Asian Popular Culture: The global (dis)continuity

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BOOK REVIEWS

Asian Popular Culture: The global (dis)continuity, edited by ANTHONY Y. H. FUNG, Abingdon & New York, Routledge, 2013, US$53.95 (paperback), 288 pp.

This edited volume provides interesting snapshots of Asian pop culture today which is constantly reinventing itself within the broader context of cultural globalization. Asian societies have long been regarded as occupying a low status in the global pop culture hierarchy until Japan and South Korea emerged as regional and even global centers of pop culture production and, more recently, China developed into a lucrative cultural market. While getting more visibility and recognition for its aesthetic and commercial values beyond the region, the forms and content of Asian pop culture and its (dis) continuity to global culture have been determined not only by profit-driven strategies of transnational cultural corporations, but also by political, economic, and social dynamics in and among Asian societies. Importantly, Asian pop culture today is situated in a specific historical time zone where culture is increasingly aligned with the economy and with nations' branding agendas in both government and popular discourses, which can be seen with the idea of "creative industries" and "content industries". However, culture's position as a promising business and source of intellectual property in the post-industrial, new-media age is not always stable because it is often regarded as a type of public good and part of "free knowledge" on the Internet. When pop culture takes the form of free culture, it tends to move more quickly and easily across national borders while overcoming government censorship and other regulations. Another key factor that has encouraged the growth of Asian pop culture is the arrival of the young, affluent, and technologically savvy generations in the region. Following in Japan and Hong Kong's footsteps, South Korea and Taiwan transformed themselves into consumerist societies in the late 1980s and 1990s. Currently, China is witnessing the rise of affluent classes whose cultural tastes could have huge influence on Asian cultural markets, potentially determining current and future strategies of global and Asian cultural businesses.

It is within these dynamic contexts that this book explores four different relationships between Asian pop culture and global cultural industries. As a whole, the book takes a nuanced approach, avoiding simplistic dualism such as the West vs. the rest (Asia) or cultural dominance vs. resistance. While being conscious of the Western cultural hegemony over Asian and global cultural markets, the chapters in the book look into different formations of their relationship – global continuity, discontinuity, cultural domestication, and cultural antagonism. These formations are contingent on multifaceted power relations and negotiations between and across different types of constituents of cultural globalization, such as cultural forms, narratives, pop cultural imaginaries and their interpretations, cultural business operations, government policies, cultural producers' capacity and aspirations, and cultural consumers' own agenda and demand. The complexity and tension found in their negotiations imply the ambivalence embedded in these four different

formations. For instance, cultural continuity and domestication entail cultural discontinuity and antagonism, and the latter occurs despite or because of the former. This book's distinction between continuity and discontinuity and between domestication and antagonism comes from political economic perspectives that view cultural globalization as conditioned mainly by business strategies of transnational media corporations and their use of global resources and talents, and national governments' direct responses to it. Meanwhile, the popularity and penetration of Western, non-Asian, and hybrid cultural forms and genres in Asian societies seems to be taken for granted as a backdrop against which we discuss the aforementioned four formations of cultural globalization in Asia.

Part I of the book focuses on "global continuity". One example is the Harry Potter fandom in China, which assists the affluent youth's self-identification as globally connected and consumerist middle class (Chapter 2). Another example is the Disneyland in Hong Kong, where Mainland Chinese tourists experience Western modernity and way of life on Chinese soil (Chapter 3); comparatively, the Disneyland in Tokyo adopts more localized strategies and mainly operates as a popular leisure facility where the Japanese experience Western culture in a less conscious way. As these examples show, cultural continuity is driven no less by global cultural brands' power to relate to transnational consumers' desire than by global corporations' business strategies. Yet, it is not always a straightforward and direct process. As Disney's publication business shows, cultural continuity may involve transnational division of labor, the management of joint ventures, multiple localization, and cross-cultural (re-) identification of a cultural product (Chapter 4). Meanwhile, global magazines' franchise businesses in Taiwan and China have become more dependent on localization strategies, where cultural meanings are renegotiated between global centers, local publishers, and local audiences (Chapters 5 and 6).

