

*Edited by Timothy J. Craig
and Richard King*

Global Goes Local:
Popular Culture in Asia



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Asia and Global Popular Culture: The View from He Yong's Garbage Dump

Richard King and Timothy J. Craig

Above an angry barrage of guitar, bass, and drums, the singer yells:

The world we live in
is just like a garbage dump
the people like bugs
fighting and struggling with each other
What they eat is conscience
What they shit is ideology

So begins the title track of He Yong's 1994 CD *Lajichang* (Garbage Dump), with a rant against the rat race of the new Asian economy and against a national leadership whose corrupt authoritarianism is cloaked in moralistic paternalism (Figure 0.1). The singer offers a nihilistic view of a consumerist world, in which "some are fighting the flab and others are dying of starvation," and of technologies that fail to solve the world's problems and threaten disastrous solutions: "Spaceships haven't found heaven / AIDS infection is death / You make war for the sake of peace / Are you trying to blast our world into a state of purity?"¹ Not all of the songs on this CD are as bleak – He Yong also sings of love, of the garrulousness of the people in the back alleys of his home town, of a longing to travel to Africa – but this nihilism is the note on which he chooses to begin and end his solo debut.

The content of He Yong's songs and his accent locate him, and his garbage dump, in his native city of Beijing, but the iconoclasm of his music resonates with places and times remote from his own: the grunge music of the Northwestern United States in the 1980s, or, more strikingly, the punk rock of 1970s London.² He Yong's "Garbage Dump" ends with the incantation "Is there any hope?" recalling the closing refrain of the Sex Pistols' punk classic "God Save the Queen": "No future for you / no future for me."³

He Yong fits comfortably into the global history of rock music as protest, the irony of his success in a system he effects to disdain no greater than was



Figure 0.1 He Yong's CD *Garbage Dump*.

the case of his precursors elsewhere. His protest against the policies of the Chinese and other Asian governments toward increased integration into the global economy is a counter-discourse that has benefited from the access to the outside world that economic reform has brought about. Western music, transmitted first by cheap pirate tapes and tinny transistor radios, then by Walkmans and cheap pirate CDs, and more recently by satellites that beam MTV and other Western images into Asian homes, spearheaded the pop-culture invasion that has captured the hearts of Asia's urban youth and challenged existing cultures, of both the traditional indigenous and the austere official kind.

All that seems to be required for global popular culture to move into a country is a slight relaxation of political control (at the end of the twentieth century, North Korea was the only Asian state resisting the tide), a modicum of disposable income, inexpensive mechanical reproduction, and (in countries with some level of ownership of television sets) satellite technology. Combined, these make widely available the intoxicating rhythms and seductive images of an opulent Western culture, slickly packaged for market penetration. This was hardly what conservative, in many cases neo-Confucian, governments had in mind when they courted Western capital to enrich and diversify their economies. Indeed, the authorities in many Asian countries have railed against invading Western culture and its local adherents. The standpoint for the denunciation may be patriotic, as with the Myanmar military junta's condemnation of "un-Burmese sounds, un-Burmese expressions, and un-Burmese stage-manners"; moral, like the Indonesian accusation that Michael Jackson and Madonna were destroying humanity; or ideological, as in the Chinese government's campaigns against "spiritual pollution."⁴ But all reveal fear of the power of popular culture to

bring about political destabilization. The problem for authoritarian governments is that modernization is a package deal: cultural values sneak in on the coattails of industrial and technical marvels; wealth creation is accompanied by alluring products to spend it on; television screens sought for their educational value are also illuminated by fantasies of greed and its gratification; hardware comes fully loaded with software.

Thus far, the process described above, an assault on the world's most populous continent by the juggernaut of a largely American global popular culture, might be seen as an archetype of Western economic and cultural imperialism, depriving Third World nations of their roots and identities, encouraging consumption that will drain economic and spiritual resources, and spawning local performers ("artists" would be too dignified a term) who are little more than impersonators of the icons of MTV, unwitting co-conspirators in the colonization of their countries and the destruction of tradition. This is a view shared by paternalistic Asian governments and many contemporary Western theorists, who may have different reasons to be alarmed by the nightmare vision of *McCultures* endlessly replicated on the ruins of proud, venerable, and unique regional and local civilizations.

