ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

Global Goes Local
Popular Culture in Asia

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Teaching Western undergraduates or other students who have very little background on Asia can be a daunting task. First, one must combat simplified stereotypes and myths to convey the great diversity/complexity of Asia. More significantly, teachers often find it difficult to discuss one specific issue detached from an entire interwoven web of Asian traditions, history, art/aesthetics, beliefs, language, social relations, and political and economic conditions. Thus, a teacher who wants to discuss gender relations finds that to help students understand its significance, he/she first must provide students with a little background on Asian history, family, politics, philosophy, and so forth. Likewise, when a teacher tries to contrast a feature in an Asian society with the same feature in the student's own culture/society, he/she often must first assist students in developing the skills to critically evaluate the parallel feature "close to home."

The issues of misunderstanding features isolated from a broad cultural setting and learning to analyze parallel features "close to home" are especially relevant when one teaches about Asian popular culture. Most students are immersed in and closely engaged with the popular culture of their own society, but few can easily identify links from it to a Western cultural worldview, and most find it a struggle to critically analyze their own popular culture. For example, students may be familiar with certain television commercials, but few are able to draw connections between features of the commercial and broad cultural belief/values or possess the skills to "deconstruct" and carefully analyze the commercial. Likewise, students may eat or work at fast food establishments, but few have the analytic tools to easily discuss the social dynamics or cultural significance of fast food restaurants. This means that an instructor who teaches about Asian popular culture must provide students with both a background on Asia and some elementary tools for cultural critique/analysis.

Teaching popular culture is important for several reasons. First, most people are familiar with popular culture, and it is an immediate, direct part of their daily life experiences. In everyday life, most people are in constant contact with the flow of popular culture. Several times I have encountered international students from Asia who were unfamiliar with the traditions, history, and elite culture that Western students were learning as the "authentic core" of their home Asian country. Like most present-oriented teens or young adults, they were much more familiar with their home country's contemporary popular culture than with the "quaint customs" or "ancient history" that outsiders were learning.

Second, popular culture is complex, multifaceted, and dynamic. It is a fluid, interactive arena in which people form identities, express beliefs, and contest values. People consume and are influenced by popular culture, but at the same time, they can act upon it, shaping and altering its direction. A society's popular culture reveals a great deal about the fabric of the daily life of ordinary people in a society.

Lastly, the process of globalization operates through popular culture. Popular culture is simultaneously a vehicle for the transmission of globalization and an external object that globalization interjects into local societies. Popular culture—fast food, cartoons, fashion clothing, advertising jingles, youth hairstyles, and so forth—increasingly crosses national borders and forms the basis of an emergent global culture.

An instructor looking for resource materials to use when teaching about popular culture in Asia may want to consider *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia*. The book is a collection of fourteen essays located at the intersection of three streams of academic inquiry—the impact of globalization on local culture, contemporary trends in Asian mass society, and popular culture studies. This makes it both exciting and frustrating to read. It joins a host of recent works that discuss the globalization-local culture nexus (e.g., *Global-Local* by Wilson and Dissanayake, *Cultures of Globalization* by Jameson and Miyoshi, *Modernity at Large* by Appadurai), and popular culture in a specific Asian society (*Japan Pop!* by Craig, *Media in China* by Donald, Keane, and Hong, *Popular China* by Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz), and general Asian consumption and lifestyle issues (e.g., the *New Rich in Asia* by Robinson and Goodman, *Consumption in Asia* by Beng-Huat, *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia* by Pinches), and studies on trends in popular culture (e.g., *Global Pop* by Taylor, *Advertising in Asia* by Frith).

The essays in *Global Goes Local* are diverse: five on China, three on Malaysia, two on Japan, and one each on Korea, Philippines, and Thailand. Plus, there is one essay on American and Japanese art during World War II. Eleven essays focus on popular culture in the present or near present. Among them, six discuss contemporary pop music, four discuss television programs, advertising, or icons, and one is on comics. Three are historical, two deal with WWII, and one focuses on the 1930s.

