

## **Globalization and Cinema Regionalization in East Asia**

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### Abstract

In a region where, for a long time, international cultural flow between neighbors were scarce and thus, where regionally common popular culture was arguably American mass culture, a cultural flow between Korea, Taiwan, Japan, China, and other countries have recently and increasingly become active. More television dramas, films, and pop music from one of these countries are consumed in their neighbors, and co-production between these countries is in vogue. What is notable is that Korea, the country that used to be considered a backwater in terms of popular cultural production and international exchanges, plays an important role in the media regionalization in East Asia. By inquiring into the recent success of the Korean popular cultural and cinema industries in particular, as well as Korean initiatives in cinema regionalization in East Asia, this paper will further explore the concept of cultural globalization.

Key words: Asian cinema, postcolonialism, hybridization, Korean popular culture, Korean media, Korean wave, media regionalization

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Typical understanding of globalization might be as follows: the global spread of neoliberal deregulation, with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and transnational corporations (TNCs) playing the key role, in conjunction with information technology development, has virtually eliminated the traditional constraints that nation states place on the flow of capital and commodities, opening a new era of global economic integration (Hirst and Thompson 1996). Such an understanding of globalization seems compatible with a process in which the end of the Cold War has facilitated the dispersion of liberal democracy across the world, consolidating U.S. hegemony. Echoing this, media

or cultural globalization is often understood to mean a situation in which U.S. cultural products dominate global markets, characterized by *Americanization*, *CocaColonization*, or *McDonaldization* of global culture (Ritzer 2002). However, what has recently developed in East Asian media markets provides an opportunity to revisit and challenge the common assumption of media globalization.

In a region where, for a long time, international cultural flow between neighbors were scarce and thus, where regionally common popular culture was arguably American mass culture, a cultural flow between Korea, Taiwan, Japan, China, and other countries have recently and increasingly become active.<sup>1</sup> More television dramas, films, and pop music from one of these countries are consumed in their neighbors, and co-production between these countries is in vogue. What is notable is that Korea, the country that used to be considered a “backwater” in terms of popular cultural production and international exchanges (Segers 2000), plays an important role in the media regionalization in East Asia. By inquiring into the recent success of the Korean popular cultural and cinema industries in particular, as well as Korea’s initiatives in cinema regionalization in East Asia, this paper will further explore the concept of cultural globalization.

### **Understanding Globalization and Culture**

As noted before, globalization is understood as a characteristic process beginning in the late twentieth century. In this process, the media are viewed as its main channel,

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<sup>1</sup> Except for a case when “North Korea” is specifically noted, “Korea” in this paper refers to the “Republic of Korea” or “South Korea.”

especially when they are largely under the control of Western-based TNCs. This perspective of a world dominated by Western—American in particular—cultural products through transnational media, is to a great extent affected by the cultural imperialism thesis. A problematization of the implications of cultural imperialism-cum-globalization, first by looking at the epistemology of transnational cultural flow, and secondly through international communication research, will constitute the theoretical and analytical framework of this paper.

Both the cultural imperialism thesis, and similarly, the unilateral view of globalization place their theoretical basis on cultural essentialism. Therefore, at the same time that developing countries protest against cultural imperialism, they praise the cultural purity of their native, homegrown cultures (Morley and Robins 1995; Shim 2004). Salman Rushdie (1999), however, criticizes such a nativist view of culture by asking, “do cultures actually exist as separate, pure, defensible entities? Is not *mélange*, adulteration, impurity, pick’n’mix at the heart of the idea of the modern, and hasn’t it been that way for most of this all-shook-up century?” He further calls our attention to the potential of danger inherent in such an essentialist nationalism: “[D]oesn’t the idea of pure cultures, in urgent need of being kept free from alien contamination, lead us inexorably toward apartheid, toward ethnic cleansing, toward the gas chamber?” (Rushdie 1999). In the same vein, Homi Bhabha calls Serbian nationalists’ ethnic cleansing a “psychosis of patriotic fervor” (Bhabha 1994, 7). This view of postcolonial criticism teaches us that the culture is such as is not stagnant but continuously flowing, and the intrinsic attribute of cultural flow is *hybridization*. According to Ulf Hannerz (1996), world history has undergone a process of *creolization* and hybridization, marked

by centuries of osmosis between different cultural groups through immigration, international trade, wars, etc. Therefore, Yosefa Loshitzky argues that today's globalization is a "postmodern variation on the Hellenistic period" (Loshitzky 1996, 335). To put it differently, globalization has taken place throughout history, but has only proceeded with striking intensity in recent years. According to John Thompson:

Rather than assuming that prior to the importation of Western TV programmes etc. many Third World countries had indigenous traditions and cultural heritages which were largely unaffected by external pressures, we should see instead that the globalization of communication through electronic media is only the most recent of a series of cultural encounters, in some cases stretching back many centuries, through which the values, beliefs and symbolic forms of different groups have been superimposed on one another, often in conjunction with the use of coercive, political and economic power (Thompson 1995, 170).

Informed by such revised view of international cultural flow, this paper employs the postcolonial notion of hybridity for its conceptual tool for understanding cultural globalization.

