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The Ideal of Intellectual Exchange
Study Abroad, Affect and the Ambivalences of Citizenship in Post-Suharto Indonesia

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Writing for a volume on 'intellectual exchange' compiled in honour of Susan Bayly, my mind immediately turns to a series of fieldwork conversations that emerged from my collaboration with Susan on our ESRC-funded project, 'The Social Life of Achievement and Competitiveness in Indonesia and Vietnam'. This project had involved no small amount of intellectual exchange between the two of us as we compared how the struggle to become competitive participants in a global knowledge economy had led distinctive concepts of 'achievement' to emerge in our respective fieldsites. Susan had shared with me details of Vietnam's Human Capacity Research Centre, an institution that provides psychic, geomantic and paranormal services while also seeking to 'scientise the Centre's provision of psychic … expertise by setting credible attainment markers … comparable to those of the nation's other classes of doers and attainers' (Bayly 2013: 175). I often discussed this nugget of comparative ethnography with the people I spoke to during fieldwork in Indonesia's Riau Islands Province. This could itself be understood as an act of intellectual exchange – sharing the findings of another scholar in order to broaden my interlocutors' awareness – although I was also interested to gauge their reactions. Some were dismissive. 'Sounds like the Vietnamese have been watching too much Harry Potter!' laughed one government official. Yet for others, the vignette awakened their own yearnings for intellectual exchange – defined here broadly, following Carter and Spirling (2008: 375), as 'the transfer of knowledge, ideas, and techniques'. 'Can you get a Bachelor's Degree in Supernatural Skills if you study at that institution in Vietnam?' wondered Padmana, a softly-spoken paranormal practitioner in his early twenties.[1] 'I want one.'

Though Padmana may have been disappointed to learn that the Human Capacity Research Centre was no Hogwarts of Hanoi, his remarks raise several issues of direct relevance to an anthropology of intellectual exchange. One, for instance, concerns how we define the boundaries of 'the intellectual': do occult knowledge and supernatural abilities fall outside this domain, or can the divisions between such traditions of knowledge and those of the secular sciences be 'bridged', as Bayly intimates in her contributions to this volume?

However, what was most striking to me about my conversation with Padmana was his fierce, immediate and viscerally palpable yearning – despite the many opportunities he had to undertake apprenticeships with paranormal practitioners across Indonesia – to gain a formal qualification in his craft from an overseas institution. In that, he resembled many of his contemporaries, who also dreamed that they, or their children, would one day get to study abroad. In this chapter I draw on over thirty-six months of fieldwork to ask why and to what effect the aspiration to partake in formalized intellectual exchange overseas has become instantiated across Indonesia. Theoretically, I use this material to outline what an anthropology of intellectual exchange might have to gain by approaching intellectual exchange not as a practice, but as an object of desire and contemplation – as an ideal.

Envisioning Intellectual Exchange

What kind of analytic object should 'intellectual exchange' be for an anthropologist? One possibility is to consider it as a practice. Indeed, many scholars writing of intellectual exchange do so in a resolutely empiricist manner, tracing the means by which knowledge develops and ideas spread as a result of particular, situated encounters. Their work offers valuable insights into the genesis of intellectual traditions. Moreover, by revealing how collective processes of dialogue and collaboration are integral to the generation and circulation of ideas, such studies displace commonplace narratives of 'individual brilliance' or the 'hegemonic imposition' of epistemological frameworks in favour of more subtle and equitable attributions of responsibility for intellectual developments (see e.g. Lewis 2004; Merkel 2017). Paradoxically, however, while this literature has made important contributions by insisting upon the centrality of exchange to intellectual history, there has been, as Merkel (2021) notes, a tendency to leave intellectual exchange itself undertheorized. A second important strand of scholarship on the practice of intellectual exchange thus comes from philosophical anthropologists and participant observers of intellectual settings who examine how factors ranging from linguistic conventions to institutional hierarchies can either facilitate or impede the articulation and circulation of ideas and knowledge (e.g. Davern and Eitzen 1995; Ermarth 1993; Garnett 2006). This body of work often carries a normative thrust, identifying limitations in current practice and inviting readers to envision arrangements through which intellectual exchange might be conducted otherwise.

Anthropologists of intellectual exchange can engage with such normative interventions in several ways. These are conversations that are deeply relevant to our profession and which demand our participation: important questions are raised regarding our own intellectual exchange practices, and whether and how the discipline might benefit from various kinds of institutional reform (see e.g. Diallo and Friborg 2021; Lee 2021). Yet alongside inviting new ways of envisaging intellectual futures, such normatively oriented conversations also reveal something important about intellectual exchange as an ethnographic phenomenon. They remind us that the experience of intellectual exchange is mediated by its proximity to or divergence from particular *ideals* of how intellectual exchange could or should be practised – in ways that may prove consequential not only for the trajectory of the exchange, but for various aspects of the participants' subjectivities, not least their propensity to participate in future exchanges. With this observation – which holds true regardless of one's normative stance on the ideals in question – I hope to nudge the anthropological study of intellectual exchange beyond both the historical and normative tendencies that predominate in the existing literature (important though these both are), to instead explore how the affective dynamics surrounding ideals of intellectual exchange can prove constitutive of subjectivity.

