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Conceptualizing an East Asian popular culture[1]

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ABSTRACT *Since the 1980s, popular cultural products have criss-crossed the national borders of East Asian countries, enabling a discursive construction of an 'East Asian Popular Culture' as an object of analysis. The present essay is a preliminary attempt to provide some conceptual and analytic shape to this object, delineated by its three constitutive elements of production, distribution and consumption. Each East Asian location participates in different and unequal levels in each of these component processes. Production can either be located entirely in a single geographic location or, alternatively, each of the necessary constituent sub-processes can be executed from different locations; preference for either arrangement tends to reflect the relative dominance of the production location in exporting its finished products. Consumption and thus consumers are geographically located within cultural spaces in which they are embedded. Meanings and viewing pleasures are generated within the local cultures of specific audience. Conceptually, among the several possible consumption positions, the one in which an audience watches an imported programme is most intriguing. In this viewing position, differences between the cultures of the location of consumption and that of the production location become most apparent. The audience member has to bring his or her own cultural context to bear on the content of the imported product and read it accordingly. In this sense, the cultural product may be said to have crossed a 'cultural' boundary, beyond the simple fact of its having been exported/imported into a different location as an economic activity. Such an audience position requires the consumer to transcend his or her grounded nationality to forge abstract identification with the foreign characters on screen, a foreignness that is, in turn, potentially reabsorbed into an idea of (East) 'Asia'; a potential 'East Asian identity', emerging from consumption of popular cultural products, is thus imaginable.*

KEYWORDS: East Asian Popular Culture, East Asian identity, regionalism, trans-border consumption.

No one would ever suggest conceptualizing Asia as a culturally homogeneous space. The adjective 'Asian' is complicated by a multitude of possible cultural references, from relatively culturally homogeneous countries in East Asian, such as Japan and Korea[2] to multiethnic/multiracial/multicultural/multireligious/multilingual postcolonial nations in Southeast and South Asia. For this occasion, I would risk this complexity and talk about East Asia plus one, namely Singapore, because of its overwhelming majority population of ethnic Chinese. The imaginary coherence of this grouping lies in the relatively imaginable possibility of constructing an 'East Asian' identity. Such a project of constructing a coherent and stable East Asian identity is a project that has a rather long standing. Most recently, in the early 1990s, in the triumphant days of the rise of capital in these countries, this group of countries was designated as a relatively coherent 'cultural' unit under the label of the 'dragon' economies. The symbol of the 'dragon', the sign of imperial China, obviously refers to their allegedly common Confucian heritage, which points beyond the Chinese population and enabled the inclusion of Japanese and Korean populations. This alleged presence of Confucianism in the ways of life of the huge, aggregated population of these countries provided for both the reason and its 'discovery' of Confucianism as an explanation for the rise of capitalism in East Asia, parallel to the affinity of Protestantism

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in the emergence of capitalism in the West (Tu 1991a). After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, this Confucian project has been displaced. Against this displacement, I am attempting to delineate an object of analysis, calling it 'East Asia Popular Culture', to designate the development, production, exchange, flow and consumption of popular cultural products between the People's Republic of China (PRC), Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Confucian East Asia displaced

First, let me briefly review the idea of a Confucian East Asia. During those triumphal days, from about the mid-1980s till 1997, continuous domestic economic growth in Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, with Japan as the forerunner and model, coupled with the economic opening-up of the PRC, spawned several ideologically significant gestures in East Asia. The economic condition had spawned the search for an explanation of the rapid expansion of capitalism in East Asia in Confucian philosophy as everyday life (MacFarquar 1980).[3] More specifically, the visible expansion of overseas Chinese capital in Asia finessed a new confidence in the so-called Chinese 'culture', which supposedly unites and provides cultural continuities exemplified by, among other allegedly 'ethnic-cultural' characters, the apparent positive disposition to engage in business activities, among the overseas Chinese across their geographical dispersion; a suggestion that disregards the historical colonial economic social structure that left the immigrant Chinese with few opportunities other than to trade.[4] Nevertheless, the diasporic ethnic Chinese business communities and their intellectual promoters, perhaps the most euphoric about what appeared to be sustainable miraculous economic growth, convened international conferences on Chinese businesses, Chinese communities and Chinese identities.

The new confidence gave rise to the idea of a 'cultural China', spearheaded by the neo-Confucnianist, Tu Weiming, and circulated through his editorial introduction, 'Cultural China: the periphery as the center', in the special issue of *Daedelus*, *The Living Tree: the Changing Meaning of being Chinese Today* (Tu 1991b). With the rise of the ethnic Chinese economies in Asia outside the PRC, Tu surmised that these 'peripheral' locations 'will come to set the economic and cultural agenda for the center [PRC]'. The desire behind the concept of 'cultural China' was not the political displacement of the Communist Party in the now marketized PRC, but more importantly, the possibility of a resurrection of a neo-Confucianism that will unite not only the dispersed Chinese population, by extension the larger population of East Asia.

In this construction of a Confucian East Asia, the countries included are organized in a relatively fixed configuration: the ethnic Chinese dominant locations, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore are the exemplary 'periphery' and the PRC as the economic laggard because of its very recent entry into global market capitalism but it is also the economic future of the grouping because of its massive consumption power. Beyond the immediate Chinese dominant locations, Japan is the economic leader and often the model, although culturally suspect because of memories of the Second World War and, finally, South Korea is economically at similar structural level as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore but culturally, arguably, formally more Confucian than these locations.

Even before the 1997 Asian regional financial crisis cast a pall on the euphoria and the Cultural China project, sceptics abounded. Detractors saw the search for Confucian values as no more than an ideological gloss over political authoritarianism in the less than democratic nations in the region. The actual might and reach of the economic power of the overseas Chinese communities in the region had also been a constant source of disagreements. The 'uniqueness' of the Chinese family firm has been frequently exposed as, among other things, an institution of exploitation of family, particularly women and child labour (Yao 2002). However, critics were kept baying at the margins until the financial crisis. With the crisis, half-hearted espousers of things 'Confucian' had quickly scurried off the stage. Only the staunchly

ideologically committed are willing to continue to fly the flag, such as the Senior Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. Pestered by international journalists for his view on the so-called 'Asian values' in the face of the economic crisis, he suggests,

> [There] has been a debasement of what I call Confucian value; I mean duty to friends and family. You're supposed to look after your family and your extended family, and to be loyal and supportive of your friends. And you should do it from your private purse and not from the public treasury. Now when you have weak governments and corruption seeps in, then this private obligation is often fulfilled at the public expense, and that's wrong. (*Straits Times*, 28 May 1998)

The ideological and emotional desire for a Confucian East Asia lives off a simple assumption that Confucianism constitutes the foundational culture of everyday life of East Asians. Empirically, any cursory observation of the Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese population will suggest that this is a flimsy assumption. Take, for example, Singapore, where the learning of Mandarin is compulsory for all primary and secondary ethnic Chinese students. Here, few individuals below the age of 30, or even 40, have ever read any Confucian texts. The shallowness of Confucianism in the everyday life of Singaporeans was further reflected in the failure to institute it as a part of the curriculum in moral education among the Chinese students. In the late 1980s, in an attempt to supposedly shore-up moral values against the supposedly corrupting cultural influences from the West, religious education, without God, was introduced as compulsory moral education to primary and secondary school students. Confucian ethics were offered as an option for Chinese students who professed no religion; the teaching material was developed by foreign experts, including Tu. The moral education curriculum, including Confucian ethics, was quickly abandoned when local social scientists discovered that students were becoming more religious as a result of the lessons and this may potentially give rise to greater divisiveness among the multiracial and multireligious population. The evidence would suggest that any presumption of cultural 'depth' in the grand Chinese philosophical traditions among Singaporean Chinese is dubious.[5] This shallowness in Singapore is at one extreme of the highly uneven inscription of Confucianism in the everyday life among the six East Asian locations with, perhaps, the Korean society at the other end of the continuum; indeed, Korean scholars are among the most active East Asian intellects who are engaged in the ongoing attempt to square Confucianism with contemporary social theories and contemporary democratic politics.

The idea of an East Asian pop culture

In contrast to the very uneven and abstract presence of Confucianism, since the 1980s popular cultural products have criss-crossed the national borders of the East Asian countries and constituted part of the culture of consumption that defines a very large part of everyday life of the population throughout the region. This empirically highly visible cultural traffic allows for the discursive construction of an 'East Asian Popular Culture' as an object of analysis.

