

Feeling Asian Modernities

Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas

Edited by

Koichi Iwabuchi



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The image shows the Chinese characters for '香港大學' (Hong Kong University) rendered in a square word calligraphy style. Each character is contained within a square frame, and the overall composition is a vertical column of four squares. The characters are '香', '港', '大', and '學' from top to bottom.

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: Cultural Globalization and Asian Media Connections

Koichi IWABUCHI

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. The development of new patterns of regional media consumption has become no less conspicuous. 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, some preferred cultural products are not without “Asian flavor.” Youths in East/Southeast Asia, for example, might love *Titanic*, Harry Potter and Eminem, but are likely to be even more addicted to the latest products

of Asian popular culture such as Korean action films, Japanese romances, and Cantonese pop-music. Cultural globalization has accompanied the activation of intra-regional cultural flows.

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

The authors of this book aim to shed fresh light on the discussion of transnational cultural flows and the emerging regional cultural connections in East/Southeast Asia through a multifaceted examination of one of the most popularly consumed media products: Japanese TV dramas for the young. The recent transnational reach of Japanese TV dramas in East and Southeast Asia is unprecedented, and not simply in terms of the range and scale of diffusion. This reach is also significant in terms of the intense sympathy many young East/Southeast Asians have come to feel toward the characters in Japanese dramas, and the way they have learned to cope with the meanings of their own modern experiences through the urban lives depicted in Japanese TV dramas. Non-Western countries have tended to look to the West to interpret their own modern experiences in terms of their distance from Western 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 only 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 a modern popular cultural form, though highly commercialized, pleasurably evokes the juxtaposed similarity and difference among contemporaneous “Asian” modernities, something that American popular culture cannot achieve.

Through the empirical analysis of how Japanese youth dramas are (re)produced, circulated, regulated, and consumed in East and Southeast Asia, each chapter in this volume variously explores the ways in which intra-Asian cultural flows newly highlight cultural resonance and asymmetry in the region under the decentering processes of globalization. Key questions include: What is the nature of Japanese cultural power and influence in the region and how is it historically overdetermined? How is it similar to and different from “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? Do Japanese youth dramas cultivate some kind of transnational imagination and self-reflexive view towards one’s own culture and society?

Engaging these questions would make a significant contribution to the study 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, with some exceptions (e.g., Sinclair, Jacka, & Cunningham 1996), towards the ubiquity of Western media and popular culture. 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, resists, imitates, or appropriates the West. The studies of dynamic interactions in the East/Southeast Asian cultural flows examined in this book 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 the (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 pages, as a way to map out the structure of this volume, I will briefly introduce the main theoretical issues in the study of cultural transnationalism to which each chapter variously attends — the transnational industry alliance, representation of “Asian” cultural modernity, the 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 equally good arguments for complicating the straightforward idea of American mass culture’s homogenization of the world. 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 flows 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 differences of the world can be expressed and elucidated. As Hall (1991, p. 28) points out, this is a “peculiar form of homogenization” which does not destroy but rather “recognize[s] and absorb[s] those differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world.” Rather than simply replicating uniformity, transnational cultural power has become deeply intermingled with local indigenizing processes in a way in which cultural diversity is organized through globally shared cultural formats (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 simultaneously enter various markets such as global, supra-national regional, national, and local, the imperatives are to establish a business tie-up with others at each level, whether in the form of buyout or collaboration, and 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 worldwide cultural industries, including non-Western players, the structure of transnational cultural power has been dispersed, but has also become more solid and ubiquitous.

In this sense, the rise of Japanese cultural exports 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 the 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 to 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 a similar vein, the recent spread of Japanese TV dramas in Asian markets also owes much to transnational collaboration among media industries in the region through which the appeal of Japanese popular culture has been highlighted and its promotion synchronized with trends in the Japanese market. This increasing affiliation between Japanese and other Asian media industries is not the outcome of a well-calculated strategy by the 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 been more intense and effective in facilitating the circulation of Japanese TV dramas in Asian markets. The 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, which has from its inception always broadcasted 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 to STAR TV's strategy of localization for Chinese language markets in East Asia. In Taiwan, the rapidly developing 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 a relatively inexpensive subscription fee has brought about a new pattern of TV viewing for more narrowly focused target audiences, and this has led to the circulation of Japanese TV dramas as 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 incentives for forging business tie-ups with Taiwanese media industries for the programs' 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, as the chapters of Hu, Davis and Yeh of Part 3 show, the spread of an "Asian" consumer technology, the VCD (video compact disc). These two chapters give us great insights into the underground political

economy of the VCD, the new way of consuming TV dramas engendered by it, and the process in which Japanese media industries are completely left out of the transnationalization of Japanese TV dramas