In making this argument, I build on three key theoretical insights from existing anthropological work on ideals. The first is that the exercise of normative reason is neither necessary nor sufficient for an ideal to take hold. Instead, ideals are reflective of what Moore (2011: 15–18) terms 'the ethical imagination'. This helpfully expansive concept refers to 'the form and means … by which individuals imagine relationships to themselves and to others', bringing conscious thought and social imaginaries into the same analytical frame as embodiment, affect and fantasy to understand how hopes, desires and (dis)satisfactions are forged. The second insight is that the experience of disjunctions between ideals and reality can spur a wide range of social behaviours and forms of cultural production. If, in some cases, ideals are subjected to scrutiny and debate, even coming to be displaced (Mayblin 2012; Stewart 1996), in others, great effort is spent on mediating such disconnects (Miller 2001). In others still, the difficulty of realizing an ideal may entrench its idealization (Trawick 1990) while suffusing everyday life with emotionally contagious feelings of ambivalence, melancholy and dissatisfaction (Gammeltoft 2018). Which of these outcomes will occur in any given case is far from assured, but is shaped in part by the hold an ideal has over us – which is precisely why it is so important to understand ideals through a rubric such as the ethical imagination, in which affect, fantasy and attachment carry as much weight as deliberative reason. The final insight is that the culturally generative force of ideals can be evident even when they relate to lives other than one's own. By reflecting on and discussing the experiences of friends, celebrities, fictional characters, or even abstracted social types, ideals can be both reworked and upheld, yardsticks for measuring what is typical and unusual are forged, and a wider, emotionally shaded sense of how the world operates is established (Mayblin 2012; Miller 2001; Stewart 1996). This point is especially important within the context of this volume because it underscores that intellectual exchange is not just a matter of relevance and interest to the people undertaking intellectual pursuits. Rather, it can be of salience to much broader publics – especially in the context of a self-proclaimed global knowledge economy, in which education, innovation and human resource quality can all be seen as essential for a prosperous national future. This, as I now show, is very much the case in Indonesia – where the possibility of undertaking specific forms of intellectual exchange (most notably formal study overseas) has become not just a personal ambition for the academically inclined but a widespread public concern.

Transnational Intellectual Exchange: The History of an Indonesian Aspiration

During the colonial period, the numbers of Indonesians pursuing, or even contemplating, study abroad was minimal. Southeast Asia had of course long been integrated into a 'broader Islamic ecumene' (Hefner 2009: 14), with small numbers of Muslims travelling to study in the Middle East; such opportunities increased in number following the opening of the Suez Canal and the legalization of the *hajj* (Dhofier 1992: 21). Moreover, as both Dutch- and Chinese-medium schools became established in the Netherlands East Indies, some Indonesians began to pursue further education abroad: sometimes in China; sometimes in Europe (Stutje 2013; Theo 2018: 51). Nevertheless, all these opportunities were available only to a wealthy few: aristocrats, urban elites and higher commercial classes. The vast majority of Indonesians had no access to formal schooling during this time, let alone higher education (van der Kroef 1957).

After independence, developing the country's education system became an urgent policy priority. Simultaneously, scholarships were becoming increasingly significant as expressions of aid, solidarity and diplomacy during an era of decolonization and Cold War tensions (Tournès and Scott-Smith 2018). Opportunities proliferated for Indonesians to study abroad. As Dragojlovic (2010: 59) notes, 'Indonesia, under the active leadership of President Sukarno had taken a major diplomatic role in the affairs of the Third World' while simultaneously 'balanc[ing] its foreign policy in relation to the USSR, China and USA. This foreign policy facilitated a rich transnational exchange across the countries of the Eastern bloc, the USA and the Non-aligned Movement'. Following the anti-communist violence of 1965–66 and the associated rise to power of President Suharto, however, diplomatic ties with the Eastern and Soviet Blocs were frozen. Many Indonesians studying in socialist states became political exiles.

An interest in transnational education nevertheless persisted. A key anxiety for Suharto's 'New Order' regime – authoritarian, developmentalist and strongly influenced by modernization theory – was that the Indonesian population lacked the skills, knowledge and 'development-mindedness' necessary for prosperity (see MacDougall 1976). Such concerns persist to this day, and are currently expressed through the idiom of 'human resource quality' (*kualitas sumber* *daya manusia*), reflecting the extent to which 'policy-making in Indonesia is heavily influenced by the theory of human capital investment introduced by Becker' (Indrawati and Kuncoro 2021: 33). Indeed, Becker's ideas (1964), which posit training, work experience and education as foundational to both personal and national development and prosperity, are widely subscribed to by Indonesian citizens, who frequently emphasize education's emancipatory potential (see, e.g., Newberry 2017; Schut 2019), even as they sometimes lament their education system's present shortcomings. Despite high rates of educational participation, Indonesian school and university graduates have less competitive skillsets than their international counterparts; reasons include knowledge deficits among educators, outdated facilities, and a lack of research infrastructure in Indonesian universities (Indrawati and Kuncoro 2021: 32–44). Pending domestic reforms, then, much hope is attached to the prospect of an education overseas – particularly at tertiary level, when the knowledge and skills being taught are most advanced and specialized (Welch 2007).

Most Indonesians whom I met during fieldwork dreamed of pursuing international study in a Western nation or in capitalist Asia (e.g. Singapore, Malaysia, Japan or South Korea), an imaginary that seems to preserve the (geo)political outlooks cultivated under the New Order. Where students actually end up studying, however, reflects the availability of financial support. While the US has tempered its provision of scholarships following the end of the Cold War, other states, including Japan, India, Turkey, Singapore and China, have begun to identify higher education bursaries as a key arena for international cooperation and diplomacy (King 2011; Tournès and Scott-Smith 2018: 17–19). Amidst these developments, and increasing pressures to self-fund a transnational education where possible, Guggenheim (2012: 149) estimates around forty-five thousand Indonesians are studying abroad at any given moment in time.