American music, movie and television industries loom large globally, penetrating all locations where local income levels have reached a standard that can pay the price. Consequently, in economically developed parts of Asia, the predominant cultural/moral interests in popular culture and its consumption are often focused on American imports. Public discussions are often ideologically directed at the generalized liberal attitudes that are portrayed in American popular cultural products. This cultural liberalism is seen by some people as pushing the conservatism of Asians and is thus desired. Others cast it as culturally and morally 'corrosive' of 'wholesome' Asian values.[6] Significantly, side by side with the American popular culture, in every major urban centre in East Asia — Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore, Shanghai,

Seoul and Tokyo — there are dense flows of cultural products from the same centres into one another, albeit the directions and volumes of flows vary unevenly between them.

Popular cultural products and personalities from these East Asian urban centres criss-cross as daily features of all major newspapers in these cities. The trials and tribulations of the pop stars and celebrities make up part of the daily gossip by fans in different locations. Music, movies and television reviewers often face barrages of complaints from fans of the stars — singers and actors of big and small screens — if they penned negative reviews of the fans' pop 'idols'; the term 'idols' has become an adjective that characterizes a specific segment of the popular culture products, as in 'idol-drama'. Some of the artists, such as the so-called 'fifth generation' of the PRC film directors or individual Hong Kong directors, such as Wong Kai Wai, have received focused analysis because they have reached international 'artiste' status. So too, have the Japanese 'trendy dramas' whose popularity has declined since the end of the 1990s. They are but part of a larger regional phenomenon.

As popular culture is unavoidably a sphere of capitalist activities, the economics of this larger phenomenon are most concretely observable. Marketing, distribution, promotion and circulation of popular cultural products throughout the geographic East Asia are now part of the planning of all product producers, from financiers to directors, producers and the artistes, wherever these individuals might be located geographically. For example, a space like Singapore is inundated with television shows, movies, popular music, fashion and food from all parts of East Asia. At the same time, Singaporean television companies are cooperating in joint ventures with production companies and/or engaging artistes from elsewhere in East Asia in local productions, so as to expand their own market and enterprise. These flows of finance, production personnel and consumers across linguistic and national boundaries in East Asian locations give substance to the concept of East Asia Popular Culture.[7] This thick and intensifying traffic between locations — the economics of this trans-location cultural industry, the boundary crossings of pop cultural products, of artistes and the variable modes of consumption of audiences of different median different locations — as a cultural phenomenon in its own right has received relatively scant analytic interest.

Nevertheless, there is some pioneering work and more is coming on stream. The most notable is Iwabuchi's (2002) analysis of the penetration of Japanese popular cultural products in East and Southeast Asia, although he is well aware of the larger East Asian regional context for the production, circulation and consumption of popular culture as an 'underdeveloped area in the study of cultural globalization' (Iwabuchi 2002: 50). This work provides important insights into the industrial strategies adopted by Japanese popular cultural industries in their attempts to penetrate the Asian regional market since the early 1990s. He came to the conclusion that, at least for the popular music industry, 'Japanese ventures for cultivating pan-Asian pop idols have only been, at best, partially successful' (Iwabuchi 2002: 107); and since the record company, Pony Canyon, 'retreated from Asian markets in late 1997' (Iwabuchi 2002: 107), even 'partially successful' may be an overly optimistic conclusion. In contrast, Japanese television dramas of romance among urban young were very popularly received by young audiences throughout the region during the later half of the 1990s.[8] Iwabuchi found that popular reception in Taiwan was based on a sense of 'coevalness' between the Taiwanese audience and the Japanese represented in the dramas — 'the feeling that Taiwanese share a modern temporality with the Japanese. This 'coevalness' constitutes the dynamic vector in generating and sustaining 'cultural proximity' between the audience and the drama-mediated representation of Japanese (Iwabuchi 2002: 122). Finally, Iwabuchi also examined Japanese audiences' reception of popular culture products imported from elsewhere in Asia. Here, he found that, diametrically opposite the Taiwanese reception of Japanese television dramas, the Japanese audience's reception of imported Asian popular culture was based on a 'refusal to accept that it [Japan] shares the same temporality as other Asian nations' (Iwabuchi 2002: 159) and that reception of the imported products was mediated by a sense of nostalgia of Japan's

own past that is the present of elsewhere in Asia.[9] The analysis of these two empirical instances and their explanations provides us with insights into the differences between local audiences watching imported popular culture products; insights that have implications on methodological issues in cross-cultural reception research.

Although Japanese television dramas constituted the bulk of the total export of Japanese television programmes, the success of these dramas in the region was somewhat serendipitous because the television industry was not very interested in the export market as the financial returns were paltry relative to the costs of production. By the early 2000s, the regional space of Japanese television drama faced increased competition from the aggressive export of similar products from Korea, where the government had targeted the export of Korean popular culture as a new economic initiative, after the 1997 Asian regional financial crisis. In the popular music industry, the opening up of the Peoples' Republic of China as a huge consumer market provided a much needed infusion of motivation energy in reviving the Chinese popular music industry in the 1990s. The ailing Cantonese pop music (Cantopop) became progressively displaced by Mandarin popular music, which in turn created a space for Taiwan as a centre for Mandarin–Chinese music production. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, the above mentioned dense traffic of popular culture products across the national/cultural boundaries in East Asia has far exceeded the analytic boundaries that are determined by any focus on a specific location. It is this empirical reality's conceptual and analytic shape and contour that cultural studies in Asia must now work out, and the present attempt is a preliminary step.[10]

Methodological note

As I have suggested elsewhere,

> The life of a consumer product is very short. It is meant to be so in order to keep the factory that produces it working, the workers employed, its consumers happy but not for long, and the economy moving. This brevity of existence is a constraint on critical analysis of any consumer object, singularly or in constellation as a trend or a lifestyle. The problem is that by the time the analyst figures out the critical angle for commentary, the object in question would have already been consumed and committed to the trash-heap. Consumed and rejected, or unsold and rejected, either way it is discarded… the brevity of life of a consumer object and of a consumer trend makes it unavoidable that all published materials on consumer products and trends are by definition 'historical'. (Chua, 2003: vii)

The same is true of popular culture products of course. Film, television programmes, popular music and musicians — in short, the data one is working with — are often already off the screen way before any analysis is completed. Secondly, many of the readers/audiences have not seen the films nor heard the music; that is, they are not familiar with the products the analyst is engaged with. For these reasons, analytic interest should not be in the products themselves, although as they constitute the empirical material of the analysis it is unavoidable to analyse and comment on them. The larger analytic interest should be oriented towards the structures and modalities through which the products partake in the social and economic material relations within the different locations where the products are produced, circulated and consumed.

The most generalized outline of East Asian popular culture as an object of analysis may be delineated by its three constitutive elements: production, distribution and consumption. Each East Asian location participates in different and unequal levels in the production and consumption of the circulating popular cultural materials. Here, the structural configuration that was noted in the displaced Confucian East Asia project appears to be serviceable: Japan as the financial leader is also a production site that leads and indeed, shows the way in many aspects

of the popular culture. Ethnic-Chinese dominant locations constitute a subset that produces and consumes cultural products of different Chinese languages — Mandarin, Cantonese and Minan, also known as Hokkien (*Fujian*) which, for the Taiwan independentists, is Taiwanese — with a written script that is comprehensible to most individuals literate in any Chinese language, in spite of the two different written scripts and local innovations, such as Cantonese or *Fujian* words. The written script enables access to material across different spoken Chinese languages, which explains the curious phenomenon that Chinese audiences are often found watching Chinese movies and television programmes with Chinese subtitles. In this ethnic Chinese subset, the PRC remains at the margin of production because of the lingering effects of its socialist ideology and politics, which I will discuss in greater detail later. There is an emergent popular cultural traffic between South Korea and Japan, after 1989, when the very porous 'ban' on the importation of the Japanese cultural products into Korea was formally lifted (Han 2000). Meanwhile, South Korea is beginning to export its own products into all the other East Asian locations, creating a so-called 'Korean Wave' in these locations. Given the uneven presence of the different locations in production, distribution and consumption, these processes need to be examined at every East Asian location. Collaborative research efforts are therefore essential to comprehensively analyse the object, East Asian Popular Culture. The following are tentative steps in teasing out the constitute elements of both the production, distribution and consumption processes to facilitate comparative studies across the region.

Production and export/distribution

The production of a popular cultural product — writings, all technical skills from acting, singing, filming and recording and financing arrangements — can either be entirely located in a single geographic location or, alternatively, with contemporary technology and globalized economy, each of the necessary constituent processes can be executed from different locations. In the case of the East Asian popular culture industry, preference for either arrangement tends to reflect the relative dominance of the production location in exporting its finished products. At one end of the dominance is the case of Japan in television drama and popular music. The ability to finance expensive television drama productions and staged expensive concerts and promotions has given the Japanese popular culture industry a dominant exporting position, giving rise to an ubiquitous impression that there is a 'Japanese invasion' or 'Japanization' of popular culture throughout the region, in spite of, according to Iwabuci (2002: 85–120), the Japanese popular culture industries tentativeness about expanding into the rest of Asia.