Secondly, by emphasizing the global (or, sender side) in communication processes, the cultural imperialism school sees the global as having direct influence on the local (receiver side) (Chadha and Kavoori 2000; Schiller, 1969/1992). While this political economic research successfully provides a big picture view of TNC-controlled international communication structure and effectively reveals the pernicious impact of corporate control of the mass media, the cultural imperialism school, however, ignores the local as a force of resistance (Herman and McChesney 1997; Thussu 2000). In the

meantime, international communication research has been characterized by the sterile dichotomy between the cultural imperialism school and an “active audience” school, with the latter arguing that media content does not have direct, unmediated impact on the audience, for the audience actively interprets, negotiates and resists media messages (Morley 1992). In this polarity between the global (media) and the local (audiences), each school is obsessed with the question of “in whose interest” culture is produced and consumed, without embracing the question of “how” the global and local interact (Kraidy 2002).

I would suggest that such a stalemate in international communication research, characterized by the dichotomy of the global and local, can be remedied by the theory of hybridity, for it is a theory about *negotiation*, not *negation* (Bhabha 1994). As a mode of analysis, the postcolonial perspective of hybridity challenges and revises binary structures of opposition, often found in the relations posited to exist between the Third and First Worlds, or those of the Marxist and the capitalist; it attempts to open up a third, in-between space. As “the in-between space . . . carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha 1994, 56), an analysis of the region—that is the third, in-between space of the global and local—is important in understanding transnational cultural flow. Fortunately, the recent rise of Korean popular culture in the East Asian region challenges the easy binarism between the global and local, and is thus suitable for this mid-range analysis.

Media regionalization is a relatively new but increasingly dominant phenomenon in the non-West. After successfully developing local media industries, partly thanks to viewers’ preference for local and regional materials, Latin American television has been

cited as a celebrated case for countering American cultural imperialism, and for media regionalization since the 1980s (Oliveira 1993; Straubhaar 2005). Beginning in the 1990s, there have been signs of media regionalization in Asia, referring to the increasing intra-regional flow of Asian programming and exchanges of expertise and resources within the region (Chadha and Kavoori 2000). This trend was arguably started with the launch of Star TV in 1991. By airing regionalized inflections of Western programming, such as the featuring of Asian singers on Channel V in its package, Star TV catered to Asian audiences, developing the region into a more unified television market. Other TNCs also realized that it was not enough to beam “global” programming in Asia. The American channel ESPN made an agreement with Star TV to form a joint venture ESPN Star Sports and has since covered pan-Asian sport events to suit local tastes. CNN, MTV, BBC and Disney have also featured regionally-produced, regionally-oriented programs. Stimulated by this development, quite a few regional players of Asian origin have entered the game. Hong Kong-based TVBS caters to Chinese viewers across borders, and India-based Zee TV entertains a regional audience of Indian-origin as well as a South Asian diaspora that is scattered around the world (Thussu 2000).

There are at least two implications visible with the media regionalization trend. First, the global-local cultural interaction leads to hybrid cultures, or cultural fusion, blurring the boundaries between the national/indigenous culture and the global culture. Secondly, because the *region* is an in-between space for a contest between the dominant TNCs and the challenging local players, by exploring the region we may avoid a stalemate in the international communication research.

### **Cultural Flow in East Asia**

Before we go any further, a few epistemological limitations need to be explained. First, I would acknowledge that the horizons of East Asian cultural flow in this paper are inevitably conditioned by the fact that I am Korean. Given this, I would instead try to see this factor into a useful vantage point from which I can possibly offer a unique perspective on media and cultural flow in East Asia. Secondly, while the geographic reach of East Asia in this paper is supposed to cover both Northeast and Southeast Asia, the focuses are on Korea, Japan, and the region called Greater China, which includes Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, to say nothing of mainland China.

While the East Asian region was for a long time characterized by scarce cultural exchanges and U.S. hegemony in terms of the political economy and culture, there an indigenous structure of order did exist before the entry of Western imperialism. It was a hierarchy of prestige that placed China at the center, with Korea, Japan and Vietnam constituting a periphery (Eckert and Yi 1990; Miyake 1993). Although it is out of my reach to measure how active and in what range were the cultural flow between these East Asian countries at both the personal and popular levels, we can assume the existence of a structure of what Benedict Anderson (1994) calls “imagined communities.” In this civilized order, elites in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam shared a common classical literary tradition, such as found in the Four Books and the Three Classics, and built social systems following the prescription of this literature. However, with the Qing dynasty’s defeat in the Opium War (1839-42) this hierarchy of prestige began to disrupt, and Japan’s “Escape from Asia” campaign in the late nineteenth century dealt a final blow to



this East Asian order (Chi 2000). Since then, Japan had joined the ranks of Western colonialism in Asia until the end of the Second World War. After the Second World War, many East Asian countries plowed the road to “compressed development” against the background of the Cold War. In this process, they could not afford to promote cultural exchanges with their neighbors, as they were busy focusing on economic development and nation-building, and governments of Asian countries made every effort to insulate their media and culture from foreign influences.