Part II highlights Asian pop culture's "discontinuity" to global cultural business and the pop culture canon. Chapter 7 finds that Singaporean English-language indie music is unlocalized and unglobalized at the same time although the music itself is a manifestation of its sharing of musical form and aesthetics with British Indie music. Meanwhile, the making and consuming of reggae music in Thailand has necessitated the complex process of localization, delocalization, and authentication with(out) linkage to the reggae music industry outside Thailand (Chapter 8). In both cases, the yearning for global continuity and connection arises from artistic rather than business concerns. Meanwhile, it appears difficult to make sense of the Taiwanese games market (Chapter 9) and the growth of the South Korean cinema (Chapter 10) within the framework of cultural discontinuity. The former highlights the global and regional continuity and proximity found with game consumption in Taiwan. The latter finds the Korean cinema's artistic and commercial shift from inbound globalization to outbound globalization, a process that has accompanied the change of Korean cultural policy agenda from "protection of national culture" to "cultural export and soft power".

Part III explores the issue of "cultural domestication" by interrogating the global consumption of Japanese anime, especially the Pokémon series (Chapter 11), and the Japanese government's promotion of its pop culture abroad under the banner of "Cool Japan" (Chapter 12). Both chapters present thorough accounts of these phenomena but their linking to cultural domestication looks unclear. Pokémon as a global cultural brand and imaginary is indebted to its localization strategies and globalized

distribution. Inasmuch as it is domesticated to Western cultural hegemony, however, it is also seen as exercising capitalistic and consumerist ideological power across borders. The nature of such domestication is complicated as anime in general still is part of a subculture in Western societies and its circulation is intermediated primarily by anime fans themselves. In the meantime, the Cool Japan policy aims at something closer to outbound globalization of Japanese culture; however, considering Japanese cultural policy's non-interventionist mode, we could expect the policy to be less powerful in terms of resource mobilization and policy implementation than its Chinese or South Korean counterparts. Japanese pop culture's linkage with global cultural markets would still be shaped by negotiations between its subcultural and commercial imperatives rather than government intervention.

Part IV focuses on the "cultural antagonism" that emerged when the Chinese government imposed tight control over the operation of global cultural businesses (Chapter 13) and re-nationalized Hong Kong's film industry (Chapter 14). If the antagonism was felt and interpreted politically in the past, it is now viewed more as an economic issue with China becoming a huge cultural market and the responses of regional/global cultural businesses being shaped by commercial reasoning. The chapters indicate two different routes to resolve the antagonism: first, boosting independent companies and learning from transnational corporations; and second, the self-sinolization of the cultural industries on the border of China – such as in Hong Kong and potentially in Taiwan. Both routes would entail strengthened global continuity and domestication.

As a whole, this book successfully provides a range of critical analyses of Asian pop culture and cultural globalization. Meanwhile, there are a few issues that could have been taken into account. First, the book presents Asia as a collection of individual nations/societies while the power and roles of Asia as a region, where the contour of Asian pop culture is negotiated and global culture mediated and hybridized, are seldom discussed. Similarly, the book could have studied the emerging pop cultural connections and the hierarchy among Asian societies. Second, the book could have taken a broadened perspective of Asian pop culture consumers because, very often, they operate as key intermediaries for regional and global pop culture distribution and sharing, accelerating the global cultural continuity. Third, across many chapters, these consumers are identified as middle classes or middle-class youth. Without explaining what middle class means in Asian societies and how these classes have been formed, however, such identification remains unexplored. Perhaps, some of us would suggest that pop culture consumers in Asia could be better understood as a generation (youth) rather than an economic class. These two dissimilar identifications would lead us to different expectations of Asian pop culture: as a manifestation of consumerism and connectedness to the global capitalist market economy, and as a means to express youth identity that would vary from that of those who are better-off to that of those whose life is increasingly defined with the consequences of the neoliberalization, such as unemployment, a lack of permanent job, and low social mobility.

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