

**Taking popular cultural connections seriously:  
Issues in the study of regional cultural flows in South/East Asia**

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In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the drastic development of communication technologies and the concurrent emergence of global media corporations have facilitated the simultaneous transnational circulation of information, images and texts on a global scale. Various (national) media markets have been penetrated and integrated by the powerful missionaries of global consumer culture such as News Corp., Disney and Sony. However, cultural globalization does not just mean the spread of the same products of Western (mostly American) origin all over the world through these media conglomerates. No less has become conspicuous the development of new patterns of regional media consumption. Looking at East/Southeast Asia, many young people are keen to consume globally circulated fashionable cultural products and do not care about the origin of those consumer items or media products. Nevertheless, preferred cultural products are not without “Asian flavor”. The youths in the regions, for example, might

love to consume *Titanic* and Mariah Carey, but are even more addicted to latest popular cultural forms of Asian make such as Korean action films, Japanese romances and Canto pops. Cultural globalization has accompanied the activation of intra-regional cultural flows with the growing collaboration among local cultural industries.

While the cultural flows in East/Southeast Asia are multilateral, particularly has become prevalent the circulation of Japanese popular culture. Animation, comics, characters, computer games, fashion, pop music and TV dramas—a variety of Japanese popular culture has been so well received in many parts of East and Southeast Asia. Japan as the former imperial power has long been exerting cultural influence in East and Southeast Asia and, at least since late 1970s, its popular culture such as animation and pop idols has been circulated in the regions. The recent spread of Japanese popular culture, however, takes a step further. Japanese and other media industries in Asia are collaboratively promoting a wider range of Japanese popular cultures in various markets for the routine consumption for the youth. Japanese popular cultural presence no longer seems to be something spectacular or anomalous but rather mundane in the urban landscape of East/Southeast Asia.

This paper aims to consider ways in which the multifaceted examination of regional cultural flows shed a fresh light into the discussion of cultural transnationalism and the emerging regional cultural connections in East/Southeast Asia, with particular emphasis on the circulation of Japanese TV dramas for the youth that is one of the most popularly consumed media products in the flows. The recent transnational reach of Japanese TV dramas in East and Southeast Asia is unprecedented not just in terms of the

range and scale of diffusion. It is also significant in terms of intense sympathy with which no small number of young people in the regions feels and negotiates with the meanings of living modern in East and Southeast Asian contexts through the urban lives depicted in Japanese TV dramas. Non-western countries have tended to face the West to interpret their own modern experiences in terms of the distance from Modernity. The encounter has been mostly based upon the (Orientalist) conception of cultural difference and developmental temporal lag. However, the unambiguously dominant Western cultural political, economic and military power has not just constructed a modern world-system covering the whole globe (Wallerstein 1991). The experience of “the forced appropriation of modernity” in the non-West has also produced polymorphic indigenized modernities and thus has destabilized the exclusive equation of modernity with the Western world (Ang & Stratton 1996). Accordingly, people in the non-West have become disposed to mutually recognize and appreciate (dis)similar non-Western experiences of urbanization, modernization and globalization. In this context, Japanese TV drama as modern popular cultural form, though highly commercialized, pleasurably evokes the juxtaposed similarity and difference among contemporaneous “Asian” modernities, something which American popular culture cannot well represent.

By referring to several empirical analyses of how Japanese youth dramas are (re)produced, circulated, regulated and consumed in East and Southeast Asia, I will variously explore the ways in which intra-Asian cultural flows newly highlight cultural resonance and asymmetry in the region under the decentering processes of globalization.<sup>1</sup> Key questions include what is the nature of Japanese cultural power and

influence in the region and how it is historically overdetermined; how it is similar and different to “Americanization” and other Asian cultural sub-centers; what kinds of images and sense of intimacy and distance are perceived through the reception of Japanese youth dramas; and whether it cultivates some kinds of transnational imagination and self-reflexive views towards one's own culture and society.

