Globalization, Consumption and Popular Culture in East Asia

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Tai Wei LIM

In the era of globalization, popular cultures originating from different localities worldwide are able to reference the universalistic influences from the US, aspects of which are hybridized with local cultures. In this process of interpenetration and adaptation of exogenous Western culture, the polycentric dispersions of the Japanese, Korean and Chinese popular cultures provide fertile materials for studying production and fandom consumption in the region. The different production centers in these three countries transcend national and traditional cultural boundaries, facilitating cultural hybridity. Through the mechanics of globalization, popular cultures originating from different countries are reinforced by the universalistic global trends from the US, and then intermediated, reinterpreted or hybridized with local cultures to attain cultural resonance with regional audiences.

This edited volume studies the platforms for interpenetration, adaptation, innovation and hybridization of exogenous Western culture and popular culture in (North) East Asia, which, together collectively shaped the way popular cultures are produced, consumed and innovated today. This multidisciplinary volume, through the use of concepts and theories related to the anthropogenic origins, political economy, and historical research, attempts to examine the workings of state policies, mass media, celebrity impact and fandom consumption of popular cultural products in (North) East Asia, especially in Japanese, Korean, Taiwan/HK and mainland Chinese markets. A number of specific case studies are examined in the publication.

We set out in this publication to examine various kinds of popular culture in East Asia and its reception by global consumers. In doing so,

we were also interested to examine regional indigenization of global popular cultural trends in trying to be independent, unique and original. In writing and editing this publication, we acknowledge the crucial importance of the heterogeneity of different varieties of popular culture in East Asia but at the same time, understand that the creative industries in these three East Asian settings exhibit high permeability when it comes to exchanges of ideas between themselves. In studying popular culture within the setting and contextualization of a regional backdrop, we acknowledge the important presence of the framework of a universal and global popular cultural industry in which East Asian originated popular culture was conceptualized, shaped, innovated, improved upon and distributed.

Shaped by ideas from global trends in popular culture, the production houses and studios based in East Asia hybridize local cultures with fashionable global trends into easily consumable commodified units tailored made for its domestic markets. Upon reaching a critical level of popularity within the home audience, successful products are then tested in familiar neighboring regional markets. And, if the receptivity towards that products proves positive, the popular cultural products are then regionalized and distributed region-wide, sometimes simultaneous with a global launch, sometimes preceding or subsequent to a global launch. Popular cultural soft power is mutually-reinforcing in the sense that East Asian economies work with each other and influence each other to become cool and creative (a process of creative cross-pollination), but yet at the same time trend-spots global popular cultural elements for selective incorporation into their textual and visual imaginations and body of works.

This publication has a multidisciplinary area studies and interdisciplinary Asian studies (Japanese studies, Chinese studies, economics, area studies) approach in a field dominated by sociologists and anthropologists. Having an eclectic approach can open the field of inquiry wider to implications of globalization, innovation, development of creative clusters and consumption with specific empirical examples. It is probably one of the few if not the first monograph (not a review volume) to cover J-pop, K-pop and Chinese popular culture. It provides comparative insights of different popular cultures in the region.

Definition of Popular Culture

There are no universal definitions of popular culture. How one understands popular culture is dependent on the context in which the term is used and whether a particular definition stands the scrutiny of cultural relativism. For the readers, it would be helpful to have a working definition of what popular culture is, and also perhaps some examples of popular culture. With references to J-pop, K-pop, Cantopop and *Tai Liu*, it may be possible to give some examples of what pop culture means in the context of these particular strains of popular culture, e.g. referring to music, dressing, Korean drama serials, Japanese anime and so forth.

Based on the narratives covered in this writing, several definitions are offered here. They range from the amorphous, broad and encompassing definitions to more precise and carefully crafted detailed definitions. For example, in defining the term "popular culture," Jonathan Pickering is less concerned about the boundaries of dichotomous global-local definitions of popular culture and conceptualizes it as a feature that encompasses "entertainment, sport and other practices of everyday life."[1] In other words, popular culture is fully integrated into lifestyles and everyday experiences. The American and Japanese middle classes as well as their lifestyles and consumption patterns inspired emulation and inspiration for the rest of the world.[2] This may be visible in the emerging economies like India, China and the Gulf region where evidence may be detected through popular culture, entertainment, material acquisitions, branding, new and traditional media, and consumption patterns.[3]

Offering another perspective, John Hannigan sees popular culture as part of a homogenizing process that is reinforced by large quantities of images interacting and interfacing with market-driven forces to influence

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[1] Jonathan Pickering, "Globalisation: A Threat to Australian Culture?" *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 48 (December 2001): 47.