Before the mid-1990s, the Korean government controlled the media sector with policies restricting the inflow of foreign content. Specifically, such regulations as import and screen quotas in the film sector created a situation where local film distributors and theaters focused on big moneymakers like Hollywood films. Other than Hong Kong action films, which were popular particularly in the period of the 1980s and early 1990s, and a few art films such as those by Zhang Yimou from China, Korean film importers ignored most Asian productions. In the period of 1971 and 1988, films from only five Asian countries (Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, India, and Hong Kong) were shown in Korean theaters. The total number of Taiwanese films shown in this period was 28; and only three Japanese films, two Filipino films, and one Indian film were shown. The situation for Hong Kong films was a little bit better in that between one and eight Hong Kong films were shown annually in the period beginning from 1971 and 1986, before the Hong Kong film boom that began in 1987, when 17 Hong Kong films were imported to Korea, followed by 46 Hong Kong films in 1988 (Korean Film Council 2005).

In the television sector, the situation was worse in that the first non-Korean Asian television drama, which most Korean informants of mine reported having seen in their

living rooms, was a Taiwanese production called *Judge Bao* (“Po Cheongcheon” in Korean) in 1995. Even the Japanese TV drama *Oshin*, which was shown in more than 60 countries in the 1980s, was not televised in Korea because of the ban on Japanese cultural products. Anticipating the co-hosting of the 2002 World Cup with Japan, the Korean government in 1998 announced its plan to lift the ban on Japanese cultural products, taking effect in four phases through 2002. However, because of the controversy over a 2001 Japanese history textbook’s description of colonial rule in the Korean peninsula, the fourth and final round of market opening to Japanese culture was delayed. Eventually, the complete market opening to Japanese programs of terrestrial channels in Korea is expected to be finalized sometime in 2006 (Hanson 2004; Oh 2004).

Other East Asian countries have had similar experiences in terms of regional cultural exchanges. In their research on the television program trade in East Asia as of 1989, Waterman and Rogers concluded that “countries of the Asian region as a whole have a relatively low dependence on imported programming, and a relatively very low dependence on intra-regional program trade” (Waterman and Rogers 1994, 107) as table 1 shows.

*Table 1. Television Program Hours by Source*  
(as of November 1989, Unit: %)

| Country     | Domestic Production | U.S. Imports | Asian Imports | Other Imports |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Hong Kong   | 61                  | 34           | 2             | 3             |
| Indonesia   | 87                  | 12           | 1             | 0             |
| Japan       | 95                  | 5            | 0             | 0             |
| Korea       | 91                  | 7            | 0             | 2             |
| Philippines | 66                  | 31           | 2             | 1             |

Source: Adapted from Waterman and Rogers (1994).

While there has been a pan-Chinese pop cultural sphere comprising Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and, to a lesser degree, Malaysia, it was a sub-regional phenomenon. Only after Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo's visit to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries in 1977 did the Japanese government begin to support the cause of Japan-Southeast Asia cultural exchanges (Katzenstein and Shiraishi 1996). All in all, many Asian governments for a long time had been on the defensive against cultural influences from foreign countries, although they were still forced to depend on U.S. programs for political-economic reasons.

### **Media Liberalization in Asia**

Around the turn of the 1990s, industry observers predicted a doomsday scenario for regional and local/national media industries in Asia. The United States had been pressing Asian countries to further open the film and television programming sectors, through the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) negotiations, and later through WTO negotiations, as well as in bilateral talks. In this situation, clamors against cultural imperialism resounded throughout political circles and the public in Asia. For example, Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kwan Yew (1998) emphasized a need to check the inflow of Western media, calling it a "threat to Asian values." India's Hindu nationalists painted foreign popular culture as an agent of moral decadence. Further, government representatives of ASEAN adopted a resolution calling for concerted action in order to protect Asian values and traditions from a Western media "invasion" (Chadha

and Kavoori 2000). Against this background, Asian governments re-regulated their media systems through such measures as explicit bans or ceilings on foreign programming, as well as equity restrictions in foreign investment in domestic media institutions (Bellman 2002).

However, they gradually began to see that the best defense against Western media “bombardment” and the pressures of opening the market was improving the competitiveness of local media and cultural industries (Yeap 1994). Especially, the coming reality of a knowledge-based economy—the so called “Information Age”—awakened the Asian economies (whose strengths lay in producing information hardware that included TV sets and computers) to the need to develop information software as well, including all kinds of digital content and entertainment programming. As the U.S. President Bill Clinton called information the “king of the global economy” (quoted in Schiller 1996, 103), information-related sectors were expected to be the core of global economic battles. In this situation, Asian countries began to see media liberalization pressured by the United States not as a “hot potato” topic, but as an opportunity to strengthen the international competitiveness of their domestic media industries (Shim, forthcoming). In the same way they had developed their national economies through a government-economy sector collaboration with manufacturing industries in the past, East Asian countries again applied this formula to the media/cultural sector. Above all else, the most successful transformations and development in the media sector have been made in Korea.

### **The Development of the Korean Cinema Industry**

Like other Asian countries, there was a sense of panic about the future of Korean cinema industry. After opening its market to Hollywood's direct distribution in 1988, Korean cinema's local market share, which used to be around 33-40% in the mid-1980s, marked a record low of 15.9% in 1993. Ironically, the Hollywood film *Jurassic Park*, which swept the global box office in the early 1990s and thus became an icon of American-led cultural globalization, contributed to the development of Korea's cultural industry. In 1994, the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology submitted a report to President Kim Young-sam, highlighting the fact that *Jurassic Park's* revenue was worth the foreign sale of 1.5 million Hyundai cars, and suggested that the government should encourage media production as a national strategic industry (Shim 2004).

