

The Vampires Our Age Deserves: 21st Century Forms of Ancient Evil

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Abstract

Traditionally, the peoples of Southeast Asia have held beliefs in numerous forms of vampires often crossed with ghosts or other spirits, such as *Pontianak* of the Malay Peninsula, *Phi Krasue* and *Phi Pop* of Thailand and the *Aswang* and *Manananggal* of the Philippines. These have been theorised as manifestations of fears and repressed aspects of life, including, previously, of dangers that lurk in the wilds surrounding villages. In modern times rumours of and belief in vampires persist and have moved to cities, but these tales are also joined by a more modern bloodsucker, the organ harvester. Poorly-sourced stories of dubious veracity circulate on Facebook feeds, warning parents to keep a close eye on their children lest they are snatched away and killed for their organs. This paper examines parallels between traditional vampire legends of Southeast Asia and current rumours of organ trafficking targeting children, and delves into some of the anxieties fuelling the contemporary stories, anxieties that ultimately spring from the region's fraught reaction to Neoliberalism.

Keywords: Vampires, Southeast Asian vampires, Organ trafficking, Social media, Mythology, Neoliberalism

First Bite

Thailand police found this in a container vehicle. Dead bodies of children. Their organs were found removed. They are all kidnapped and brought to Thailand from different countries, police says. Take care of your children and share this message to your contacts.[sic] (Snopes, n.d.)

This shocking post on social media prompted this paper. My wife, scrolling through Facebook before bed, came across a photo of dead children, which jolted her awake. The accompanying text (quoted above from the fact-checking website Snopes, as the original post has since disappeared into the social media aether) explained that these dead children were found in a truck at a border checkpoint, crossing from Malaysia into Thailand. The organs had been removed from their tiny corpses and sold on the international black market. It closed with a warning to parents to keep a close eye on their children as these organ traffickers were active in the region and were looking for more victims.

She turned to me, showing the pictures,¹ and asked if they were real. Something about the story seemed off, but the photos were real enough, and shocking enough to make me look for confirmation. I discovered through a brief web search that it was in fact a fake story using real pictures; a story created by scammers using emotionally charged images to generate 'likes' on social media. This practice is called 'like-farming', done by people who "start pages and fill them with content dedicated to collecting as many "likes" or "shares" as possible in the shortest amount of time" (Snopes, 2016). Facebook's algorithms then boost the visibility of these posts and the pages that create them, perhaps giving the creators opportunities to sell the pages off.

Snopes has thoroughly debunked the story, as have other sites (c.f. Tang, 2014; SM Hoax Slayer, 2016), yet various permutations of the story continue to circulate, making the rounds throughout Southeast Asia and in the tropics in general. The pictures used in the version of the post that we saw were from two different and completely unrelated (though both horrific) events; one was the aftermath of a chemical attack on civilians in Syria, the other was from a kidnapping/murder case in Indonesia. Additionally, the story was full of errors and implausibilities. For example, the organs had already been harvested, yet the harvesters continued to haul around the hollow corpses of the children. Surely ditching these bodies would have been an easier proposition. The photos also contained images of products not available for sale in either Malaysia or Thailand. Despite these obvious errors, the story continued to circulate so much so that Malaysian police felt compelled to respond: Kedah police chief Datuk Asri Yusoff went on record in the Malaysian newspaper *Berita* (Zulkifi, 2016, n.p.) saying, "I advise the public to stop spreading this case and not to easily believe any kind of incidents that is going viral on social media" (English translation via Tang, 2016, n.p.).

Despite the persistent attempts to debunk them, these stories have been remarkably resilient and continue to spread on social media even among well-educated, sophisticated and globally educated citizens like my wife – an intercultural Singapore citizen raised and educated overseas. Likewise, although I dismissed the story as a hoax, it has stayed in my mind, lurking. I began to wonder why two educated, international people were so taken in by a fake story, and what about the story was so haunting.

While mulling over these questions, it occurred to me that the myth of the organ trafficker and the myth of the vampire come from the same essential bloodline. The commonalities shared by these two folkloric figures, when analysed, provide a strong argument for categorizing the organ trafficker as the 21st century update of the enduring folkloric vampires of the world.

¹ The pictures from the original post have been omitted from this paper due to their graphic nature. The original photos can be found at the websites linked here.