While this consumer technology has been developed and marketed by prominent manufacturers such as Sony and Panasonic, VCDs are not available in Japan and VCDs of Japanese dramas are largely unlicensed, pirated discs manufactured outside of Japan. While it is difficult to know exactly how this underground industry conducts business, it seems that groups in Hong Kong and Taiwan take the initiative in manufacturing VCD titles, with operations dispersed in East and Southeast Asia. Made-in-Japan TV dramas are repackaged, complete with Chinese subtitles and attractive packaging, for transnational circulation in Asia and beyond, but with the notable exception of Japan. The pirated VCD's audiovisual quality is lower than DVDs, and even worse than licensed VHS copies, but the flexibility and cheapness of the medium is precisely its strength. Through surprisingly swift addition of subtitling, Chinese-language audiences can purchase at cut-rate prices nearly every Japanese TV drama just a few days to 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 their favorite scenes of the dramas repeatedly and intensively. Through the illegitimate East Asian trade in VCDs, Japanese TV dramas have gained new transnational cultural meanings and connections outside Japan.

Articulating the Global and the Local in 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 we can explain

the ways in which the globally diffused images of “modern” living 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 was an epoch-making change in the sophistication of Japanese TV drama production in the early 1990s. The better organization of plots, subtle use of music, and sympathetic representation of urban youth’s experiences have drastically increased the number of young viewers, particularly women, in Japan. It is necessary to clarify at this point in the discussion the kind of Japanese TV dramas that are analyzed in this book. The Japanese TV industry produces various kinds of dramas, such as period dramas, samurai dramas, home dramas, detective dramas, soap operas, and situation comedies, but the type of Japanese drama that is most well-received in East and Southeast Asia as well as in Japan, and thus mainly concerns this book, is the one that depicts youths’ love affairs, friendship, and working life in urban settings (i.e., Tokyo). While this kind of drama has been widely known in Chinese-speaking regions such as Hong Kong and Taiwan as “Japanese idol dramas,” a term coined by Star TV, “trendy dramas” is the term commonly used in Japan. However, as several chapters in this volume make it clear, trendy dramas are, strictly speaking, those produced from the late 1980s up to the early 1990s. The eye-catching features of trendy dramas were their depictions of stylish urban lifestyles and trendy nightspots abundant with extravagant designer clothes and accessories, sets with chic interior designs, and the latest pop music, all of which clearly reflected the then prevailing highly materialistic consumerism Japanese young people enjoyed under the so-called bubble-economy. As Ōta Tōru, a prominent Fuji TV drama producer, reflected in his speech included in this volume on the development of youth-oriented drama production since the late 1980s, the makers of trendy dramas did not spend much time on narrative sophistication and developing the themes of their dramas, but devoted themselves to stylishly depicting various kinds of consumerist trends in order to attract a large numbers of young viewers who hitherto had not watched TV dramas.

However, a highly popular and influential TV drama, *Tokyo Love Story*, which aired from January through March 1991, further

significantly improved upon the production values of “trendy dramas.” Since then, popular youth dramas have become more story-oriented, sympathetically depicting young people’s yearnings for love, friendship, work, and dreams, even though in *Tokyo Love Story* popular idols, consumer trends, and the Tokyo setting were still vital factors in the drama’s production. In this sense, the youth-oriented popular dramas dealt with in this volume, such as *Tokyo Love Story*, *Long Vacation*, *Love Generation*, *Over Time*, and *Yamatoadeshiko* (The Ideal Japanese Woman), are actually “post-trendy dramas,” even though such dramas are still called “trendy dramas” in Japan and the two terms are used interchangeably in some chapters of this volume.

