

Book Reviews

Pop Culture Formations across East Asia. Edited by Doobo Shim, Ariel Heryanto, and Ubonrat Siriyuvasak. Seoul: Jimoondang, 2010. 324 pp.

Upon first browsing of *Pop Culture Formations across East Asia*, one is puzzled that this book about popular culture in East Asia does not have a single chapter on popular culture from China, and only has a few pages discussing the culture industries of Japan. It is perhaps more appropriate to title the book as *Pop Culture Formations across Asia* instead, as there are three chapters in the volume dealing with issues in the national cinemas of Indonesia and Malaysia, which are countries in Southeast Asia rather than East Asia. However, considering that this book is a collection of papers coming out of the 2009 Korea-ASEAN Academic Conference on Popular Culture across East Asia in the 21st Century: Hybridization or Asianization? (held at Burapha University, Thailand), it is little surprise that the book has somewhat disproportionate coverage of the Korean Wave and its influence on countries in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, this volume provides valuable insights into recent trends and developments in intra-Asian flows of popular culture and raises important questions about the emergence of cultural hierarchies in the “Asianization of cultural production, distribution and consumption” (p. 9).

Edited by Doobo Shim, Ariel Heryanto, and Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, the book is divided into three sections. The first section, *Media Consumption in Asia and Identity Politics*, opens with a chapter by Young-Hee Chung on the pleasures that audiences derive from watching *My Name is Kim Sam Soon*, a Korean television drama

featuring a pudgy loud-mouthed heroine who defies the image of the submissive woman in Korean society. This section also includes two chapters on Indonesian cinema. Both involve textual analysis of two Indonesian films — *Berbagi Suami* (*Love for Share*) and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (*Love Verses*) — in the context of growing Islamization in popular culture. The fact that one chapter is written by Korean professor Hyung-Jun Kim, and the other by Indonesian professor Ida Rachmah, provides an interesting contrast in readings *within* and *outside* Indonesian society, towards two films centred on the theme of polygamy. The fourth essay by Zawawi Ibrahim is an excellent introduction to Malaysian cinema for non-specialist readers, from the early Malay films in the studio era (1940s to 1970s), the social realism of the first New Wave in the mid-1990s, to the increasingly fluid notions of “nation” and “identity” in the Post New-Wave era after 2000.

The second section, Nation-States and Media Transformation, takes on a political economy perspective by examining the centres of production, products, workers, and markets of various culture industries in Asian economies. There are two chapters in this section that specifically address the Korean Wave, a term that has been used to denote the rise in popularity of Korean popular culture across Asia. Both essays point to the Korean Wave entering a stage of decline. Doobo Shim’s essay “Whither the Korean Media?” reveals that overseas sales of Korean cultural products (including films, TV dramas, and pop music) have been far less profitable than expected, despite the prevalence of foreign fandom in Korean popular culture. He discusses the internal factors within South Korean media industries that contribute to the financial crisis in TV drama production. Jeongmin Ko’s chapter, on the other hand, reviews the influence of the Korean Wave in various countries and regions such as Japan, China, Southeast Asia, the United States, and so on. However, Shim’s and Ko’s analyses are largely focused on Korean TV dramas (K-dramas), and rely heavily on statistics and media reports between 2005 and 2008. They have not discussed the latest trend whereby Korean pop music (K-pop), along with its boy bands and girl groups, has now replaced K-dramas

at the forefront of the Korean Wave. For instance, K-pop idols attract thousands of fans when they perform in Singapore (*Straits Times*, 15 February 2010), and many Singaporean students have turned up at local auditions held by Korean talent management agencies, hoping to make a name in the K-pop industry (Chua 2011).

