

## Review of Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, 2017–ongoing

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### ABSTRACT

A review of Ho Tzu Nyen's ongoing online project *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*.

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Clicking on [cdosea.org](http://cdosea.org) loads the Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen's *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*. A sonorous hum emerges in the split second before the image appears, a sonic intimation of the fugitive energies at play: "'A' for altitude. 'A' for attitude. 'A' for anarchism. 'A' for animism. 'A' for aporia. 'A' for archipelago. 'A' for assimilation." Suddenly videos burst forth. In this instantiation, it is a flyover view of a digitally rendered coconut grove and an animation of a many-headed creature that, when decapitated, spurts cartoon blood. When the browser is refreshed, a woman bathes a child on the street, and a much-decorated general gives a speech in a clip from *C-SPAN*. The haunting audio track has also altered. A similar litany of "A's" is repeated, this time in a half-whisper, to the surging and ebbing strains of gamelan and electronic static. A website and database that has been active since 2017, this ongoing project also serves as Ho's research repository.<sup>1</sup> As the work's title suggests, under examination are both the conceptualization of Southeast Asia and the archive itself. Ho conducts a two-pronged investigation that multiplies and explores the logics of the two terms, based on the linguistic resource he has compiled.

Newsreel images, 2D and 3D animations, digitally rendered landscapes, nature documentaries, ethnographic films, and movie clips, both created and collected by Ho, dance and dissipate on the browser window to each syllable, chord, or chime, as if it were the acousmatic voice of the internet. ("Voice" is the sonic cousin of the ghost," intones the lilting voiceover that accompanies the letter "V.") This polyvocal cacophony simultaneously recalls spoken-word poetry and incantation, folksong and electronic composition. Created in collaboration with the musician Bani Haykal, while integrating Southeast Asian music samples by the field recordist and composer Yasuhiro Morinaga, this auditory baseline lends the quick-cutting moving images a quality of uncanny automatism. For although the operative principle of sound and image is straightforward—a simple choice of toggling between the twenty-six letters of the Latin alphabet—their recombination fascinates and touches. These algorithmically generated sequences of images are not like others that so quickly glide and disappear across our electronic screens today.<sup>2</sup>

Repetition causes the stickiness of images in what the artist calls this "oracular montage machine." The topical, tonal, and visual reverberations evoke a deliberate haunting, gleaned from the

suppressed memories and forgotten topographies housed in Ho's digital repository. Modeled on an abecedarium, *Dictionary* wears its pedagogical intent on its sleeve, indicating that a kind of schooling or reschooling is at stake. The work's title identifies the geographical subregion of Asia that lies south of East Asia and southeast of South Asia, which today encompasses the nation states of Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Bordered by the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the region is marked by a diversity of languages and different histories of colonialism and nationalism that emerged across the fourteenth to twentieth centuries. More recent Cold War and civil conflicts are still raw and within lived memories. Yet Ho eschews colonial borders and national development for metrics from a more distant era—Southeast Asia's pre-colonial and even pre-state histories are evoked by key words like "altitude," "irrigation," and "paddy." Here Ho references the research of the political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott on the region's self-governing indigenous hill peoples of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma, who live in the world's largest remaining region that has resisted being fully incorporated into nation-states. Scott argues that by avoiding wet rice or paddy cultivation and Buddhism as well as other structures of "civilization," these hill peoples have practiced a "deliberate and reactive statelessness," an "anarchist" resistance to change since premodern and colonial times.<sup>3</sup> Ho casts this indigenous ungovernability as a broader principle of subversion that can be adopted to challenge present-day authorities, which have at times adopted neocolonial practices. (Accompanied by a montage that includes footage of deposed political leaders from the region, the entry for the letter "C" for "corruption" charges: "Cosmology of corruption ... Corruption of spirit and spirit of corruption.")

The *Dictionary* thus revises dominant understandings of Southeast Asia. Ho's "critical" framing, to recall the work's title, questions first the very notion of Southeast Asia, which originally featured as a Cold War geopolitical construct—and is still frequently deployed in area studies and security studies. Second, Ho's Southeast Asia is poised against regionalist visions framed by its contemporary governments, which give neoliberal logics pride of place. Against these definitions, Ho's counter-archive yields a Southeast Asia that is in formation; it is a community grounded in cultural, cosmological, and ecological elements and exchanges. Such reimagination is exemplified in the entries of "T" for "tiger" and "W" for the mythical "weretiger." Tigers populated the region and figured, for instance, in Malayan folklore, where they would take human form when crossing bodies of water. They also appear in ethnographic accounts as local shamans transformed into tigers for healing rituals. As the accompanying refrain reflects, in the "line of perpetual metamorphosis" between tiger and man that is "anthropomorphic yet non-anthropocentric" and "materialist and metaphorical," "one senses the contours of this shape-shifting region." Ho's research on the tiger and weretiger centers on Singapore, where he uncovers the creatures' afterlives. In the Second World War the conquering Japanese general earned the nickname "Tiger of Malaya," while Singapore's postwar government labeled the communist guerillas in the region "tigers." In the nineteenth-century British colony, indentured servants from the Indian subcontinent were at times tasked with capturing tigers, while migrant workers in contemporary Singapore follow similar lines of peregrination. Building off these historic encounters, Ho makes the case that the young nation, borne of anticolonialism but perpetuating some of colonialism's practices, is haunted by feline specters.<sup>4</sup>