Five themes run through the essays. The first is hybridization, or how local and "outside" cultural elements are blended together to create something new. For example, Eric Thompson analyzes Ella, Malaysia's "Queen of Rock." Although the surface appearance is one of heavy metal imitation, the lyrics and subtle adjustments reveal that Western music has been altered to deliver messages relevant to local audiences. The album titled *Ella USA?* has a photo of the pop star next to California license plates and was promoted as having a strong United States connection. USA appears to stand for United States of America, but it really stands for a word-based mixture of English, Japanese, and Malay that stands for Unique Superb Authentic. It is neither wholly Western nor wholly Malay, but a mix of forms and meanings that have been created to speak to Malay desires and aspirations. A second example is Keith Howard's essay on Korean pop music. He notes that when successive musical forms from the West first entered Korea (rap, reggae, hip hop, house, techno, and so forth), they attracted attention because they were foreign, exotic, and modern, but musicians quickly adapted them to local conditions with an infusion of Korean content. Musicians added Korean themes, issues, and styles to gain broad popularity. In other words, Western imitation may initially attract attention, but it is only after reshaping the imitation by infusing local elements that it becomes relevant and can win broad appeal. As the book's editors observed, popular culture often contains "unique regional hybrids with layers of meaning to local audiences that can go well beyond any surface impression of imitation of the West" (p. 6). This nascent idea about layered meanings of popular culture is not fully developed, but it is applicable to many of the essays.

A second theme is that the meanings of elements in popular culture are context-dependent. Local culture shapes how people understand and attach specific meanings to "global" popular culture. The meaning of popular cultural icons and images may diverge from the original source and take on a significance distinctive to a particular local setting. Peter Metcalf's essay on "Hulk Hogan in the Rainforest" discusses his surprise at the great popularity of the American wrestling champion in upriver Borneo. He argues that the blond muscleman is a new version of a traditional mythic hero. Hogan is a symbol that locals use to assert themselves and express feelings of their marginalization by an onslaught of outside modernizing forces. Similarly, Junko Oba offers an example using *gunka*, Japanese war songs. The military songs were developed from the late nineteenth century through 1945, but their meanings and social functions changed over time. Early gunka had a strong Western influence. Most of the song lyrics emphasized heroism, camaraderie, or death, but they changed with different Japanese wartime experiences. In contemporary Japan, many people dislike gunka and associate it with fanatic ultra-nationalist groups. Yet, for people in the older generations the songs retain a personal and nostalgic appeal. They are attracted to the sad and solemn more than the upbeat propagandistic songs. Today, the songs serve the function of renewing social bonds in small gatherings where people sing informally to recover feelings of past cama-raderie or lament a bygone era and lost friends. The songs serve to reestablish past intimacy rather than renew militaristic aggression.

A third theme is how popular culture expresses the tension between state and market. Market forces largely drive popular culture, but governments also engage in implicit and explicit attempts to regulate it. For example, Todd Holden and Azrina Husin analyze political messages in Malaysian television commercials. They outline the Malay political context, describe several commercials, and identify specific political-moral themes present in the commercials. They do not limit themselves to commercials that clearly fit within the government's written rules, but also discuss others that seem outside government control. They assert that such deviant or immoral commercials relative to the official codes "represent middle ground between absolute compliance and non-enforcement, a middle ground purposely chosen by government officials . . . " (p. 156). This is an intriguing idea, but it could use greater development and documentation.

A second example of government influence is found in Rachel Harris's essay on Uyghur music. As she notes, authorities confiscated the cassettes of an Uyghur singer and refused to let him perform because his "ethnic" music promoted taboo social-political ideas. The music became controversial in the context of rising ethnic nationalism in Xinjiang in the 1990s. Moreover, in Xinjiang, pop and folk music have an important role. They dominate outdoor life, and leisure culture generally includes local music. What makes Uyghur music politically controversial is that it has become a vehicle for pan-Uyghur identity and a means for expressing ethnic nationalism. Similarly, in an essay on Chinese popular music, Mercedes Dujunco notes that the process of hybridization has been accompanied by political satire. The symbols and slogans that had been associated with Mao, the Communist Party, or the Cultural Revolution are being reconfigured into new forms in contemporary popular culture. The symbols and slogans are detached from their original political meaning to express satire or cynicism. By adding an air of frivolity, the contemporary pop versions of somber, serious old political songs transform them into sources of possible resistance. The reconfiguration seems to reverse original structures of domination by disrupting the political meanings that had been in the songs.

A fourth theme emphasizes a negative side of popular culture for local participatory cultural forms and political contention. Westernized popular culture, particularly centrally controlled mass media, can stifle local creative expression and soothe political contention. Michiyo Yoneno Ryes, in an essay on indigenous music in a remote area of northern Luzon in the Philippines, observed that local cultural forms found in the early 1990s rapidly disappeared after the introduction of television. Exposure to television affected a past tradition of spontaneous vocal compositions and song debates. These had been a major form of communal leisure shared across age groups. Exposure to television fostered stronger feelings of national identity among the local people, and new recording technology may help to preserve and disseminate traditional music forms. Yet, the new technology dampened spon-

ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

taneous composition and greatly reduced participation in traditional communal activities; "many young people today now prefer to stay at home watching television rather than participating in traditional musical rituals and events" (p. 56).