The engagement with these questions would make a significant contribution to the studies of TV drama in Asia, which has been underexplored compared to other popular cultural forms such as film and popular music, and to the studies of cultural globalization that have been highly biased towards the ubiquity of Western media and popular culture with some exceptions (e.g., Sinclair, Jacka & Cunningham 1996). While there have been fascinating analyses of the global-local interpenetration that refute the sweeping view of global homogenization through the examination of local practices of cultural translation, hybridization and creolization (e.g., Miller 1992; 1995), the arguments have nevertheless tended not to transcend the West-Rest paradigm in a satisfactory manner. “Global” is still apt to be exclusively associated with the West and global-local interactions are mostly considered in terms of how the non-West responds to, resist, imitate or appropriate the West. The studies of dynamic interactions in the East/Southeast Asian cultural flows will productively fill the lacuna in the West-centered analyses of cultural globalization by elucidating how “the decentering of capitalism from the West” (Tomlinson 1997) operates not just by offering empirical evidence to counter (American) media/cultural imperialism thesis but, more importantly, by attending to ways in which the intra-regional cultural flows forge transnational

connections both dialogically and asymmetrically in terms of production, representation, distribution and consumption.

In the following, I will briefly introduce theoretical issues in the study of cultural transnationalism—transnational industry alliance, representation of “Asian” cultural modernity, entangled perception of cultural distance, postcolonial questions, and the (im)possibility of cultural dialogue.

### **Decentering globalization and transnational corporate alliance**

A series of events since 11 September 2001 has re-highlighted American economic and military supremacy, so much so that one is apt to conclude with good reason that globalization is after all Americanization. However, in analyzing cultural globalization, there are still no less good grounds for maintaining the necessity to complicate the straightforward argument for the homogenization of the world through American mass culture. Tomlinson (1997) enumerates three interrelated reasons why we should reframe the issues posed by the “cultural imperialism” thesis with the decentering perspective of cultural globalization. They are the question of the impact and the ubiquity of Western cultural products in the world; the dialectic nexus between global and local in terms of ongoing cultural hybridization and appropriation; and the relative decline of Western cultural hegemony. While the circulation of American media and consumer culture might be truly global, locally produced non-Western cultural products typically exceed American counterparts in popularity domestically, and in some cases even internationally. Intensifying transnational cultural flows have vitalized local practices of

appropriation of foreign (mostly American) cultural products and imaginaries, which have given birth to new cultural meanings at the site of production and consumption.

American cultural imaginaries are undoubtedly still by far the most influential in the world, but the process of globalization has made the conception of rigidly demarcated national and cultural boundaries implausible and tenuous in a way in which it has come to be untenable to single out the absolute symbolic center that belongs to a particular country or region. Theoretical reformulation is imperative in order to grasp the gist of the decentering forces of globalization that make transnational cultural flow and power relations much more disjunctive, non-isomorphic and complex than can be understood in terms of a center-periphery paradigm (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996). Here, it cannot be emphasized too much that while problematizing a center-periphery perspective of the “Americanization” thesis, the decentering process does not eradicate (still West/America-dominated) transnational cultural power but rather newly highlights it. The diffusion of American popular culture has not straightforwardly homogenized the world but has given birth to a series of cultural “formats”, based on which various difference of the world can be expressed and elucidated. As Hall (1991, 28) points out, this is a “peculiar form of homogenization” which does not destroy but rather “recognize and absorb those differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world”. Transnational cultural power has become deeply intermingled with local indigenizing processes in a way in which cultural diversity is organized through globally shared various formats rather than uniformity is replicated (Hannerz 1996;

Wilk 1995). The world is standardized through diversification and diversified through standardization. The operation of global cultural power can only be found in local practice while cultural reworking and appropriation at the local level necessarily takes place within the matrix of global homogenizing forces.