Three chapters of Part 1 look at developments and changes in Japanese TV drama production and its representational style in the 1990. Tsai looks at the development of the genrification of love stories through the rise of women scenario writers. With particular focus on Kitagawa Eriko who has written phenomenally popular love stories such as *Long Vacation*, Tsai analyzes Kitagawa’s narratives that are “attentive to love’s nuanced emotionality,” and examines the position of female authorship in the production of a love story by considering a wider picture of male-dominated Japanese TV drama production as well as Kitagawa’s inter-textual strategy to make her own works and herself prominent. Reflecting on his own experience of making numerous popular TV dramas, such as *Tokyo Love Story* and *The 101st Proposal*, Ōta Tōru of Fuji TV tells us from the producer’s point of view how he initiated a new era of Japanese TV drama production in the late 1980s (trendy dramas) and in the early 1990s (post-trendy dramas) to attract young audiences. Ōta’s frank reflection enhances our understanding of a successful producer knack for producing popular love stories in terms of the representation of certain kinds of femininity and how Japanese TV drama producers are exclusively concerned with the Japanese domestic market, without a thought for other Asian markets.

Needless to say, the producer’s tale does not necessarily match researchers’ critical accounts. Ito’s chapter constructively critiques Japanese youth dramas in terms of their 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 could hardly be described as such. Based on comparative textual analysis of three representative post-trendy dramas since 1991 — *Tokyo Love Story*, *Long Vacation*, and *Yamatonadeshiko* — Ito argues that these dramas represent a new attractive femininity but barely transcend the familiar narrative; femininity that is not submissive to men but independently and actively seeking love and work, yet, in the final instance, not quite disobedient to men. Japanese TV dramas represent youths’ concerns in an appealing manner, which seemingly reflects 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 can, in their own way, pleasurably relate to when living their own lives.

Entangled Perception of Cultural Distance

Admittedly, the representational style of young peoples’ lives in Japanese dramas is not substantially different from Hollywood aesthetics. On the contrary, as discussed earlier, it is a kind of popular cultural form that is deeply imbricated in US cultural imaginaries. However, as Ang argues in *Afterword*, this should not lead to the disregard of culturally specific meanings and feelings that young people in Asia sympathetically find through non-Western popular culture because 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, dreams, and romance that are represented through Japanese TV dramas have much to do with their specific modes and meanings of modern living 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 Asian contexts, such as the development of urban consumerism, the expansion of middle class, 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, p. 22–4) 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.

In Part 2, five chapters elucidate various ways in which the encoding of Japanese youth dramas that represent young people 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. As many regions are excluded in the analyses — notably urban areas of China where Japanese TV dramas are also becoming sympathetically received by the youths — this part does not pretend to thoroughly cover East/Southeast Asia. The dramas analyzed are not wide-ranging either. Neither should the findings in the chapters be considered to be generalizable in each society or nation analyzed. Rather, as Ko and Leung suggest in their chapters, such a conception of “local = national audiences” as a coherent entity constituting a clearly demarcated locality itself needs to be critically interrogated in the first place. Each chapter instead tries to 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 modern living in a specific socio-historical conjuncture of each urban area: Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Bangkok.

For Taiwan viewers, Ko contends, Japanese TV dramas conjure up an intertwined perception of the “dream” and “reality” of urban modernity. The Tokyo depicted in the Japanese dramas signifies a space

of “real imaginary” where youth in Taipei feel dreams would come true in the 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. Lee’s chapter attends to the development of Taiwanese tourism to Japan that the prevalence of Japanese TV dramas has generated. He analyzes how young Taiwanese are motivated to see the “real” Japan through the consumption of “post-text” travelogues and how they actually experience it in their journeys. Lee shows various ways in which the imagining of the “dreamworld” Japan meets the actual experience of Japan via drama-tours, and the ways in which the actual encounter discourages, confirms, or strengthens Taiwanese young people’s sense of identification with Japan. Leung’s chapter 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 in Hong Kong derive different empowering messages, 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 depict young people’s concerns in life are still relatively uncommon, Japanese youth dramas to some extent appear liberating and emancipating. MacLachlan and Chua’s chapter elucidates how young women in Singapore eagerly watch the Japanese youth drama, *Over Time*, which is perceived as representing women’s sexuality in an “open” manner that counters the state-driven, rigid control of sexuality in Singapore. Their chapter enriches the discussion of cultural proximity. They find that the depiction of women’s sexuality in Japanese dramas is seen by Singaporean (ethnically Chinese) young women as more acceptable than its depiction in American programs, and its “Asianness” is usefully enunciated to counter the state’s intervention in private matters. However, Singaporean women also consider it unrealistic and unfavorable to put the sexuality depicted in Japanese dramas into practice. Siriyuvasak also points out the discrepancy between feelings and actual practice, but in a more