[2] Justin Dargin and Tai Wei Lim, *Energy, Trade and Finance in Asia: A Political and Economic Analysis* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

[3] Justin Dargin and Tai Wei Lim, *Energy, Trade and Finance in Asia: A Political and Economic Analysis* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

the lives and worldviews of the receivers of such culture.[4] Popular culture may be more easily identifiable by younger generations and students located in a particular region. Japanese popular culture (J-pop) and more recently Korean popular culture (*hanliu* in Chinese, *hallyu* from Korean pronunciation, *hanryū/kanryū* in Japanese or K-pop)[5] may fit this role in integrating the East Asian market culturally and contribute to common appreciation and consumption of such culture within the global rubric and context of American-driven popular cultural trends.

Popular culture generated in East Asia is utilized as a case study to find out if regional strains of popular culture contain elements of soft power (i.e. if the concept of soft power indeed exists) and can be applied to popular culture. The creative industries in these three East Asian settings are likely to find more exchanges and permeability, developing hybridized and unique forms of popular culture in the process within the setting and contextualization of a regional backdrop. It is within the framework of a universal and global popular cultural industry that East Asian-originated popular culture was conceptualized, shaped, innovated, improved upon and distributed.

Some academic works focus exclusively on defining specific East Asian popular cultures in country-specific area studies settings. For example, in my study, I discovered that traces of Japanese popular culture can be found integrated into the daily lives of Japanese people and they can be classified into tangible and intangible categories. In the tangible category, Japanese popular cultural representations can be found in the form of physical promotional items displayed at outlets that are patronized by the general public. Other than Japanese popular culture, some scholars studying K-pop defined Korean popular culture as a fusion between East and West. For example, Woongjae Ryoo "explores a regionally specific phenomenon and logic of transnational popular cultural flow as an example

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[4] John Hannigan, "Culture, Globalization, and Social Cohesion: Towards a De-territorialized, Global Fluids Model," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 27, no. 2/3 (2002), http://search.proquest.com/docview/219574482?accountid=10371 (accessed June 16, 2011).

[5] J-pop or K-pop usually refers to popular music only while *kanryu/hallyu* refers to the "Korean wave/popular culture". The definition of K-pop may be a bit narrower and different from *kanryu*.

to illustrate the complexity involved in the cultural hybridization and the implications that it has on the globalization of culture" (Ryoo, 2009).[6] He also argues that the impact of the Korean wave has not only permeated popular culture but is also a measure of positive lifestyle for many Asians (Ryoo, 2009, p. 144).[7]

Importance of the Subject Area

Regardless of how one defines the term popular culture, we believe that popular culture is no longer a fringe subject matter but has mainstreamed academically due to its far-reaching implications for other subject matters like the study of soft power (political science), creative industries and clusters (business and urban planning), resonance with audiences (cultural anthropology), public policy-making (public administration), consumption (economics), subtext readings of virtual idols (psychoanalysis), impact of an aging population (demographics), cultural aspects of otakus (area studies), etc. Therefore the subject matter of popular culture has become an eclectic interdisciplinary subject that encompasses a wide spectrum of expertise. The importance of popular culture as an academic subject is also reflected by the academic publishing industry's increasing interest in the subject area. Some trends and news update are discussed selectively in the section below.

Sensing a strong market in this area, in October 2013, a much larger publisher Routledge made the fateful decision of taking over 15 "cutting-edge" journals from Intellect and focusing in the fields of visual and performing arts, film, media and cultural studies. Routledge itself has a number of books on Chinese popular culture, including recent ones on the dynamically changing Hong Kong popular cultural scene with the introduction of multimedia technologies as well as production and consumption of local media. Much of Intellect and Routledge's offerings in popular cultural studies tends to be general coverages of popular culture as a theoretical subject,

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[6]Woongjae Ryoo, "Globalization, or the logic of cultural hybridization: The case of the Korean Wave," *Asian Journal of Communication* 19, no. 2 (2009).

[7]Woongjae Ryoo, "Globalization, or the logic of cultural hybridization: The case of the Korean Wave," *Asian Journal of Communication* 19, no. 2 (2009).

focusing on universalistic Western popular culture or country-based studies. These are all very important. This edited volume contributes to this important body of literature by adopting an area studies-based approach but one with comparative perspectives of Japan, China and Korea.

Japanese popular cultural soft power has spilled over to neighboring countries and consumer markets, changing and modifying the lifestyles of fandom communities in those regions. They draw reactions from the critical mass media in the receiving audiences. In Lin's chapter, she discusses how the media stereotypes otakus and their subculture in China, creating negative connotations about this community. The Chinese media is not the only participant in image construction of dedicated groups of popular culture as otakus were first marginalized in Japan where the term came from. Lim's chapter on Akihabara however points out that perceptions of sub-cultural groups do change and the otaku community has somehow transformed their marginalized image to that of cool consumers based on the consumption power they possess and their ability to influence design trends and creative processes.