On the Reality of Organ Traffickers and Other Bloodsuckers

One possible reason for the haunting effect of the article is the plausibility of the crime. The question of whether organ trafficking is real has come up before, though the answer is not so clear cut. While the organ trafficker as described in the stories circulating on social media may not be real (as per Snopes), the existence of a global black market for organs is demonstrably real, and it is enormous in size and scope. The illegal organ trade generates upwards of one billion dollars U.S. yearly, according to Global Financial Integrity (May, 2017), a non-profit organization that investigates black market economic activity. Many reputable outlets such as *the Guardian* (c.f. Associated Press 2014; Tuckman, 2014; Pokharel, 2015) run stories similar to those described in the like-farming organ trafficker posts, and researchers have found overwhelming evidence that this black market is thriving. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, a professor of Anthropology at the University of California Berkeley has spent decades mapping the global trade in human viscera, writing several books on the topic, for instance *The Last Commodity* (2008). However, and despite this reputable literature and evidence, for the purposes of this article, the reality or non-reality of actual organ traffickers is moot, as is any discussion on the existence of vampires.

While vampires as they are commonly conceived of in both folklore and fiction probably do not exist, the mythological reality of these supernatural entities is unquestioned in many parts of Southeast Asia, including highly developed cities like Singapore, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur – cities that have developed at a very rapid pace and are populated by people who were living in villages or the countryside a mere generation or two previously. Nur'Adlina Maloud (2009) has written an excellent in-depth analysis of the mythological realities of the vampiric-ghost entity known as *Pontianak* and her hauntings in contemporary Singapore. My own interactions with Singaporeans (which have included discussions on supernatural topics) have provided more confirmation for Maloud's notions of the mythological reality of those vampiric entities in Singapore and the wider region.

In fact, belief in a variety of supernatural entities in the region is strong. A survey from the Pew Research Center, a Washington, D.C. based think tank, indicates that belief in *Jinn*² among Southeast Asian Muslims is quite high; over 50% of Southeast Asian Muslims surveyed expressed a belief in these legendary spirits. In Malaysia the rate was especially high; 77% of respondents there believed in the existence of the entities (Pew Research Center, 2012, p.69).

Belief in supernatural monstrosities is not confined to the Muslim inhabitants of the region. Katarzyna Ancuta (2017) affirms the mythological reality of female vampiric entities like *Phi Pho* and *Phi Krasue* in Bangkok and other parts of Thailand. Edward Lansdale, a former U.S. Army psychological warfare operative, recalls in his 1991 autobiography how he used stories

² Jinn are "supernatural spiritual beings, created by God, that are described in the Quran. Jinn can be good, evil or morally neutral" (Pew Research Center, 2012, p. 114).

of the *Aswang*, a shapeshifting vampire of the Philippines, to convince communist rebels to abandon a area of strategic importance to the military. By kidnapping and murdering a rebel soldier, then draining his blood through two holes in his neck, the US operatives were able to make it seem like the soldier was a victim of vampires rather than an occupying military (pp. 72-73). And these beliefs do not seem to have faded; in more recent years, news reports from the capital, Manila, (c.f. Robles, 1997; Cuyos, 2011) indicate that the mythological reality of such vampiric creatures continues to this day.

Similarly, the resilience of the organ harvester stories circulating on Facebook show that these tales have some sort of mythological veracity in the tropical imagination of the people of Southeast Asia. Despite all the attempts at denials and debunkings, the terrifying plausibility of the tales ensure their survival.

Vampire stories tell us about the world we live in and our fears (Burns, 2017). This is true of both fictional vampires like Dracula and Edward Cullen, and folkloric vampires like *Pontianak*, *Phi Krasue*, and their Southeast Asian sisters. These organ traffickers are something of a societal shadow, lurking in our collective unconscious, manifesting the dark underbelly of the systems powering the world we live in. In this way, they resemble the Shadow as described by Carl Gustav Jung, the “the sum of all personal and collective psychic elements which, because of their incompatibility with the chosen conscious attitude, are denied expression in life and therefore coalesce into a relatively anonymous “splinter personality” with contrary tendencies in the unconsciousness” (Jung, 1983, p. 417). Organ traffickers, when analysed as a 21st century incarnation of the vampire, provide a telling glimpse into the times, revealing truths about our modern world that are sometimes too horrible for our conscious minds to contemplate. The repressed Shadow of society is our guide to the modern world.

A Thirst for Blood, A Hunger for Guts

The mythological organ trafficker moves through different cities in gangs, they abduct unsupervised and unwary children, remove their organs, and then transport their bodies across international borders for disposal. In some variations of the social media post, Malaysian authorities are described as having actually caught one or two of the perpetrators, though these are portrayed as being only a drop in a vampiric ocean that still threatens to engulf local children. In one version of the story, the anonymous author claims that “[the] Driver was a Malay man and truck owner Chinese” (Wong, 2016, n.p.), an illustration of how these vampiric gangs transcend racial and ethnic boundaries. These faceless figures pass through communities and over borders, while local authorities watch helplessly. The liminal spaces they inhabit, border crossings and neoliberal international metropolises, are places in which vampires have traditionally thrived (Lundberg & Geerlings, 2017).

