Modernity, Dialogue, and Re-nationalization: Critical Issues in the Study of Trans-Asian Media Culture Connections

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Abstract

Asian media culture and its circulation in the region have been studied extensively over the past fifteen years. This area of research may be the most advanced in media and cultural studies. This reflects the trend of considerable development in the production capacity of media cultures, as well as the intensified mediated connections via Internet sites and social media across Asia. Toward further advancement of this area of research, this paper revisits the critical issue of transnational connections via Asian media culture and suggests further directions of research. The focus is on three issues: Asian modernities, transnational connection and dialogue, and soft power competition, re-nationalization and the suppression of cultural diversity within the nations. It will be suggested that these research areas need to be advanced within the framework of inter-Asian referencing and with an aspiration toward trans-Asian collaboration.

Introduction

The rise of Asian media culture and its circulation in the region has been studied extensively over the past fifteen years. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this is one of the most advanced areas of research in the study of media and cultural globalization[1]. This reflects the following trends that have been observed across Asia: the production capacity of media cultures, including TV, films, and popular music has developed considerably; transnational co-production and circulation of media cultures has become commonplace through collaboration and partnerships; and multilateral consumption of media culture via DVD, Internet sites, and social

media has intensified. Given the ongoing progress of these trends towards complexity, it is vital to continuously make a contextualized examination of emerging cases and issues from fresh perspectives, as this inaugural special issue aims to do. The purpose of this paper is to revisit some significant issues pertaining to the study of transnational media and communication in Asia and suggest further directions of research. It will focus on three issues: Asian modernities, especially in terms of cultural hybridization; transnational connection and dialogue; and soft power competition and the suppression of multicultural questions. Studies in these areas, it will be argued, need to be developed within the framework of inter-Asian referencing, which requires adopting a de-nationalized approach and advancing trans-Asian collaboration.

Conceptualization of Asian modernities

One of the most significant issues regarding the rise of Asian media culture and its regional circulation is the articulation of various modes of modernities in the Asian context. How we comprehend "Asian modernity" is a contesting issue as its formation is overdetermined by the history of colonialism and the conceptualization of modern experiences in diverse socio-historical contexts is commonly made through the juxtaposition with Euro-American counterparts. Caution must be taken to avoid reproducing the centrality and originality of Euro-American modern experiences when referring to their inflection on the construction of non-Western modernities (Shome, 2009). Thus greater efforts are required to (re)conceptualize and theorize Asian experiences so as not to reduce them to a derivative of the Euro-American original. Modern experiences, such as gender relations, urbanization, and cultural mixing in a particular Asian context, have tended to be understood predominantly in comparison to (supposedly superior or advanced) Western experiences; however, inter-Asian referencing will offer a better grasp of and opportunity to theorize Asian experiences. A further deliberation is required to render such theorization and conceptualization trans-locally relevant, if not universal, and translatable to other social contexts (Chua, 2011). Jung's (2011) re-conceptualization of "*mugukjeok*" in the South

Korean context by referring to my conceptualization of "*mukokuseki*", which is derived from the Japanese experience (Iwabuchi, 2002), nicely shows these two levels of theorization and conceptualization of Asian modern experiences. Chua (2011: 44) argues that Jung's re-conceptualization of "*mugukjeok*" makes my conceptualization of "*mukokuseki*" trans-locally applicable and advances it in a way to offer a more nuanced meaning as it conceptualizes a "positive quality of mobility, of being unbounded by nations" than the English term "transnational." This displays the way in which inter-Asian referencing to similar and different experiences further generates a sophisticated understanding of the interaction between transculturation and cross-border mobility of media cultures.

To develop a comprehensive inter-Asian referencing in the study of media and cultural globalization, the historicization of Asian media culture production, circulation, and consumption is vital (Cho, 2011). For example, undertaking a comparison between Hong Kong and Japanese media culture and their influence on other parts of Asia over the past thirty to forty years would be critical to fully comprehending the commonality and specificity of the current popularity of South Korean media cultures, a phenomenon known as the "Korean wave." Spatiotemporal comparisons with other Asian media cultures and examinations of inter-Asian influences would offer valuable insights into the rise of the Korean media culture in terms of "the historicity as well as the multiplicity of East Asian pop culture" (Cho, 2011, 388). One issue that such historicization will productively elucidate is cultural mixing and adaptation in terms of two associated processes: Asian media culture's negotiation with its American counterparts and subsequent intra-regional cultural exchanges between Asian media cultures in the (re)constitution of modernities in Asia. Needless to say, Asian media cultures have long ingeniously hybridized in local elements while absorbing American cultural influences. Many studies have elucidated how Asian countries have subtly localized American media cultures in terms of production techniques, representational genres, and comparative consumption (e.g., Lee, 1991; Shim, 2006). However, a comprehensive examination of the similar and different experiences of negotiation with American media culture in Asia has yet

to be conducted and researchers tend to repeat the cliché that Asian media cultures "translate Western or American culture to fit Asian tastes" (Ryoo, 2009: 145). Instead, inter-Asian referencing would highlight at once the operation of "glocalized" power configurations, in which American media culture has played a central role, and the continuum of cultural translation practices in the Asian context such as the re-essentialization of cultural differences between the West and Asia, selective appropriation of Western cultures and the reformulation of local cultures, nationalist claims of cultural indigenization skills, replication of global mass culture formats, and inventive translation..