pessimistic manner. Siriyuvasak argues that Thai youths find Japanese TV dramas and 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 holds reservations about whether transient semiotic empowerment could 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 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. Japan's historically constituted Orientalist conception of Asia as well as its desire for connecting — and 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). Now is a time when Japan is beginning to re-assert 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 Japanese popular culture's encounter with other Asian countries in the 1990s is more multifaceted, 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, the 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's chapter elucidates, in Taiwan, young people'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 an 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 describes the Taiwan's postcolonial cultural context in which Japanese TV dramas are most intensively received in Asia.

The other former colony, Korea, has a rather different postcolonial trajectory. The inflow of Japanese popular culture is still partly banned (notably TV programs and popular music), although it is expected that the policy will soon be entirely abolished. Two chapters of Part 4 explore Korea's somewhat obscured transnational connections with Japanese popular cultural imaginary. Park's chapter offers an intriguing dimension to the translocal consumption of Japanese TV dramas. Despite the official prohibition of the inflow of elements of Japanese popular culture, 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 those Asian TV dramas have different resonance and meanings to Korean diasporas in Los Angeles. Residence in the US offers not just a context in which Korean-American youths routinely meet both people from Japan in everyday life and the culture 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's chapter analyzes Korean producers' reworking of Japanese youth dramas. While Korean audiences cannot regularly watch Japanese TV dramas within Korea, Korean TV producers have constantly watched them and, overtly or covertly, taken on their style

in terms of story, settings, and properties for their own drama productions. In developing youth drama formats that are seemingly similar to their Japanese counterparts in early 1990s, the Korean TV industry has been a target of strong criticism for allegedly disgracefully imitating the culture of its former colonizer. However, Lee's chapter elucidates how Korean TV producers have not just imitated but also creatively appropriated and transformed Japanese TV dramas into their own productions, so much so that Korean youth dramas now sweep over East-Asian markets, including Japan, in what is now the well-known phenomenon of *Hanliu* (Korean Wave). The number of Korean titles is small compared to their Japanese counterparts, but their ratings are even higher than Japanese dramas in East Asian markets. Korean popular dramas also depict youths' lives in urban settings, but in contrast to the "small universe" of youths depicted in Japanese TV dramas, whose isolation from the complexity of the real world makes young audiences emotionally involved in the dramatized reality, family relationships are an integral part of Korean drama texts. This feature does not just enable the dramas to successfully capture a broader range in the ages of viewers, but also makes young viewers of East Asia feel Korean dramas are more "realistic" than Japanese dramas. According to my brief interviews conducted in Taipei in March 2002, young viewers greatly sympathized with Korean dramas because the youths' lives intertwined with family relationships seem more similar to real Taiwanese situations, and thus Korean dramas more appealingly depict the meanings of living modern life 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 a drama based on the Japanese comic series about high school students' lives, *Hana yori dango*. There is no original Japanese drama based on the comic series, but Taiwan's TV 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 the Taiwanese idol group, F4, and original theme songs. The program has been phenomenally popular not just in Taiwan but also in Singapore, Indonesia and China. The latter development has occurred despite the ban of its broadcast as

Chinese authorities deem that love affairs and violence in the high school depicted in the drama will have a bad influence on the thought and behavior of their 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 indigenizing 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 cannot be fully addressed in this volume, 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. In one point, Siriyuvasak’s chapter, which situates the recent influx of Japanese popular culture in the development of middle-class consumerism in Thailand, is an important reminder. 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 inattention to the fact that increasing intra-Asian cultural flows newly highlight structural asymmetry and uneven power relations in the region. As suggested earlier, 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 that 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 critically and rigorously. Popular culture does connect people in the distance crisscrossing the world, 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. We hope this collection at least will make some contribution to the generating of further comparative and collaborative research projects in the future.

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