Descriptions of folkloric vampires in Europe and Asia describe figures that in key ways resemble the descriptions of organ traffickers in the social media posts. The vampire returns from death, the metaphorical and literal underworld (in the case of those rising from the

grave), while the organ trafficker is an underworld figure at times connected to larger criminal syndicates (c.f. Associated Press, 2014). Both vampires and organ traffickers cause harm to the living, they both disturb public and private places indulging in antisocial behaviour. They use force to get what they want. References to the vampires' targeting of babies in their cradles, pregnancy and the death of children also resonate with the organ traffickers' targeting of children; their predations on the young propels the fear of the parents sharing the social media legend, and the posts often end with exhortations to remain vigilant against these unidentified criminal figures. Evangelos Avdikos' (2013) summary of the vampire of Greek folklore paints a picture of them as preying on people of the communities they once inhabited, particularly menacing to children:

Vampires return from the dead and cause harm to the living.... They suffocate people in their beds, especially newly married couples and babies in their cradles, whose blood they enjoy sucking. Vampires also steal eggs, hens, and goats, and suck nanny goats' nipples until they squeal with pain. They destroy agricultural produce, suffocate and kill animals, and spread illness. They make women pregnant, and cause pregnant women to miscarry (pp. 311-312).

Paul Barber (1988) provides many additional examples of the how integral organs are to the myths of the folkloric vampire. Tales of 17th century vampirism in the Baltics are replete with dissections and examinations of organs (pp. 16-18), and folktales of the day claimed that removal or destruction of vital organs was necessary for the permanent destruction of a suspected vampire.

Southeast Asian folkloric vampires likewise have an affinity not just for blood, but also the internal organs, especially of children. Organs are intimately linked with *Phi Krasue*, a female vampiric creature who is described as "suffer[ing] nightly separations of the head from the body, where the head then flies away into the night in search of food, drawing a bloody trail of its entrails behind it" (Ancuta, 2017, p. 32).

Irwin (1907, p. 25) interestingly connects *Phi Krasue*, with the Malay community of Thailand, illustrating the interconnectedness of such legends and underscoring the futility of artificially dividing populations in Southeast Asia by national borders. Similar creatures exist in the folklore of various other Southeast Asian cultures, such as the *Manananggal* of the Philippines, and *Penanggalan* of Indonesia and Malaysia, who hunts for the blood of menstruating women (Bane, 2010; Abdul Rashid, 2010). The folktales of the bloodsucking monsters of the region seem to have common origins, and are intimately linked with dead children.

In the Malay parts of Southeast Asia, the foremost vampiric-ghost entity associated with children and sucking blood is *Pontianak*, whose folkloric origin story begins in many tellings with the death of a child, and continues with the hunting of other children. The similarly

vampiric *Langsuir* is a related entity, and the *Langsuir* and *Pontianak* may sometimes be interchangeable terms for the same creature (Maloud, 2009; Lundberg, 2008). Another Malay ghost with infant resonances is the *toyol*, a baby ghost known for sucking blood from its hosts (Abdul Rashid, 2010, p. 61).

The Vampires We Deserve

Nina Auerbach is paraphrased as saying “Every generation gets the vampire it deserves” (Erkal, 2014, p. 157), an idea critical for unlocking the significance of the organ trafficker stories. In this telling, vampire myths adapt to the cultures they inhabit, and changes in those cultures reflect in changes in the vampire myths. According to Auerbach, “what vampires are in any given generation is a part of what I am and what my times have become” (2009, p. 1). Though referring to the fictional vampires of popular entertainment such as Dracula and Edward Cullen of *Twilight*, these words are equally applicable when we examine the folkloric tradition of vampires.

Evidence of the interconnectivity between the fictional and the folkloric are apparent in many works about Southeast Asian vampires in fact and fiction (including video games, see Dillon & Lundberg, 2017). Maloud (2009) illustrates the symbiotic links between folkloric vampires and fictional vampires in her analysis of films depicting *Pontianak* and radio call-in shows eliciting tales of ‘real’ encounters with the creature. As she says, “the cinematic Pontianak has undeniably influenced the way in which generations of Malays imagine and experience the Pontianak” (p. 48). Ancuta has at various times explored Asian cinematic depictions of both vampires (2017) and organ traffickers (2018), and this thematic continuity can be detected in her explorations. Thus an analysis of folkloric vampires can easily accommodate ideas from analyses of fictional vampires, and organ traffickers are the perfect revenants with which to examine the realities of life in modern Southeast Asia. The border between the fictional and the real is a porous one.

