

Rogue Flows

Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic

Edited by

Koichi Iwabuchi, Stephen Muecke and Mandy Thomas



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Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

“At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed.”

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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Introduction: Siting Asian Cultural Flows

Koichi Iwabuchi, Stephen Muecke and Mandy Thomas

This book analyses the ways in which the accelerating movement of goods, ideas, cultural products and finance in West-dominated globalisation processes have affected the framing of the transnational cultural traffic and encounters among Asian societies. The 1990s was the decade of Asia, in many senses. The decade opened with spectacular economic development of the region, which has made Asian nations more assertive against Western cultural and economic power. The Asian economic miracle was followed by a dramatic downfall due to the recent financial and economic crisis in the region. While what has been highlighted at the end of the millennium is the lingering Western (American) economic power, culturally, the recent economic crisis in the Asian region has not stopped intra-flows but rather furthered the interaction and intra-flows among Asian nations. This cultural traffic is exemplified by the increasing number of film co-productions among several Asian nations, including Japan. The Asian economic tumble has revealed the fallacy of an essentialist Asianism discourse, which associates the Asian economic miracle with primordial Asian values based upon the exclusive binarism between East and West (e.g., Huntington 1993). What has become more prominent — and this book provides some useful analyses — is the emergence of popular Asianism and Asian dialogues whose main feature is not Asian values or traditional culture but capitalist consumer/popular culture. In this sense, the recent crisis has revealed that it is the multifarious Asian response to the global spread of West-dominated capitalist modernities that has given new momentum to the meaning of being Asian in the new millennium.

There are, therefore, various new and still emerging Asian modernities whose distinctiveness and commonality have been articulated through a forced experience of indigenising Western cultural influences. The cultural and commercial interaction between these modernities provides the material analysed in this volume. We interpret these processes without, on the one hand, resorting to an essentialist conception of 'Asia', defined in clearly demarcated, authentic and traditional culture and identity. On the other hand, we reject the idea that the impact of West-dominated cultural globalisation homogenises Asian cultures, or indeed that Asia can simply replicate Western modernities (see Iwabuchi 2002). So, there are two broad dimensions to the analysis of intra-Asian cultural traffic, one that the cultural mixing of 'the local' and 'the foreign' (the West) is a common practice in the formation of non-Western modernities, and secondly that the 'traffic' can be a site for contestation as well as dialogue among non-Western countries. Depending on the context, the indigenisation of Western cultures can be a source of unequal cultural power among Asian nations. This cultural power is generated by the activity of transnational cultural industries, creating a common ground for dialogue among Asian nations as they articulate new ('impure') Asian identities alongside 'original' cultural imaginaries, a sign of the irreducible difference in the mode of Asian modernity which leads to the reproduction of Western Orientalist cultural othering in Asian contexts.

The chapters in the volume focus on the two interrelated issues: the development of transnational media systems and the acceleration of people's cross-border movement (Appadurai 1996; García Canclini 1995). Both issues have drastically transformed the landscape of hitherto clearly demarcated national/cultural imaginaries in the world by making people's contact with cultural others and other lifestyles more immediate and reciprocal and thus cultivating various modes of new transnational connections and imaginations. The work here attends to how these globalising forces, together with lingering Western cultural hegemony, have contradictorily and disjunctively promoted dialogues, contests and asymmetries among the multiple indigenised modernities in Asia.

The issues addressed in this volume are: how intra-Asian cultural traffic of popular and consumer culture (such as TV, music, film, advertising and commodities such as fashion and character goods) has produced a new mode of cross-cultural fertilisation and Asian modernities which cannot be a mere copy of Western counterparts; how Asian and Western transnational cultural industries compete and co-operate in marketing local popular/consumer culture in Asian markets — how Asian transnational cultural industries have exploited 'Asianness' and the sense of cultural commonality in marketing

popular/consumer cultural products in the region, and how it is similar to and/or different from the exploitation of popular cultural flows by nationalist discourses; how such newly articulated 'Asianness' promotes the (re)construction of Asian identity within Asia and reconfigures Asian diasporic identities in Western countries through the consumption of Asian popular culture; and how asymmetrical power relations among Asian nations are articulated through intra-Asian tourism and consumption of Asian popular/consumer culture in the organisation of the invention of traditions and nostalgic longing for an Asian (tourist) gaze which points to an oriental Orientalism against other Asian nations.

Methodologically, the innovative theoretical paradigm shift is based upon concrete empirical analysis of interaction between different Asian national cultures relative to indigenising Western cultural influences with the advent of global capitalism. Participants are from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, media and cultural studies, sociology, and literature, but their works are strongly characterised by interdisciplinary investigation. The papers analyse how such intra-Asian flows (re)produce or challenge socio-cultural formations of Western modernity, with relation to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and class in Asia, and play a part in constructing national/cultural identities in Asia and in articulating the discursive category of 'Asia'.