In a recent article, Gellert (2015: 386–88) critiques contemporary Indonesian educational attitudes as unduly oriented towards securing membership in a community of 'global, English-speaking, placeless professionals and consumers' – a point he sees exemplified in, for example, a teacher's hope that a high-potential student might one day contact him to say (in English), '*Sir, I have received a scholarship to America*'. Gellert is certainly correct to observe that such cosmopolitan opportunities are disproportionately available to an already 'privileged and transnationalised segment of the population' (2015: 389) and that other realizations of 'potential' should be celebrated and encouraged. Yet one should not overstate the extent to which membership of a transnationalized community is integral, rather than incidental, to aspirations of study overseas. Al Qurtuby (2020: 47–48), for instance, argues that Indonesian Muslims' desire for international education should be understood with reference to the longstanding Islamic concept of *rihla* (travel embarked upon in search of knowledge, whether religious or secular). Endorsed in the Qur'an and Hadiths, *rihla* not only offers Muslims the promise of wisdom but also of receiving God's rewards and being assured entry into Paradise after death (2020: 48). Moreover, for many Indonesians, citizens and policy makers alike, the appeal of international study has long been that it allows students to bring the skills and knowledge they acquire overseas *back to Indonesia* so these new talents can be put into practice to improve the national situation. Some research participants noted that returning to Indonesia was an explicit condition of receiving a scholarship – although Indonesians who have studied abroad frequently cite their 'frustration' at being unable to use internationally-acquired skills and knowledge (whether because of inadequate facilities or entrenched attitudes among colleagues) as a principal downside of the experience (Cannon 2000; Keats 1969). Such findings significantly complicate the claim, latent in Gellert's critique of Indonesian education, but stated more baldly by several other prominent Southeast Asianists, that foreign education is best understood as one of the 'status or positional goods' most urgently sought by Asia's emerging middle classes (Chua 2000: xi) and that Indonesians value education more as a 'symbol of modernity', or for the title it conveys, than for the knowledge transfer it entails (Gerke 2000: 148). While international education undoubtedly offers personal benefits to one's status, it is important to recognize that these frequently sit alongside, and to some extent derive from, the meritorious implications of becoming a conduit of intellectual exchange.

Equally, 'people who study overseas' are widely considered to be important national assets. There are of course cases in which overseas graduates are viewed ambivalently upon their return and accused of arrogance or of having forgotten their roots. Yet even in these cases there is typically a grudging respect, linked to both the skills and knowledge they have acquired and a sense that they must be people of exceptional potential to have been accepted by an overseas institution. Margareta Astaman, an Indonesian writer who studied in Singapore, summarizes the prevailing attitude – which she too had internalized – as she describes her departure from Indonesia:

> Imagine an early morning flight full of the cleverest kids from across Indonesia. Our heads are held high, full of hopes and self-belief. The people accompanying us have proud smiles on their lips.
>
> *We are the chosen ones.* The champions above all the other school champions …. Our talent has already attracted the attention of the Singaporean government. We are not like domestic workers or manual labourers, who hold the status of *Foreign Worker.* We have been invited as *Foreign Talent.* (Astaman 2010: 12–13)

To summarize, in contemporary Indonesia, issues such as the destinies of high-achieving, high-potential citizens and the circuitries of intellectual exchange are not just matters of individual aspiration but of broader public and political concern. The corollary of this is that public understandings of how such nationally significant intellectual exchange is occurring can prove highly consequential for Riau Islanders' (and other Indonesians') sense of their place in the world, the futures they consider possible, and their relationship to the state. In the following sections, I develop this line of argument by turning to two discursive flashpoints that featured prominently during my fieldwork: the question of access to the possibility of intellectual exchange via overseas study, and the question of how Indonesians studying overseas are treated – an issue which became especially heated following the mysterious death of an Indonesian student on a Singaporean campus in 2009. The analysis reveals that although travelling overseas for intellectual exchange may be experienced in various ways by individual Indonesians (the fulfilment of one's national duty; an ordeal; an exciting escape from a nation in which one feels limited or excluded), the broader ideal of intellectual exchange serves as a touchstone for public feelings of disappointment in the Indonesian government and despair for the nation's future. Such feelings warrant analytic attention for several reasons. In the most extreme cases they may turn Indonesians away from the political ideal of the democratic nation-state and towards radically alternative forms of government, such as Islamic theocracy or a return to authoritarianism (Long 2016). Yet even absent such impact upon political horizons, they can imbue everyday life with a tangible sense of despondency and unfairness – what Throop (2014) might label a 'moral mood' – thereby proving highly consequential for what it is to live in Indonesia today.

Accessing Intellectual Exchange

> *I have to get that scholarship. There is no other option, I have to get it!* Those were the words that rang in my heart every time I stood in front of the mirror. That scholarship was a ticket out of a life I couldn't be proud of. (Hirata 2005: 272)

These words are spoken by Ikal, the narrator of Andrea Hirata's novel *Laskar Pelangi* ('The Rainbow Troops') shortly before the story's end. The book follows the fate of ten disadvantaged students attending a ramshackle school on the island of Belitung who nevertheless have a passion for education and learning. Having graduated, and after twelve unfulfilling years spent as a postal worker, Ikal sees an advert for a scholarship in the European Union. He enrols in an undergraduate degree, studies obsessively at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, and, thanks to an outstanding research proposal on transfer pricing models for the telecommunications industry, is able to 'repay [his] moral debt' to his teachers and classmates by securing the funding. This denouement is bittersweet, however, as Lintang – the most talented of the pupils – must abandon his schooling following his father's death and ends the story working on a sand barge.

Laskar Pelangi became Indonesia's bestselling novel of all time: an outcome that simultaneously reflects its charming, memorable characters and its trenchant critique of inequality. This latter concern is expressed most vividly in the fate of Lintang, but is also evident in Ikal's own struggle to secure an opportunity to study abroad, doing so against the odds, and only as a result of truly prodigious efforts. Indeed, given the importance of scholarships to the fulfilment of personal destinies and societal obligations – for very few Indonesians could afford to study overseas without them – the question of their availability and distribution featured keenly in my interlocutors' minds. One of the requests that I most frequently received during fieldwork was to advise on how to secure a scholarship to study in the United Kingdom.