An opposing, and more optimistic, view of popular culture in an age of global communication holds that many local cultures may prove resilient; that the apparent cultural hegemony of the West may be only a transitional phase in a symbiotic process whereby popular culture is constantly being rediscovered and reconfigured by its audiences and performers, only then to be co-opted by the producers and executives who package and market it. In the first essay of this collection, Peter Metcalf cites a century of anthropological tradition to assert that "every act of borrowing is ... a reinvention" and that groups that adopt the icons of alien cultures invest them with meanings that might never have been intended or imagined by their originators (p. 15). The Indian-born, American-based anthropologist Arjun Appadurai observes in *Modernity at Large* that "globalization is not the story of cultural homogenization."⁵ Just as erstwhile colonials can master and dominate games learned from their former rulers,⁶ so popular music from the developed West, itself the product of ethnic and class diversity, can be co-opted and reshaped by Celtic, Caribbean, African, and Asian performers, and incorporated by eclectic Western visionaries into world music projects, or adopted intuitively by young artists with little conscious awareness of or concern for the source. This music is then, *mutatis mutandis*, received and remoulded by performers worldwide, and presented to their "local" audiences in the language they can best understand and with musical variations that play to the audience's understanding of itself. And, as with music, literary, and cinematic conventions, television features and commercials, even food, can be appropriated, transformed, and used by cultures in the constant drama

of self-definition – a self-definition that may take the form of subversion against government control as well as against Western cultural and economic hegemony. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall observes, in the military metaphor popular among marxists, that popular culture is a battlefield “where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won or lost.”⁷ In his study of the politics of popular music in Southeast Asia, Craig Lockard, following Hall, sees this struggle as including components of “incorporation, resistance, distortion, negotiation and recuperation.”⁸ The result is a series of unique regional hybrids with layers of meaning to local audiences that can go well beyond any surface impression of imitation of the West.⁹ For example, Eric Thompson’s reading, in this volume, of a CD by Ella, Malaysia’s “Queen of Rock,” demonstrates that her music is “not about mimicry,” and shows how the singer-composer is prepared to share a sly joke with her audience about the extent she is influenced by the United States (p. 58).

The conundrum of cultural studies articulated by Gayatri Spivak as “Can the subaltern speak?” is at the heart of any discussion of world popular culture. Are the peoples of “under-developed,” “developing,” or “Third World” nations so oppressed by the dominant political, economic, and cultural forces of the West that they have lost the power to represent themselves? Many of the peoples of Asia are in archetypally subaltern positions, subject to multiple subjugations: by multinational capital and the political pressure that accompanies it, by national governments of different ethnic or racial background, by social traditions that privilege men over women, and by state ideologies that suppress as dangerous heterodoxy any expression of pluralism. To judge from studies that appear in this collection, however, it would seem that subaltern groups (oppressed nations and races, disadvantaged minorities, and majorities) cannot be silenced. The component parts of Asia, as Chen Xiao-mei states in her study of Occidentalism, “participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others.”¹⁰ Their voices, even though they may be manipulated and mediated by the artistic and business moguls of the music, film, and television industries, are needed to invigorate the global popular culture that is then fed back to them and to everyone else.

The same technology that imports the alien mega-culture into Asian societies and disseminates its localized variants at home also exports these variants back out into worlds beyond. To return to the garbage dump: He Yong, an artist frowned on by the authorities (though certainly not persecuted as previous dissident artists might have been), and unable to perform in large venues at home, could still become an international recording star, one of a small group of mainland rockers selected in the early 1990s by the

Taiwanese record label Magic Stone for promotion outside China, leading to a state-of-the-art CD, a concert in Hong Kong (also recorded), and videos that could be seen on any television in Asia that the Star TV network could reach.¹¹

In the final years of the twentieth century, localities across Asia as varied as great cities and remote mountain villages were similarly and simultaneously brought into contact with a contemporary Western popular culture conveyed by technologies that moved more swiftly, cost far less, and penetrated more deeply than the more conventional modernizations of factories and refrigerators, roads and automobiles, runways and airplanes. Each locality must, whether it wishes to or not, respond to the threats and challenges posed by the World Wrestling Federation, *Dallas*, *Titanic*, Ricky Martin, and the Spice Girls, by means as varied as capitulation, resistance, imitation, assimilation, and transformation. What is certain is that societies touched by contemporary Western culture in any or all of its forms cannot remain as they are. As younger generations encounter a global imaginary with no relation to indigenous traditions, local core values and ideologies are challenged, and collective rituals risk abandonment in favour of a trip to the karaoke bar, the solitary enjoyment of a tape on the Walkman, or an evening at home watching reruns of American soaps. Local cultures are in danger, especially initially, of losing the attention of their young. But the more resilient cultures may also draw inspiration from the influx of this "other" culture, creating new hybrid forms that are appealing and accessible to their audiences, and presenting messages important to their extended localities in languages and styles that build new communities and kinships.