Agreeing to the suggestion, the Korean government soon devised plans to promote the film industry. In 1995, in order to provide administrative support to the industry, the government set up the Cultural Industry Bureau within the Ministry of Culture and Sports. In December that year, a new Motion Picture Promotion Law replaced the previous one, which had long controlled Korean cinema. The new law introduced the Film Promotion Fund to facilitate the financing of film production, and eased many rules and regulations governing film exports and co-production with foreign companies (Kim D. 2005). In order to entice the local big business conglomerates, or *chaebol (jaebeol)*, into the cinema industry, the government decided to offer tax breaks as support for film production. In this favorable environment, many *chaebol*, including such majors as Hyundai, Samsung, and Daewoo, rushed headlong into not just film, but other media sectors (Shim 2002).

The Asian financial crisis in 1997, however, hit the Korean economy hard, prompting the *chaebol's* exit from cultural industries. Nevertheless, the Korean cinema industry was beginning to produce high-quality films and thereby gradually winning back local audiences. In 1999, the action thriller *Shiri*, which professed itself to have adapted Hollywood-style action scenes, broke the local theater attendance record set by the Hollywood film *Titanic* (1998), by attracting 5.8 million theater goers nationwide. As “shiri” is the name of a miniscule, aboriginal fish, the saying that the “*Shiri* (a metaphor for the weak Korean cinema industry) had sunk the *Titanic* (a metaphor for a strong Hollywood)” was the phrase on everyone’s lips.

*Shiri* was also partly funded by a venture capitalist. Taking a cue from this success, many venture capital and investment firms began to finance film production. For them, film production was attractive for the following reasons: first, the turnaround for realizing profit from film production was faster than that from information technology (IT) start-ups; second, when the dot-com bubble burst, film production was the only bright spot in a still gloomy economy; third, film production offered a good portfolio within which investment firms could spread risks; and finally, investment in a cultural industry had a favorable impact on the corporate image. As of 2001, the venture firm KDB Capital had devoted about 8% of its US\$380 million fund to the film industry (Chon 2001a, 2001b). With the influx of capital, as of 2003 the average cost of production per film amounted to 4.16 billion won, a considerable increase from 0.9 billion won in 1995 (Korean Film Council 2005).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Won is the basic unit of currency in South Korea, with US\$1 roughly valued at 800 won before the financial crisis in 1997. After its exchange rate plummeted to be valued at as much as 2,000 won for US\$1 during the financial crisis, it has stabilized at about 1,190 won since mid-1998.

Starting with *Shiri*, Korean cinema began to consistently produce blockbusters in a row. In early 2001, the military thriller *Joint Security Area* broke *Shiri's* box-office record. A few months later, the gangster film *Friend* reset once again a new local box office record of 8.2 million admission tickets across the country (Korean Film Council 2005). In February 2004, *Silmido*, which revisited the Cold War reality of the 1970s, set a new box office record with 10 million theatergoers in Korea. In March 2004, *TaeGukGi: The Brotherhood of War*, a movie about two brothers' experiences during the Korean War, also reached the 10 million mark and even set a new record of over 11.7 million viewers in May 2004. It must be noted that the Korean cinema industry made every effort to learn from Hollywood—more rigorous planning before actual shooting, emphasis on marketing, Hollywood-style plots, etc.

There are many reasons accounting for the success of the Korean cinema. The influx of capital into the cinema industry has facilitated not only actual film production but also an increase in audience consumption. The comfortable theater facilities introduced by multiplex theaters, largely built beginning in 1998, enticed audiences back to the theaters. The number of screens nationwide increased from 497 in 1997 to 1,132 in 2003 thanks to the multiplex building boom. Largely located within the shopping malls, multiplexes have combined the film viewing culture with shopping and diverse consumptive activities. “The audiences have become more sophisticated and avid,” remarks the film critic Kim Bong-seok. He adds, “[T]hey have begun to read more about cinema in newspapers, magazines and Internet” (personal communication). As of 2005, there are three weekly film magazines in circulation in Korea, and another magazine is reported to start publication in late 2005 (Kim J. 2005).

The growing number of avid cinema consumers began to prefer local films. As of 1999, in a Korean Film Council-administered survey of local audience film preferences, 54.2% of Korean movie-goers responded that they preferred Hollywood films over films from other countries, while only 21.6% reported that their first choices were Korean films. In 2003, on the same question, 53.8% responded that they preferred the Korea films while 34.3% responded with Hollywood films. In addition, the nationalist fever attached to Korean film consumption (as demonstrated in slogans such as “Let’s watch Korean films in danger of extinction because of the monstrous Hollywood!”) played an important part in reviving the local cinema industry. The number of Korean films viewed per person per annum increased from .25 in 1991 to 1.32 in 2003. Consequently, the Korean cinema’s local market share has continuously increased: from 15.9% in 1993, 25.5% in 1997, 35.5% in 2000, and finally to 53.5% in 2003 (Korean Film Council 2005). The Russian film director Timur Bekmanbetov, who set the new Russian box office record for his film *Night Watch* in 2004, is reported to be envious of Korea, where audiences have come to love local films more than Hollywood ones (Bak 2005).