The high quality of Japanese television is captured, in a rather essentialist manner, by an American critique:

> The most positive aspect of the primacy of form and the perfection of role is the creation of excellent images. The Japanese concern with the visual, in combination with their advanced technology, ensures that Japanese television is often very pleasing to the eye. Sets are technically well designed and the photography is excellent…. If television is used as a means of relaxation and escape, as opposed to education and enlightenment, it may be very enjoyable to lose oneself among the images without having to bother with the search for ideas. (Stronach 1989: 155)

The most illustrative examples are Japanese television urban drama series. These series are also known as 'trendy drama' for obvious reasons: the story line is generally about romance among urban young professionals. The visual pleasure comes from the fact that, on the set and scenes, the characters, major and minor, are very well-dressed in designer clothes, live in cosy small apartments, eat in expensive — usually Western — restaurants in the entertainment districts of the city but, above all, all the actors and actresses are beautiful men and women; of

this last element, more will be discussed later. According to the producer of the very first of these dramas, *Tokyo Love Story*, when he was given the task as a producer, at age 28, Japanese television was filled with programmes for middle-aged individuals and he would not watch any of them. He asked himself, and people like him, what would he/they like to watch on television and came up with a simple list: beautiful people, beautiful clothes, good food and good entertainment, the plot is secondary.[11] Although the production cost per episode was phenomenally expensive, with about 50% going to pay the beautiful cast, the local Japanese market, in the euphoric days of the bubble economy, was able to support the cost. No considerations were given to a potential export market. The subsequent popularity of these series was possibly a surprise to the Japanese producers and came as surplus profit when it happened.

Successes throughout East Asia did not go unnoticed; they spawned an explicit ambition to address directly the enlarged audience population in order to consolidate it. In 2000, the drama series, *Romance 2000*, was simultaneously broadcast in Tokyo, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Conceptually, with the desire to capture directly the expanded audience, the plot of the series incorporated elements of generalized 'pan Asian' interest. It went beyond the formulaic simple story line of such dramas to include Cold War politics, which is still very much alive in East Asia today. The plot understandably became very complex, with the beautiful lovers cursed by political ideologies. Briefly summarized: as an unnamed government had kidnapped and threatened to kill his mother and sister if he did not carried out its orders, a young Korean was forced to become an assassin in Japan. As fate would have it, a young Japanese woman found him when he was hurt, she harboured and nursed him back to health and, of course, fell in love with him. She became involved in his affairs, leading eventually to her own death — she sacrificed her life to safe a multitude of people in an amusement park from a bomb explosion. One could say the complex plot, incorporating a generalized regional political anxiety, ultimately destroyed the fantasy that sustained such a drama of romance. In addition, it sank the series. In contrast to the serendipitous success of the drama created for Japanese audience, ironically, this conscious attempt to transnationalize the content, presumably to be 'more relevant' to the enlarged East Asian audience, failed. Conceptually, this 'noble' failure poses some interesting issues. Are the audiences of the East Asian popular culture ready for the mixing of cultural and political themes that are hewed from different locations? Does the failure suggests an absence of a possibility of an emergence of what might be called an 'East Asian identity' from emerging through popular culture, in this instance television drama? The answers to these and other questions will, of course, have serious implications on the development of the contents of the products and on any idea of an East Asia as culturally, relatively coherent entity.

Such failures aside, the popularity of the Japanese 'trendy dramas' across East Asia from the mid to late 1990s was without doubt. This was reflected not only in media attention but also attracted much academic analysis, both in Japan and elsewhere in East Asia.[12] An international conference on such dramas, held at the International Christian University in Tokyo, drew participants from every location in East Asia, including young East Asian scholars studying in the US.[13] Within the television drama industry, the quality of Japanese production clearly sets the industry standard; producers elsewhere in East Asian tend to take the Japanese as industry leader. Perhaps, the very high standard of production, and thus the elevated demands of a Japanese audience, has contributed to the relative absence of imports from other East Asian locations into the Japanese market. Iwabuchi, however, provides an ideological explanation for the unequal flow of products in and out of Japan; he argues that this is the result of 'Japan's refusal to accept that it shares the same temporality as other Asian nations' (Iwabuchi 2002: 159). Nevertheless, some breaks in the boundaries are taking place; for example, Japanese pop singers have sung duets with those from the region, partly in efforts to expand their market reach into the huge Chinese audience, and even globally, through singing in English.[14] In any

case, the relative impermeability of the Japanese pop cultural sphere to imports from other East Asian locations is a question that requires further research.

Korean popular culture industry appears to be the most influenced by the standards of Japanese production. Dare one suggest that this is part of the postcolonial connection? At the political level, there was a formal ban on Japanese cultural products since its decolonization from Japanese imperialism, immediately after the Second World War. This formal ban was not lifted until October 1998, with the Joint Declaration of the New 21st Century Korea–Japan Partnership. However, the ban did not make Korea impermeable to Japanese popular cultural products; even the government-owned Korean Broadcasting Station was guilty of illegal importation (Han 2000: 14–15). In the words of one Korean cultural commentator: 'We firmly lock and bar front doors but leave our back doors wide open. With our left hands we indignantly slap away any offers but we are busy snatching at any opportunities with our right. This has been our society's attitude toward popular Japanese culture during the last 30 years' (Do Jung Il quoted in Kim Hyun-Mee 2002: 1).[15] In addition to this constant stream of underground importation, Japanese popular cultural products have also been 'copied', 'partially integrated', 'plagiarized' and 'mixed' and 'reproduced' into Korean products. Little wonder that Korean fans of Japanese popular music suggest, 'When we listened to Korean songs it is easy to recognize similar or same parts from Japanese songs' (quoted in Kim Hyun-Mee 2002: 4). Kim further concludes that 'in the case of TV animations and comics, most [Korean products] are adaptations of Japanese products so Japanese culture in Korea has already set its roots deep into the emotional structure of Koreans' (Kim Hyun-Mee 2002: 4). After the lifting of the ban, Japanese cultural products now flow smoothly into Korean popular cultural spaces. And in 2002, the first Japanese and South Korean co-produced television drama series, *Friends* — a drama series about the relationship between a Korean man and a Japanese woman — was broadcast in both locations simultaneously, marking not only a pop culture event but also a 'political' event in Korean–Japanese relations.

Significantly, production of Japanese 'trendy drama' has lapsed and the exports slowed by late 1990s. The media space in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore has been, in a sense, replaced and occupied by Korean imports; the influence of Japanese trendy drama on the Korean product is unmistakable. The importance of Korean export can be seen from its effects in Singapore. In 1999, the local monopoly that publishes all the major newspapers in all four official languages of the city-state, ventured into commercial television with two free-to-air stations, one in English (I Channel) and the other in Mandarin (U Channel), under a new company called, *Mediawork*. Of the two channels, the English-channel local programmes have been an abject failure and the studio effectively shut down within less than two years of its establishment. The local English programming is reduced to daily news programmes; all the other programmes are imported, largely from the US. On the other hand, the Mandarin channel was able to carve out and take away a significant size of the audience population from the already established state-owned station, *MediaCorp*, through a combination of broadcasting Korean drama series and local variety shows which look and feel like the similar shows in Taiwan, which in turn are very similar to those in Japan. MediaCorp has since also imported Korean drama series; such that, by late 2003, there is at least one Korean drama series on Singaporean television stations every night, after the daily news. The drama series has brought Korean artistes not only onto Singaporean television screens but also into the entertainment pages of the print media, particularly Mandarin publications. Korean drama series have thus become a site for local media competition, which perhaps, justifies these exports as part of the so-called 'Korean Wave', which includes Korean movies and Korean popular music exports.

Korean movies made their debut in East Asia, as perhaps elsewhere, through the Hollywood style blockbuster *Shiri*, followed by *Joint Security Area*, in late 1990s. Both films translated the Cold War tension of North–South Korea into personalized relations. The first is a romance between secret agents from both side of the divide, a female agent from the North being

involved with a male counterpart from the South. The second film thematized 'illicit' friendship and camaraderie between North and South Korean soldiers who police the demilitarized zones. A second category of Korean films that were popular in their time is what may be labelled 'gangster comedies', where criminals are let off all accusations, guilt and punishment and humanized by their ineptness or goofiness in other aspects of their daily lives.[16] Since then Korean films have had a constant but not particularly dense presence in East Asian market. Again, it should be noted that this Korean presence came at a time when Japanese films had been all but absence in the export market. However, the success of the Japanese horror movie, *The Ring*, in late 1990s, sparked off a string of 'horror/ghost' movies from Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand, which is still coming on stream in 2003.