This proliferation of consumable cultural difference goes by the logic of capital and is actively promoted by transnational media and cultural industries. For transnational corporations to enter simultaneously those various markets such as global, supra-national regional, national and local, the imperatives are the establishment of a business tie-up with others at each level—whether in the form of buy-out or collaboration—to select new cultural products with an international appeal from many parts of the world and adapt—or glocalize if you like—them to various local market conditions. Through increasing transnational integration, networking and cooperation among world-wide cultural industries, including non-Western players, the structure of transnational cultural power has been dispersed but even become more solid and ubiquitous. In this sense, the rise of Japanese cultural export can be read as a symptom of the shifting nature of transnational cultural power. The collaborative role in which Japanese media industries play in cultural globalization articulates a new phase of transnational cultural flows dominated by a small number of transnational corporations (Aksoy & Robins 1992). It is important, for example, to place the significance of Sony's inroads into Hollywood as well as the international popularity of Japanese animation and computer games within a wider picture of increasing interconnectedness of transnational media industries. This development testifies to the growing trend of global

media mergers which aim to offer a “total cultural package” of various media products under a single media conglomerate (Schiller 1991). In this process, Japanese companies try not to replace but strengthen American cultural hegemony by investing in the production of Hollywood films and by facilitating their distribution all over the globe. Conversely, finding a local partner is much more imperative for non-Western cultural industries and products to penetrate global (i.e., including Western) markets. Japanese cultural industries and Japanese media products cannot successfully become global players without Western partners. The advent of Japanese animation and characters such as Pokémon clearly show that it can become a global culture only by relying on partnerships with Western media industries in terms of promotion, distribution and even localization of the content to hide its “Japaneseness” as global marketing strategy (Iwabuchi forthcoming).

In the similar vein, the recent spread of Japanese TV dramas in Asian markets also owes much to transnational collaboration among media industries in the regions, through which the appeal of Japanese popular culture has been highlighted and its promotion synchronizes with trends in the Japanese market. This increasing affiliation between Japanese and other Asian media industries is not the outcome of well-calculated strategy of Japanese media industries. While there have been some promotional efforts on the Japanese side, the local partnership and initiative in promoting Japanese cultural products have more intense and effective in facilitating the circulation of Japanese TV dramas in Asian markets. Japanese cultural presence became conspicuous as local industries in East/Southeast Asia found its promotion value for the

rapidly expanding media markets (Iwabuchi 2002). A prominent example is STAR TV that has from the inception constantly broadcast Japanese TV programs, particularly dramas, in prime time. According to my interview with a manager of the STAR TV Chinese Channel, Japanese programs have been indispensable for STAR TV's strategy of localization for Chinese language markets in East Asia. In Taiwan, the rapid development of the Taiwanese cable TV market has taken the strongest initiative in promoting Japanese TV dramas (STAR TV is also watched on cable). The abundance of cable TV channels for relatively inexpensive subscription fee has brought about a new pattern of TV viewing for more narrowly focused target audiences and this led to the constant circulation of Japanese TV dramas as a profitable media products in Taiwan. In turn, this local initiative has given Japanese TV industries more confidence in the exportability of Japanese TV programs and incentive for forging a business tie-up with Taiwanese media industries for its promotion.

Furthermore, the comprehensive picture of the transnational alliance in the promotion of Japanese TV dramas in Asian markets cannot be captured solely by the examination of the formal business and distributional route. The underground market route of pirated software has played an even more significant role in transnationally popularizing Japanese TV dramas. Particularly vital in this process is the spread of "Asian" consumer technology, VCD (Video CD) As Hu (2003) argues, the examination of the underground political economy of the Asian cultural technology will give a significant insight into the new way of consuming TV dramas engendered by it, and the process in which Japanese media industries are completely left out in the

transnationalization of Japanese TV dramas

While this consumer technology has been developed and marketed by prominent manufacturers such as Sony and Panasonic, VCD is not available in Japan and the VCDs played on the machine are largely unlicensed, pirated ones of non-Japanese make. While it is difficult to reveal exactly how this underground industry handles the business, it seems that Hong Kong and Taiwan take the initiative with manufacturing VCD titles, with its operation dispersed in East and Southeast Asia. With Chinese subtitle and neat cover jackets, made-in-Japan TV dramas are repackaged for transnational circulation that goes across and beyond Asian regions, but notably excludes Japan. Pirated VCD's audiovisual quality is obviously low compared to DVDs and even worse than licensed VHS copies, but the flexibility and cheapness is precisely its strength. Through surprisingly swift subtitling, Chinese-language audiences enjoy purchasing at a low price nearly all titles of Japanese TV dramas just several days or a week after they are first broadcast in Japan. The ownership of cheap VCD copies has brought about a new pattern of media consumption by enabling audiences to watch the preferred scenes of the drama repeatedly and intensively. Through the East Asian (illegitimate) VCD repackaging, Japan TV dramas gain new transnational cultural meanings and connections outside Japan.