In his essay on Chinese television dramas, Michael Keane argues that political control over television drama has been relaxed, and since the mid–1990s commercialization alone determines the direction of television serial dramas. Three types of television drama are shown: historical subjects, overseas entertainment-oriented tele-dramas, and contemporary social issues. The latter category replaced earlier socialist realism. In the late 1980s, television had branched out into investigative journalism and exposing social problems. After the government crackdown that followed the Tiananmen Square incident of spring 1989, "viewers abandoned domestic dramas in favor of apolitical and melodramatic overseas soaps" (p.125). By the mid–1990s, non-political secular concerns had displaced social injustice issues. With fewer state controls, Keane sees Chinese television dramas as now almost entirely market driven. Chinese stations attempt to attract multinational advertising and satisfy viewer taste by offering "a smorgasbord of televised choices" that differ little from what was in the Western media. The consumer democratization of Chinese television and use of viewer ratings has produced an increase in dating shows, sports programs, foreign movies, and melodramatic soaps, but this "opening" to popular taste has been accompanied by an aversion to covering serious, contentious political issues.

A last theme is that popular culture can be a vehicle that carries deep symbolic referents. Popular culture often contains embedded symbolic meanings that evoke memories, trigger emotions, or express other messages for local people on both the explicit and tactic levels. Such deep referents are rarely static or fixed; they are fluid and depend on the changing discourse shared among popular culture consumers. Moreover, different consumers may "read" the same symbols embedded in popular culture differently. For example, Pattana Kitiarsa examines the practice of spirit mediums in Thailand and the role of television. More specifically, popular culture is found to be an arena in which the traditional spirit mediumship, which has deep roots in Thai religious history, comes into conflict with the forces of modernism and rationality. In the tension between the two that is played out in popular culture, proponents of modernism portray spirit mediums as backward, irrational, and incompetent. Yet spirit mediums continue to be very popular among ordinary Thai people. This suggests that the medium cults continue to thrive and flourish because they offer followers advice, comfort, and understanding in an uncertain world. They reduce anxiety and provide assurance in ways that modern, Western, rational substitutes cannot.

Another example comes from Mark MacWilliam's essay on religious views expressed in Japanese *manga*. He argues that while pop-culture, mass-marketed manga do not explicitly proselytize for a particular sect, they often include myths, rituals, or gods from traditional Japanese folk religion. He engages in a detailed analysis of one manga, *The Phoenix*, to illustrate his point. It is thirteen separate but interwoven stories spanning 3,000 pages. MacWilliams argues that the manga "offers nothing less than a controversially new religious vision" (p. 181).

Many collections of essays, especially one that comes out of an international conference as this one does, are uneven in quality, focus, and coverage. This diverse collection provides more of an eclectic assortment than a balanced overview of popular culture in Pacific Asia. The topics and perspective have only loose connections with one another. Several essays are excellent in their own right as stand-alone pieces, but as an entire collection, there is limited coherence. Developing an edited book out of a conference is difficult, and authors tend to go off in divergent directions, but greater dialogue among the essayists and a more detailed, synthetic introductory essay would have been useful additions to this book.

In addition, several features will keep instructors from assigning it to students, except perhaps to a graduate-level seminar. Most of the authors situate their analysis within one of several non-overlapping streams of academic discourse. Since the audience, background, vocabulary, and issues addressed vary greatly from one essay to another, and the country and area of popular culture being examined also vary, most students will quickly get lost. An instructor might select one or two essays to illustrate a specific point, but even then will need to provide students with supplemental background material. For example, students will have difficulty with the excellent essay on government-imposed controls on television advertising in Malaysia unless they have some background on Malaysia and are familiar with how to critically analyze advertising.

In addition, teachers will find it difficult to use many of the essays without providing students with audiovisual material that makes the material more concrete. Students need to see the specific forms of popular culture operating in a social context. Reading song lyrics that have been translated or looking at one or two still black-and-white photos will not engage most students. For pedagogical purposes, teachers will find it necessary to accompany an essay on pop music with a showing of the music video that it discusses. Also, some essays have a very narrow focus; they examine a single song or television program. This makes establishing connections among essays or developing generalizations from them difficult. In sum, this collection of essays may be a worthwhile addition to one's bookshelf as a reference on Asian popular culture, but teachers will find that few students can benefit directly from reading it as an assigned text without significant assistance and supplements. ■

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