In terms of production and export capacity, Hong Kong and Taiwan may be said to occupy the same in-between position as South Korean popular cultural industry. However, they occupy prominent, if not dominating, positions in the pan ethnic-Chinese segment of East Asian Popular Culture. In addition to their own domestic audiences, which still constitute the first market, television programmes, films and music from Hong Kong and Taiwan have always had a constant presence in the other locations where there are significant ethnic Chinese populations, such as Singapore and Malaysia and, of course, the PRC, especially after its economic liberalization. Hong Kong had been the major production site of Chinese movies from the 1950s to the late 1980s, and although the production rate slowed down considerably in the 1990s, it remains the major production location of Chinese movies, predominantly in Cantonese and increasingly also in Mandarin. However, its television drama programmes have grown as a result of film producers, such as the Shaw Brothers, switching to the small screen. Taiwan has a continuing presence in exporting 'traditional' family dramas in which the much maligned and oppressed daughter-in-law eventually triumphs when her moral righteousness survives her long suffering. However, since the success of the young adult romance drama, *Meteor Garden* (discussed below), it has also begun to export contemporary drama series, including the 'updating' of traditional family dramas by dressing the characters in contemporary clothes, without altering the plots and themes.

In popular music, Hong Kong was without rival in the 1970s and 1980s, with the invention of Cantopop. However, in the 1990s, with the impending and final 'incorporation' as a Special Authority Region of the People's Republic of China, Cantopop has waned and all major popular music performers have switched over to singing in Mandarin in order to catch the huge mainland market. This switch in language has enabled Taiwan to emerge as a major recording location for Mandarin-pop. It features much more prominently as a place to train, record and market music for all ethnic-Chinese singers who are not hewn from Hong Kong, particularly those from Southeast Asia, especially Singapore and Malaysia.[17]

The presence of the PRC as a production location for East Asian popular culture can be said to be very marginal, in contrast to its huge consumer market for imports from other East Asia locations. (Since the absorption of HK as an SAR, HK television companies have been quick to capitalize on the huge market by making television series that are directed specifically at the mainland audience.[18]) This is due in part to the underdevelopment of such industries under socialism, and economic marketization is still in its early days. As consumerism is a new phenomenon in PRC, its mass cultural products are still far behind in quality and style for them to be picked up by the more advanced consumers in the other affluent Asian locations; there is a sense of what is commonly labelled 'country feel' (*tu qi*).

However, there are two divergent, deeper 'cultural' problems that constrain its cultural products for the export market. First, ironically, the PRC is tied to being the root-site of 'traditional' Chinese culture. Secondly, the popular cultural products from the PRC, from rock music to television, films and other visual art forms, are deeply inscribed and haunted by the revolutionary politics of the past, particularly the Communist revolution, and its antagonists, 'tradition' and authoritarianism, both traditional and contemporary. As the origin of Chinese

history, PRC producers are often compelled to translate into screen historical dramas and/or transform literary classics of either historical or mythic pasts, such as the famous historical/mythical huge novels, *Water Margin* and the *Three Kingdom*, which were very well produced long running television drama series. As long narratives of heroic acts of mythic figures in ancient Chinese history, these series speak little to the young consumers of popular culture; the length of the series only emphasizes its tedium. In terms of contemporary popular culture, the deep inscription of revolutionary politics and its discontents is most observable in the case of rock music from PRC. The lyrics are so heavily laden with local politics (De Kloet 2000) that they are difficult to understand by consumers who are not part of the local scene; consequently, their presence in the other ethnic-Chinese predominant locations in East Asia is limited to the margins of 'alternative' music. Similarly, PRC television programmes are ideologically overdetermined and regularly play up the themes of involuntary exile or voluntary migration against the social and political conditions in the mainland itself (Sun 2002).

These two divergent ideological constraints are reflected in the works of no less an internationally acclaimed director than Zhang Yimou. Along with his critique of the oppressiveness of the 'Chinese traditions' in such films as *Raise the Red Lantern* and his depiction of the rural poverty of contemporary China in films such as *Not One Less*, he also did the monumental film *Hero*, which narrates a version of the failed assassination of the brutal Emperor Qin, the first man to unify what was then China.

Zhang's movies, like those of the other directors from the PRC, are unable to avoid political inscription and reading by foreign audiences. The reading by audiences in the West or West-educated in East Asia is very succinctly put by Chen Xiaoming:

> once his films enter the world film market, politics inevitably captures the spotlight. Hence, in the eyes of a Western beholder, Zhang Yimou's *Judou* (1991) is interpreted as an innuendo against the gerontocracy, and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1992) is seen as a political power struggle. Political readings of these Chinese films are not necessarily farfetched misreadings insofar as the cultural imaginary of Oriental culture has always already inculcated an invisible, but omnipresent, nexus of absolute power and totalitarianism, which overshadows Zhang Yimou's, and other's, films. It does not matter whether such a power nexus refers to ancient feudalism or despotism, or to the 'proletariat dictatorship' of modern China, for the cultural imaginary of Oriental culture is fundamentally timeless — the present is all but a reappearance of the past. Politics is thus a determinant situation in the cultural imaginary of China. (Chen 2000: 229)

Such complex political inscriptions are too taxing for mass audiences of popular culture and the films are, consequently, delegated to the international, art-house and film festival circuits with their sophisticated audiences.[19]

The other essentially consumer location is Singapore. With its very limited domestic market, Singapore has no film and music industries and a relatively new television industry.[20] However, it is cash rich. Here, the decomposition of the production process, with each input coming from different locations is most observable. From its very beginning (and it continues to be true), the Singaporean television industry depended on imports of professionals from Hong Kong. Until recently, the Hong Kong professionals worked behind the screen. However, since early 2000, Hong Kong television actors and actresses have been appearing in leading roles in situation comedies and other productions; two notable examples are Lydia Sum who leads in *Living with Lydia* and Carol Cheng in *Oh! Carol*, both programmes have survived the first season and have become weekly features. In these instances, the 'lesser' position of Singapore is clearly reflected, as Singaporean actors are placed in supporting roles, one might say as 'apprentices' to the Hong Kong stars.[21] Similar arrangement is also found in Singapore financed movies.[22] The other television company, Mediawork, has also launched, in 2004, its first collaborative productions with Taiwan company, *Sanlih e-tv*, in a teenage drama series

featuring the members of an all-male singers/actors group, *5566*, entitled *Westside Story*, making reference to Taipei's teenage shopping area, Simenting (West Gate Square), with one of the popular Singaporean female actress in its stable acting as the mother of the lead character. At this point in the development of Singapore's television industry, such joint productions must be seen as a way of introducing Singaporean artistes into the ethnic-Chinese segment of the East Asia Popular Culture, as the products are often sold to Taiwan and PRC stations.[23]

In recent years, joint ventures, co-productions or direct financing of films have picked up pace. Reflecting the government's ambition in establishing a 'creative industry' in the knowledge-based economy, the government has set up a film commission to help finance film projects. As part of this industrial strategy, the film company, *Raintree Pictures*, was established within the state-owned television company, *MediaCorp*. So far, interests in production financing are restricted to collaboration with participants in the pan-ethnic Chinese segment, particularly with Hong Kong; in addition, there are collaborations with individual artiste in other Southeast Asian countries. A successful co-production effort is the three-part film series, *Infernal Affairs*, in 2003–2004, a detective story set entirely in Hong Kong with Hong Kong actors, where Singapore does not feature at all, either in setting or actors on screen. A central non-Hong Kong character was played by the Mainland Chinese actor, Chen Daoming. And, it must be mentioned that the producer of this film series is a Hong Kong person working in Singapore for *Raintree*.

From a methodological angle, a location like Singapore, being at the other extreme end of the production continuum and an essentially consumption location, is very advantageous in observing and researching the relative placing of all these production locations. Singapore's radio waves, television screens and movies theatres constitute sites in which Japanese, Korean, Hong Kong and Taiwanese films, television drama and variety shows and popular music compete for space, reflecting their relative market position in the different media and genres. This will be discussed in the next section.

Obviously, the linearity of the written text and its reading on this occasion is a clumsy structure for the depiction of the complexity of flows of popular cultural products, and thus the porosity of the 'national' boundaries, throughout East Asia. These flows take place routinely on a synchronous plane within these spaces through a variety of media, including *manga*, films, television, music and fashion. To give a sense of the fluidity of these flows, I will take the example of the latest sensation in East Asian popular culture, the F4 phenomenon.