### **Producing Japanese (post)trendy dramas**

While the transnational alliance between (underground) industries and markets plays an important role in the dissemination of Japanese TV dramas, it cannot fully explain how

and why Japanese TV dramas are favorably received in Asian countries. In understanding the transnational reach of Japanese TV dramas in Asian regions, we should also direct our attention to the textual and symbolic appeal embodied in and identified through them. Through such inquiries will be meaningfully explicated the ways in which the globally diffused images of living “modern” are dynamically re-worked and its meanings are re-situated in a specific local context at the site of production, representation and consumption.

Looking at the encoding side, there were epoch-making change and sophistication of Japanese TV drama production in the early 1990s. The thickened organization of plots, subtle use of music, and sympathetic representation of youth’s urban experiences have drastically increased the number of young audiences (particularly women) domestically. It is necessary to clarify here the kind of Japanese TV dramas that are well-received in Asian markets. Japanese TV industries produce various kinds of dramas such as period drama, samurai drama, home drama, detective drama, soap opera and situation comedy, but the Japanese drama that is most well-received in East and Southeast Asia as well as in Japan and thus mainly concerns this paper is the one depicting youth’s love affairs, lives and works in urban settings (i.e., Tokyo). While this kind of drama has been widely known in Chinese language regions such as Hong Kong and Taiwan as “Japanese idol dramas”, as coined by STAR TV, “trendy dramas” is the term commonly used in Japan. However, “trendy dramas” are, strictly speaking, those produced from late 1980s up to early 1990s. The eye-catching features of “trendy dramas” were the depictions of stylish urban lifestyles and trendy

nightspots abundant with extravaganza brand commodities, the chic interior and latest pop music, all of which clearly reflected the then prevailing highly materialistic consumerism Japanese young people afforded to enjoy under so-called bubble-economy. As Ôta, prominent drama producer of Fuji TV, reflects on the development of youth-oriented drama production since the late 1980s in his speech (2003), “trendy dramas” did not much care the narrative sophistication and the theme of the dramas, but more devoted itself to stylishly representing various kinds of consumerist trends in order to attract a large number of the youth who hitherto had not watched TV dramas.

However, a highly popular and influential *Tokyo Love Story* that was aired in the period of January-March 1991 further significantly renewed the production style of “trendy drama”. Since then popular youth dramas became more story-oriented that sympathetically depict young people’s striving for love, friendship, work and dream, though the featuring of popular idols and consumer trends as well as the setting of the drama in Tokyo are still vital factors in the drama production. In this sense, the youth-oriented popular dramas that are well-received in Asian markets such as *Tokyo Love Story*, *Long Vacation*, *Love Generation*, *Overtime* and *Yamato Nadeshiko* (The Ideal Japanese Woman) are actually “post-trendy dramas”, though such dramas are still called “trendy drama” in Japan.

Ito (2003) analyzes with critical eyes Japanese youth dramas in terms of the continuity and discontinuity in the representation of gender. As Ito contends, Japanese TV dramas successfully provoke intense identification of the youth by employing the new representational style of a “small universe”, within which young people’s lives are

self-contained with little reference to family relationships. While this drama format was innovative, the narrative of the dramas is not quite. Based on comparative textual analysis of three representative “post-trendy dramas” since 1991—*Tokyo Love Story*, *Long Vacation* and *Yamato Nadeshiko*—, Ito argues that these dramas represent apparently new attractive femininity but does barely transcend the familiar narrative; femininity that is not submissive to men but independently and actively seeking for love and work, yet in the final instance not quite disobedient to men. Japanese TV dramas appealingly represent youth’s concerns, which seemingly reflect the drastic changes and the increasing sense of uncertainty in contemporary Japanese society, by providing certain patterns—moderate alternatives that subtly combine the emergent and the residual—of love affairs, work situations and personal anguish, with whose meanings viewers could variously and pleasurably negotiate for living their own lives.