The government support of the cinema industry by the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2003), which launched the policy of “a government that would support, but not interfere with, cultural industries,” has never flagged. In 2001, the government designated “cultural technology”—which referred to technologies that turned culture, including both cultural heritage and mass media-mediated culture, into commodities—as one of the six key technologies that should drive the Korean economy into the twentieth-first century, and pledged a huge financial investment and continued administrative support to local cultural industries. As part of this project, the government



established the Korea Culture and Content Agency in 2001 under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, with an annual budget of US\$90 million for that year (Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2001). In addition, the government promised in 2000 to contribute 170 billion won to the Film Promotion Fund by the end of 2003. The new Broadcasting Law introduced in 2000 stipulated that terrestrial broadcasting stations should air Korean films in proportions of at least 20-40% of total broadcasting time given to films (for cable, it was 30-50%) (Kim D. 2005). Despite constant pressure by the US, the government protected the screen quota, which asked theaters to show Korean films at least for 106 days a year (Jeong Yong-gwan 2003).

Not only has the Korean cinema taken back domestic audiences from Hollywood, but it has also attracted larger audiences beyond Korean borders, particularly across East Asia. For example, *Shiri*, the biggest hit in Korea in 1999, topped the Hong Kong box office and was seen by 1.2 million theatergoers in Japan in the same year (Kim 2001). In 2002, the comedy *My Sassy Girl* dominated the Hong Kong box office for two weeks, earning HK\$14 million (To 2002). In 2003, Korea exported 164 flicks with the total revenue of US\$30,979,000, up from 14 movies with US\$173,838 in 1993. Asian markets accounted for over 60% of Korea's total film export revenue (Korean Film Council 2005). Korean cinema's achievement overseas is understood against the backdrop of the recent popularity of Korean popular culture across East Asia. Therefore, the term "Korean Wave" was coined to refer to the enthusiastic consumption of various cultural commodities and forms from Korea, including pop music, TV dramas, films, fashion, food, and hairstyles, in these East Asian countries. However, we should not ignore the fact that there was a similar fever for Japanese popular culture in East Asia in the mid-

1990s before the arrival of the Korean Wave, which is something that needs to be further explored.

### **Japanese Popular Culture in East Asia**

The relationship between Korea and Japan provides a clue towards understanding cultural flow in East Asia. Therefore, it is worth elaborating on Korea's ambivalent attitude toward Japan here. First, Koreans have traditionally held contempt for the Japanese out of the belief that they were culturally more civilized than the latter and the fact that Koreans had transferred cultural resources to Japan, especially during the period of Japan's ancient kingdom development (Miyake 1993). Secondly, Koreans have regarded the Japanese as an enemy because Japan cruelly colonized the Korean peninsula in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, Koreans have made much of Japanese technologies, as the modern Korean economy and mode of industrialization modeled itself after Japan's. Therefore, even while enraged at Japanese politicians' controversial remarks about the colonial past, many Koreans still held a preference for Sony digital cameras over those of Samsung on the level of the everyday.

Korea's strange and contradictory "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977) about Japan is well reflected in its double standard in dealing with Japanese culture. By suggesting the possibly undesirable impact of Japanese culture on Korean culture, such as relatively liberal expressions of sex and violence, the Korean government banned Japanese cultural products. On the other hand, it is an open secret that Korean cultural industries have often plagiarized or imitated Japanese popular cultural forms and artifacts.

For example, Korean broadcasting stations showed Japanese animation by altering Japanese character names and references to Korean ones so that many audiences did not know that they were actually watching Japanese shows. Therefore, Korean adults often find *nostalgia* for their childhood from old Japanese animation and comics. In addition, Korean cartoonists read many Japanese comics in their youth (and, in their training for professional careers), and were inevitably affected by Japanese techniques and styles of drawing comics. It had the effect that “the tastes of Korean comic readers have been cultivated by manga for a long time” (Noh 2004).

As in Korea, Japanese popular culture has received ambivalent treatment in other parts of Asia. Because of its colonialist past, many Asian governments banned or regulated Japanese popular cultural imports. On the other hand, they gave tacit consent to their local broadcasters’ imitating or plagiarizing Japanese television shows. In addition, with the media liberalization that came since the 1990s, through new channels including Star TV and cables (in Taiwan, there were cable channels specializing in Japanese programming), through signal spillover (NHK satellite TV), as well as through pirated videos and VCDs, Asian audiences have had considerable exposure to Japanese animation, films, and television dramas (Iwabuchi 2002). It has had the effect that Asian audiences have built up similar cultural tastes. Therefore, the dominant American popular culture and Japanese culture have, in gradual degrees, honed sympathetic cultural sensibilities among Asian consumers.

It must be noted that the popularity of Japanese popular culture in Southeast Asia in the 1990s facilitated an easier introduction of Korean popular culture there because of their similar aesthetic and cultural styles to the eyes of Southeast Asian audiences. Quite

a few interviewees in Singapore and Malaysia reported that they were rather confused between Japanese cultural productions and Korean ones. This reminds us of the tendency that many Koreans have difficulty distinguishing Indonesian culture from Malaysian culture. In fact, some of the interviewees reported that they began to consume Korean television dramas because of their certain similarities in styles and forms to Japanese television dramas after having been exposed to the latter. Consequently, where there is now a Korean Wave, there was previously a Japanese cultural fever (also see Cho 2002).