In 2000, a Taiwanese producer reproduced a Japanese *manga* story into a television series, *Meteor Gardens*. The college-students drama series featured four complete unknown young men (of the same height) as the principle actors, collectively introduced to the media world as F4. The series was an instant success throughout East Asia. It was screened in Hong Kong and Singapore and subsequently in Korea in 2002, whereas in the PRC they were watched on DVDs.[24] It transformed F4 from complete obscurity to the hottest boy-band in the past two years; their television appearance had finessed their entry into popular music, although their singing skills are noticeably limited. Every public appearance by F4 throughout the region draws huge crowds of screaming fans; for example, their appearance in a Shanghai shopping centre had to be cut to 10 minutes because of the crushing crowd, and their scheduled concert was cancelled by the local government. Their success in East Asia has, of course, spawned other Taiwanese boy bands and individual male singers who are marketed throughout an especially ethnic-Chinese predominant East Asia, usurping popular attention at a time when Hong Kong singers and Cantopop are in relative decline.

Before proceeding with consumption issues, the current structural arrangement of the production and export of East Asian cultural products can be summarized thus: Japan is the leader that sets the industry quality standard and is the prime production and export location, with relatively little importation from the rest of the constituent regional locations. South Korea has made a very conscious effort to export its popular culture products as part of its export-oriented economy, especially after the 1997 Asian regional financial crisis. Hong Kong

and Taiwan play central roles in the production of Chinese language popular culture products, with an apparently skewed division of labour, movies and television programmes in Hong Kong and popular music in Taiwan. PRC and Singapore remain largely locations of consumption of East Asian popular culture, each with its own problems of trying to elevate itself into a serious production location. The PRC appears unable at this point to shake off its ideological baggage, both traditional/historical and contemporary/political, for its popular culture products to have mass appeal, while Singapore is trying to get into the business through its investment power, without apparently any other ideological interests.

Audience position as methodological constraint

If the production processes of popular cultural products can be disaggregated and organized transnationally, consumption is, however, thoroughly grounded in specific locations. Consumers are geographically located within cultural spaces in which they are embedded and meanings and viewing pleasures are generated within the local cultures of a specific audience. Of course, the 'local' cultural space is not to be conceived as a hermetically sealed entity but one that is porous and actively engaged, appropriate and absorbing cultural elements and fragments from all the directions with which the 'local' has contact. Without this openness, there would be no such discursive object as East Asian Popular Culture. Nevertheless, local cultural proclivities continue to work their effects in the ongoing movements and boundary shaping of the local cultural sphere.

Conceptually, there are three possible audience or consumption positions in consuming popular culture programmes. The first and least complicated position is an audience watching a locally produced programme. Here, the audience is embedded in the very culture of the location of production as his/her own. Identification with the themes and characters may be said to come 'naturally' — as in phenomenologically the 'natural attitude of everyday life' — and references can be readily made to events, individuals and other activities that are 'similar' to those on screen. The audience may be said to 'know' the filmic or lyrical representations of events, issues and characters from the 'inside'. There is an excess of knowledge that is then used to judge the 'accuracy', 'truth' and 'critical reflections' of the content of the cultural programme. In this sense, the program may be used as a 'critical' mirror to one's own life and community. An exemplary instance is Kim Soyoung's analysis of the eclipse of 'Korean women' in recent big budget Korean films, such as *Joint Security Area*, as indicative of a generalized shrinking of the 'women's sphere' and the elevation of male-bonding in post 1997 financial crisis Korea (Kim Soyoung 2003).

Second, the audience could be a diasporic subject watching or listening to a programme that is thematically concerned with one's homeland. The programme may be produced either by homeland or foreign producers. Here, the audience position and relation with the content is once removed, that is, less immediate than the first position. Nevertheless, the audience is still being interpellated, voluntarily or otherwise, into the programme. The same knowingness as the first position will be brought to bear on the content. However, the judgements made are likely to be with hesitancy, due to, and dependent on, the distance of both space and time away from home. An additional 'nationalist' element may arise if the programme is foreign produced; the audience may protest and charge the foreign producer with politically motivated misrepresentation or, if one were in political exile, affirm the representation as a reasonable critique of conditions in the 'homeland'; a critique or misrepresentation lays obviously not in the substance of the content but in the viewing position of the audience. For detailed analysis of the diasporic subject position on East Asian popular culture, see Sun's (2002) insightful analysis of various films and television programmes, produced for the PRC audience, with either local or foreign or co-funding.

The third position is an audience watching an imported programme. Here, the audience is

not embedded in the culture of the production location. The audience is thus distanced from the detailed knowledge of the first and second position; what knowledge he or she has is derived from outside the programme itself. It is in this viewing position that the differences between the cultures of the location of consumption and that of the production location become most apparent. The 'meaningfulness' of the programme is now relocated into the horizon of relevance of the audience's own cultural context. The audience has now brought his or her own cultural context to bear on the content and to read accordingly; here, the earlier mentioned empirical studies, by Iwabuchi (2002), of Taiwanese audiences of Japanese dramas and Japanese consumers of popular culture products imported from elsewhere in Asia are illustrative and instructive. It is in this sense that the cultural product may be said to have crossed a 'cultural' boundary, beyond the simple fact of having it means it has been exported/imported into a different location as an economic activity.

Each of these stances may involve different investment of the self in identification with the characters and themes on screen or in music. The effects of the consumption of the imported cultural products will, of course, differ from those derived from consuming a product which represents the culture in which one is embedded. The intensity of self-investment is likely to decrease in proportion to the immediacy of 'home/national' self-identification, with the third viewing position coming closest to an idea of 'mere' entertainment. Each of these positions is, of course, a field of analysis in its own right and each would illuminate different aspects of audience-ship.

In this particular instance, in the delineation of the discursive concept and object of an East Asian Popular Culture, the central analytic focus is on how products criss-cross the cultural boundaries within the region to reach non-home-audiences. Consequently, the analytic starting point would have to be that of the third audience or consumption position of a local audience watching foreign imports. This is a necessary methodologically constraint in the analysis of cultural border crossing of popular culture material. The East Asian Popular Culture must therefore be conceptualized as a complex discursive object that incorporates, and is constituted by, the popular culture of each regional location as both culture of production and culture of consumption. The ever-changing contours, shapes and substance of this discursive object are, therefore, necessarily a collaborative collective enterprise of analysts across the region.

Being a Singaporean and living in Singapore, I am therefore methodologically constrained to confine myself to sketching out some, by no means exhaustive, characteristics of a Singaporean audience as part of this East Asian popular cultural sphere.[25] This exercise is therefore largely an illustrative instance, as the same constraint would apply to local analysts elsewhere throughout the region with different outcomes. Furthermore, I shall restrict myself to the discussion of television and film products rather than music, both for ease of presentation and reception, because they are much less abstract than music.[26]

How a Singaporean watches imported television

Urban stories

Singapore as a city-state has no rural hinterland. Singaporeans in general have little or no contact with things and sentiments rural. 'Rural' is ideologically often reduced to 'backward', 'underdeveloped' and lacking in urban amenities, thus inconvenient; at its most generous, 'rural' appears as nostalgia, a place to escape the urban stress. Consequently, imported drama series that are popularly received are almost all urban romance stories featuring young, single professionals, either living on their own or with their families of origin; in general, the Japanese series tend to have young professionals in their own well appointed apartments, while the Korean series appear yet to have shaken off the yoke of family. Historical period dramas of work from Japan and Korea — and there are plenty of such drama series in both

countries — do not travel well to Singapore and thus are never seen on local television. However, programmes that are set in imperial Chinese dynasties are common because there is a vague (fake) sense among the ethnic-Chinese Singaporean audience of knowing Chinese history.

The trials and tribulations of urban living are of course intimately familiar to Singaporeans. Familiarity makes the urban stories accessible, audience friendly. A Singapore consumer can readily identify with the themes and characters as representations of 'urban' people and phenomena that are familiar, if not similar, to themselves; that is, if desired, a Singapore audience can allow itself to identify completely with the representation of the urban characters on screen. However, 'foreignness', nevertheless, remains a feature desired by the same audience. First, local programmes generally deal with issues of Singaporean everyday life, with messages that are relevant and didactic but, precisely because of these features, can become 'tiresome' rather than 'entertaining'. So, foreignness, and the 'exoticism', of imported products is part of the local audience's desire and viewing pleasure. However, of greater conceptual significance is that the 'imported' status of the programme can be used by a Singapore audience to limit the degree of identification, that is the degree of interpellation of self, with the themes and characters on screen. That the product is a foreign import enables a Singaporean audience to maintain a stance of 'watching', in a voyeuristic manner, the lives of others, elsewhere in East Asia. It enables a difference between self and other East Asians to be maintained, in spite of sharing similar urban and familial dispositions. Thus, foreignness must remain recognizably foreign in the programme. The most immediately foreign difference should be, of course, language; however, as discussed below, this is most easily erased through dubbing. Two other markers are retained, background music and outdoor scenery.