Inter-Asian referencing is also a significant part of cultural production in Asia, as cultural mixing and adaptation among Asian media cultures has become salient due to the influence of the Hong Kong, Japanese, and more recently, Korean media cultures. Media culture markets have become transnationally synchronized, whereas media culture industries and producers have been working across national borders; consequently, intra-regional cultural mixing and adaptation have become a conspicuous component of media culture production in Asia.[2] Successful TV dramas and films from certain parts of Asia are frequently remade; this trend is especially the case with Japanese, Korean, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and Chinese media texts. In addition, Japanese comic series are often adapted for TV dramas and films.[3] In studies of cultural hybridization, the "Rest" has tended to be supposed only to receive, imitate, appropriate, and/or hybridize the West. The dynamic processes of trans-Asian cultural mixing and inter-textual reworking need to be further examined to expose both the commonalities and differences in the reciprocated constitution and representation of "Asian modernities."

Cross-border mediated dialogue

As Asian media cultures have been finding unprecedented trans-Asian circulation and acceptance, inter-Asian referencing is no longer a matter of academic theorization; rather, it has become a mundane practice. Although media culture consumption may not necessarily engender

an Asian identity, it promotes mutual understanding and self-reflexive dialogue among the populace of the region. Arguably, Asian media culture connections have engendered a "cultural public sphere" (McGuigan, 2005). The mutual consumption of media cultures, such as TV dramas, films, and popular music, does not only deepen people's understanding of other societies and cultures. It also offers people many inventories for critically reflecting on their own lives and social issues, such as gender and sexuality, working conditions, interpersonal relationships, and social justice, through the perception of spatial-temporal distance and closeness of other Asian modernities.[4] The mediated encounter with other Asian modernities stimulates many people in Asia to appreciate the similarities and differences in the representation of common experiences of modernization, urbanization, Westernization, and globalization in other Asian contexts; moreover, many people realize that they inhabit the same developmental time zone as other parts of Asia. While the consumption of media culture from other Asian countries might evoke a perception of nostalgia of an Orientalist kind, it encourages people to contemplate critically and self-reflexively their own life, society, and culture as well as the socio-historically constructed relations with and perceptions of other Asian societies. Meanwhile, mundane practice of media consumption accompanies virtual interactions through Internet discussion sites and actual cross-border contact. Many people eventually visit other Asian cities, where they meet new people, learn local languages, and join transnational Internet fan communities (Hu, 2005); all these post-text activities further enhance self-reflexive understanding and conversation.

These developments offer new insights into the study of media and cultural globalization. They have enhanced our understanding of the formation of inter-Asian mediated connections, interactions, and solidarity in the digital age, an issue explored by several chapters in this volume. However, no less urgent is the examination of what kinds of connections are eventually promoted through media texts, and whose voices, and what types of issues are being disregarded in the emerging Asian cultural public sphere. Asian media culture connection has resulted in cross-boundary disparity, divisions, indifference, antagonism, and marginalization as well as

dialogue. Not to mention that the disparity in the material accessibility to media culture remains a serious issue,[5] the following questions need to be addressed: what types of mutual understanding are primarily promoted? Who are not included in this newly developed mediated connectivity in Asian regions? Do cross-boundary dialogues give voice to socio-culturally marginalized people? A critical analysis of these questions is crucial in order to fully shed light on Asian media culture connectivity. One pertinent question here relates to the political economy of media culture circulation: what kind of media culture is promoted for wide circulation for regional consumption by Asian cultural industries? Digital communication technologies have blurred the boundaries between producer and consumer, diversified cultural expressions, and facilitated cross-border connections, including those among marginalized people and activists. However, as the advancement of Asian media culture circulation may be attributed predominantly to market-oriented and corporate-driven forces, major media texts that circulate in the region are those of the commercially and ideologically national dominant in each country. Consequently, these media cultures tend not to adequately represent socio-culturally marginalized differences and voices within a nation. Although many critical studies have dealt with media representations of queer culture, race, ethnicity, region, class, migrants, and diaspora in a national context, studies on trans-Asian media culture connection have not sufficiently attended to these issues of media representation, showing more interests in how audiences positively and self-reflexively interpret the gender relations and love romances represented in TV dramas from Asian societies.[6]. More than ever, researchers of trans-Asian media culture connections need to examine critically whether and how transnationally circulating media cultures represent cultural differences, inequality, and marginalization of each nation, and how they are received in other parts of Asia.

The intersection of migrants/diaspora and media culture consumption is another area that requires further examination in the study of trans-Asian media culture connection. This type of examination does not just deal with the mundane practices of Asian migrants/diaspora in the Asian regions but also those in non-Asian countries. Although some studies have examined the practice

of transnational consumption by Asian migrants/diaspora of media culture circulating from their "home" countries or regions in Euro-American contexts (e.g., Kim, 2008; Park, 2004), these works tend to be side-lined in the studies of trans-Asian media and communication. The inclusion of Asian migrants living in Western countries in trans-Asian cultural connection would be imperative to go beyond a closed conception of "Asia" as region. A trans-Asian perspective would in turn offer a fresh insight into the examination of diasporic media consumption and the construction of the entangled sense of multiple belonging in the age of digital media communication.