### **Entangled perception of cultural distance**

Admittedly, such a representational style of youth’s lives in Japanese dramas is not substantially different to Hollywood aesthetics. On the contrary, as discussed earlier, it is a kind of popular cultural form that is deeply imbricated in U.S. cultural imaginaries. However, this should not lead to the disregard of culturally specific meanings and feelings young people in Asia sympathetically find through non-Western popular culture since they cannot be subsumed under some generic “globalized image” that is often equated with American or Western culture. While the distinctive appeal of Japanese youth dramas can be apparently displayed only by founding itself on a globally diffused

cultural format, youth's anguish, dream and romance that are represented through Japanese TV dramas have much to do with their specific modes and meanings of living modern that lucidly articulate the intertwined composition of global homogenization and heterogenization in the Japanese context.

In this sense, the specific meaning audiences favorably perceive through Japanese youth drama should not be regarded as something that is "Japanese" or "Asian" in any essentialist meaning any more than as a mere duplication of Western modernity. It is often pointed out that Japanese TV dramas taste and smell like dim sum (Chinese snacks) and kimchi (Korean spicy pickles) to consumers in East Asia (*Newsweek Asia* 8 November 1999), but this kind of expression should not be automatically interpreted as evidence that the popularity of Japanese TV dramas is driven by the perception of "cultural proximity" in a primordial sense (cf. Straubhaar 1991). Elsewhere I argued that the perception of cultural proximity as such needs to be understood less as the manifestation of given cultural attributes and values than the dynamic process of "becoming" (Iwabuchi 2002). Japan and other nations might share certain cultural values and Asian viewers often refer to this cultural affinity as a reason for their preference for Japanese TV dramas. However, the perception of cultural proximity is a matter of time as well as of space. The emerging sense of cultural similarity between Japan and other Asian nations experienced as such seems to be based upon a consciousness that both live in the same modern temporality.

It is important to stress here again that what has substantiated the cultural geography of "Asia" in the 1990s is less some essential and distinct "Asian values" than

the advent of global capitalism and modernity (Dirlik 1994). The latter has brought about converging situations in which cultural specificities are brought into relief in the Asian contexts, such as the development of urban consumerism, the expansion of middle class, the changes in gender/sexuality relationships and the ordinariness of (simultaneous) transnational media consumption. Under the forces of modernization, Americanization and globalization, those elements complicatedly interact to articulate the cultural resonance of Japanese TV dramas for viewers in East/Southeast Asia who synchronously and contemporaneously experience and feel “Asian modernity” through them.

At the same time, the other side of intimate similarity is pleasant distance. As a corollary of on-going asymmetrical cultural encounters in the course of the spread of Western modernity, Ang and Stratton (1996, 22-24) argue, we have come to live in “a world where all cultures are both (like) ‘us’ and (not like) ‘us’”, one where familiar difference and bizarre sameness are simultaneously articulated in multiple ways through the unpredictable dynamic of uneven global cultural encounters. The sense of cultural similarity is thus closely interconnected with the sense of difference. The dynamic context of the 1990s has promoted the intra-regional cultural resonance among the youth in East and Southeast Asia, who meet cultural neighbors vis-à-vis a common but different experience of indigenizing modernity. The entangled perception of cultural distance/closeness is constantly reformulated under globalization and differently articulated in each locality. Similar and dissimilar, different and same, close and distant, fantasizing and realistic, all of these intertwined perceptions subtly intersect so as to

arouse the sense of cultural identification, relatedness and empowerment in the eyes of young people in East and Southeast Asia.