Background music, particularly the programme's theme songs, is generally left untouched, preserving the foreignness. However, this is increasingly unreliable as a marker of the location of production. First, the visual and the audio contents of a programme can be produced separately at the point of production. The importing location is free to supply both dialogue and music to the video material; the 'imported/foreign' features are thus suppressed for the local audience. Second, the background music can be intentionally foreign at the point of production; for example, Taiwan drama series often come with background music sung in Japanese — in the interest of 'exoticizing' local products and/or exporting the product to foreign locations. In a location such as Singapore, where both Taiwan and Japan are foreign, such mixing leaves the 'foreignness' undisrupted but locating the 'origin' of the product is made problematic.

Scenery is a more stable marker of foreignness as it is built into the visuals of the story. Scenery transports a localized audience into a foreign space and place; it constitutes a mode of visual tourism. Thus, avid fans of television dramas can become so enamoured by the sceneries that the locations become 'must visit' places when the fan gets a chance to be an actual tourist to the country in question and, upon arrival, feel completely familiar with the environment, with a sense of *deja vu*. Screened sights have become tourist sites. At their peak of popularity, Singaporean tour promoters did organize tours of the 'trendy drama' sites in Tokyo for the fans; similarly for Singaporean fans of Korean television drama.[27]

An extension of scenery and a marker of foreignness to the Singapore audience is the seasons. Seasons are completely foreign to Singaporeans who live permanently in hot tropical weather. Autumn, with its changing colours of the trees, and winter, with its cold and snow, are quintessentially romantic — enhancing the romantic themes intrinsic to the programmes — for Singaporeans.[28] Along with cold weather is fashion. The hot, humid tropical climate is a bane of the fashionable because it denies them the seasonal changes of fashion. The fashionable Singaporean is thus jealous of the layers upon layers of warm clothes that enables the making of fashion statements; (s)he is denied the 'layering' effects of fashion.

Chinese languages

There are four 'official' languages in Singapore; of which English and Mandarin are two that are used in dubbing and subtitling of imported television programmes and films from East Asia.[29] All imported films and television programmes, no matter whether the products are in Korean, Japanese or other Chinese languages, such as Cantonese from Hong Kong and *Minan* from Taiwan, are dubbed into Mandarin; as we will see, this practice has great significance in the consumption of East Asian popular culture. English subtitles are often provided, reflecting the primacy of the language in Singapore. There have been instances when a television series was particularly popular and English subtitles were not provided, which led to public complaints from those Chinese who do not understand Mandarin that they were being denied the pleasure of watching the series.[30] Obviously, dubbing of foreign languages makes the cultural products accessible to a Singaporean audience. Japanese and Korean popular music have a far lesser presence in Singapore than popular television programmes and films, largely because of the language barrier. However, with duo-sound technology in television, a Singapore audience can watch Korean and Japanese programmes in the original languages if they so choose.

Elsewhere in Chinese-dominant East Asian locations, Mandarin is not always the official or even the primary language of the Chinese. In Hong Kong, the official language is Cantonese, with Mandarin making an increasing appearance. In Taiwan, a mixture of Mandarin and *Minan* or *Fujian* language is the common practice. All these Chinese languages and more were, until not too long ago, living languages among the Singaporean Chinese population. In the early 1970s, they were labelled derogatorily as 'dialects' and since then banned from all mass media. In their place, the government, ostensibly with the desire to unify the multi-tongued Chinese population through a single, standard, formal language, adopted Mandarin as the one language — both phonologically and written — for all Singaporean-Chinese; thus, there is dubbing of Chinese programmes other than those in Mandarin.

Technically, Chinese languages can be phonologically strange to each other, although a relatively common written language facilitates communications among all literate Chinese. Consequently, Chinese films and television programmes will very often have the dialogue and lyrics of songs in one of the Chinese languages, with Chinese written scripts as subtitles. These subtitles are different from conventional subtitles that translate the film's language into a completely different language, such as from Japanese to English. Although the Chinese subtitles may have the same translation function, they translate from one Chinese language to another Chinese language.

Although it is often assumed that the written script provides the common language for all literate Chinese, the meaning of a written word is nevertheless not always assured. This is because a written word may be used only phonologically as a transliteration of spoken sound, with the meaning of the word completely discarded; then, it would be completely meaningless if read literally. For example, in Cantonese, the common sound for 'yes' is 'hai' and a Chinese character with similar sound is used in the written script of Cantonese newspapers or Cantonese subtitles. The written word means 'category' in Mandarin, which is completely different from 'yes', which in Mandarin, would be written as 'si'. The multiple Chinese languages situation sometimes creates an interesting disjuncture when a Chinese audience is watching a film or a television programme that is dubbed in one Chinese language while carrying scripted Chinese subtitles in another, when one simultaneously listens to and reads the dialogue.

One disjuncture that significantly reflects the localness of consumption is illustrative. As noted earlier, the ethnic Chinese population in Singapore was, before the 1970s, very Chinese-multilingual. However, this multilingualism has been progressively reduced by the official policy of banning the use of all Chinese 'dialects' except Mandarin. Nevertheless, the presence of the suppressed languages was never entirely erased. A socially and culturally severe consequence is

that, other than Mandarin, all Chinese languages have come to mark their users as the poorly educated, the uncouth and the rude — generally, the lower social class. These other Chinese languages can no longer be entrusted with carrying a serious communicative substance. The appearances of speakers of non-Mandarin Chinese languages on television programmes and films have thus become 'laughable' and are, accordingly, used by local producers to get the desired 'comedy' effects (Chua and Yeo 2003). Significantly, this 'comedy' effect has been put to critical use recently in locally produced films, in which dialect-speaking Chinese characters use their self-deprecation as a mode of marking their marginalization in Singapore society, particularly English-speaking Singapore society, thus raising indirectly the marginalization of 'Chineseness' in spite of being a demographically Chinese predominant society.

The marginalization of other Chinese languages also has its effect on the boundary crossing of films and television programmes from other Chinese–East Asian locations. For example, in Taiwan, for those who are politically committed to independence from the PRC, there is a preference to speak exclusively *Fujian*; this language has been politically elevated to the status of 'Taiwanese' and is spoken with pride. The mismatch of the political status of the *Fujian* in Singapore and Taiwan results in a Singaporean audience laughing at the wrong nuances in the dialogue, and it completely misses the political intention of the insistence of the use of the language in Taiwan television, films and music.[31] The result is not only a miscommunication but also a political misreading when a Singaporean who still knows the remnants of *Fujian* watches a Taiwanese film (Chua and Yeo 2003). A similar effect often holds in the way Chinese-Singaporeans watch Cantonese programmes from Hong Kong.

Beyond the specificity of one Chinese language other than Mandarin, a different kind of disjuncture occurs when two Chinese languages are used simultaneously, one in dialogue and in subtitles. On one occasion, I was watching a Korean gangster comedy in which the dialogue was in Mandarin and the subtitles in Cantonese.[32] Questions of the migratory path of the film arose: given the Chinese linguistic conditions, the film was likely subtitled in Hong Kong and re-dubbed in Singapore, otherwise the dialogue would be in Cantonese.[33] If this was so, then the film is first exported from Korea to Hong Kong and then re-exported to Singapore. Or could it have been dubbed and subtitled in Hong Kong in two different languages in the first place, in order to capture both Mandarin and Cantonese speaking audience in Hong Kong itself, since there is a significant, and increasing, size of only Mandarin-speaking audience? And was the film then re-exported to Singapore? Finally, could it have first been imported to Singapore and intentionally dubbed and subtitled in the two languages with the view of re-exporting it to Hong Kong? The path of circulation of this particular film is an interesting puzzle. This latter issue is, perhaps, not specific to a Singapore–Chinese audience but all Chinese audiences as such.

The above elements are constitutive of the audience position of Singaporean consumers of East Asian popular culture. They may or may not be shared by audiences elsewhere in the region. Indeed, it is conceivable the localized audience of each of the constituent locations of East Asia will have its own set of specific characteristics grounded and derived from their respective everyday life. However, it is not inconceivable that the audiences of all the constituent locations would also share certain characters by virtue of being consumers of the same products in circulation. These questions remain empirical issues that can be answered only through collaborative comparative analysis across the region. The possibility of a set of shared features raises, perhaps, the most contested question that underlies this conceptual exercise and its implied research programme.

Effects of viewing: a pan East Asian identity?