The sweeping forces of the Korean Wave have also met with conflicting local responses, those with awe and envy on the one hand, those with anxiety and fear on the other (Tyfo.com). Yet, coupled with many Asian countries' efforts to revitalize and internationalize their local media industries, the growth of the Korean cinema has facilitated more cultural flow and dialogue in the region. In the next section, we shall examine some examples of Korea's initiatives in cinema regionalization and co-productions.

### **Korea's Initiatives in Cinema Regionalization**

The efforts to promote Korean cinema in the global film circuit were sustained by the establishment of international film festivals. Of many film festivals that have sprouted up in Korea since the mid-1990s, the Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival (PIFAN), Jeonju International Film Festival (JIFF) and Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) stand out. Launched in 1997, the PIFAN has found a niche as an exhibition for genres of thriller, science fiction, and horror, and for underground or experimental movies, and has

made efforts to appeal to non-mainstream audiences such as children and the elderly. The JIFF, started in 2000, aims to introduce “films beyond the traditional concept of filmmaking” by showing indie and digital films (“JIFF”). As the first of its kind in Korea, the PIFF was started in 1996 with the aim of promoting Korean cinema globally.

The PIFF has also played an important role in showcasing Asian films to the rest of the world. PIFF’s only competitive section, “New Currents,” features works by young Asian directors, and another program, “A Window on Asian Cinema,” focuses on works by important Asian auteurs. As such, European Film Promotion recognizes PIFF as a “pathway to the global market for Asian films as well as . . . international cinema” (“European Film Promotion”). In addition, the PIFF sponsors the Pusan Promotion Plan (PPP), of which pronounced aims are to construct a network and solidarity among Asian filmmakers and to link them with film planners, investors, producers, and distributors. Every year, the PPP recognizes several promising Asian film projects with cash awards. At its 2004 PIFF, the Asian Film Commissions Network (AFCNet) officially launched with a total of 18 national film commissions, from Korea, Japan, China, Malaysia, and Russia, to name a few, as full members. AFCNet’s main goals are the linking of its members in terms of information sharing, collaboration in marketing, and in professional development. During the same period of the PIFF, the organization committee of the PIFF has held scholarly conferences and seminars on the theme of mutual co-operation between Asian countries in film production (Jeong U. 2004).

Korea’s initiative in Asian cinema regionalization has been echoed by other Asian filmmakers. In particular, the Hong Kong and Taiwanese film industries, which have suffered from poor market performance in recent years, view the regionalization as a

smart strategic move. Taiwanese arthouse director Hou Hsiao-hsien said, “We Asian filmmakers need to build up a network through PPP so that we can collaborate on film productions” (Bak 2002). Kung Fu star Jackie Chan recently argued for the necessity for Asian collaboration in film production (Kim Y. 2005). In Hong Kong, directors Peter Chan, Teddy Chen and Allen Fung even established the production house Applause Pictures in 2000 with the pronounced aim of developing it as a mediator in pan-Asian film productions. According to Peter Chan, Asian co-productions are “the future of Asia’s film industry” so that each film market in Asia can be combined to work as a huge “single domestic market.” He adds that the U.S. film industry is successful because of its “strong” domestic market, and if all Asian markets were added together, the total population would be much bigger than the U.S. domestic market (Jin 2002). Hong Kong director Stanley Tong argued for the necessity for Asian collaboration in film production in order to more effectively “compete against the big money that is Hollywood films” (Foong 2005). Taiwanese director Edward Yang supports the idea of pan-Asian co-production by saying “It makes good economic sense to work with regional resources” (Mazurkewich 2000).

The initial stage of Asian cultural exchange in film production is remake or adaptation. With the Korean director Kim Ji-un’s *The Quiet Family* (1998) attracting quite a few Japanese film fans, it was remade in 2001 as *The Happiness of the Katakuris* by a famous Japanese filmmaker, Takashi Miike. Another Korean movie *Christmas in August* (1998) directed by Hur Jin-ho was remade in Japan by the same title in 2005 (Ju 2005). On the other hand, Kim Dong-bin directed *The Ring Virus* (1999) as a Korean remake of Japan’s 1998 thriller *Ring*. *The Ring Virus* is recorded as the first-ever

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Japanese investment in the Korean film industry, with it financing 50% of the production cost. The 2004 Japanese blockbuster *Crying Out Love, In The Center Of the World* was remade into *Blue Alert (My Girl & I)* in Korea in 2005. In addition, some Korean films are adaptations of various popular cultural texts from Japan. For example, *Singles* (2003) is based on the Japanese novel, *Christmas at Twenty-nine* by Kamata Toshio, while director Park Chan-wook's *Old Boy*, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes Film Festival in 2004, took its basic setup and the title from Tsuchiya Garon and Minegishi Nobuaki's Japanese comic (Im 2003; Jeong Young-gwon 2003).