An unusual version of such a request came in 2013, when Pak Rafiq, an official in the Riau Islands Department of Education, summoned me urgently to his office. He and his colleagues were brainstorming plans for enabling students from the Riau Islands to study overseas and were eager for my input. Every year, Rafiq explained, the provincial government planned to award their top ten high school graduates full scholarships to study overseas in one of five areas: economics, engineering, marine sciences, tourism, and religious studies. The selection of these fields was interesting in itself, revealing much about how the provincial government envisaged the areas in which high-quality human resources were required. Economics and engineering were necessary given the province's recent reliance on export-oriented manufacturing. Marine sciences and tourism had been identified as two particular growth areas for the Riau Islands province, the surface area of which was 96% water, and which boasted numerous beaches and heritage sites that were felt to have hitherto unrealized touristic potential. Meanwhile, the scholarships for religious studies reflected a growing conviction across Indonesia that religious piety was a principal line of defence against the evils of corruption (Rudnyckyj 2010).

The 'religious studies' being supported appeared to be exclusively Islamic; Rafiq and his colleagues had already decided that scholarships in this field should be taken up in Egypt. Their choice departs interestingly from the late twentieth-century view that Indonesians should pursue their interest in Islam at Western universities so as 'to integrate national and Islamic intellectualisms' (Dhofier 1992: 26). However, it can be seen as reflecting both an illustrious history of Indonesian Muslims travelling to Egypt to further their knowledge of Islam (including Indonesia's former president Abdurrahman Wahid) and the more recent enthusiasm among Indonesians for travelling to the Middle East so as to become active participants in global Islamic discourse (Laffan 2004: 20–21). The office had also settled on Germany as the location for engineering – a selection that appeared to have been inspired by the auspicious biography of New Order technocrat and post-Suharto president B.J. Habibie. Habibie, who held a doctorate in aerospace engineering from RWTH Aachen University, was respected for this achievement across Indonesia but was an especially revered figure in the Riau Islands owing to his role in making the island of Batam an area of special economic development (Nur 2000). However, the question of where scholarships for the other three disciplines would be held remained undecided.

My summons had been inspired by the idea that, as a faculty member at the London School of Economics and Political Science, I might be able to broker a scholarship for Riau Islands students to study economics in London every year. Such hopes were quickly scotched when I revealed that the Indonesian high school leaving certificate is not recognized as sufficiently rigorous for admission to the LSE, but Rafiq did a good job of hiding his disappointment at this news. His department was, he explained, planning a reconnaissance trip to Europe in the near future to see what was available and whether they could broker any Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs). My input would still be helpful for working out where to target.

A key priority was to identify where would be best for tourism studies. Rafiq's own inclination was that Austria would be good, and Switzerland even more so, but his junior colleague Iskandar had doubts. These only intensified when I mentioned that, to my knowledge, much of the tourism in Austria and Switzerland revolved around skiing. 'We should be sending them to Australia,' Iskandar insisted, 'the attractions are more like the ones we have in Indonesia.' Rafiq, however, had been thinking that Australia would be a better fit for marine sciences. The department had originally hoped to send the marine tranche of students to Japan, partly because Iskandar had identified a scholarship scheme in which students received contributions towards their living costs, but also because Japan was renowned as a powerful fishing nation. To their dismay, however, they had struggled to find any marine sciences programmes in Japan that focused on the fisheries sector. Perhaps, Rafiq reflected, Japan could be a good option for economics....

Several aspects of this ethnographic vignette stand out as being of interest. Firstly, we see how the planning and aspirational labour taking place within this government office are shaped by particular normative visions of intellectual exchange. Even under the status quo, the majority of the Riau Islands' top ten students would likely go on to further study or training. What Rafiq, Iskandar and their colleagues are attempting to do is insert the students into particular circuits of exchange, envisaged as generating maximal value for the students – and for the province – upon their anticipated return to Indonesia. We can see clearly how the governmental vision for intellectual exchange is driven by a specific ethical imagination, underpinned by market logics and religious nationalism, rather than, say, a commitment to supporting individual vocations or aptitudes: there is little scope in this scheme for a gifted Riau Islands biochemist to discover a cure for cancer, let alone for a budding historian, literature scholar or anthropologist to hone their craft. Moreover, absent an existing institutional framework in the Riau Islands that could facilitate such travels, the vignette points to an incipient ethical imagination of how a circuitry of intellectual exchange could and should be established. Governmental ideals are informed by the exercise of deliberative reason (as in Iskandar's discovery of generous maintenance support in Japan), but also more affective, unconscious or instinctive elements, from the aura of familiar prestige that comes from following in the footsteps of presidents to the sense that places such as Switzerland and Austria *must* be good places to study tourism – either because of their impressive reputation as tourist destinations or, as more cynical research participants were inclined to suggest, because of the education officials' own desires to visit them and ski through snowy vistas under the pretext of establishing an MoU. Equally striking was how volatile prospective destinations could be – their prioritization contingent on the vicissitudes of office interactions, and easily deflected by a suggestion from a colleague or an intervention by a visiting anthropologist. Even as intellectual exchange was unflinchingly sought out, its possible dynamics seemed highly malleable.

Despite such openness to possibility, however, almost ten years on, no scholarship arrangements for Riau Islands students have been established. The limited opportunities to study overseas have become a source of great public frustration in the Riau Islands, yet where blame should be apportioned is far from clear. In interviews with high-achieving schoolchildren, I repeatedly encountered claims of disappointment that their achievements were not better 'valued' (*dihargai*) and was often asked to advise the government that more overseas scholarships should be made available. Many research participants suspected there was ample money in departmental budgets for such opportunities but that it was being squandered on vanity projects, corrupted away, or diverted to those who had personal connections with government officials (see also Long forthcoming). Such misdeeds may sometimes be taking place, but ethnographic encounters such as the one outlined above suggested to me that education department officials were often in as deep a thrall to the prospect of overseas intellectual exchange as the students for whom they were planning, but simply unable to negotiate a suitable arrangement with universities that preferred to have greater control over their own admissions or to allocate block scholarships at the national level.

