psychological level: it is the individual audience member who is considered at risk. Hence, in Allor’s image, it is ‘the individual in front of the machine’ (1988: 228) who is the object of study in most audience research in the West (as in effects research), the helpless individual (mostly the child, the young, naïve and innocent person) who may be defenseless in the face of the bombardment of images of seduction (violence, pornography, etc). It would seem to me that in many Asian and other non-Western countries the danger is located at a more cultural and collective level: what is ultimately at stake is not so much the well-being of individual members of the audience, but the integrity and stability of society as a whole, the national culture. The dangers here are associated with the perils of modernity and modernisation as such, whose western origins are not yet completely erased from social experience and historical memory.

Western research preoccupations reflect certain Western anxieties, and are strongly connected with the values of liberalism and individualism. In this regard, the anxieties are about those sections of the audience who may not be capable of participating in the smooth running of liberal civil society, which is presumably made up by free, rational and knowledgeable individual citizens or consumers. In Asia, by contrast – and I am using ‘Asia’ here in an unbearably reductive manner – the concern is less with effects on individuals, and more with cultural and ideological effects. And in this context individualism itself is generally seen as part of the problem rather than the solution, as in the West.
Hence, for example, the concern about ‘decadence’, which in countries such as Singapore and Malaysia – in light of the Asian values debate – is still seen as a dangerous social and cultural excess which is associated with the fallacies of western modernity. In the postmodern cultural configuration of the West today, behaviours which used to be marked by mainstream society as ‘decadent’ (such as homosexuality) have become a part of individual freedom and choice, and tolerance is the word by which it is to be accepted, not so much as ‘normal’ but as an individual human right. To be able to condemn a cultural behaviour as ‘decadent’ and to outlaw it, one would need a centralised moral authority with legislative powers. In most western liberal democracies today, as a result of the rise of identity politics and cultural pluralism in the past thirty years, such a central moral authority no longer exists, or at least no longer exists as an unquestionable source of power. Accordingly, the state can no longer play the role of moral guardian of traditional values without attracting fierce political protest and resistance, and governments who do attempt to hold on to that role (such as the Howard government in Australia, which recently introduced censorship laws against internet pornography) are invariably of a conservative mould, and generally seen as regressive and anti-democratic. Indeed, much criticism about Howard’s move was made with the mocking comment that ‘Australia was now worse than Singapore’ – ‘Singapore’ here signalling all that is wrong about non-liberal authoritarian government and, to a certain extent, what is inferior about ‘Asia’ from an Australian perspective.

Indeed, in quite a number of Asian countries, the moral authority of the state is still more intact, at least at the visible level of public policy and social regulation. ‘Decadent’ expressions of culture are banned or explicitly delegitimised, in the name of a social and cultural order of modernity which still wishes to distinguish itself from the liberal western model. I would argue that the term ‘Asian’ (which in each country is given a distinct nationalist bent: ‘Singaporean’, ‘Indonesian’, ‘Thai’ and so on) is mostly implicitly, but sometimes explicitly, the symbolic marker of that desired (if not real) cultural distinctiveness.

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To put it schematically and (too) simplistically, from the state's point of view media audiences should remain true to their 'Asian' identities, whatever that may be, as this would prevent the nation to fall prey to uncontrollable 'westernisation'. The ideal would be for ordinary people – those who daily make up the audiences reached by the media – to consume TV and other media as extensions of their civic education, and through their media use become ever more organically integrated in the state-endorsed national culture. This kind of relationship between media and audience represents a modernist ideal, where the audience is imagined as disciplined, law abiding, and respectful of authority.

To be sure, the forging of such a patronising relationship with the audience was not uncommon in the West until well into the 1960s. For example, Lord John Reith, the BBC's managing director in the 1920s and 1930s, was famous for his philosophy of public service broadcasting as a form of enlightened cultural dictatorship, an effective means for cultural leadership and guidance (Ang 1991: ch 12) This philosophy reflected the preferred modernist role of broadcasting as an instrument of national integration: what Raymond Williams called 'the deep contradiction between centralised transmission and privatised reception' (Williams 1974: 30) stipulated the orchestration of the mass audience as an ordered, obedient national citizenry.