Cultural Flows Unsettling the Category of 'Asia'

In the first section, the authors question the beginnings and ends of 'Asia'. At the same time, the issue of exactly how one defines the 'culture' in cultural traffic arises and complicates the picture of exactly what flows between different spaces and how those spaces are constituted. In the chapter by Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke, the historical foundations of cultural traffic in the Indian Ocean are explored, as they remind us that the Indian Ocean was a global economy long before the relatively brief colonial period and that this Asia-centred globalisation is strongly asserting itself once again, rather than being a totally new phenomenon (Frank 1998). Their method is to explore stories of cultural flow in order to bring the relations between objects to the surface. They are concerned to reveal the links between politics, economics and social life in the nature of cultural movement and trade of small merchants. Indigenous groups participated energetically in the changes that were taking place in European trade to the region. They argue that pre-colonial India's trading networks placed it at the centre of the interregional world-system and that it was a crucial crossroad between Europe, Africa, the

Middle East, China and Southeast Asia. As this trade created enduring fluid connections and flows between different regions, it provides an exemplary transnational space to study, a space which defies a clear-cut separation between the different regions. The space was also one in which it is apparent that culture and commerce were interlocking realms of experience and that the movement of people, disease, religion went hand in hand with the flow of food, goods, technology and wealth.

Hamilton explores the meanings of popular religion associated with 'Chineseness' in Thailand, as a distinctive example of recent Chinese identity in Southeast Asia more generally. Hamilton argues that 'Chineseness' in Thailand has been re-evoked through the popularity of rituals originally brought from China in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as through the depiction of an 'imaginary China' in 'sword and ghost' films and popular television series set in an undefined Chinese past. The significance of China as an identity under late modernity is shown to be constantly transforming, taken on by Chinese descendants strategically depending on social needs. Although the practices confirming 'Chineseness' in this context would continue to exist without television, magazines and cinema, the mass media significantly enhance their significance and vitality.

Michael Keane's chapter concerns cultural traffic in television formats in the People's Republic of China. The formats in question originate primarily in Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong and are developed within those sites. Following their successful transition to the Mainland, they inevitably spread virus-like among Chinese satellite and cable stations. However, rather than exemplifying cultural imperialism, format exchange refashions a distinctive pan-Asian television subject. To demonstrate this, he provides some historical background to traffic of generic formats in relation to Chinese television drama, dating shows, game shows and children's television programmes that have either been licensed or pirated.

In Chua Beng-Huat's chapter, the way in which both Taiwan and Singapore are oriented towards the Hokkien language is explored. The dominant 'Taiwanese' language is *Minnan*. The same language is known as *Hokkien* 'dialect' in Singapore, the language of the largest number of Chinese in Singapore. Both *Minnan* and *Hokkien* are suppressed by the desire of the respective governments of Taiwan and Singapore in preference to developing Mandarin as the 'common' and 'unifying' Chinese language. In Taiwan, Mandarin, derived from the 'Mainland' and imposed as the 'national' language is to native Taiwanese, the language of the coloniser. In Singapore, Mandarin is promoted as the 'unifying' language of the Chinese in a multiracial society, suppressing sub-ethnic or dialect identities, including *Hokkien*. The Taiwan

independence movement has reasserted the locals' determination to use *Minnan* as the Taiwanese ethno-nationalist language. To speak the language is thus a political act. Although in Singapore *Hokkien* has an everyday existence that is denied in government-controlled mass media, it is the common language that has facilitated the traffic of popular cultural material, such as movies and popular songs, from Taiwan to Singapore, to be enthusiastically received by the less educated classes. However, the politics of *Minnan* in Taiwan is transformed by the politics of *Hokkien* in Singapore in this reception. Chua thus sees the means through which languages that have migrated with populations throughout Asia may become enmeshed in contemporary political meanings.

Orientalising and Self-Orientalising: Constructions of Asian 'Others'

The next set of papers explores a tension within Asian nations between the desire for pan-Asianness and the contemporary assertion of national cultural meaning. Mitchell's chapter examines the Singapore pop musician Dick Lee as a potent example of intra-Asian pop cultural traffic. Dick Lee, with his pan-Asian lyrics, has been hugely successful throughout Southeast Asia and Japan. Mitchell explores the performances and argues that Lee's focus on expressing a deliberate and self-conscious pan-Asianness is through a parodic self-Orientalisation. While Lee is celebrated in Singapore for his success, he fills a contradictory space: his positive Orientalism is similar to the nationalist project of the Singaporean state, yet at the same time some of his lyrics are banned. His attempts at forming a syncretic popular music are part musical flows around a flourishing market, crossing borders and overcoming language differences, but Lee is no doubt a pivotal player in the Asian pop music scene as he balances the notion of a pan-Asian identity with the use of clever parodying and inversion of Western imagery and musical idioms.