Several works elucidate various ways in which the encoding of Japanese youth dramas that represent youth's lives who strive for love and work in the setting of mega city Tokyo meets translocal decodings in East/Southeast Asian urban space with intense emotional attachment to the stories and characters of these dramas. They attend to contextualized readings—hence “translocal” rather than “transnational”—through which audiences emotionally engage in particular Japanese TV dramas so as to negotiate with and reflect on the meanings of living modern in a specific socio-historical conjuncture of each urban area: Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok. For Taiwan viewers, Ko (2003) contends, Japanese TV dramas conjure up an intertwined perception of “dream” and “reality” of urban modernity. “Tokyo” depicted in the Japanese dramas signifies a space of “real imaginary” where youth in Taipei feel dreams would come true in visualized “there”. And such a consumerist desire for founding Taiwan's present/future on Japan's urban modernity, Ko forcefully argues, cannot be dissociated from the history of Japanese colonialism, the important point I will return to shortly. Leung (2003) concerns the Hong Kong consumption of Japanese TV dramas. Referring to the three groups of Hong Kong viewers'—two age groups of Hong Kong natives and one group of Japanese “diasporas”—positive identification and appropriation of a Japanese idea, *ganbaru* (holding out and striving to achieve something), she elucidates how viewers inhabiting in Hong Kong differently derive empowering messages for their present lives according to their life situations by

watching Japanese TV dramas such as *Long Vacation* and *Beach Boys*.

In Singapore and Bangkok, where local dramas that sympathetically depicts youth's concerns of life are still relatively uncommon, Japanese youth dramas to some extent appear liberating and emancipating. MacLachlan & Chua's (2003) elucidates how Singapore young women positively watch Japanese youth drama, *Overtime*, which is perceived as representing women's sexuality in an "open" manner that counters the state-driven rigid control of sexuality in Singapore. Their paper enriches the discussion of "cultural proximity". They find that "Asian" women's sexuality represented in Japanese dramas are seen by Singaporean (ethnically Chinese) young women as more acceptable than American counterparts and thus useful to counter the state intervention with the private matter, however it is perceived as unrealistic and unfavorable for actualization. Siriyuvasak (2003) also points out the discrepancy between the feeling and the action, but in a more pessimistic manner. Siriyuvasak argues that Thai youths find Japanese TV dramas as well as Japanese popular music expressive of their deep-seated dissatisfaction with the authoritarian Thai government. Comparing the current consumption of Japanese popular culture with the politically motivating consumption of American counter culture in the 1960s and 1970s, she raises reservation about whether transient semiotic empowerment would lead to actual social change.

### **Postcolonial trajectories**

While the popularity of Japanese post-trendy dramas in many parts of Asia is a recent phenomenon, it has not occurred in a historical vacuum. It is always-already interwoven

with the power relations and geopolitics embedded in the history of Japanese imperialism and colonialism. In the Japanese context, the phenomenon has strongly stimulated the recuperation of Japan's transnational desire for "Asia". Historically constituted Japan's Orientalist conception of "Asia" as well as its desire for connecting (with) Asia have resurfaced with the rise of Asian economies and the transnational reach of Japanese popular culture in the region since the 1990s (Iwabuchi 2002). It is a time when Japan began re-asserting its Asian identity, when the cultural geography of "Asia" has recurred to the Japanese national imaginary as Japan faces the challenge of (re)constructing its national/cultural identity in the era of globalization. While the Japanese popular cultural encounter with other Asian countries in the 1990s is multiple, contradictory and ambivalent than a totalizing and cavalier Japanese Orientalist conception would suggest, Japan's condescending sense of being the leader of Asia and the asymmetrical power relationship between Japan and (the rest of) Asia are still intact. Japan's cultural nationalist project has been reconfigured within a transnational and postcolonial framework.

Obviously, transnationalization of Japanese popular culture far more seriously concerns other Asian nations, particularly the two former colonies. Due to not-yet-resolved historical problems of Japanese imperialism and colonialism, the export of meanings from Japan inevitably has revitalized excessive reactions in Taiwan and Korea. As Ko (2003) elucidates, in Taiwan, youth's embracing of Japanese culture has induced much criticism and a deep-seated ambivalence of "desire and anxiety for modernity" as it is regarded as undesirable remnant of colonial mimicry or another

cultural invasion. Ko suggests that this is a kind of nationalist discourse that fails to do justice to the contradictory, uneven and disjunctive transnational cultural flows, being too obsessed with interpreting intensified transnational flows exclusively in terms of a dichotomized framework such as local-global or national-foreign. Nevertheless, it is precisely this intertwined complex of historically over-determined anxiety and consumerist-driven desire for modernity that specifies the Taiwan's postcolonial cultural context in which Japanese TV dramas are most intensively received in Asia.