The spillage of sound and of motif in Ho's *Dictionary* suggests that fluidity is at its crux. Ho takes up the sea as a key subject, a geographical feature that contributes to the archipelagic nature of many areas in Southeast Asia. Although it facilitated regional and international trade, vast areas of the sea remain *terrain vague* and terra incognita. These waters are the source and site of life for the

region's dwindling indigenous seafarers, the seaborne counterparts to the insurgent hill peoples. The sea is likewise home to jellyfish tribes that "shape-shift" to elude capture ("J" for "jellyfish"), although, owing to pollution and rising temperatures, increasing jellyfish numbers have contributed to the sea's further warming. In line with these shifting maritime fortunes, Ho diagnoses in Southeast Asia a more existential aqueous condition in an omnipresent "humidity" (the entry for "H"): "Death by water and its vapors is a kind of endless falling into a dense darkness, lethargic and dreamlike ... a daily death that is infinite ... [a] sluggish melancholy ... where time itself seems to have slowed down to an infinite crawl." For better or for worse, Ho's multifaceted maritime address invokes through shifting, watery identities a potential subject formation.<sup>5</sup>

The anthropocenic, indigenous, and decolonial axes of Ho's critical history must be read against the public histories and national narratives proffered by the region's governments, such as that of Singapore, Ho's country of origin and residence. The *Dictionary* frustrates the dominant state narrative enshrined in a "national education" syllabus taught in local schools, in which modern Singapore emerges only when British colonialists established a trading port on the island in 1819. In coming up against such authoritative histories, Ho has spoken about his speculative storytelling as a kind of ethical responsibility, rather than a free wielding of the imagination.<sup>6</sup> He counters the heavy trade in technocratic and scientific mythologies with symptomatic reading. Singapore must take seriously the ghosts in her history, and Ho provides the alternative epistemologies and vocabularies of an "expanded semiosis that makes spirits visible," as the audio track to the letter "G," for "ghost," recommends. Ho's techno-poetic assemblage of sound and image adduce points of cathexis, raw materials of the imagination for new histories.

Ho's audiences are not just from Singapore or Southeast Asia, however; they are equally, or even more, the international audiences of the global artworld, as the frequent exhibitions of his work across Asia and in Europe attest.<sup>7</sup> In this international frame, *Dictionary* inevitably comes up against the tropes of techno-Orientalism, what David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu succinctly characterize as "the stereotyping of Orientalized cyborg bodies predicated on a presumed seamlessness with technology," premised on the Asian subject who is perceived to be "producer (as cheapened labor), designer (as innovators), and fluent consumer (as subjects that are "one" with the apparatus)."<sup>8</sup> But perhaps, to borrow again terms that Roh, Huang, and Niu also contemplate, Ho's techno-discourse is a techno-Orientalism that is no longer Orientalist. Ho's embrace of a digital aleatory magic to access atavisms, proliferate correspondences, and generate futures bears little regard for Western anxiety or envy.<sup>9</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The project was commissioned by the independent research institute Asia Art Archive in 2018. The audiovisual material that features on the website is also deployed by Ho in complex video installations, such as *One or Several Tigers* (2017), the prominent centerpiece of the exhibition *2 or 3 Tigers* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, as well theater performances, including *The Mysterious Lai Teck* (2018) at the Kampnagel International Summer Festival in Hamburg.

<sup>2</sup> The audio and image tracks are controlled by an algorithm designed by the programmers Jan Gerber and Sebastian Lütgert.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), x.

<sup>4</sup> Much of this material on tigers emerged in Ho's 2007 essay "Every Cat in History Is I," in which he constructs a cultural history of Singaporean cats "big and small, wild and domesticated, imagined and real." Ho further explored these themes in his 2017 video installation *One or Several Tigers*. See Ho, "Every Cat in History Is I [2007]," in *2 or 3 Tigers*, ed. Anselm Franke and Hyunjin Kim (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2017), [https://www.hkw.de/media/texte/pdf/2017\\_2/2o3tiger/170419\\_2o3Tiger\\_PDF\\_HoTzuNyen\\_press.pdf](https://www.hkw.de/media/texte/pdf/2017_2/2o3tiger/170419_2o3Tiger_PDF_HoTzuNyen_press.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Ho's work resonates with the methodologies and themes of the growing interdisciplinary field of transpacific studies; consider, for instance, Aimee Bahng's recommendation that scholars approach the Pacific Ocean as "the body of water, the aquatic organisms that inhabit it, the islands in it and their human denizens, as well as the nation-states and multinational corporations that parlay across it." Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 147.

<sup>6</sup> In Ho, "Every Cat in History."

<sup>7</sup> Ho was the subject of the solo exhibition *G for Gong* at the Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst in Oldenburg, Germany, from July 11–September 29, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism: An Introduction," in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 14, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Roh, Huang, and Niu, 15.

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## AUTHOR BIO

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