In practice, it seems unlikely that the inequities of access frustrating my interlocutors could be fully resolved without fundamental structural changes to global education markets. However, the predominant narrative that sees intellectual exchange as wholly possible if only there were better, more responsible action on the part on individual state officials proves a seductive one. Rather than positioning Indonesians as globalization's losers, it allows a sense of parity with other nations to be maintained, at least when it comes to one's most able achievers. The problem is one of how the state mediates access to financial support, rather than either cultural, structural or personal circumstances constraining the ability of Indonesia's brightest, or intractable structural obstacles that lie outside Indonesia's control. Paradoxically, then, while intellectual exchange is often held up as something that stands to equip high-potential young people with the knowledge and insights needed to render them ever-more valuable assets to the nation, the expectations and desires surrounding this ideal, the disappointments to which idealizing intellectual exchange can give rise, and the resultant clusters of narratives that are used to make sense of the situation, all contribute to feelings of disenchantment and alienation towards Indonesia and its (system of) government.

An Opportunity to Die For?

Never has study abroad been as hotly discussed across Indonesia as in the weeks and months following 2 March 2009. That was the day on which David Hartanto Widjaya,[2] an Indonesian undergraduate studying Electrical and Electronic Engineering at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (hereafter NTU), fell four storeys to his death from a link bridge on campus while his final year project (FYP) supervisor, Prof. Chan Kap Luk, lay bleeding from stab wounds in a nearby office.

As the coroner's inquest unfurled, the Singaporean media painted a grim picture of the events leading up to that fateful morning. David, an Indonesian Buddhist of Chinese ancestry, had been 'an outstanding student who came to Singapore on an ASEAN scholarship', wrote *The New Paper*, but from the second year onwards, he had 'changed' (Chong and Yong 2009a). He no longer studied diligently throughout the year. Instead, he skipped lessons and tutorials, spending hours every day playing *World of Warcraft*, *Defence of the Ancients* and *Destiny Online*. His GPA had deteriorated to the point that his ASEAN scholarship was withdrawn. He was also struggling to make headway with his FYP, a project provisionally entitled 'Multiview Acquisition for Person Adaptive 3D Display', which involved combining input from multiple cameras and projectors to create three-dimensional holograms. 'Things had become so bad,' the paper reported, 'that [David] was scared of [Prof Chan] … He avoided the professor and would sneak away rather than face him because he had fallen behind.' Prof. Chan had even 'scolded him' at a weekly meeting because David had failed to give any update on his work.

Then, on the morning of 2 March, David turned up unexpectedly at his supervisor's office. Prof. Chan told the inquest that David had brought along a USB stick containing his FYP work (Chong and Yong 2009b). However, the office computer did not have the software necessary to run the demonstration David had prepared, nor did Chan have time to relocate to his lab. Chan therefore asked David to give a brief oral summary of what had been done, and listened to this overview while continuing to work on some lecture slides at his computer. David's voice became shaky, and he began mumbling indiscernible words. Then Chan felt a blow to his back. He spun around and saw David wielding a knife. A struggle ensued, during which Chan took control of the weapon. David fled from the office and, according to eyewitness reports, jumped to his death. Subsequent examination of David's laptop revealed a file entitled 'Last Word', composed on 25 January 2009, in which David described how difficult he was finding life at university in Singapore, his fears that he was not strong enough to continue, and his thoughts of ending his life. Based on this evidence, and reports from forensic pathologists, the Singapore state coroner ruled David's death a suicide (Spykerman and Thomas 2009).

This version of events exhibits a narrative and ethnopsychological logic widespread in Singapore and the Malay World, namely that of the man who '[upon being] grievously offended responds with uncontrollable rage' (Lee 1981: 237), embarking upon a murderous and self-annihilating *amok* rampage.[3] *Amok* has conventionally been associated with the Malay mind, rather than the psychology of ethnically Chinese individuals such as David, although there have been reports of *amok* among Chinese who have 'lived in close proximity' with Malays in both Singapore and Indonesia (Kon 1994: 688). Yet, as Williamson (2007: 348–49) notes, the discourse of *amok* has its own pernicious poetics: in British Malaya, the 'madness' of *amok* violence served as a potent sign of the 'anti-modern'; a trope that secured 'a colonial divide between coloniser and colonised' and thus served as a source of fascination and pleasure. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the fevered Singaporean interest surrounding the David Widjaya case – while never formally labelling it as a case of *amok* – results in part from a similar frisson arising at the thought of 'mad', 'anti-modern' Indonesian violence encroaching into the hyper-rational technomodern space of a Singaporean electrical engineering faculty. Certainly, David emerges in the Singaporean narrative as the antithesis of an ideal achiever-citizen poised to flourish in the knowledge economy. Troubled, indolent, struggling or insane, his intellectual potential becomes almost the least noteworthy aspect of his story. It certainly does not seem to have characterized his time in Singapore: Prof. Chan told the inquest that he had only discovered that David was an ASEAN scholar after his death (Chong and Yong 2009b).

However, David's demise prompted a different set of accounts in Indonesia, where many citizens considered the coroner's verdict a cover-up for a more sinister truth: David had been murdered. This possibility had first been mooted by David's parents. They refused to believe that their son would take his own life, not least because the alleged emotional triggers were unconvincing. As a relatively wealthy family, they could cover the additional tuition costs arising from the withdrawal of David's scholarship, especially since he was soon to graduate. They further claimed that his FYP was already 90% complete, casting doubt on the contention that the stress of the project had tipped David over the edge. David's father also reported meeting a witness who had heard someone screaming 'they are trying to kill me' in the vicinity of Prof. Chan's office at the time David died. The family assembled an independent 'Verification Team' (*Tim Verifikasi*) composed of twelve bloggers and citizen journalists from across Indonesia, which travelled to Singapore to inspect the crime scene and speak to people on campus. The team also solicited an independent forensic analysis, which highlighted details – such as the number of wounds on David's body, and the angle at which his ankle had broken – that appeared inconsistent with the accounts given by Prof. Chan and on-campus witnesses. Suspicions were stoked further after Zhou Zheng, a project officer in NTU's School of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, was found hanged in his staff apartment on 6 March, and Hu Kunlun, a research fellow in the same school, was killed in a road traffic accident on 27 March. Many Indonesians suspected these deaths to be linked to David's.

