

RSIS Seminar Notes

RSIS Seminar on

“Singaporean Constructions of Riau Islands and Riau Islanders’ Construction of Singapore”

By

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Introduction

The seminar on “Singaporean Constructions of Riau Islands and Riau Islanders’ Construction of Singapore” was organized by the Indonesia Programme. It consisted of two presentations that drew upon anthropological fieldwork done by the presenters. In the first presentation, Mr. Nick Long examined to what extent Riau islanders share typical perceptions that cooperation between the Riau Islands and Singapore is inherently good, and what other competing models exist. The second presentation, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Singapore and Kepulauan Riau (Kepri) from 2004-2007, Dr Michele Ford and Associate Professor Lenore Lyons examined the multiple ways in which Singaporeans imagine the Riau Islands.

Seminar Speech

Mr. Nick Long looked at Riau islanders’ narratives and construction of Singapore as their neighbor. The construction took place from impressions formed from interactions with Singaporean visitors, information passed through the mass media such as newspapers and radio programmes. He began with the history of the pre and post-1979 plans of the Riau regional government, in order to situate the narratives of the islanders about Singapore in contemporary context.

To Mr. Long, the conflicted and contorted relationship between Riau and Singapore stemmed from their border, and any difference or similarity may be more imagined than real. The islanders’ perceptions are framed in terms of the relative closeness to Singapore. For instance, due to the closeness, there is a perception that somehow qualities that are

deemed favorable from the Lion City will be seen to rub off on the Riau islands. For instance, Mr. Long stated the example from his field research about some of his Riau informants believing that due to their proximity to Singapore, their command of the English language will be better than the other Indonesian counterparts.

However at the same time, there is also the view that somehow, there are not enough of the good qualities received by the Riau islands due to negative qualities of the Singaporeans, thereby causing Riau to be held back in time in terms of development. For instance, Singaporean visits to Riau brothels are perceived as colonization of the Riau girls. At the same time, there is a tendency to stress the Singaporean origin of Riau social problems such as toxic waste and piracy. Therefore, Riau perceptions of Singapore are riddled with ambivalence. Due to the perception of relative backwardness of the Riau islands in comparison of their Singaporean neighbor, the islanders saw themselves as the subaltern victims of Singaporean “colonial” outlook. Singaporeans are seen to behave in a haughty manner when interacting with the Riau islanders and deny their “responsibilities” for the Riau social issues.

Yet at the same time, in cases where Riau islanders are in positions of “authority”, the interaction also comprised of giving Singaporeans the consumption of Riau traditional values, which the islanders believed they want, Singaporeans being seen to have “lost” their traditional culture themselves. For instance in the tourism industry, where Riau tour guides sell the traditional aspects of Riau to Singaporean tourists.

In view of the ambivalence of the Singapore-Riau border, Mr. Long concluded by suggesting the need for critical evaluation and to downplay rather than exaggerate the differences between the two sides before the implementation of any policies.

In the second presentation, A/P Lyons explored the findings from her research regarding Singaporean perceptions of the Riau Islands, beginning with an introduction of the research methods, which comprised mostly of interviews with Singaporeans and Indonesians. She situated her combined research with Dr. Ford as being important due to need to understand more about Riau as the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) besides the economic and political impressions.

She stated that in general, Singaporeans tend to see the Riau islands as neighboring but insignificant, having very limited understanding of their exact geographical location and composition of their people, culture, historical linkages and economy.

Singaporean perceptions of the Riau islands are formed from impressions of Indonesians in general. These come from their interactions with Indonesian domestic workers and what they learn from the mass media about prostitutes, illegal migrants, political differences that resulted in a view of Singaporean regional vulnerability as well the issue of security. These formed and reinforced the view of Riau islands as a backward and corrupt region where people such as domestic servants need to come to a better place in order to be better taken care of. It also gave the impression that the proximity of the Riau islands make it channel for threats to enter Singapore, such as sexually-transmitted

diseases, trafficking as well as terrorism. The impression of Singapore as a Little Red Dot of Chinese majority in a sea of Muslim nations has also been created.

Conclusion

Both presentations concluded with the acknowledgement of the need to take into consideration Singapore and Riau islanders' perceptions of each other besides economic and political impressions in policy making.

Discussion

Construction Stemming from Stereotypes of the Entire Nation

The discussion brought up the issue of the construction of perceptions not as an issue of individuals, but of the countries as a whole. There was also a recognition of the presence of competing discourses within each nation, with no dominance of any one narrative. For instance, there is difficulty in finding where Riau islanders fit into the national discourse in Indonesia. However, discussion revealed that stereotypical perceptions that stemmed from national discourse of the other is difficult to erase.

Deepening of Misunderstanding

During the course of the discussion, a suggestion that the mutual perceptions are leading to increasing misunderstanding was given. The more Riau islanders know about Singapore, it appears, the less they wish to be part of it and vice versa. This stems from the view that if they try to incorporate themselves into the other society, they fear being disadvantaged due to their backgrounds from the other society. There appear to be little desire to know each other better, due to perceptions of each other as tourist destinations and the stereotypical negative impressions of each other.

Perceptions Contributed by Indonesian Chinese

The issue of Indonesian Chinese was also brought up during discussion with the suggestion that Singaporean perceptions of Indonesia also came from interactions with them. They are generally perceived as being rich and are here to pursue education. Stereotypical perception of Indonesian Chinese was debunked during the discussion as the ones in Riau tend to be of the lower strata in the society.

Research Methodologies

Other parts of the discussion related to the research methods of the presenters and how these might have influenced the results. An issue brought up was the fact that generational gap may have contributed to some differences in perceptions. In response, the presenters stated that due consideration had been given to the matter as the interviews were divided in terms of age.

Recorded by:

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About the Speakers

Dr Michele Ford chairs the Department of Indonesian Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. Her research is focused on the Indonesian labour movement, women and work in Southeast Asia, transnationalism in Southeast Asia and Indonesia's Riau Islands. Michele has recently co-edited two volumes, *Women and Work in Indonesia* (with Lyn Parker) and *Women and Labour Organizing In Asia: Diversity, Autonomy and Activism* (with Kaye Broadbent). She is currently working on an Australian Research Council (ARC) project titled "In the Shadow of Singapore: The Limits of Transnationalism in Insular Riau" with Associate Professor Lenore Lyons which examines transnational encounters between Singaporeans and people living in Insular Riau.

Associate Professor Lenore Lyons is Director of the Centre for Asia-Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS) at the University of Wollongong, Australia. In addition to her project on transnational encounters between Singapore and Insular Riau with Michele Ford, Lenore is working on an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project on migrant worker activism in Singapore and Malaysia. She has published widely on the women's movement in Singapore, trans/national activism in support of migrant domestic workers, and cross-cultural feminist methodology. Her most recent book is *A State of Ambivalence: The Feminist Movement in Singapore* by Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, 2004.

Nick Long is the Honorary William Wyse Student of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, UK, where he is completing an ESRC-funded PhD on the anthropology of Kepulauan Riau. In August and September 2007, he held a Visiting Fellowship in the Department of Indonesian Studies at the University of Sydney.