Wan-ling Wee's chapter examines Singapore's 1997 and 1999 productions, funded by the Japan Foundation, of an Asian *Lear* by flamboyant director Ong Keng Sen. Not only does the play deal with issues related to being a multicultural Singaporean, but it also questions the meanings behind being 'Asian'. The reformulation of this canonical Western play by Asian artists revealed the many complex ways in which history, tradition and cultural influences may be disrupted and interrogated in cultural productions such as this one. Wee argues that this play was an important site for Singapore to work through some contemporary re-imaginings of itself: the urge to be cosmopolitan; Singapore's desire is to place itself alongside the other wealthy

nations of the world, especially those of the West. However, rather than replicating the West–the Rest division or attempting to rewrite it, Wee suggests that *Lear* revealed the multiple ways in which cross-cultural and intercultural connections and movements are intertwining Asia and the West in much more complex formations. His final statement encapsulates a theme expressed in many of the other chapters, that ‘understanding the “West within” should help us to come to terms better with the violence it took to become modern Asian societies’.

Koichi Iwabuchi’s chapter explores the different ways in which ‘Asia’ is imagined in Japan, through an analysis of the different forms of popular cultural traffic to Japan. His research on the reception of Hong Kong films and pop stars in Japan reveals not only the nostalgic longing of a Japan which is perceived as degraded by its own modernity but also paradoxically reveals the sense of proximity and economic and temporal likeness shared with Hong Kong. It is at these moments, Iwabuchi argues, that the notion of Japanese superiority is questioned and redefined while Japanese identity is itself placed under critical evaluation. This does not lead, however, to a deconstruction of the notion of ‘Asia’ in Japan but rather reinforces many binaries and historically rooted imaginaries about the region and Japan’s place in it. The nostalgia experienced through consuming Asian popular cultural products in Japan arises out of a sense of discomfort in the present moment. The longing for a pure past is evidenced in Japanese media representations of, and backpacking trips to, developing countries in Asia. The desire of Japan to consume Asia is ultimately the basis for asymmetrical relations, but, Iwabuchi concludes, ‘the imagining of a modern, intimate Asian is still based upon the reconstruction of an oriental Orientalism’.

Dis/Empowering Negotiations in Asian Consumer Popular Culture

In the final set of papers, the authors discuss the different ways in which cultural traffic may reassert new forms of inequality or inequity. Thomas argues that popular culture in Vietnam currently documents a momentous upheaval in the relations among the public, the media and the state. The social and cultural transformations that are taking place are potently manifest in the energetic response of the public to several realms of East Asian popular culture in the form of Taiwanese soap operas, Hong Kong videos, Cantopop, and Japanese computer games and animation. In Vietnam, these cultural products mark out a terrain for unexpressed popular protest. East Asian popular culture in Vietnam signifies the possibilities and desires for affluence, accumulation

and personal freedom and, in doing so, conjures up new forms of society in a nation experimenting with its response to the suddenly expanding role of the media. The coalescence of popular culture with modernity and mass consumption in Vietnam has released a storm of desire for the products and consumer cultures of East Asia. At the same time, the specificities of the engagement of the Vietnamese public with East Asian popular culture indicates that these products are indigenised in culturally meaningful ways to dynamically construct dimensions of a national identity not fabricated by the state but, rather, in opposition to the regime. The reception of East Asian cultural products is part of a process of the popular reinscription of images of modernity into the making of the future Vietnamese nation-state. Thomas argues in this paper that the new obsession with East Asian images in Vietnam is integral to the contemporary fantasies of accumulation at the same time as it signifies a trajectory into a sense of belonging to an increasingly complex Asian imagined community.

Jing Zheng's research on the Taiwanese importation of teahouses into Beijing reveals the way in which these sites have become important locations for the reassertion of a distinctive 'Chinese' nostalgic style of furnishing, serving and eating. While the Taiwanese have set up these businesses primarily for financial gain, the unexpected results of the presence of these teahouses have been to initiate a flourishing new leisure activity for Beijing residents. The teahouses are astonishingly popular with the younger educated élites of the city, who are using the sites not just to assert their particular cosmopolitan style and taste but also to make connections with others. Zheng argues that although these new forms of communication cannot easily be defined as an emergent 'public sphere', they do reveal new modes of social, economic and political negotiation and sharing of ideas separate from state intervention. In this way, a cultural 'return' to China of something that has been reinvented and repackaged has the possibility of intervening in routine political and financial styles, and has the potential to have a major impact on a city's leisure and business activities.