My friend Wilson, an irrepressible Toba Batak in his forties, was convinced that David had been the victim of foul play. After the Singaporean Coroner's Court had issued its verdict, members of the Indonesian press had been invited to inspect the evidence and ask any questions they had regarding the case. Wilson, a seasoned Riau Islands journalist, had been among them. He shared the story with me and a host of other Bataks from his patrilineal group at a lively dinner following a wedding at a local church. He told us how he had seen all the evidence relating to the case and how there was only one conclusion to be reached.

The truth, Wilson explained, was that David Hartanto Widjaya was a genius who had discovered all sorts of extraordinary things, devising incredible inventions that his supervisor had never even thought of. Prof. Chan had wanted David to stay with him in Singapore to do a Ph.D. so they could develop new technologies for Singapore, but David had refused because he was determined to return to Indonesia and use his knowledge and skills there. After David had declined Prof. Chan's offer, the NTU academic realized exactly what was at stake if David were to return home. David had the brilliance and the aptitude to develop new forms of technology that would lead to Singapore losing out to Indonesia – one example being a new form of 'hand phone' in which one would make calls by speaking directly into the palm of one's hand.[4] Unable to stand the thought of Indonesia gaining access to this superior technology, Prof. Chan had initially attempted to stab David with a knife. When this proved unsuccessful, he had pushed David off the link bridge. Supposed 'eyewitnesses' were either in on the plot or had been bribed to fabricate or falsify their testimonies. The one who had refused – Hu Kunlun – had been mown down by a car.[5] Wilson explained how he had initially thought that the cover-up was orchestrated by the campus authorities in order to protect NTU's reputation. Yet the coroner's complicity in promulgating the 'suicide' verdict led him to conclude that the whole affair had been orchestrated by none other than the Singaporean government, in order to subordinate (*menggagalkan*) Indonesia. Wilson spoke fluently and compellingly; his friends listened spellbound, shaking their heads and tutting at the audacity of the crime. 'So in other words, this was political?!' asked Gordon, a high school maths teacher, with horror in his voice. 'Turns out the world of overseas education is a dangerous one....'

In Wilson's narrative, David is cast not as a troubled youngster or delinquent gaming addict whose intellectual attainments presaged a tragic fall from grace that brought shame upon his nation. Rather, he is the quintessential Indonesian achiever. This is a common feature of Indonesian narratives surrounding David's death, many of which highlight that he had travelled to Mexico to represent Indonesia in the 2005 International Mathematics Olympiad – one of the most prestigious of all academic achievements.[6] David is repeatedly referred to as a 'prodigy', a 'genius' and 'brilliant'. One vlogger even dubs him 'the Tony Stark of Indonesia' (Arum Story 2021), referencing the alter-ego of 'Iron Man' in Marvel Comics and the recent Avengers film series: a billionaire industrialist and inventor with an interest in 3D holograms and an estimated IQ of 270 (Floorwalker 2019). The implication – that someone so talented could not plausibly have surrendered his studies to the pleasures of online gaming or embarked upon an *amok* rampage – often underpins Indonesians' sense that the story emanating from Singapore is somehow 'odd' (*aneh*; *janggal*), or lacking in credibility. As a fellow Chinese Indonesian studying in Singapore told Goh (2011: 9, emphasis mine): 'We didn't expect him to kill himself – *not for a scholar, and not in Singapore*'. Most striking in Wilson's account, however, is a presumption of David's ongoing determination to participate in intellectual exchange on nationalist, Indonesian terms. He would go to Singapore to learn from experts housed in world-class facilities, thereby realizing his evident potential, *but he would then return to Indonesia*. Indeed, it was his commitment to bringing his knowledge and capabilities back home, rather than using them to further the ambitions of Singaporean academic interests, that had ultimately cost him his life.

Wilson's mention of a 'hand phone' invention is relatively idiosyncratic, but it shares with most accounts a conviction that David's death was linked to his intellect and ingenuity, and a tendency to portray him as the tragic embodiment of the predominant Indonesian public ideal of intellectual exchange, which was itself reiterated and fortified through the extensive commentary on the incident. Such interpretations rapidly displaced the suspicions of a sexual or romantic dimension to the case, which some commentators, including David's brother, had proposed in its immediate aftermath (Chan 2009; Mesakh 2009). Most commentators suspected it was David's undergraduate research into display technologies that had led him to be killed. Such advanced technology had potential for a wide range of lucrative applications – including in military operations. Taking knowledge of it back to Indonesia would have made David a threat to Singaporean economic and tactical interests. Students and staff on the NTU campus told the Indonesian Verification Team that David's research was a 'Ph.D. calibre project', lamenting that it was he – of all possible students – who had died (Anon. 2009; Riza 2009). All this led many to suspect malpractice on the part of the Singaporean state, or perhaps sinister international networks that had Singapore under their control (Suwignyo 2013). Nevertheless, in all cases, the same underlying logic was clear: intellectual exchange, for Singaporeans, was not an untrammelled effervescence of ideas that should be pursued and gloried in for their own sake, but an exchange that could only take place on strictly defined terms that served to reinforce Singaporean hegemony. As Gordon the maths teacher had observed, the world of overseas education was not neutral and benign, but rife with politics and danger – especially for those best placed to benefit from it. From this perspective, to pick and choose destinations for international study based on their imagined prestige, sophistication and quality – as many Indonesian applicants do, and as I had observed being undertaken in my visit to Rafiq's office – was at best naïve and at worst negligent. It overlooked the extractive and predatory elements of schemes that purport to develop human resources, such as scholarship schemes that oblige foreign students to work for a period of time in Singapore so as to enhance the country's productivity (Febriani 2016: 604).