For local residents of Singapore like my wife, life is urban and modern, but these modern urbanites are only a generation or two removed from the days of rural villages. The experiences, beliefs and fears of modern Singaporeans also mirror those of urban dwellers in neighbouring nations. For the people of Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur or Jakarta, the rapid urbanisation and story of development is quite similar. These changes have by and large been positive ones, and the standard of living as measured through the various metrics employed by governments and non-government agencies is much higher in the 21st century than it was for previous generations. In contrast to the past, indoor plumbing is ubiquitous in these cities, wages are far higher, and people have access to advanced technology like smartphones and the internet.

However, all this breakneck development has come at a price, and modern life in Southeast Asia has a dark side. The organ trafficker can be seen as an embodiment of the social conditions and global trends that characterize the dark side of the era in which we live; an embodiment of the fears of people. Here again we can see how the organ trafficker can

embody subconscious or suppressed fears of the modern world, and calling to mind once more the Shadow of Jung, that part of oneself (in this case a society rather than an individual) that one might find abhorrent, and thus represses. The forces represented by the organ trafficker are unsavoury and repressed by society, yet remain present, lurking beneath the surface. This shadow of society flows from the pooling blood of eviscerated corpses. Therefore, a closer look at the shadow through the lens of these stories of vampiric organ traffickers offers a revealing glimpse at the zeitgeist of the early 21st century globalized world.

TransASEANia: The Realm of the Vampires

Though the story of this paper began in the twilight hours in Singapore, the ensuing discussion covers a lot of ground culturally and geographically, moving throughout the region and then to the glaring daylight and harsh realities of the world order. Its shifting positioning with regards to the populations being discussed (i.e. believers of the vampiric organ trafficker stories circulating online) is an unavoidable product of the sociocultural realities of the region. The national boundaries of present day Southeast Asia are a largely modern construct, and surveys of cultural borders of the region map a territory whose borderlines are far different from those of an atlas. Culturally speaking, the Malay world extends from southern Thailand (home of the former kingdom of Pattaya) through Malaysia, Singapore and into Indonesia and the Philippines. Singapore itself was a part of the country of Malaya through to 1963, then briefly part of the newly formed Malaysia until 1965, and many Singaporeans have relatives in these other countries, so discussions of these two nations as separate entities is problematic. The shared myths and legends pass freely through national borders and circulate despite language differences. In Southeast Asia, national, cultural and language identities are mutable and multifarious, and any discussion about the region must necessarily reflect this fact. These identities can be glimpsed in the female vampire myths of the region, many of which share commonalities in nomenclature, descriptions and proclivities. Take for instance the similarities of the names and descriptions of *Phi Krasue*-esque monsters *Manananggal* and *Penanggalan*; these similarities seem unlikely to be coincidental. These folkloric vampire stories seem to have spread organically, flowing over borders and across languages. In the same way, stories of organ traffickers spread throughout the region on social media, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers.

So, what forces in the world could have given rise to the legends of these vampiric organ traffickers? There are three major trends influencing the city-state of Singapore, the ASEAN region and the world that I believe can help explain the mythological existence of these new vampires types, global trends that are clearly visible in the daily lives of the people prone to sharing the tales of organ traffickers. These trends are the rapid urbanisation and globalisation of Singapore and other Southeast Asian cities, the neoliberal world social order that has come to displace older ways of living and to dominate the region, and the presence of trafficking rings of other kinds (i.e. sex trafficking) operating out of Southeast Asian countries. These forces influence the shared social nightmares of modern Southeast Asia, creating an atmosphere in which the folkloric organ trafficker has materialized and spread.

Vampire as Transnational Terror

Singapore has been completely remade in the post-war era. Originally little more than a colonial backwater, since its independence in 1965 it has developed rapidly and become a world economic powerhouse. Until as recently as the 80s, life in Singapore was village and community oriented. Though today 80% of the population lives in high rise public housing flats (Yuen, 2007), in the 80s the island still featured many *kampong* ("village" in Malay). These villages were self-generated, small-scale communities with strong social ties. The problem with the *kampong*, at least in the eyes of the government, was the informal, self-generating nature and impoverished character (or at least the appearance of poverty). Described by Maloud (2009) as an "administrative monstrosity," these villages were seen as being problems that needed solving, and the government made eliminating these *kampong* a central feature of their housing policy. Today, Singapore, a city-state, currently boasts 100% urbanisation of its citizens (Yap, 2010), with only one *kampong* (Kampong Lorong Buangkok) remaining in the city limits, though even this community's days are numbered. Like Singapore, the rest of Southeast Asia has developed rapidly post-World War II. By 2025, 70% of the population of the region is predicted to be urbanised. In contrast, that figure stood at 15% in 1950 (Yap, 2010, p. 1). In all, the region has experienced change both rapid and dramatic, completely upending old patterns of life.