The more advanced form of cultural exchange is co-production, which utilizes production sites and creative labor from each other, lessens the financial burden, and increases films' appeal in the regional market. In fact, international co-production is a method that transnational film companies based in Hollywood have used in order to globalize their business. As they earn more and more revenue outside of the US, Hollywood studios make movies with foreign viewers in mind. This leads to more partnerships in film production with foreign studios, poaching talented directors and popular stars from other countries, thus further increasing their films' overseas appeal. In addition, with "runaway productions," those transnational film companies can enjoy lower labor costs and looser union regulations in developing countries (Miller, et al. 2001). Taking their cue from TNC companies, East Asian film industries have increasingly adopted this international co-production as a strategy beneficial for all involved across East Asia, leading to cinema regionalization.

Some films that have resulted from Korean and Japanese film co-productions are as follows: *Asako in Ruby Shoes* (2000), *KT* (2002), *Seoul* (2002), *Run to You* (2003),

*Operation Boss* (2004), *Rikidozan* (2004), *Fighter in the Wind* (2004), and *Blue Swallow* (2005). While identifying itself as a Korean film—with its main director, lead actor and staff being Korean, and the main source of investment coming from Korea—*Rikidozan* was shot 100% in Japan and has more than 90% of its lines in Japanese in order to appeal to Japanese audiences. On the other hand, more than 80% of the scenes from the Hong Kong movie *Seoul Raiders* (2005) were shot in Seoul (“China.org.cn”). Korean and Chinese co-productions include *Bichunmoo* (2000), *The Anarchists* (2000), *Failan* (2001), *Musa* (2001), *1,000-year Lake* (2003), *Seven Swords* (2005), and *My Wife is a Gangster 3* (expected in 2006). By starring international actors and actresses like Zhang Ziyi, Cecilia Cheung, Donnie Yen and Leon Lai from China (Hong Kong), these films have sought to appeal to wider audiences in Asia.

The above-noted Applause Pictures’ international co-productions include *Jan Dara* (2001), the first Hong Kong-Thai co-production ever made; *One Fine Spring Day* (2001), a Hong Kong-Japan-Korea co-production; and *Three* (2002), a co-production between Korea, Thailand and Hong Kong. As an investor in the production of *Jan Dara*, Applause Pictures convinced the Thai director Nonzee Nimibutr to star Hong Kong actress Christy Chung so that the movie could have more regional attention. Eventually, the movie appealed to the greater Asian region, not to mention the Hong Kong and Thai markets. *Three* has three segments, which were respectively directed by the three countries’ directors (Kim Ji-un of Korea, Nonzee Nimibutr of Thailand and Peter Chan of Hong Kong), with each segment having different languages, actors, and locations. This is an experimental co-production to attract greater Asian audiences as well as those of the three countries (Jin 2002). The success of *Three* generated a sequel in *Three . . . Extremes*



(2004) with three segments each directed by Korean, Hong Kong and Japanese directors, this time to appeal to Japanese audiences as well. *The Eye* (2002), Applause Pictures' other Asian co-production with Singapore and Thailand movie interests, briskly attracted regional theater-goers across Asia in 2002. For example, in the Singapore market it was among the top ten grossers of the year (Oon 2003). *The Eye* gave rise to two sequels *The Eye 2* (2004) and *The Eye Infinity* (2005), with each featuring stars from several Asian countries (Fern 2005).

Other East Asian co-productions include *Last Life in the Universe* (2003), *2046* (2004), *The Promise* (2005), *Perhaps Love* (2005), *The Myth* (2005), and *Initial D* (2005). *Last Life* is a co-production between Japan and Thailand, with the latter's film industry is fast growing in recent years. *2046*, directed by Wong Kar-wai, featured Chinese, Japanese and Thai stars and was shot in Hong Kong and Thailand. *The Promise* was directed by China's Chen Kaige, featuring regional stars including Jang Dong-gun (Korea), Cecilia Cheung (Hong Kong) and Sanada Hiroyuki (Japan) (Jeong Young-gwon 2004). *Perhaps Love* was directed by Peter Chan (Hong Kong), featuring Ji Jin Hee (Korea), Takeshi Kaneshiro (Japan), Zhou Xun (China) and Jacky Cheung (Hong Kong). *The Myth* was directed by Stanley Tong (Hong Kong), featuring Jackie Chan (Hong Kong), Kim Hee Seon (Korea) and Mallika Sherawat (India). The film adaptation of a Japanese manga, *Initial D* aimed to appeal to pan-East Asian audiences by featuring Japanese actress Anne Suzuki, Hong Kong actors Shawn Yue and Edison Chen, and Taiwanese pop prince Jay Chou, who had a huge fan base across the region (Hong 2005; Loh 2005). It is reported that more Asian co-productions are in the making or being planned (Foong 2005). Governments in East Asia welcome the regional co-productions,

believing that the increasing circulation of East Asian cultural products, which are supposed to have cultural proximity to one another and a common value system, would reduce the ideological and political concerns that may arise from the Western programming imports (Chadha and Kavoori 2000).

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

Media liberalization swept the world in the 1990s, and East Asian countries opened their national media markets. The short supply of domestic programming initially provided more revenue opportunities to the U.S. producers, as explained by conventional media globalization theories. However, this situation brought about a backlash and eventually awakened East Asian countries to a renewed concept of American cultural imperialism. Against this background, governments in the region developed local and regional media industries, and became less worried about importing other East Asian media content. As we have examined in this paper, the Korean government has made every effort to develop and internationalize its cultural industries. Conclusively, the vitality of local media evidenced in the success of Korean popular culture and the rising efforts for pan-Asian cinema productions demonstrates the coexistence of local power, regionalization and globalization in East Asian popular culture.