Indeed, themes of negligence and care can explain why the David Widjaya case has exercised such a powerful grip on the Indonesian imagination, continuing to provoke speculation even to this day. Conspiracist suspicions no doubt partly reflect the 'generalised distrust in appearances' that characterized the first decade of Reform-era Indonesia and spawned a generation of 'citizen reporters' and 'democratic detectives' determined to expose the ways in which political and economic interests were influencing various spheres of everyday life (Gibbings 2013). Iwan Piliang, the head of the Verification Team, had dedicated his life to exactly such practice, and had been motivated to assist David's family after watching footage of the incident on *Channel News Asia* and having an immediate feeling that something about the story was *janggal*, or not quite right (Riza 2009). But if suspicious dispositions had prompted many to suspect there was more to David's story than met the eye, what sustained their interest in the case was the Indonesian government's apparently lackadaisical attitude towards securing justice for a citizen who had potentially been murdered overseas.

Besides, David was not just any citizen. In an interview with the online magazine *Perspektif Baru* (Riza 2009), Iwan Piliang revealed that he had something he wanted to tell the government: not only was Indonesian culture (*kebudayaan*) in decline, but Indonesia had become a country in which civilization (*peradaban*) itself was reaching the lowest possible depths. 'David once elevated the name of Indonesia when he represented us in the Maths Olympiad in Mexico,' Piliang explained. 'Then he was taken by Singapore and given a scholarship because of the brilliance of his mind, and conducted research that could probably have given rise to something important. We stay silent about David, who was smart but described by his campus as someone brutal, because we never think of intangible qualities like intellect as assets.' Piliang explained how he hoped that one day soon, Indonesia would begin to value 'brilliant kids' as assets equivalent to metal ores and coal – not only seeking justice for them, but also investing more heavily in the domestic higher education sector so that talented Indonesians did not have to travel overseas to study in jurisdictions where they had minimal protection.

Fassin (2021: 130) notes that the articulation of conspiracy theories enables their narrators to construct themselves as moral persons, especially vis-à-vis the nefarious entities who are supposed to have orchestrated the conspiracy. It is undoubtedly true that, in Indonesian accounts, the Singaporean state emerges as a villain *extraordinaire*. Yet an equally interesting moral positioning is occurring with respect to the Indonesian government, which is seen as abrogating its responsibility both to its citizens overseas and to all those citizens who would have benefitted from David's participation in intellectual exchange. The government's official stance was that they had offered David's family support via the Indonesian Embassy in Singapore but could not get involved in matters that were properly the jurisdiction of the Singaporean Coroner's Court

(Hermawan 2009). Yet commentators were more disparaging, responding to the situation with cynical humour. 'The people going to Singapore are an independent verification team. Why hasn't it been the Indonesian government asking to conduct an official verification in Singapore?' asked one commentator: 'Maybe they're all too busy with their election campaigns? He… he…' (SidikRizal 2009). 'I just hope that the authorities in Singapore are moved to unravel the mystery of David's death,' wrote another – 'The leaders of Indonesia? Ahhh, they're too busy campaigning and deprecating themselves in front of large crowds' (Sams 2009). Significantly, despite a change in political regime, this sense of discontent has not abated. More than ten years on, commentators are continuing to bemoan the government's limited support to the Widjaya family, and its reluctance to press for a reopening of this cold case (e.g. Arum Story 2021; Santosa 2020).[7]

The implications of such sentiments should be neither overstated nor understated. Though I encountered no cases where the David Widjaya case had, in and of itself, precipitated a change in someone's political outlook, discussion surrounding the case could heighten existing sensibilities: that Indonesia was vulnerable to the malign intentions of foreign powers upon which it was nevertheless dependent for skills and knowledge; that Indonesians embarking upon auspicious but high-risk projects of intellectual exchange could not rely on protection from the government; and that democratization, although conducted in the name of reform and of empowering the citizenry, had ushered in a political class preoccupied with self-interest and safeguarding their electoral prospects rather than public service. Such sentiments could contribute to a growing sense within Indonesia that democracy was not the 'right' political system, heightening the appeal of perceived 'strongman' political figures, and leading some to hope for a shift towards more explicitly Islamic forms of governance (see Long 2016). Even for those who remained attached to the democratic ideal, cases such as David's could compound feelings of disappointment that the new national order was not truly leading to the citizenry being cared for – either in terms of securing justice for their deaths, or in terms of safeguarding the circuitry of intellectual exchange on which Indonesia's future depended.

Meanwhile, for those contemplating study abroad – who already had to balance the moral and practical opportunities it offered with the discomforts and dangers of being far from home (Cannon 2000) – the coverage of David's case only sharpened their sense of what could be at stake in such intellectual exchange activities. Few feared they would be murdered, but the case heightened awareness that they might not be protected overseas. Was it worth the risk? Some thought not, invoking the aphorism '*Daripada hujan emas di negeri orang, lebih baik hujan batu di negeri sendiri*', which translates as 'Rather than golden rain in someone else's country, it's better to have rain of stone in your own country' and suggests one is always better off staying at home (Rani 2009). The case also led some to question whether life on campus overseas was so harsh that it could actually drive even a stellar scholarship student to suicidal *amok* violence.

One person entertaining this latter possibility was Margareta Astaman, the *chosen one* whose account of arriving in Singapore was discussed earlier, and who was herself a student at NTU. Her memoir of life in Singapore outlines how, despite the glamour and excitement of being a scholarship student, the experience proved alienating. ‘Sometimes it was forgotten that talent was emplaced within a human being,’ she reflects, ‘we were seen only in terms of what we are able to accomplish, rather than as people. *What patented inventions can we produce? What journal can we write an article for? How can our accomplishments increase GDP?*’ (Astaman 2010: 13). On top of these demanding expectations and the challenging syllabus, she was also expected to get involved in extra-curricular activities. It was too much. ‘For years,’ she writes, ‘I have tried to tell the people around me how it makes sense that an NTU student who is bright, who is living comfortably in Singapore, and who is highly regarded could be doomed to end up on a railway line or in a psychiatric hospital’ (2010: 16). Yet nobody would believe her. For Astaman, David’s death offered an unexpected, and bitterly welcome, opportunity to share her experiences and to question the value of an education system that treats human beings like machines.[8] Yet, even this trenchant criticism is laced with ambivalence, as Astaman ultimately does not regret her time overseas: ‘by mentioning a series of achievements believed to be only possible if she had not chosen to stay in Jakarta, she convinces us that above all the stressful culture, being a successful person at [a] young age is worth fighting for. For this, she owes Singapore’ (Febriani 2016: 605). Despite everything, and despite their frustrations with the government, intellectual exchange continues to endure as an ideal for those Indonesians able to secure the opportunity and prepared to weather its risks.