The other former colony, Korea has rather a different postcolonial trajectory. The inflow of Japanese popular culture is still partly banned (notably TV programs and popular music), though it is expected that the regulating policy will be entirely abolished soon. Park (2003) offers an intriguing dimension to the translocalized "Asian" consumption of Japanese TV dramas. Despite the official regulation of the inflow of Japanese popular, some Korean audiences watch Japanese TV dramas through pirated videos and the internet both inside and outside Korea. Park's examination of Korean-American audiences' viewing of Japanese and Korean TV dramas tells us the way in which the reception of those "Asian" TV dramas has different resonance and meanings to Korean diasporas in Los Angeles. The residence in the U.S. offers not just a context in which Korean-American youths routinely meet both people from Japan in everyday life and cultures of Japan through the consumption of TV dramas that are not permitted in Korea. The consumption of Japanese TV dramas is also situated in a context in which a global city in North America positions Korean and Japanese diasporas together as ethnic minorities, thus generating a sense of solidarity as

“Asian-American”.

Lee (2003) analyzes Korean producers' reworking of Japanese youth dramas. While Korean audiences cannot watch Japanese TV dramas regularly within Korea, Korean TV producers have constantly watched them and overtly or covertly taken on their styles for their drama production in terms of story, settings and properties. In developing youth drama formats that are seemingly similar to Japanese counterparts in early 1990s, strong criticism has been directed against the Korean TV industry, which allegedly has disgracefully imitated the culture of the former colonizer. However, Lee elucidates how Korean TV producers has not just imitated but also creatively appropriated and transformed Japanese TV dramas into their own, so much so that Korean youth drama now sweeps over East Asian markets including Japan, the well-known phenomenon called Hanliu (Korean Wave). The number of the title is small compared to Japanese counterparts, but the rating is mostly higher than Japanese dramas in East Asian markets. Korean popular dramas also depict youth's lives in urban settings, but in contrast to the “small universe” of youth depicted in Japanese TV dramas whose cutting off from the complexity of the real world makes young audiences emotionally involved in the dramatized reality, family relationship is an integral part of Korean drama texts. This feature does not just enable the dramas to successfully capture broader age-groups of viewer but also make young viewers of East Asia to feel Korean dramas being more “realistic” than Japanese dramas. According to my brief interview in Taipei in March 2002, young viewers greatly sympathized with Korean dramas because the youth's lives intertwined with family relationships look much closer to Taiwanese real

situations and thus Korean dramas more appealingly depict the meanings of living modern than the self-contained youth communicative space of Japanese youth dramas.

Another interesting example of creative localization of Japanese cultural influence is Taiwan's *Liuxing Huayuan* (Meteor Garden). It is based on Japanese comic series about high school students' lives, *Hana yori dango*. There is no original Japanese drama based on the comic series, but Taiwan producers skillfully adopted it to a drama form on their own initiative. While the drama takes up Japanese character names as they are, the story is reconstructed in Taiwanese high school settings, featuring Taiwanese idol groups, F4, and original theme songs. The program has been phenomenally popular not just in Taiwan but also in China. The latter development has occurred despite the ban of its broadcast as Chinese authority deems that love affairs and violence in the high school depicted in the drama will have a bad influence on the thought and behavior of the youth (*Asahi Shinbun*, 12 July 2002). The hybrid composition of Japanese and Taiwanese cultural imaginations has brought about a new East Asian youth culture that resists rigid political regulations.