The fourteen essays that follow in this book, by scholars based in Asia, North America, Europe, and Australia, explore different aspects of popular culture in Asia from a variety of regional specializations, academic disciplines, and theoretical standpoints. Music, one of the most ancient ways that people create and share identity, and the spearhead of cultural invasion, is of primary concern to many of the authors; they examine cultural persistence and adaptation in changing times and developing technologies, the continued use of music as a means for self-assertion and protest, and the creation of new musical hybrids from the fusion of local, national, and global influences. Television (with its VCR and VCD or DVD player attached) is the other principal force in the instant dissemination of popular culture; essays in this collection consider the effect that TV serial dramas, popular chat shows, ideologically normative product advertisements, and images of professional wrestling have on Asian populations at different levels of development and interaction with the outside world. Pictorial and literary arts, appearing in the forms of political propaganda and comic books, tell a broad audience who they are and what cultural traditions they share. All

these forms and phenomena are integral to the nature of popular culture, and are addressed in the pages that follow.

The five chapters in the first section of the book explore, with reference to different regions of the Asian continent, some of the central issues in the study of popular culture, questions concerning the mutual appropriations that take place between global and local culture and the authenticity or otherwise of the resultant hybrid forms. In his chapter on Hulk Hogan in the rainforest, Peter Metcalf examines the penetration of global culture, in one of its more bizarre manifestations, into a remote part of the world. Global culture does not always mean the same thing everywhere, however; as Metcalf demonstrates, the Upriver people of Borneo have their own reasons for admiring Hulk Hogan, reasons that are rooted in their particular historical, political, and economic circumstances. Mercedes Dujunco, in her discussion of hybridity and disjuncture in mainland Chinese popular music, explores the way that disparate political and cultural influences create hybrid forms. She focuses on two hybrid musical fashions: the "northwest wind" folk songs that incorporate singing styles characteristic of the poor and arid regions that flank the Yellow River, and the Maoist anthems with synthesized "disco" accompaniment that were a short-lived sensation in the early 1990s. Michiyo Yoneno Reyes presents a case study of the Philippine Cordillera, looking at the different technologies that brought music from the outside world to a remote region over the second half of the twentieth century, and the ways that the villagers have coped with the cultural invasion. Reyes' study finds indigenous culture endangered, with not only its music but also the traditional participatory rituals that music accompanied, threatened by the private pleasures of listening and viewing that modern electronics offer.

Eric Thompson's chapter on Ella, Malaysia's "Queen of Rock," presents a contrary and more heartening example of the ways that cultures can reinvent themselves in response to external influences, and opens the question of authenticity: Is Ella's heavy metal an imitation of a popular Western form, or is it a new creation with its own values and characteristics? Pointing to lyrics that transcend state discourse and assert Islamic moral traditions that counter the values customarily associated with rock music, Thompson argues that new Asian popular music can be as "Unique, Shining, Authentic" as this singer-songwriter claims. In the final chapter of the first section, Keith Howard reviews Korean pop music in the 1990s, exploring the tensions that exist between an economically expansionist but ideologically conservative Confucian state and a market-driven youth culture. Among the images in Howard's musical collage are Koreans performing reggae and rap, and taking both forms far enough from their roots in the inner cities of Jamaica and the United States for them to be Asianized, and "authentically" Korean.

The second section of the book examines political, ideological, and spiritual issues in popular culture, revealing the tensions between state paternalism and market forces, dominant and subordinate groups within states, and mainstream ideologies and dissident opinion. Janet Upton's chapter on the poetics and politics of *Sister Drum* broaches the question of who has the rights to a culture, an increasingly important issue as artists appropriate freely from the products of cultures they barely understand. *Sister Drum*, a hit CD by the Chinese singer Zhu Zeqin (alias Dadawa), drew heavily for its inspiration on Tibet but was harshly criticized by leaders of the expatriate Tibetan community for what they saw as an inaccurate and insensitive incorporation of Tibet into the Chinese national narrative and an imagined primitive spirituality constructed by Tibet's Chinese colonizers. In his examination of culture for the masses and the cultural market, Michael Keane focuses on Chinese television. Made-for-television drama in China is seen to be a barometer of state involvement in, and interference with, the media, and of the commercialization of culture. Production companies that can raise the resources needed to mount a series without recourse to government funding tend to offer the viewers what the producers perceive the public wants rather than what the government feels they ought to be watching; this led to radical changes in what was shown on Chinese television in the 1990s.