Conclusion

Valuable though it can be for anthropologists to focus on the actualities of intellectual exchange as practised, this chapter has advanced a parallel case for the importance of attending to the ways in which intellectual exchange serves as an object of desire, contemplation and discussion, analysing the generative force of the ways it is idealized. I have shown how, with human development standing out as an urgent imperative, the ideal of transnational intellectual exchange has become an animating trope of both governance and citizenship in Indonesia. In its most positive version, overseas study is a priceless if demanding opportunity through which citizens can render Indonesia’s skills and knowledge base on par with those of more prosperous, nations – if only their access were not hampered by a pitiful shortage of scholarships. In its most negative version, overseas study is a high-risk endeavour in which gifted Indonesians are put at the mercy of ostensibly benevolent educator-hosts who will stop at nothing to drain their brains or suppress their return in order to maintain global and intra-Asian hierarchies and inequalities. In both visions, the young achiever serving the nation needs the nation's support – and in both cases, the Indonesian government is found distinctly lacking. The divergence between citizens' ideal of intellectual exchange and what they perceive to be the reality – whether that be education officials corrupting away scholarship money or government ministers disregarding the murder of their nation's Tony Stark in order to pursue re-election – thus serves as one of many faultlines in contemporary Indonesian political subjectivity. Whether one responds by becoming a dedicated citizen reporter, gritting one's teeth and doubling down in pursuit of a scholarship, or quietly surrendering to a sense of hopelessness for the country's future, a sense of Indonesia's vulnerability in the realm of human development is keenly and consequentially felt.

On the one hand, material of this kind supports normative arguments calling for structural reforms within arenas of intellectual exchange so as to render them more accessible and inclusive. As Garnett (2006: 534) argues, intellectual development can only be possible following 'the removal of substantial unfreedoms' and the reform of 'institutional circumstances that affect a person's ability to exercise his or her academic freedoms'. Yet the ethnographic materials outlined here also complicate such arguments by revealing how one's ideals of intellectual exchange and one's understanding of the barriers to those ideals' realizations are themselves grounded in narrative logics and affectively compelling intuitions that have their own situated histories, reflective of specific national, geopolitical and perhaps personal circumstances. These may not straightforwardly correspond to what is happening in practice: Hanoi's Human Research Capacity Centre will never grant Padmana a degree in Supernatural Studies; government officials sometimes do try their best to secure scholarships for their students (albeit without success); ultimately, none of the explanations offered for the David Hartanto Widjaya case offer a watertight account of what led him to fall to his death – and so they cannot be straightforwardly or fully addressed simply via processes of institutional reform. Even as we strive to improve our own practices of intellectual exchange, such material serves as a reminder of the importance to remain reflexive about the factors and attachments informing our own ideals, anxieties and frustrations, and the process by which we identify both obstacles to our ideals' realization and possible solutions for overcoming these. Anthropologists must recognize that the effects associated with the ideal of intellectual exchange can be just as consequential as the practice of transferring of skills, knowledge and ideas. Indeed, much of the promise and value of an ethnographically grounded anthropology of intellectual exchange, of the kind called for by this volume, is that it allows such affects to be documented, and subjected to critical analysis, in their own right, to afford a broader understanding of the many ways in which intellectual exchange shapes both individual lives and the sociocultural worlds that we share.

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Notes

1. I have used pseudonyms for all the fieldwork interlocutors cited in this chapter. When discussing the works of writers, bloggers, news commentators and individuals profiled in media stories, I have retained their original names, since these are already a matter of public record.
2. Some sources spell David's surname as 'Widjaja'.
3. Several Indonesian commentators explicitly identified David's actions (as reported in the Singaporean media) as an example of *amok/amuk* (e.g. Siagian 2009; Smith 2009).
4. The term 'hand phone' is widely used in Indonesia and Singapore to refer to a cellular mobile or smartphone.
5. Wilson did not make any reference to the death of Zhou Zheng, but other accounts speculate that he was either a witness to David's murder who was killed for his silence or had been involved in the murder and hanged himself out of remorse.
6. Strikingly, no mention is typically made of David's performance in the international contest; Olympiad records show he placed 356th, with a total score of 4 out of a possible 42.
7. There are interesting parallels here with Marsden's account of Afghan traders living overseas, who commonly report feeling 'left abandoned' by the Afghan state and disadvantaged vis-à-vis merchants from countries perceived as providing more effective diplomatic and consular support. In both cases, feelings of abandonment lend a distinctive affective tenor to international mobility. Moreover, Marsden's interlocutors 'take active steps to establish alternative centres of diplomacy' (2016: 70), just as Indonesian citizens took active steps to establish an alternative verification team. Such material highlights the ongoing importance of attending to practices and perceptions of national statecraft when investigating forms of global mobility and intellectual exchange that initially seem 'global', 'cosmopolitan' and 'world-bridging' in character.
8. Other international study destinations can elicit negative reactions for different reasons. For example, Abaza (1991: 356–57) found that Indonesian students at Al-Azhar University in Cairo struggled with the memorization-based learning style, the difficulty of the Qur'anic examination, and the nonchalant attitudes of their Egyptian peers. Meanwhile, Theo (2018: 104–5) notes that Indonesian students embarking upon study abroad in China can be beset with anxieties stemming from Cold War-era stereotypes of communism, although she observes that such perceptions are often quickly overturned once in-country.

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