CHAPTER FOUR

DISQUIETING DEGENERACY:
POLICING MALAYSIAN AND SINGAPOREAN POPULAR MUSIC
CULTURE FROM THE MID-1960S TO EARLY-1970S

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Introduction

On the 22nd of October 2013, I visited a modest exhibition on Malay youth music from the mid to late 1960s in Singapore’s Esplanade Library. The minimalistic and silent exhibition created by the Malay Heritage Centre of Singapore featured five two-sided colour panels displaying photographs and historical information about the Malay rock and roll bands of the *pop yeh yeh* music era. It was part of a series of nostalgic Malay cultural exhibits sponsored by the Malay Heritage Centre\(^1\) intended to shed light on a vibrant but often occluded period of cultural history in the Malay Peninsula. Much like the quiet atmosphere of the ‘musical’ exhibition, the Malay youth of the *pop yeh yeh* era expressed a culture that was in need of silencing by the aggressive cultural policies implemented by the government authorities of Malaysia and Singapore. The following pages, in response to this renewed interest in *pop yeh yeh*, intend to give a voice to the contestatory discourses and issues that were articulated by Malay youth in the 1960s.

This chapter seeks to provide some much needed amplification of the study of Malaysian and Singaporean music in this era by observing the ways in which Malay youth of the mid-1960s to early-1970s were implicated in cultural policies and conservative regimes. Moreover, such youth negotiated their differences with the older generation in divergent ways: some actively and proudly fashioned themselves with the subversive styles and sounds of the West while others voiced conservative concerns about such trends, effectively policing their peers with discourses of morality and tradition. While this chapter is not primarily concerned with

\(^1\) Information about the Malay Heritage Centre’s ongoing exhibits can be found on their website: http://www.malayheritage.org.sg/exhibitions.htm.

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government policy in relation to music, I discuss the ideas of two Malay film music icons. During the implementation of the Malaysian National Culture Policy (NCP) that was drafted in 1971. Their reactionary comments on the erosion of Malay culture by youth-related lifestyles and musical dispositions provides an ideological frame of reference for the discourses of cultural nationalism that demonised pop yeh yeh youth.

I then proceed to discuss youth music culture in 1960s Singapore and Malaysia followed by an observation of the ‘yellow cultures’ or subversive youth trends that caught the negative attention of Singaporean and Malaysian government authorities. The ‘beat music’ of English-language bands primarily based in Singapore in the 1960s emulated music from British rock bands such as The Shadows and The Beatles. In time, English songs were adapted to Malay, and eventually, by the mid-1960s, Malay youth started writing and performing original compositions in the styles of previously emulated Western rock bands. Attendant with such music was a vibrant array of youth fashions that included tight-fitting attire, sunglasses, mini-skirts for women and long-hair for men. The Singaporean and Malaysian state active in policing what was deemed degenerate ‘yellow cultures' resulted in youth harassment and the banning of music performances. Youth themselves were also active in the ‘policing' of their peers as fan letters in the Malay music magazine Bintang dan Lagu [Stars and Songs] indicate.

Finally, to provide an insight to the discourses on Malay youth and moral degeneracy in the mid-1960s, I turn to the movie A Go Go ’67 (1967) directed by Omar Rojik for the Shaw Brothers’ Malay Film Productions. This film was made during the waning years of Malay film production in Singapore and indicates an attempt by the film industry to attract a youth audience whose consumption patterns were straying from Malay cinema while being drawn towards local electric-guitar-band performances and their numerous vinyl record releases. My research suggests that the once popular means of disseminating Malay music through film was being

\[2\] Zubir Said was one of the first Malay film music composers in the 1950s and P. Ramlee, whose ideas on Malay music culture inspired the implementation of the Malaysian National Culture Policy (NCP) that was drafted in 1971. Their reactionary comments on the erosion of Malay culture by youth-related lifestyles and musical dispositions provides an ideological frame of reference for the discourses of cultural nationalism that demonised pop yeh yeh youth.

\[3\] Jones’s (2001) book, Yellow Music, describes how the term ‘yellow' was used in China during the Republican era to associate a degenerate and ‘pornographic' quality to the popular music of Li Jinhui that blended ‘American jazz, Hollywood film music, and Chinese folk music’ (Jones 2001:6).

\[4\] In the 1950s, numerous singers for Malay films including P. Ramlee recorded film songs for record labels such as HMV, EMI, Columbia, Parlophone and Pathé (Sarji 2011:...