Based on an extensive survey of television advertising in Malaysia, Todd Holden and Azrina Husin argue in their chapter on cultural integrity, Westernization, and politics that TV commercials, like other television programming, can be made to present normative patterns of behaviour for viewers to emulate. Under paternalistic guidance from the Malaysian government, advertisers of domestic and foreign products alike present a utopia of traditional families and harmonious racial integration. A different kind of television programming, one that challenges and debunks popular beliefs and superstitions, is the subject of Pattana Kitiarsa's investigation of the controversy surrounding a Thai talkshow's exposé of spirit-mediums. Here, television functions as a forum for discussing the apparently incompatible attractions of scientific modernity and superstition or spirituality that appear to coexist in Thai culture. A quest for spiritual essence and national identity is likewise at the heart of Mark MacWilliams' study of Osamu Tezuka's epic *manga* (Japanese comic), *The Phoenix*. In a trenchant critique of the imperial gods and the first Japanese emperors, and in his juxtaposition of Japanese myths and sacred historical events within the frame of a story held together by the central theme of humankind's fruitless and foolish quest for eternal life, Tezuka transforms *manga* from low-brow diversion into a sophisticated means of religious expression.

The third and final section considers the value of popular culture in creating, defining, and asserting the identity of a nation, place, ethnic group,

generation, or class. Three of the chapters take a historical perspective. Nancy Brack and John Pavia look at the propaganda output of both sides in the Pacific War to examine the process of a nation defining itself as combatant, another as enemy, and still others as allies or hapless victims to be saved from atrocity. The songs of wartime can resurface decades later with new meanings, as Junko Oba shows in her chapter on the changing role of *gunka* (Japanese military songs). Tracing the evolution of *gunka* through four international wars and their aftermath, Oba shows how these songs are today shared in an act of nostalgic self-affirmation by the veterans of the defeated Imperial army. Isabel Wong's portrait of Shanghai looks at the role that the haunting voice of songstress Zhou Xuan and other popular music played in creating and reinforcing the mystique of the world's most exciting and romantic city in the later years of the Chinese republic. Shanghai's popular songs, with their poignant lyrics set to jazz accompaniments, even now retain their power to charm and to evoke the past. The final chapter returns to the contemporary: Rachel Harris' report on the Uyghur music scene in Xinjiang in the 1990s shows a minority nationality in China's far west using a vibrant living musical culture to distinguish itself from China's dominant Han culture, and to assert and preserve its own unique spirit and identity.

The popular culture of the world's most populous continent, in all its regional and national diversity, cannot be fully analyzed in a single volume. The authors of the following chapters have given an Asian perspective to significant questions being considered by scholars of popular culture, be it global or local, high- or low-tech, dominant or subaltern, patriotic or subversive: How do cultures embody transnational, national, local, and personal identities? Can poorer and less developed regions cope with the onslaught of cultural globalization, delivered by cheaply reproduced audio- or videotape, or by state-of-the-art satellite technology? What new hybrid forms emerge from the collision of indigenous traditions with the juggernaut of Western popular culture? What criteria can be used to judge whether these new hybrids are mere imitations of a dominant global culture, or the authentic expression of local sentiment and creativity? Can emergent cultures in an age of instant worldwide communication retain the capacity to speak for minorities and voice the protests of the disadvantaged? The case studies in this book, written by scholars with differing disciplinary backgrounds, dealing with different parts of Asia and encompassing a variety of cultural forms, go some way to showing how cultures suffer, survive, or prosper in an environment that can be variously considered as a cyberspace imaginary or a Beijing garbage dump.

Notes

- 1 The first verse quoted is from He Yong, "Lajichang" (Garbage Dump), track 1, from the CD *Lajichang* (Magic Stone Records, 1994). The second quotation is from the "alternative take" (*erban*), track 10.
- 2 A photograph of the singer is captioned "Punk Rocker He Yong" in Andrew F. Jones, *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asian Series, 1992), following p. 90. He Yong's CD, recorded after Jones' book was written, demonstrates considerably greater musical sophistication than that characterization might suggest; his record label describes the singer as "eccentric-styled."
- 3 The Sex Pistols, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* (London: Warner Brothers, 1977).
- 4 The Myanmar military junta is quoted in Craig A. Lockard, *Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 28. The Chinese government campaign is quoted in *ibid.*, 34-9, which also cites similar, earlier, condemnations from the former Soviet Union and East Germany.
- 5 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 11.
- 6 As Appadurai demonstrates with the case of cricket.
- 7 Quoted in Lockard, *Dance of Life*, 13.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 9 For a discussion of hybridity in popular culture see Chapter 2 by Mercedes Dujunco.
- 10 Chen Xiao-mei, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4-5. Chen notes in pp. 21-5 of her book that the Maoist advocacy of the "workers and peasants" took a subaltern position (well before subalternity was current in critical terminology) to suppress the traditional role of the intellectual.
- 11 The first group of Chinese performers recorded by Magic Stone were Black Panther (Hei bao), Tang Dynasty (Tang chao) and Ai Jing, in 1992; Magic Stone recorded Zhang Chu, He Yong, and former Black Panther lead singer Dou Wei in 1994.

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