Finally, to the most controversial issue that needs to be considered in the conceptualization of East Asian Popular Culture, the question of an East Asian identity as an ideological effect of the production and consumption of the popular culture. This is, no doubt, the most elusive and

the most contentious question. An initial step must be to identify how the cultural products may work in unison to create a discursive and imaginative space for the emergence of such an identity.

First, it should be noted that the border-crossing popular urban television dramas and films have displaced, if not erased, references to East Asia as a space of 'traditional' in relation to a sense of the 'rural'. The struggle of rural migrants into urban areas in search of better living is a theme that is almost exclusively still used because of its continuing social relevance for PRC products (Sun 2002). The image of the rest of East Asia is urban and modern. Occasionally, the 'rural' will be evoked as a nostalgic reference to a mythic time and place when life was simpler and people less cunning than the urban present, an imaginary escape but not a place to live in the present.[34] The emphasis of the urban facilitates culture-border crossing; in contrast to the idea of 'tradition' that specifies 'uniqueness' and 'boundedness' of a culture, the urban increasingly lacks specificity, it is 'anywhere', 'anyplace' and 'anyone', the urban thus passes through cultural boundaries through its insistence on 'sameness' — the most extreme of this urban sameness is, of course, the banking district of every city, and then come the shopping complexes of imported goods, each differentiated only by landmark buildings of famous designer-architects, that is if one even knows who these star-architects are in the first place.

Second, the focus on the urban, young and single professionals has a tendency to displace the central place of the family; an urban consumer oriented culture is evoked to displace the tradition-soaked Confucianism. However, unlike the American series — such as *Friends* and *Sex in the City* — in which the family has all but disappeared, in East Asian urban television dramas and films, the family still has a presence. The family appears to alternate between an obstacle and a refuge to romance and the city. The presence of family and its influence varies across the locations of production and is accordingly inscribed into the culture products. As noted earlier, references to family as an institution have largely disappeared in Japanese 'trendy' drama, but continue to have a very significant presence in Korean urban drama series, and strong versions of Confucian filial piety are still often scripted into such series. The presence/absence of the traditional family is, in part, determined by the 'age' of the screen characters; it can be completely absent in series that feature urban, adult professionals in their late 20s or older but has to be present in teenage or school drama series, even if vaguely. For example, in a number of recent Taiwanese series centred on college youth, the family is referred to in dialogue but parents are distinctively absent, enabling the children to do things contrary to parental desires.[35] Furthermore, in these instances, the screen characters have sympathy and form coalitions with each other against their parents. Within the context of the popular culture programmes, Confucian familialism appears to be largely a working class ideology in contemporary East Asia. Dramas with working class themes and characters continue to be inclined to use the family as the foil to dramatize its members' struggle for upward mobility, while the middle class turns increasingly urban, inscribed with competitive consumer-based individualism dictated by global capitalism.

Third, the emphasis on urban lifestyles enables the screen-visual images of middle-classness to transcend the relativities of real incomes in different East Asian locations. Although the income of an accountant, for example, in Taiwan and Korea is much lower than in Tokyo and Singapore, so too are the relative costs of living in these cities; consequently, while each urban middle-class stratum is embedded in their different spatial locations, a comparable level of lifestyle consumption is available to most, if not all. With the emphasis on lifestyles, urban middle-class Asians are given interchangeable bodies on screen, despite income differences and geographical location dispersion. Young professionals throughout East Asia will be able to identify with their screen representations in a 'clear, direct, and seemingly transparent' manner, through the 'immediate and efficacious' media that is television and films (Chow 1995: 10). To put it more categorically, urban dramas are imaginable, realistic, and foster identification among those who are willing to interpellate themselves into the screen, by temporarily or

permanently suppressing their national/ethnic identities; again, Iwabuchi's empirical study of the Taiwanese audience's reception of Japanese trendy dramas and his conceptualization of this reception as based on 'coevalness' testifies to this (Iwabuchi 2002: 85–120).

Fourth, East Asian popular culture, following the lead of Japanese popular culture, consciously cultivates a genre of 'beautiful' youth; particularly noticeable are the leading men who are boyish, have brown-tinted, full, fluffed-up long hair and are earnest, if not innocent — a mode of 'beautiful masculinity'.[36] The lead women are beautiful, of course, self-confident with very non-revealing clothing, commonly in formal office wear, showing very little explicit sexuality. The packaging is so similar that only the trained eyes of aficionados who can recognize the actors and actresses are able to distinguish one country's product from that of another, particularly television drama, on screen; an indoor shot of a Korean drama looks very much like one from Taiwan or Japan or, increasingly, from Hong Kong.[37] The beautiful look is arguably more important than acting or other performing talents, including singing. The similarity of packaging and the indistinguishable sameness creates visual and discursive room for the insertion and projection of an idea of 'Asian-ness', with nationalities suppressed.

Finally, unlike the Confucian identity that is supposed to seep quietly, through years of implicit socialization, into the identity formation of East Asians, the construction of a pan East Asian identity is a conscious ideological project for the producers of East Asian cultural products, based on the commercial desire of capturing a larger audience and market. Apart from co-financing, producers increasingly feature and mix artistes from different East Asian locations in the same television programmes and films, in the hope that audience from the different locations will identify with the artistes that are hewn from their own space and place, thus expanding aggregate consumption. At its most extreme, a film may even be divided into 'filmlets', each coming from a different location, with its own directors and artistes.[38]

Obviously, there are no linear effects of consumption of popular culture on such a film's audience, ranging from completely without resonance to a strong sense of identification. However, the displacement of the 'traditional', the emphasis on the similarities of young, urban, middle-class consumer lifestyles and a projection of 'Asian-ness' are the building blocks to facilitate audience identification across East Asia with the personas on screens, large and small. One could say that the discursive and conceptual spaces for the possible emergence and formation of a pan-East Asian identity have been laid. It is here that the strategic methodological insistence of the audience position is consequential. It has to be a local audience, watching imported products, which is potentially able to transcend their grounded nationalities to forge abstract identification with the foreign characters on screen, a foreignness that is in turn potentially reabsorbed into an idea of (East) 'Asia'.

The expansion of East Asian popular culture is still a nascent phenomenon. It is also a new phenomenon in generational terms, for it has emerged in the current generation of youth below 30 years, who can or have moved beyond, or embrace only much diluted emotions towards the histories of the Japanese colonization of Korea and Taiwan, Japanese incursions in China before the Second World War and Japanese occupation of Singapore during the War. The place of this nascent phenomenon in the process of East Asian identity formation will obviously be long and circuitous. Although there are signs of its emergence, they come, ironically, from instances of attempts to suppress it by national political interest. A good example is the case of Chang Huei Mei, more popularly known as 'Ah Mei', the Taiwanese popular singer, who was banned by from all appearances in the PRC, and all her appearances in screen and print ads selling soft drinks were removed from the media, when she performed at the inauguration ceremony that celebrated Chen Shui Bian's election to the Presidency of Taiwan. Nevertheless, Chang's popularity among her PRC fans continued unabated and she was finally allowed to return to perform in the PRC after having performed during the 2001 government supported trade union May Day celebration in Singapore and a charity show in Hong Kong in August the same year. The singer, buoyed by her fans across the ethnic Chinese dominant locations in East Asia,

appeared to be beyond the clutches of the state and, in fact, able to bring the latter to capitulation. Whatever may be one's political sentiment about the desirability of such an emergent identity, its possibility is nevertheless an issue that cannot be analytically avoided, without intellectual dishonesty.

