



HOUSE

Of



GLASS

Culture, Modernity, and the
State in Southeast Asia

edited by

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Introduction

YAO SOUCHOU

My life was as straight as a piece of wire pulled taut, without twists and turns. ... And now it was not just bent, but tangled. And I could not see how I could unravel the tangle. Every day I feel my throat in the tighter and tighter grip of an outside power ...

I would now have to be on the lookout, like looking for a needle in a pile of paddy stalks. The needle must be found, even the paddy stalks have to be destroyed. All this even though it was a small piece of pure steel, without the rust of evil, except for that speck of idealism, that history of love of people and country, that seed of patriotism and nationalism whose final flowering could not yet be clearly seen. And that you are careful that you are not pricked by that needle yourself. For the government and I as its instrument, must, however, look upon such idealism as criminal. (Toer 1992, pp. 50-53)

Thus begins Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer's magisterial meditation on the fate of one living under the spell of the colonial state in his *House of Glass* (1992). The time was 1912; the place, Netherlands East Indies. The narrator Jacques Pangemanann is a former Commissioner of Police. Educated in Lyon, France, he is indeed like Conrad's Kurtz, a flower of European civilization. But what confronts his heart of darkness is an enterprise far more insidious than those of economic plunder and military conquest by colonialism. He has been asked by the

Dutch colonial authorities to investigate the “textual activities” of the anti-colonial radicals:

My new assignment was to study the writings of the Natives that were being published in the newspapers and magazines. Analyse them. Interview the authors. Compare them. And make some conclusions about their calibre, the direction of their thinking and their attitude towards the Government of the Netherlands Indies. (Toer 1992, p. 52)

These “texts” are not merely trails which Pangemanann follows assiduously to monitor the growth of anti-colonial activities. As he carries out his master’s deed, such “texts” offer the oppressive possibility of betrayal. In the hands of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, texts and textual production are to have a crucial existential significance. As it gives central voice to Pangemanann, *House of Glass* charts his complex desire as he confronts the seduction of — and his inner contempt for — his own authority and a secret admiration for his nemesis, the Islamic revolutionary Minke.

Betrayal and secrecy, however, are not the only fate of text. As a radical and a writer, Pramoedya cannot help but invest a crucial emancipatory potential in text and its production. What gives *House of Glass* its ambivalence are the circumstances in which the work was written: on the prison island of Buru in eastern Indonesia where Pramoedya was imprisoned without trial for fourteen years until his release in 1979. The oppressive inner world of Pangemanann becomes a spatial metaphor for the island prison. In this inner world and on the island, words are whispered in secret. The title of the novel must have been a literal rendering of the conditions of the prison: the policing and surveillance of inmates, the division of day and night, secrecy and openness, what is allowed and what is forbidden. In these horrendous conditions, textual production became for Pramoedya, a desperate act of resistance. However, if writing is a personal act of defiance in the Buru Island prison house, it is also through the contemplation of text, Pramoedya reminds us, that the narrator Pangemanann is able to accomplish his task for the colonial authorities. In this sense, the ultimate fate of text might lie precisely in its fragile promise of release. For textual production is as much about emancipation and liberation, as it is an enterprise to which the state turns to realize its hegemonic aims.