Lise Skov's analysis of the highly globalised world of fashion in Hong Kong reveals the way in which the notions of 'traditional dress' or 'national costume' enter into the distinctive styles of contemporary Asian fashion. By carefully exploring numerous aspects of a Hong Kong fashion show and the meeting in Hong Kong of a group of fashion designers from Asia-Pacific countries, Skov discusses what is meant by 'Asian fashion' at the same time as questioning the assertion that Hong Kong is the regional centre of fashion. She then analyses the development of Hong Kong's export-oriented garment industry relative to its changing position in the globalised business sector.

Finally, Skov reflects on the issue of power in relation to Asian fashion in respect of the different economies and stages of development of the region's member nations as well as the financial backing of individual designers. She also indicates that although the power of fashion designers is in creating meanings, they are extremely dependent upon the money behind them to support cultural innovations. While she argues that Asia 'as a fashion region is culture in the making', she suggests that the internal differences in the region reaffirm power differentials and the capacity of some nations to affirm their centrality in 'making culture' over others.

Meaghan Morris in the final chapter reflects on the themes of the book. The chapter begins by returning to the question of how the notion of 'intra-Asian' arises and the way in which the notion of flow and movement itself is what frames the perceived boundaries. Morris then discusses the 'trafficking' of academic professional skills and transnational cultural studies scholarship and the transferability or not of academic expertise in the region. Interrogating the problems of employing theory separated from empirical work and of invoking terms like the 'West' for ease of analysis but without denying its fictitious quality, Morris argues that coming from an 'eccentric place', Australia, allows one an off-centre take on grand theory and on being a 'Westerner', and on the costs of over-generalisation of theory which fails to engage with the particularities of different locations. The argument that the complexity of local differences and empirical details deserve more attention is one that Morris then draws upon when she suggests that cultural studies can benefit from exploring the search for connections within the sphere of proximity. This seeking of cultural likeness and un-likeness is a more productive form of analysis than the search for identification in that it also recognises deviation and invention.

Re-theorising Asian Cultural Flows

While rich in empirical findings, the analysis of intra-Asian cultural traffic in the project will be a productive corrective to hitherto highly West-centred theorisation of cultural modernity. In recent years, the theories of modernity and modernisation have been criticised for their Eurocentric perspective. It is often argued that they give priority to time rather than to space, spatial differences being subsumed under a singular developmental time of Western modernity. Now that many non-Western countries have achieved a certain degree of modernisation, it is clear from the continuity with their own indigenous historical forms that they have not simply copied Western models.

With the emphasis being put more on space, academics are analysing cultural exchanges more laterally in relation to modernities in the plural (e.g., Featherstone et al. 1995). The same trend can be discerned in the discussion of 'globalisation'. Few would still argue that globalisation just facilitates homogenisation of the world based on Western modernity. What is becoming commonly held among scholars is an idea that two contradictory forces such as global-local, homogenisation-heterogenisation and sameness-diversity, operate simultaneously and interpenetrate each other (cf. Appadurai 1996; Featherstone et al. 1995; Robertson 1995; Hannerz 1996).

Although straightforward homogenisation theses have been thoroughly criticised, the arguments of heterogenisation, hybridisation and creolisation still tend not to transcend the West-the Rest paradigm. We still tend to think of global-local interactions by how the non-West responds to the West and to neglect how the non-Western countries 'rework' modernities (Ong 1996, 64). The globalisation of media and popular/consumer culture is still based upon an assumption of the unbeatable Western (American) domination, and the arguments are focussed on how the Rest resist, imitate or appropriate the West. There have been fascinating analyses of (non-Western) local consumption of Western media texts, which transcend a dichotomised perspective of global-local (Miller 1992, 1995). However, 'global' still tends to be exclusively associated with the West. A dynamic interaction among countries in the non-West has been seriously under-explored.

This book thus aims to forge a theoretical shift in the study of cultural globalisation from the West-the Rest paradigm, which until now has been privileged, to specific questions associated with the dialogue, rivalry and domination between non-Western modernities. We hope these contributions will stimulate and promote discussion and dialogue among Asian scholars regarding the emergent cultural issues of how the accelerating movement of goods, ideas, cultural products and finance in West-dominated globalisation processes have influenced the framing of transnational cultural traffic and encounters among Asian modernities.

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