Conclusion

Popular cultural products criss-cross cultural borders everyday in East Asia. East Asian popular culture has been able to carve out a significant segment of the regional consumption economy, although the US popular culture industry still dominates the airwaves and the large and small screens, and is unlikely to be displaced anytime soon. Furthermore, players in the US media industry are not sitting by waiting to lose part of their global empire but have formed a partnership with East Asian producers to produce East Asian popular culture.[39] There are, of course, many worthy researches to be done on the economies of these transnational product chains and product flows; similarly for researches into the organizations of the media industries in different specific locations and transnationally. The possibility and realization of a transnational East Asian identity, facilitated by the production and consumption of popular culture, remain empirical questions in each of the East Asian locations. The mapping of the manifest forms and contents of the pan-East Asian identities will require the collaboration of researchers in different locations, as the identities take shape and change. I only hope that I have delineated here, a conceptual boundary within which such empirical research may find a starting point.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay, entitled 'The making of an East Asia popular culture', was delivered as the Inaugural Distinguished Visiting Scholar Lecture, Carolina Asia Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 28 February 2003.
2. Throughout this essay, Korea refers only to South Korea.
3. This later morphed into the search for 'Asian Values' in multiracial societies in Southeast Asia, such as Singapore and Malaysia.
4. The literature on diasporic Chinese businesses abound, covering the entire range of praises and critiques; a selection of which is Redding (1990), Ong and Nonini (1997), Ong (1999) and Yao (2002). Similarly for the issue of pan-Chinese identities, see Ang (2001); Chun (1996).
5. This attempted inscription of Confucianism to the ethnic Chinese Singaporeans further ignored the historical fact that the local Chinese educated community was heavily influenced by the 4 May Cultural Movements of the early 1990s and had since then adopted the use of the so-called 'common language' rather than classical texts in the local Chinese school curriculum.
6. While the generalized term of 'Western' influence is often evoked, Europe is largely absence in the popular cultural sphere.
7. In a consumption space like Singapore, where there are substantive quantities of South Asian population and Malays, Bollywood products also feature prominently in the popular cultural sphere.
8. The popularity of Japanese television drama led Iwabuchi to organize the International Conference on Japanese Drama, International Christian University, Tokyo, 2001. The book of edited essays is to be published by Hong Kong University Press.
9. This finding about the Japanese audience's reception of other Asian popular culture as 'nostalgia' for Japan's past is, as noted by Chin (2000: 250) also found in another Japanese critic's, Tsubouchi Takahiko's, 'explanation' of the popularity of the television drama Oshin, in Asia during the 1980s. Chin himself, instead of criticizing such a simplistic reductionist reading of the reception by Asian audiences, proceeded to use these Japanese readings as the evidence for the presence of 'Asian regionalism', 'Asianism' or 'Asian consciousness'. Without empirical evidence of the basis for a popular reception of audiences in different locations in Asia, the best that could be said of Takahiko's reading is the critic's own desire 'to Japanize Asia' and 'Asianize Japan', 'a desire both to see Japan as the embodiment of Asia and to construct Asia as a reflection of Japan's past' (Chin 2002: 254). Such Japanese 'superiority' is, if anything, a sure way of alienating other Asians rather than a basis for an Asian regionalism.
10. The very sketchy and preliminary manner of this unfinished piece of conceptual work is presented as the inaugural lecture of the Carolina Asia Center, and is, I hope, consistent with the spirit of the

opening of the new research centre where the definition of its character lies in the work that has yet to be done.

11. This was a statement given by the producer of *Tokyo Love Story* in a talk given at the International Conference on Japanese Drama, International Christian University, Tokyo, 2001. Up until that time, and in contrast to the 'trendy dramas' that feature urban, beautiful, independent and unmarried working youth, the Japanese television series were largely about family problems (Gossmann 2000).
12. Eva Tsai (2003) gives a fascinating reflective biographical account as a researcher of such dramas.
13. International Conference, 'Feeling "Asian" Modernities: TV drama consumption in East and Southeast Asia', International Christian University, Tokyo, 2001. During this conference, analysts from Southeast Asia countries, with the exception of the paper from Singapore, worked on non-Japanese drama series.
14. During a trip to Kyoto in February 2004, I saw a Korean television drama being broadcast into two languages. This and one news event channel were the only non-Japanese programmes in 12 channels.
15. As the Japanese pop cultural products were 'illegal', this generated additional pleasures of illicit consumption, see Kim Hyun-Mee (2002).
16. The first category includes the films *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area*, the second includes the films *My Wife is a Gangster* and *Guns and Talk*. In the last film, mid to late 20s assassins who could design elaborate plots of murder are shown to be completely at the mercy of women, as clients and as potential victims.
17. The most outstanding example of a Singaporean singer who had achieved star status is Stefanie Sun Yanzi. The Taiwanese, I am told, claim her as one of their own.
18. Eric Ma of Chinese University of Hong Kong reported research on such productions during the 'Feeling Asia' conference at ICU, 2000.
19. For example, the most recent US financed *wuxia* blockbuster film, *Hero* by Zhang Yimou was immediately subjected to debates of whether the director, known for having his films banned in the PRC because of their critical political stance, has 'sold' out to the Party when his film was released without event, and was a huge commercial success.
20. In the 1950s, there were two film studios that produced Malay films.
21. The latest joint production television series, for 2002–2003, is '*Innocently Guilty*', an oxymoronic translation of the Chinese title '*There Are Fair Weather Days in the Law*' (*Fa nei you qiang tian*), a reference to the generalized Chinese belief that the court is to be avoided at all cost. It stars, the Hong Kong actress, Anita Yuen.
22. One such instance is the 'ghost story', *The Tree*, which feature Singaporean leading actress, Zoe Tay, next to Hong Kong actor, Wu Zhenyu (Francis Ng).
23. One Singaporean actress that has achieved some success through this mode of entry is Fann Wong, who played the Little Dragon Girl in a popular *wuxia* series and, in 2003, starred in Jackie Chan's blockbuster, Hollywood produced movie, *Shanghai Knights*.
24. It was also the very first popular Mandarin television series to be screened in Indonesia after the lifting of the official ban on Chinese culture. It was alleged that the '*Meteor Garden* has turned many Indonesians on to anything Chinese' (*Straits Times*, 21 July 2002).
25. Significantly, if the idea of 'Asian-ness' is absent, identification is also absent. For example, Sun (2002: 100) notes that PRC audiences consistently report that they do not identify (*rentong*) with Taiwanese or Hong Kong televisual cultural products.
26. I am concerned in this essay with only the ethnic-Chinese audience. The two other constituent racial groups in the population, Indians and Malays have their own viewing preferences in Hindi movies, and thus, in spite of geographic and national location, do not partake significantly in the East Asian popular cultural sphere.
27. Tour companies in Singapore organize tours to these televised sites for the fans. In a recent instance (December 2002), a group of Singapore tourists to Korea for winter holidays were persuaded by one of the members of the tour to change their designated ski resort to one that was featured in the popular drama series, *Winter Sonata* (*Straits Times*, 4 January 2003).
28. Singaporeans never fail to mention their first encounter with snow in their correspondence and memories. For example, a friend who is a foreign correspondent wrote this in January 2003: 'It is very cold here in New York and temperatures fall below zero daily. But I was lucky enough to see amazing snow fall in the city, which drives New Yorkers crazy but had me with a big smile on my face for the entire day.'
29. The other two are Malay and Tamil, a southern Indian language of the majority of the resident Indian population.
30. English subtitles make it, in principle, accessible to South Asian and Malay audiences, although as noted in note 25, few Malays and Indians seldom consume East Asian popular culture, preferring Hindi films and locally produced Malay programmes.
31. The association of low social class status with *Fujian* language is most pronounced in popular music, where popular songs imported from Taiwan *Fujian* are sung almost exclusively by working class men in karaoke lounges.

32. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a spate of Korean movies that were well received in Singapore, that featured 'emotionally sensitive' male or female gangsters who may be social misfits or inept, but deadly sophisticated in their execution of murder and other violence. This mismatch of character is used as the foil for comedy; such as *Guns and Talks* and *My Wife is a Gangster* in contrast to the more serious gangster film, *Friends*.
33. For a Singaporean Chinese who does not realize that Cantonese can be phonologically transcribed with Chinese written words, the subtitle would be incomprehensible. Nevertheless, he or she would still understand the dialogue.
34. In most newly industrialized countries that have undergone very rapid urbanization, nostalgic imagination of the simplicity of pre-industrialized and urbanized life is often evoked as a lament and a criticism of the high stresses of life in the city in pursuit of better material life (Chua 1995).
35. This is especially true in the depiction of absent parents who are fabulously successful entrepreneurs but thoroughly negligent of their families, especially teenage children; for example, the series, *MVP Lover* and the earlier mentioned, *Westend Youth*.
36. For example, the four members of Taiwanese F4 (*Meteor Garden*), the Taiwan born Japanese actor, Takashi Kaneshiro and Korean actors, Bae yong Jun (*Winter Sonata*) and Won Bin (*Friends*)
37. In one instance, in Hanoi, I was not able to identify where in East Asia the on-screen drama programme was from until Mandarin could be heard beneath the local quality voiceover of Vietnamese narration; in Vietnam, due to lack of funds, there is a tendency for a narrator to tell the story that is unfolding in a voiceover rather than dubbing the original dialogue.
38. The most recent offering in this 'filmlet' structure is a film called '*Three*', which contains three ghost stories, one each from South Korea, Thailand and Hong Kong, produced by a company that is consciously aiming to be pan-Asia.
39. Indeed, all the major record companies — Polymer, EMI, Bertelsmann, Warner and Sony — are already here, with East Asia accounting for up to a quarter of their global earnings since the mid 1990s. In addition, Warner Brothers have entered into joint production, with Singapore's Raintree Pictures and Hong Kong's Milkway Image, of a new film adaptation of popular Taiwan romance novel, *Turn Left, Turn Right*, in 2003 (*Straits Times*, 17 December 2002).

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