However, this kind of arrangement has gradually been eroded in most western societies. In today's postmodern, globalising world, the dominant figure of audience is no longer the passive TV viewer who watches whatever he is served, but the active, sovereign consumer who insists on freedom of choice. The old, modernist idea of audience – stable, clearly delineated and confined by national boundaries – is being replaced by a transnational proliferation of fluid, fragmented, and fractal formations of consumers and users, for whom the word 'audience' hardly seems suitable. The reasons are well known: the spectacular growth and expansion of the media industries in the past twenty years or so, together with the dazzling array of new consumer technologies flooding the marketplace, has turned practices of media and cultural consumption increasingly diverse, active, and individualised, and thus more unpredictable and uncontrollable.
In this respect, Allor's reference to the question of audience as the central concern of communication research needs to be adjusted to changing times and altered circumstances. In the context of mass communication the 'individual in front of the machine' was positioned at the motionless receiving end of the chain of communication, and the anxiety was generally about the audience being too passive. Today, however, the opposite seems to be the case: the anxiety focuses more on the naughty things the individual might do with the machine – he may be too active for his own good! This shift can be observed in the shift in main interest from broadcast television to the Internet. Internet studies is now the sexiest branch of communication research, where the most innovative intellectual energy and critical thinking is invested.

The global virtual reach of the Internet and its practical uncontrollability has left governments, including Asian governments, with few means of surveilling and disciplining the growing army of internet users within their territorial borders. Thus, people now can download TV programs that are banned from the screen by the national broadcaster, such as *South Park* in Singapore. Even more disturbingly, the practice of 'net-surfing' gives people virtually unlimited access to sites and information without the filtering interference from a central authority who makes decisions about what is and is not suitable content. The Internet empowers people in ways that were not possible with television or newspapers; it explodes the modernist notion of 'audience'.

However, the Internet is not the first or only cultural technology through which the deterritorialisation, fragmentation and transnationalisation of the audience has taken place. Earlier, audio cassettes and the video cassette recorder has played similar roles. For example, in Malaysia, where the Chinese population have been by far the major users of VCR tapes to watch programs and films from Hong Kong, the government had expressed concern that VCR use might undermine national cultural development (Reeves 1993: 67). These new technologies, with their capacity to deconstruct hierarchical and centralist mass communication processes, have reconfigured the
relationship between state, media and audience; they have highlighted the difficulty, if not impossibility, for national governments to police the symbolic environments to which their populations have access. It remains to be seen, of course, how particular governments will respond to this situation, which will only become more intense as media and cultural globalisation continues apace. It seems clear, however, the high modernist moment of the ‘mass audience’ is over for good (Poster 1995).

Media research in Asia could do worse than focusing on examining and analysing the ongoing tensions and contradictions created by these developments. Contrary to media studies in Latin America, for example, there is, as far as I know, very little work in Asian media research which looks at the politics of the popular (eg Martin Barbero 1993; Canclini 1996), taking seriously the extent to which audiences evade the modernist media arrangements established by the state, and represented by the official national media institutions, without necessarily subverting or incapacitating the power structures themselves. In western media research, this kind of emphasis was strongly promoted in the 1980s by theorists such as John Fiske (1987) and Michel de Certeau (1984), whose almost romantic emphasis on the tactics of “resistant, evasive, scandalizing bottom-up power” (Fiske 19249) was extremely influential, if controversial, in Anglophone cultural studies. But it is not necessary to reproduce this populist romanticism to nevertheless recognise the importance of analysing the effects of decentralised, interactive communications, which inevitably loosens the state and official media’s hold on the audience.

This may be even more relevant in parts of Asia than in the West, where the perceived need for the state to safeguard social and cultural integration is still very high on the agenda. The power of evasion reflects the inevitably incomplete power of the state to govern, to control, to determine. But it doesn’t necessarily mean that people will all now become political activists ready to contest state power; more likely, what the proliferation of decentralised media technologies will lead to an expansion of everyday, popular practices of unruly media use which can no longer be contained within a neat, national framework. The extent to which and the speed at which this is bound to happen is of course not the same across the region. In high-tech Singapore,
where modernist state control over culture has been very tight, it might actually happen with more intensity than in, say, Indonesia, with its vast territory and enormous social, cultural and economic diversity.

The point, then, is to examine carefully and with an eye to specificity to which extent and in which regard the epithet ‘Asian’ is useful in our understanding of the realm of media culture in Asia. Media cultures are complex and dynamic formations where local audiences engage in their own ways with increasingly vast arrays of information and entertainment originating from divergent global, national and local sources. In this sense, media cultures anywhere in Asia are never purely ‘Asian’ (whatever this may be); given the relative ease with which media information and images, sounds and texts flow across territorial boundaries, media cultures today everywhere are inescapably hybrid and creole cultures (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1992; Canclini 1996). It is this hybridity and creolisation that nations all over the world will have to come to terms with, and which media researchers in and out of Asia can contribute to.
Bibliography