Research Objectives

This book aims to discuss the burgeoning fan communities and sustained proliferation of popular culture with East Asian origins, particularly the Japanese, Korean and Chinese genres. The polycentric dispersions of the East Asian cultures are influential forces with the support of extensive distribution and reception networks within and beyond the region. In its form and makeup, popular culture from different production and originating centers transcend national and traditional cultural boundaries, facilitating cultural hybridity and ideational cross-pollination aided by globalization. Underlying the production of the East Asian popular culture is the closely-intertwined relationships among the iron triangle of production companies (producers), fans (consumers) and the states (regulators), which evolve into the contemporary system of sales, distribution and production in the popular culture industries.

The publication also discusses how consumption emanates soft power — through the encouragement of consumption in regionally rising middle classes and/or marketing efforts of production networks in the

region. The writings will also examine soft power reinforced by the concept of cultural resonance with regional audiences. Structurally, Japanese and Korean popular cultures not only serve as forerunners for regional developing economies with emerging consumers like China, but also provide a platform for interpenetration, adaptation, innovation and hybridization of exogenous Western culture and traditional popular culture in historical China, which then leads to the establishment of the current local-regional-global cultural network. While Japan has prided itself on producing and exporting its own fantastical pop culture, Korean entertainment has gained popularity and global recognition in melodrama and musical market share.

Several questions are raised in this writing. First, historically, how did relationships within the iron triangle of production companies (producers), fans (consumers) and the state (regulators) evolve to the current contemporary system of sales, distribution and production in the popular culture industries? How does the proliferation of culture change in the digital era? Second, what sort of influence does popular culture have on regional audiences? Do the cultural products resonate with a regional audience through collective consumption, contents-based depictions of normative values and network-based peer pressure? Third, how does consumption emanate soft power — through the encouragement of consumption in regionally rising middle classes and/or production networks in the region? How can a government leverages on its cultural advantages to stretch its national influence? These questions will be discussed and analyzed in this volume and they will be discussed and contextualized in the case studies of J-pop, K-pop and Chinese popular culture. Before proceeding to an explanation of the layout and organizational structure of chapters in the publication, it may be useful to discuss some of the existing literatures written on the topic of Northeast Asian popular culture.

Literature Review

The unifying element in all the case studies covered in the volume is the unmistakable influence of American popular culture in all of its Northeast Asian carnations. Regardless of whether it is J-pop, K-pop, C-pop, Mandopop, Cantopop or *Tai Liu*, the roots of postwar East Asian popular

culture cannot escape the American influence. Existing literatures study-
ing the universalistic characteristics of American popular culture urge
caution in conceptualizing it as a hegemonic entity. Ian Condry argues
against defining American popular culture as a ubiquitous and broad
entity, and to avoid defining it as a uniform entity "wherever it appears"
and instead differentiate definitions according to their local features and
characteristics.[8]

Condry and other scholars propose defining popular culture as a form
of constant negotiation between globalized culture and localization.
Jonathan Pickering is less concerned about the boundaries of dichotomous
global-local definitions of popular culture and conceptualizes it as a fea-
ture that encompasses "entertainment, sport and other practices of every-
day life."[9] In other words, popular culture is fully integrated into lifestyles
and everyday experiences. The American and Japanese middle classes as
well as their lifestyles and consumption patterns inspired emulation and
inspiration for the rest of the world.[10] This may be visible in the emerging
economies like India, China and the Gulf region where evidence may be
detected through popular culture, entertainment, material acquisitions,
branding, new and traditional media, and consumption patterns.[11]

John Hannigan sees popular culture as part of a homogenizing process
that is reinforced by large quantities of images interacting and interfacing
with market-driven forces to influence the lives and worldviews of the
receivers of such culture.[12] The idea of a "homogenizing" universal
American popular culture makes the formation of regional identifications

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[8] Ian Condry, "Japanese Hip-Hop and the Globalization of Popular Culture," in *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of the City*, eds. G. Gmelch and W. Zenner (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2002), 372.

[9] Jonathan Pickering, "Globalisation: A Threat to Australian Culture?" *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 48 (December 2001): 47.

[10] Justin Dargin and Tai Wei Lim, *Energy, Trade and Finance in Asia: A Political and Economic Analysis* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

[11] Justin Dargin and Tai Wei Lim, *Energy, Trade and Finance in Asia: A Political and Economic Analysis* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

[12] John Hannigan, "Culture, Globalization, and Social Cohesion: Towards a De-territorialized, Global Fluids Model," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 27, no. 2/3 (2002), http://search.proquest.com/docview/219574482?accountid=10371 (accessed June 16, 2011).