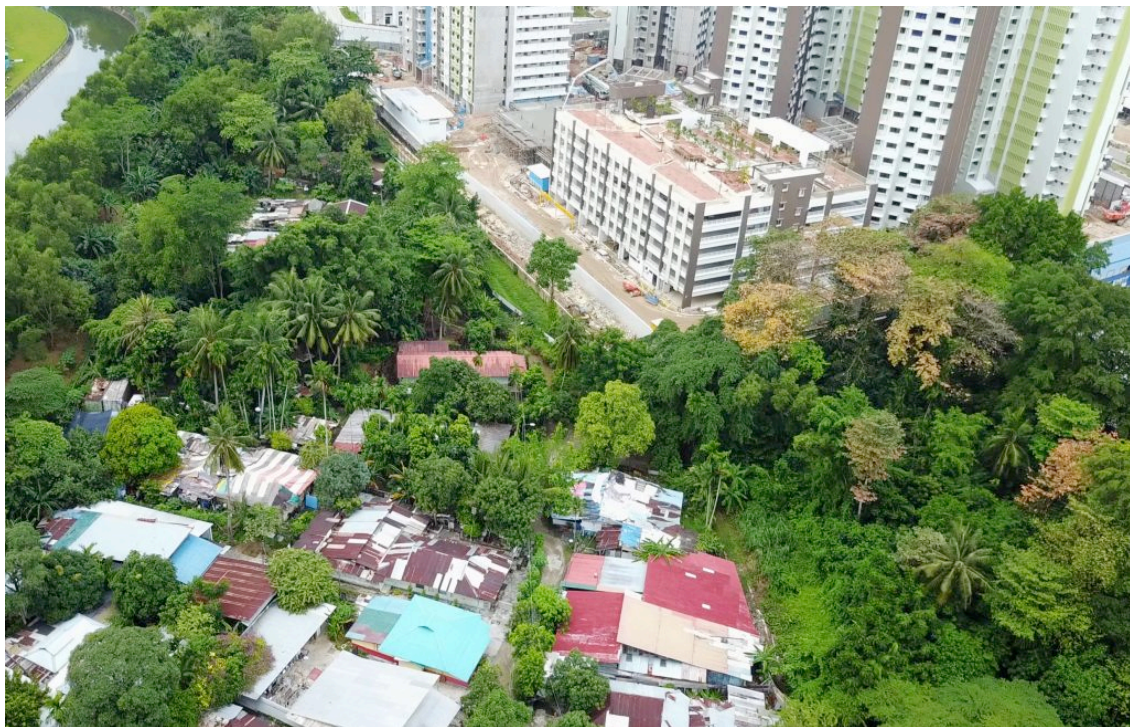


Figure 1: Kampong Lorong Buangkok, Singapore's last kampong next to housing developments.
Retrieved from: <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/big-read-singapores-last-kampong-villagers-cast-wary-eye-future>

While the new housing is modern, many residents also lament the death of the “kampong spirit,” a phrase that pops up regularly in Singapore newspapers, websites, blogs and forums (c.f. *The Straits Times* April 24, 2017). The rehousing of villagers in high rises happened very rapidly, within one generation, meaning most adult Singaporeans have some memory of these earlier times. Rather than fade out gradually, these old modes of living disappeared seemingly overnight, rendering the contrast between old and new ways of life in stark detail. In the view of many locals affected by the rapidly changing housing landscape, neighbours were no longer friends, they were now strangers; whereas *kampongs* once housed small communities of roughly 20 families, new clusters of high rise blocks housed hundreds, even thousands of souls.

The increasingly global and transient nature of the inhabitants of Singapore has meant that in the local's perception, the city was becoming a place filled with strangers, some resembling the neighbours they once knew, others belonging to no community the locals recognise at all. With its development as a globalised city-state, the foreign population in Singapore has increased rapidly, and these changes are visible at both the higher end of the economic spectrum (the “foreign talents” who came to occupy high level jobs in multinational companies and local industries) and the lower (the migrant workers coming from various countries in South and Southeast Asia to fill the roles that local Singaporeans are reluctant to do; such as construction work, street sweeping and maid services). In 2000, 25% of inhabitants in Singapore were foreign. By 2013, that number had climbed to 38% (Ranasinghe, 30 Jan 2013).

The cumulative effect of all this has been increasing feelings of paranoia and social alienation. Whereas previous generations could trust neighbours to look out for children, now this is no longer perceived as possible. In such a milieu, where friends and family have been replaced by strangers both local and international, monsters have appeared among those teeming masses. The descriptions of the organ traffickers is always vague, somewhat familiar yet alien. In one depiction of the traffickers, quoted earlier, the ethnicity of the Chinese and Malay traffickers mark them as possibly but not necessarily of Singaporean origin; are they ordinary working Singaporeans, are they Malaysians, or are they from further abroad? Are they ethnically Chinese and Malay but of Thai nationality? No names are given here, and it is not made clear if “Chinese” refers to the man's ethnicity or nationality. Likewise, the Malay may or may not be Malaysian. The blurred identity emphasises the nature of the threat; the outsiders taking children are all the more terrifying because they look like your friends and neighbours, but mean to harm the children of the community. These monstrous individuals blend in to the local population though they may not actually belong to this population. Their monstrous natures lurk behind a normal facade.