In this process, by mixing indigenous cultural elements with foreign forms and styles, the Korean cinema has responded to the sensibilities of contemporary Koreans and achieved commercial success. Like their own domestic audiences, new-generation Korean directors have been deeply influenced by Western—particularly American—and

Japanese popular cultures, while also being responsive to contemporary domestic changes and trends. In their creative mimicry and appropriation of foreign cultural practices and styles, they have constructed hybrid cultural forms that are accessible to their fellow national audiences. These hybrid cultural productions provide an important means for their self-definition, a self-definition that not only distances itself from a xenophobic and moralizing adherence to local cultural “tradition” but also poses a challenge to Western cultural hegemony (Shim and Shin 2004).

This cultural hybridization has taken place for a long time in East Asia. As Waterman and Rogers (1994) called American culture “the common denominator” of popular culture in East Asia, decades of American cultural imports have enabled the fusion or creolization of cultures that are disjunctively shared by each Asian popular culture, having formed similar cultural tastes among audiences in the region. In addition, the reception and consumption of Japanese popular culture in East Asia from the 1990s onwards has facilitated an easier transnational advance of Korean popular culture, as noted before. We find the global *mélange* or boundary-crossing mixture in many cultural forms such as Thai boxing done by Moroccan girls in Amsterdam, Korean “fan dance” performed by trans-sexual dancers in Thailand, *kimchi* (*gimchi*) burgers in Korea, Satay pizza in Singapore, etc. It is no longer the *pansori*, the traditional Korean music genre, but rap music that would better represent the sensibilities of contemporary Koreans. Now, we understand that culture is always changing and transforming itself into something new. Based on this notion of culture, we are on the vantage ground to reconceptualize numerous modes of international cultural exchange, instead of sticking to a sterile debate of cultural imperialism vs. cultural purity.

The discussion of pan-Asian media development necessarily leads us to think of its relations with discourses such as the Asian Age or the Asia Pacific era. It is Western journalism and academia that first circulated such discourse in the 1980s, as Asia's contribution to the global economy grew and was expected to grow further with the gradual opening of the Chinese market. In these discourses, Confucianism is imagined to have worked as the cultural basis to propel the economies of East Asia. These countries are even believed to have emerged to "challenge the nearly five century long (*sic*) EuroAmerican domination" (Dirlik 1993, 6). Out of political and economic interests, Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew has been the most vocal champion of Asian, or Confucian, values. After the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, regional economic integration has become a critical issue. As in the words of Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong (2005), their argument is: "If East Asia does not coalesce, it will lose out to the Americas and Europe." Against this background, political elites and business people in the region briskly discuss a need to construct a common regional identity, again employing the discourse of the alleged presence of Confucianism in the region.

However, countries in East Asia have a long way to go as a regional community and there are many political and economic barriers between them. When a group of cultural studies scholars in Asia launched an academic journal in cultural studies in 2000 in order to stimulate more scholarly exchanges within the region, they titled it "*Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*," rather than "*Asian Cultural Studies*." This title insightfully reflects the reality of Asia. According to its co-founding editor Chen Kuan-hsing, the journal began a dialogue between "fragmented" Asian scholars from scratch (personal communication). The fact that Japanese female admirers of the Korean star Bae Yong Jun tend to think that

all Korean men are taller, more muscular and sensitive than average Japanese men, which might account for the thousand-fold increase in 2004 in membership applications from Japanese females to matchmaking companies operating between the two countries (Lewis 2004) ironically—and interestingly—illustrates the limited exchange between the peoples of these two countries in the past.

Meredith Woo-Cumings once said that East Asia is “an area without an identity, a region incapable of imagining itself as a community” (Woo-Cumings 1993). According to Benedict Anderson (1994), national identity is constructed through daily rituals of media consumption by which the readers/audiences imagine the media’s co-readers/audiences to be a part of the same commonality, although they will never know most of the other members. In the same way, we suppose that a growing number of audiences of pan-Asian popular culture may develop regional subjectivities and communal consciousness and even regard themselves as sharing in a fraternity with other Asian audiences. Interestingly, it is reported that in order to promote peace and prosperity in the region, the Korean Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative is mapping out a common 24-hour television channel between Korea, China and Japan in which the three countries’ national or public broadcasters—Korea’s Korea Broadcasting System (KBS), China’s China Central Television Station (CCTV) and Japan’s Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK)—each provide 8 hours of programming everyday (Kim S. 2005). It is reminded that the Eurovision, the European broadcasting network launched in 1954 to encourage broadcasting programming exchanges between European countries, is said to have laid the foundation for today’s European Union. Early communication scholars including John Dewey and Harold Innis were deeply concerned

with the decline of community resulting from modernization, and agonized over how to make an academic contribution to instill community spirit in urban cities. I believe that one of the main responsibilities of communication scholars today is to establish ways to rebuild or develop local and regional cultures that have been denied their prosperity or existence by the dominance of hegemonic global culture.

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