

# INTERCULTURAL PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION IN SYNCRETIC ENCLAVES

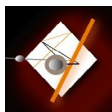
An overview of failed corporate  
public discourse in Malaysia

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Communities of Malaysia's rural/urban *kampongs* (villages) may respond angrily when corporate public discourse favors technocratic knowledges over syncretic values. Regarding technocracy, Feenberg's "revised technocracy thesis" established that technological systems are not really autonomous above all human populations. Instead, powerful groups benefit when technologies subjugate others (1994, p. 94). And Goh (2009) perceived syncretism—the integration and transformation of symbols into local meanings—in Malaysia's lower- and middle-class ethnic Chinese (pp. 110–114).



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Seeing conflict between technocracy and syncretism, I begin this position paper with a personal story of Singapore's syncretic high-rise, public-housing culture—a transformation of earlier *kampong* cultures. Contrasting this syncretic, though technocratically changed, culture with Malaysia's rural and urban *kampongs*, I position Australia's Lynas Corporation—especially its public discourse on a rare earths processing site in Malaysia—within a history of corporate professional communication failures harmful to Malaysia's *kampongs*.

Hungry Ghost Month, Singapore, 1999. Burnt paper fragments drifted in through our third-floor window. Home to my predominantly Malaysian Chinese family, the building housed many Singaporeans. Discounting my presence as a Westerner, I considered the place “real Singapore,” distinct from areas where Westerners lived. Real Singapore? Recalling Singapore's 1960s public housing campaign, Loh (2009) recounted a population shift from rural and urban *kampongs* and shop houses to government-regulated high-rises (pp. 139–140). In time, the link between physical *kampongs* and everyday life was broken, but syncretic practices survived around communal ground floors, or “void decks,” of the public-housing high-rises. It was joss paper remnants that had floated into our flat from burning joss paper bins near the void deck.

In Malaysia, many rural and urban *kampongs* and shop houses remain, but these syncretic cultures get pushed aside increasingly by planned development spaces of various scale. Ong described these “subregional economic zones,” including the expansive Singapore–Johore–Riau Growth Triangle, or Sijori of Indonesia–Malaysia–Sin-

gapore (2006, pp. 88–89). Near Kuantan, Malaysia, through much of 2012, Lynas Advanced Materials Plant (LAMP) awaited government approval, even as a proposed Malaysia–China Kuantan Industrial Park promises industries—according to one government officer—in plastics, electronics, and clean energies.

Belying geopolitics, the proximity of the planned industrial complexes inside the larger East Coast Economic Region (ECER), which includes Kuantan, led that same spokesperson, ECER Chief Executive Officer, Datuk Jebasingam Issace John, to exclaim “Lynas is a good idea, a good project. We don’t want to have a negative impression of it right from the beginning” (Ahmad & Razali, 2012, para. 1,5). In fact, LAMP would supply near “a fifth of the world’s demand” for rare earths used in nanotechnologies, automotive parts, weapons systems, and green energy technologies, all pulling currently from China’s rare earths at 95–97% of global consumption (Rare earths, 2012, para. 2, 4).

Quite recently—in November 2012, in fact—the site began processing rare earths—a few months after Malaysian authorities granted Lynas a temporary operating license. Yet this work proceeded in light of a formal protest, a legal appeal community members near the site made to Malaysia’s Court of Appeal. Though they sought to block the temporary operating license at least until a court date in early February 2013, the group was unsuccessful. On 19 December 2012, the Court of Appeal rejected the legal challenge, thus allowing Lynas to continue processing rare earths in the meantime (Agence France Presse English Wire, Dec. 19, 2012, para. 1-5). Also in December, Malaysian

government representatives reminded Lynas publicly that validity of the temporary operating license hinged on the company removing all leftover substances, whether saleable or not, from rare earths processing in the country (Agence France Presse English Wire, Dec. 11, 2012, para. 1-6).

Indeed, *kampong* communities have remained concerned that Lynas would store thorium—a low-level radioactive byproduct of rare earths processing—in Malaysia. Australian law prohibits importing the material to Australia, even when derived, as would be the case, from raw material mined in Australia (Lynas Ahead, 2012, para. 5; Tanquintic-Misa, 2012, para. 2-4). Significantly, Malaysian opposition member and Penang chief minister, Lim Guan Eng, rejected the offer of Lynas' Executive Chairman, Nicholas Curtis, to meet in Australia. Claiming Curtis should meet Malaysian communities instead, he quipped “Being from Australia, you will indeed appreciate that the process of public consultation is part and parcel of a democracy” (Sta Maria, 2012, para. 12).

Quite problematically, Lynas' public discourse privileges technocracy, ignoring syncretic values such as comprehensive consultation. A brief overview of Lynas' website and related online media reveals Lynas' approach. “Enhancing Environmental Protection,” “Enabling Digital Technology,” “Improving Energy Efficiency,” and “About Lynas” convey the company's claim that its “goal is Zero Harm” (Lynas Corporation, 2006a, 2006b). Likewise, Lynas' YouTube clips tout rare earths for “energy efficiency,” “environmental protection,” and “digitization” (Lynas Malaysia, 2011, May 11), refuting parallels between

LAMP and a rare earths processing debacle two decades ago at Bukit Merah, Malaysia:

We're not there to damage the children of Malaysia, as some people are trying to claim. We're there to give opportunity to the children of Malaysia and Kuantan. . . . We are safe. We are not to be compared to Bukit Merah. (Lynas Malaysia, 2011, May 11).

However, independent media report concerns about rare earths processing. Despite Curtis' insistence that Lynas would control thorium through "extremely safe, well-tried industrial processes that are used in European, American, German, Japanese industry," Al Jazeera's *101 East* correspondent cited incidents of leukemia, still births, and severe mental disabilities at Bukit Merah (101 East, 2011). Though Mitsubishi Chemical denied responsibility for these health problems, it closed the plant in 1992, spent US\$100 million for clean-up, and donated US\$164,000 to area schools (Bradsheer, 2011). Counting on public comparisons of LAMP to Bukit Merah, YouTube channels Kampong Radioaktif ("Radioactive Kampong") and Save Malaysia, Stop Lynas! value community voices over Lynas' business and scientific experts.

Like Lynas, Malaysia's government privileges technocracy. My recent search-term query for "Lynas" on [bernama.com](http://bernama.com), the Malaysian government's official news website, resulted in this sampling of headlines:

1. "Discuss Lynas based on facts, says rare earth expert,"
2. "Malaysia has adequate laws to ensure Lynas' activities not dangerous – expert,"

3. “Lynas issue must be handled in a scientific manner – Psc,”
4. “Continued engagement with the public necessary, say rare earth experts,”
5. “Rare earth experts impressed with Lynas facility.”

Ultimately, Lynas’ public discourse repeats failed strategies of multinational corporations linked to earlier “spirit possession” cases in Malaysia (Ackerman & Lee, 1981; Ong, 1987, 1988; McLellan, 1991). Specifically, Ong faulted Malaysia’s government and transnational corporations for framing Malay female workers’ “spirit possession” protests in highly gendered mental health rhetoric (e.g., “mass hysteria”). Because the pre-Islamic underpinnings of Malay *kampongs* see “spirit possession” as beyond a woman’s power to resist, society cannot therefore punish rural factory women who have taken that culturally sanctioned path to protest male-dominated, institutional control at transnational factories (1987, pp. 86, 139–221; 1988, pp. 28–40).

Whether “spirit possession” or community anger against Lynas’ public discourse, syncretic protests should lead professional communicators to question how our practices impact communities in intercultural contexts. ■

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