The emphasis on the Korean Wave in the second section has been balanced by two other essays — Ubonrat Siriyuvasak's chapter contrasts the Korean culture industries with those of Japan and Thailand in their strategies and viability in transnational distribution of cultural products, while Liew Kai Khiun highlights various cases of success and failure among Singaporean and Malaysian artistes venturing into the television, film, and popular music industries in East Asia. Most research on intra-Asian flows of popular culture tends to focus on the circulation of texts and the transnational audience's reception of these texts, and far less on the cross-border movement of human capital in these circuits of exchange. Hence Liew's chapter breaks new ground in that it departs from the usual discourses of transnational stardom, and calls these popular culture artistes "symbolic migrant workers" (p. 181), drawing attention to how ethnic Chinese singers and actors from Singapore and Malaysia face the pressure of performing Chineseness in their efforts to break into entertainment industries in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Liew's chapter should be read together with Minjung Kim's paper in the third section of the book. Based on fieldwork and interviews with Filipino female vocalists working as pub singers in South Korea, the latter is a rare ethnographic study of transnational entertainment migrants negotiating gender relations and their own national identities in the host society. Part Three of the volume covers Cross-border Consumption of Regional and Global Cultural content and the Question of "New" Identity Formation. While most of the essays in the book focus on intra-Asian circulation and consumption of popular culture, Younghan Cho's paper in this section reminds us that the United States has not faded from its dominant position in the export of cultural commodities all over the world. Cho traces the expansion of U.S. sports as a global commodity in South Korea,

and how sports fandom intersects with mediated technologies (such as television and the Internet) as well as nationalistic sentiments towards South Korean players in U.S. sports leagues. In another chapter, Ariel Heryanto explains how the popularity of Taiwanese idol drama *Meteor Garden* in Indonesia is articulated through class and religion. More importantly, he also emphasizes the need for more research on Islamic popular culture in intra-Asian flows of popular culture. The last chapter in the book is Joseph T. Salazar's essay, which looks at Filipino spectator positions vis-à-vis two popular imported soap operas, *Miramar* (Mexico) and *Jewel in the Palace* (South Korea). Salazar contends that the display of sexual desire in Mexican telenovelas evokes a sense of moral superiority within the Filipino viewer, while the Korean melodrama is used to affirm the modern identity of the Philippines with its "mastery of English and ... movement away from tradition" (p. 305).

The overall tone of the book, as I gather from the various essays, is a pessimistic one. For scholars doing research on the Korean Wave, there is concern that the Korean Wave is going into decline. A hierarchy is also emerging in intra-Asian flows of popular culture, whereby the exporting countries are concentrated in East Asia, whereas Southeast Asia remains the receiving countries. For example, Siriyuvusak writes in her chapter that

[o]n the whole, there has not been a regular flow of Thai cultural products to Asia and the world market. The sale of some products, such as film, television dramas and music, largely confine themselves to Southeast Asian countries, rather than Northeast Asia. (p. 171)

The situation of the "weaker" cultural economy in Southeast Asia" (p. 174) may well be changing. The airing of *Battle of Angels* by Anhui Satellite TV in 2009 has garnered favourable ratings and sparked a craze for Thai TV dramas in mainland China, along with the mushrooming of online fan communities for Thai actors (Ke 2011). Subsequently, several Thai TV dramas have been telecast in China, with *Track of Love* hitting the second highest in ratings on China Central Television's TV drama channel (CCTV 8) in 2010

(Pajee 2011). Initially imported by Chinese television stations due to their competitive pricing, the prices of Thai TV dramas have risen because of their popularity, and are now almost on par with Hong Kong TV dramas, while remaining cheaper than Korean TV dramas (Ke 2011). It now appears that Thai popular culture, particularly its TV dramas, could possibly become the next wave in the largest TV market in East Asia. Thai culture industries, despite their problems and shortcomings, may transform into a model for other Southeast Asian nations keen to export their cultural products. Hopefully, this volume edited by Shim, Heryanto, and Siriyuvasak would inspire further research on the changing landscape in transnational flows of popular culture across Asia, especially on the texts and practices of popular culture in Southeast Asia.

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