The mythological vampires of traditional legend are similarly of, and yet apart from, the communities they threaten. *Pontianak* for instance, the vengeful spirit of a local woman who died during childbirth, returns. Once of the community, now a monster, the *Pontianak* haunts her former neighbours who have since become strangers, separated from her by the cold void of death. The vampiric folk monsters of the wider region contain a similar dynamic in

that the origins of many are local rather than from abroad; they have turned predatory and now threaten local communities. *Phi Krasue* is made so through demonic possession or dabbling in forbidden magic; to return to human form, she must convince a relative to swallow some of her saliva, thus ensuring the monstrosity survives within the same community that fears it (Ancuta, 2017, p. 32). These vampires are metaphorically removed from their communities (through misfortune, heinous acts or demonic possession) but return later to haunt their peers, bringing back with them something unspeakable. The monstrosity is both familiar and utterly alien, compounding the terror it spreads in its wake, much like the organ traffickers are said to look like ordinary locals.

The development of Singapore parallels the development of the region's other urban areas, sites of some of the most rapid and concentrated development the world has ever seen. It is not surprising then that these stories of organ traffickers spread so easily throughout the interconnected cities of Southeast Asia. As the cities of Southeast Asia develop and evolve, and ties between them deepen, strangers circulate among the local population, strangers whose presence causes a deep sense of unease among once tight-knit communities. As the region develops, so too does its folklore.

Bloodsucking Vanguard of the Neoliberal World Order

The new internationalism of Singapore is the result of a financial system that has conquered the world, Neoliberalism. The modernisation of the city, the opening of its borders to multinational corporations and so-called "foreign talent," these are symptoms of Neoliberalism's influence. Though the term Neoliberalism is often used as a catch-all to describe systemic problems in first-world countries and can mean different things to different people, British author and activist George Monbiot (2016, n.p.) provides a helpful overview of what precisely the term encompasses:

Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that "the market" delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning.

Author and blogger Cory Doctorow (2017) has an even harsher take; in his ezine BoingBoing, he describes Neoliberalism as "a moral arbiter that elevates the worthy to unspeakable wealth and dooms everyone else to penury, hard labor, and precarity." The increasing dissatisfaction with the current world economic order can be observed in many other places on the internet, such as among the nearly 200,000 registered users of the LateStageCapitalism³ sub-forum on multi-million user discussion board reddit.com.

³ <https://reddit.com/r/lateststagecapitalism>

The depiction of the forces of Capitalism as vampires was a major feature of the writings of Marx who described the capitalist system as “dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx, 1887 p.163). The vampire motif was prominent in Marx’s critiques, and Mark Neocleous (2003) argues that the vampire dwelt in the heart of Marx’s arguments against capitalism: “If one extends such a textual analysis to other major and minor works by Marx, it is clear that the vampire motif, if not the vampire himself, runs like a red thread through his work” (p. 670).



Figure 2: The Capitalist Vampire (1885), by Walter Crane.

Source: <http://spartacus-educational.com/Jcrane.htm>

Prior to Marx, philosophers were seeing the vampiric in the forces of capitalism. Voltaire likewise drew parallels between capitalists and bloodsucking, saying of the powerful money men of Paris and London, “I confess that in both these cities there were stock-jobbers, brokers, and men of business, who sucked the blood of the people in broad daylight; but they were not dead, though corrupted. These true suckers lived not in cemeteries, but in very agreeable palaces” (2014, n.p.). The image of the capitalist as vampire has a long tradition.

In recent years, many commentators have furthered these depictions of capitalism as vampiric. For example, the journalist Matt Taibbi (2010) has repeatedly described Goldman Sachs, one of the most emblematic companies of the current economic system, as “the vampire squid”. Taibbi’s characterisation seems to have struck a nerve, and others have run with this vampiric description applying it to not just Goldman Sachs, but to the neoliberal system in general (c.f. Blacker, 2011). In the Neoliberal world everything is commodifiable, even the blood of the young. Some for-profit companies are even using the precarious financial situation of many students to take their blood. These companies pay poor students

for their blood, and advertising can be seen prominently displayed near college campuses in the United States. In addition to the image below (Figure 3), other examples of plasma-for-profit advertising can be found on Reddit and other forums.



Figure 3: Advertisement for plasma donation business.

Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/LateStageCapitalism/comments/5pruek/spotted_outside_my_community_college_bookstore/

Angst about the global capitalist order is not limited to the West. With rapid economic development has come an intense feeling of financial insecurity among Singapore's vast middle class. Citizens of the city of Singapore, ranked among the most expensive cities in the world, have watched living costs spiral upwards, and these concerns are a recurring theme in news reports (c.f. Ranasinghe 30 Jan 2013; Au-Yong & Mokhtar, Jan 30, 2014; *Today*, August 14, 2015). The anxieties articulated in these stories mirror the anxieties expressed in forums like LateStageCapitalism.

These fears can be found in fictional depictions of the organ trade as well. Ancuta's (2018) survey of depictions of organ trafficking in Asian cinema explicitly links these vampiric crimes to the Neoliberal world order, where bodies are commodities and vulnerable populations like the young and the physically disabled are commonly targeted by criminal syndicates. One film in particular, made by a Japanese director but set in Thailand, features both the sexual exploitation of Southeast Asian children and the harvesting of some of their organs (Ancuta, 2018, pp. 92-94). In Ancuta's reading, the criticism of Neoliberalism in these films is central, its bloodthirsty impulses a central feature of the ideology rather than a side effect.

In a system that elevates profit and returns above all other considerations, vulnerable children become especially valuable potential commodities. Who better to represent these

forces than the vampire – draining blood and viscera for cash? Given the established connection between capitalism and vampirism, it would make sense that angst about the neoliberal system would manifest as vampiric entities like the organ trafficker. The organ trafficker is the ideal avatar of neoliberal angst in the 21st century.

Vampiric Flesh Dealers – It's Not Just Organs

Locals' susceptibility to believing in false stories about organ trafficking could also be explained by the presence of other types of trafficking in the region. The Southeast Asian sex industry is massive, the region is a world hub for sex trafficking and sex tourism. The countries mentioned in the organ trafficker social media posts are notorious for confirmed cases of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Thailand, for instance, is often discussed in connection with sex trafficking and paedophilia. According to the US Department of State (2017), the southeast Asian kingdom "is a source, destination, and transit country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking" (p. 330), and is classified as a 'Tier 3' country, meaning it "do[es] not fully comply with the Trafficking Victims' Prevention Act's minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so"(p. 47).

Thailand is not the only country with an unsavoury reputation; Singapore's nextdoor neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia are also criticised for the presence of sex tourism and sex slavery. The same US Department of State report (2015) says of Indonesia, "Child sex tourism is prevalent in the Riau Islands bordering Singapore, and Bali is a destination for Indonesian child sex tourists" (p. 187), while "Malaysia is a destination and, to a lesser extent, a source and transit country for...children subjected to sex trafficking" (p. 233).

Vampires have long been associated with sex and death, and the fact that children and pregnancy are central to both vampire stories and organ trafficker stories gives credence to the idea of the organ trafficker as vampire. Barber (1988, p. 9) says of vampires, "the vampire of folklore is a sexual creature, and his sexuality is obsessive." Avdikos' description quoted earlier also contains references to the virile nature of the vampire (2013, pp. 311-312).

In the region of Southeast Asia, Maloud (2009) goes into great detail regarding the connection between sex, violence, and the vampiric in her study of *Pontianak*, who in her telling represents a "sexually transgressive woman" (p. 31). In some versions of the *Pontianak* folklore, she is the spirit of a rape victim (Abdul Rashid, 2010), and she suffers the trauma of a miscarried child (Lundberg, 2008, Dillon & Lundberg, 2017). Her appearance is at times sexual, having been described "as being a beautifully endowed woman, with firm breasts that capture the attention of men" (Abdul Rashid, 2010, p. 9). Other tellings of the story include different depictions of sexual violence; *Pontianak* has been known to rip the penises off male victims, for example (Abdul Rashid, 2010, p. 68). Similarly, *Phi Krasue* is frequently depicted in Thai popular culture as "a sexually aggressive voracious creature"

(Ancuta, 2017, p. 31), and has been shown in cinematic depictions as a sex worker, servicing Western sex tourists, among others.

Given the intimate link between vampires and sexuality, it is not a stretch to see how organ traffickers could be manifestations of local fears of the global sex trade, and a contributing factor to the spread of the organ trafficker legend. The final warning in the messages circulating on social media about organ traffickers is unambiguous: keep a close eye on your children, lest they fall victim to these dark forces. With such a pedigree, the vampiric organ trafficker fits right in to the folklore of Southeast Asia.