These developments testify that despite historically deep-seated anxiety shown in social discourses, these two countries do not just imitate Japanese youth dramas. Negotiating with Japanese influence of drama production styles, Korean and Taiwan TV industries have developed their own youth dramas whose representation of "here and now" in Asian urban contexts has transnational appeals in a different way from those of Japanese dramas. It is often argued in Japan that the appeal of Japanese popular culture can be attributed to Japan's extraordinary skills of indiginizing American popular

imagination in Asian contexts, the assumption that is analogical to the ideology that has been developed in the course of Japanese imperial expansion to claim its civilizational superiority (Iwabuchi 1998). However, the growing regional flows have highlighted the fact that such a practice is quite common and mundane in other parts of Asia and thus displaced the Japanese colonialist imagination.

### **Whither popular cultural dialogue?**

Finally, it seems necessary to direct our attention to one imperative issue, that is, how we can make an effective critique of globally diffused consumerism on which uneven intra-regional cultural flows are founded and through which inequalities and discriminations in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and immigration are institutionalized nationally *and* transnationally. While the positive and subversive aspect of youths' active negotiation with transnational popular culture should not be easily dismissed, whether and how such consumption will lead to making a *real* difference for the betterment of social is dubious. People's freedom of negotiation and imagination at the receiving end of transnational cultural flow operates under the system of global capitalism, out of which no one can stand.

This issue also poses a highly arguable question as to whether and how the emerging connections forged through commercialized popular cultures lead to nurturing transnational dialogue. In Japan, there has been a strong interest in the potential of popular culture facilitating cultural dialogue, particularly in terms of its capacity to improve Japan's reputation and to transcend the historically constituted Japan's

problematic relations with other East and Southeast Asian countries. It might be true that the dissemination of enjoyable Japanese contemporary culture has introduced the issues and concerns young people in the regions share. As the popular cultural flows are becoming more multilateral and regular, they might have also activated cultural exchange and mutual understanding among youths in East/Southeast Asia on a large scale that has never been observed.

However, this optimistic view should not be uncritically embraced in exchange for the inattention to the fact that increasing intra-Asian cultural flows newly highlight structural asymmetry and uneven power relations in the region. There is much imbalanced difference not just in the quantity and the vector of the flows but also in terms of the perception and appreciation of spatio-temporal distance/proximity vis-à-vis other Asian modernities that are represented in popular cultural texts (Iwabuchi 2002). We should also remember that while the main corporate actors of cultural globalization disregard the rigid boundaries of nation-states, their “origins” and demarcation of borders of cultural resonance are limited to a small number of powerful nations that exclude so many people and regions. More precisely, emerging transnational connections through popular culture are predominantly ones among relatively affluent youth (and mostly women with the case of TV dramas) and among media and cultural industries in urban areas of developed countries. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are compelled to re-recognize, through the sudden, massive media attention to the hitherto forgotten nation of Afghanistan, how the disparity in economic and cultural power between the haves and have-nots has been despairingly widened *and*

how the disparity itself has been left out of commentaries on global media communications. If popular cultural connections do not cultivate social imagination that would encourage people's mutual engagement with those social and cultural issues which interpenetrate "here" and "there", trans-national issues that have been historically constructed but aggravated under globalization, it would be still a long way from the creation of transnational dialogue.

This is not to deny the possibility that the mediated transnational encounters might promote such dialogical and self-critical views (cf. Appadurai 1996). On the contrary, precisely in order to foster such dialogic potential, critically attending to how media industries and products of Asian regions are collusive in reproducing cultural asymmetry and indifference on a global scale has become more imperative than before. Popular cultural encounter will keep on feeding new modes of transnational asymmetry and imagination among people in East and Southeast Asian nations. Nothing guarantees any promising future. If we are to avoid harboring too excessive expectation of transnational popular cultural flows—be it optimistic or pessimistic—, any discussion needs to take popular culture more seriously, to analyze the complication of transnational production, distribution and consumption of it rigorously. Popular culture does connect people in the distance crisscrossing the world, both evenly and unevenly, intimately and indifferently, friendly and discordantly. It is only through a well-attended empirical analysis of comparative co-project among researchers of East and Southeast countries that we can grasp how these contradictions and ambivalence are disentangled and how cultural unevenness as well as dialogue is newly articulated through

transnational flows of popular culture. I hope this paper at least will make some contribution to the generating of such comparative and collaborative research projects for the future.

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