Epitaph

Like dreams, the archetypal figures that manifest in a society's collective consciousness tell us a lot about that society's collective *unconscious*. Organ traffickers, the archetypally shadowy vampiric entities terrorising Southeast Asia through viral social media posts, offer a rich vein of material for analysis, giving observers insights into the state of the region. Broadly speaking, these vampiric figures certainly look like manifestations of Singaporeans' unconscious fears of the neoliberal economic and cultural system that is the order of the day in the cosmopolitan global city, in the Southeast Asian region, and the world. The current atmosphere seems to be one of fear, specifically, fears of being consumed by – or losing loved ones to – the increasingly bloodthirsty neoliberal system, which values little apart from value itself. The fear is manifesting as shadowy men of indeterminate origin targeting the most vulnerable members of society, its children. Despite the easily debunked nature of the stories, they persist, continuing to circulate past mythbusting websites and even local police forces – a testament to the numinous powers of these archetypal figures, that are very ancient despite their modern guise and *modus operandi*.

These stories do not just show the strength of the archetypal images, they are also illustrative of the adaptability of them. The fears that lurk behind these stories are excellent guides to the psyche of the ordinary citizens of the rapidly developing cities of Southeast Asia, people who have witnessed immense social upheaval, are engulfed in the neoliberal world order and the all-pervasive influence of social media spreading shocking stories of the dissolute nature of the world. In the panopticonic⁴ modern social media milieu in which we all dwell, constant reminders of the horrors of the world turn up daily in Facebook feeds. The ugly underbelly of neoliberalism stares social media users in the face and they cannot turn away.

Revulsion of this state of affairs lurks at various levels within modern cultures and societies. In Western countries, many are becoming more conscious of the workings of neoliberalism

⁴ Panopticonic is here used in preference to 'panoptic,' as it more effectively conveys dystopian notions of a surveillance state. Seemingly coined by prolific blogger and podcaster David Boles at bolesblogs.com, usage is spreading. See: <https://bolesblogs.com/2009/08/04/the-definition-of-panopticonic/>

and starting to voice discontent. In Singapore, the revulsion towards this system seems unconscious, manifesting instead in these vampiric entities haunting local imaginations and social media posts. The “Third World to First World” legend is a powerful one in Singapore, forming the title of the autobiography of first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (2000). The story of the Asian Tiger countries is one that locals are very proud to be a part of. Hence criticism of the present system, which has brought so many so much, would be unthinkable to many in Singapore. However, unease with the system is apparent when one examines local newspapers. Has this situation in fact led to a state of cognitive dissonance among local people? Such a situation would lead to the sublimation of criticism and negative feelings about the Neoliberal system, necessitating repression of thoughts on its inherent injustice. Could going against oneself, one’s ideal of being, be so unthinkable to the conscious brain that these feelings can only manifest in the Shadow?

When looking more carefully at these vampiric folktales, what becomes most apparent is the fear lurking in the Southeast Asian unconscious, the fear of the new global world into which people have found themselves thrust. The old world has disappeared with astounding rapidity, and the one that has replaced it is missing much of what made the old comfortable and manageable, namely community and the familiar patterns of village life. The new world, populated by teeming masses housed in tower blocks surrounded on all sides by peers yet paradoxically more isolated than ever, appears to be filled with a constantly rotating cast of strangers, faceless, anonymous, representing potential danger to the community’s most vulnerable members, the children.

Another pervasive fear of the system itself. The observers seem to be unconsciously aware of the bloodthirsty nature of this system willing to put a price tag on nearly everything, including the very vitality of life, the blood and vital organs of the young. This fear does not seem to have surfaced into the mainstream, and it is not easy to find community discussions on the nature of the neoliberalism in Singaporean contexts. Google searches reveal little information, and none of the circulating stories of organ traffickers come with denunciations of the economic order of things. If locals are consciously critical of the neoliberal system, they do not seem to be expressing these fears online like netizens in Western countries.

Finally, the knowledge that bodies are for sale for sex in the neoliberal system’s shadow is one that seems to be subconsciously haunting the local populace. The longstanding tradition of sexual tourism and sex trafficking in Southeast Asia is no secret. In the year 2017, headlines were dominated by sex scandals involving politicians and celebrities, and these headlines are not confined to Western countries. Trending stories on social media including the #metoo⁵ hashtag have popped up in local publications as well (c.f. Tan, 2017), reminding Singaporeans that the dirty laundry being aired isn’t just American.

⁵ Women on social media are sharing their stories of sexual assault and harassment using the #metoo hashtag to raise awareness of how widespread the issue is.

The ranks of vampires are swelling in the 21st century as bloodsuckers take on new forms in response to the trials and tribulations of modern life and the overarching systems of the contemporary world. This paper has argued that these new forms are being shaped by the prevailing social and economic conditions dominating the Southeast Asian region and the world, and shaping residents' lives in ways that can feel terrifying. As the global economy evolves to make average citizens feel more and more precarious, and social ties weaken further and further, disturbing stories from other countries seem increasingly plausible to audiences. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that a creature like the organ trafficker would appear on the border.

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