Another important research area is the insensibilities, divisions, and antagonism generated by Asian media culture connectivity. Especially urgent is the analysis of how political issues, such as territorial disputes, can cast a shadow over the circulation of Asian media cultures. Asian media culture circulation has activated the vicious circle of (cyber)nationalism and jingoism, as evidenced by the recent surge of the anti-Korean wave and anti-Japanese movement (Liscutin, 2009). In Japan, for example, mass media exposure of Korean media culture has significantly decreased over the last several years. This is partly due to the rising costs of Korean media culture in the international market. However, this trend has also been influenced by the rise of anti-Korean sentiment, which has triggered anti-Korean wave demonstrations as well as racist attacks against resident Korean communities in Japan. An intriguing question left unexamined in relation to this trend is how people who consume Korean media cultures perceive and react to the growing anti-Korean movement in Japan. Some may be indifferent to it while they continue to consume Korean media culture; some may stop consuming Korean media culture to express their dissatisfaction with the anti-Japanese movement in Korea and support the anti-Korean movements in Japan; or some may express opposition to the jingoistic anti-Korean movement through the Internet or social media and participate in the countermovement against escalating racist attacks on resident Korean communities in Japan. In any case, research should be conducted on how the vicious circle of East Asian jingoism has impacted people's consumption of Korean media culture in Japan and how people in Japan who consume Korean media culture respond to the anti-Korean movement. This

investigation would be significant to gauge the resilience of the mediated dialogue and mutual understanding cultivated in Asia.

Soft power competitions and disengagement with cultural diversity

The advancement of transnational media culture connections has accompanied the process of re-nationalization in which the pragmatic uses of media culture played an important role. This point is elucidated in the growing soft power competitions across Asia. Although the term "soft power" was originally developed by the US in the post-Cold War context, the term has been widely adopted by other states that seek to exploit the economic and political utility of media culture and then enhance the international image of their nation. "Cool Britannia" was one of the pioneering state policies that aimed to develop media and cultural industries based on national interests. Since the 2000s, many governments in Asia have begun to pursue this kind of policy actively. It is well known that the Korean government has implemented such a policy since the late 1990s and this move has contributed to the rise of the Korean wave. Stimulated by Korea's success in this regard, other Asian governments, including Japan, have also begun developing cultural policies to enhance their nation's soft power. The widespread adoption of soft power has also altered its original meaning in the Asian context, in which the prominence of national image projection is apparent. Together with nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and creative industries, many states in Asia have become keen to develop soft power policy with an aim to enhance all-embracing national interests in terms of international relations, foreign affairs, and economic development.

The rise of soft power competition in Asia raises imperative research questions. First, we need to carefully examine what strategies have been developed by policymakers in Asia in the name of soft power: the kinds of media culture promoted and circulated internationally, and the program content and reception of international broadcasting services, such as CCTV International, Arirang TV, and NHK World. This line of inquiry relates to another research area regarding the effectiveness of soft power as a foreign policy tool. The export of media culture may not actually

improve a country's national image; moreover, this issue is challenging to measure. A subtle combination of qualitative and quantitative research would reveal patterns in this regard. The processes of soft power policy implementation are crucial areas to explore as well. What role do governments and media and cultural industries play in this process, and whether and how does it result in incoherent and contradictory policy actions? Only an elaborated ethnographic research of policy implementation and audience reception would help illuminate the complicated process of national image projection.

No less significant is the examination of how soft power policy works as a dominant discourse in Asia. Soft power is not just an external-oriented cultural policy of the projection of national images but also operates as an internal-oriented governance. As a pragmatic discourse on the usefulness of (national) culture, how does it discourage serious discussions on the uses of culture in the service of wider public interests? How does it suppress a crucial role, which cultural policy should play, in terms of caring about the views of marginalized groups and concerns raised in the public sphere? A market-oriented nationalist policy discussion on the uses of media culture does not adequately address the issues that have been (re)generated by transnational cultural flows: the high concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few global companies, monopoly of intellectual property rights by media culture industries, or exploitation of creative workers by a hierarchical international outsourcing system. Re-nationalization and further marginalization of marginalized voices is another significant issue. Soft power policy discourse has been developed in tandem with the increasing interest in national branding, and recent studies show how nation branding has engendered the re-essentialization of national culture and exclusive notion of national cultural ownership and belonging (e.g., Aronczyk, 2013). The rise of collaborative discourses and policy implementation between the state and media culture industries in branding media cultures engenders the reconstruction of an idea of the nation as an organic cultural entity. Such conceptualization is facilitated by the proliferation of international cultural events and media spectacles, such as sports events, film festivals, TV/music awards, food expositions, pageant and

tourism events, as well as the proliferation of satellite and cable broadcasting and audio-visual Internet sites, which has given birth to what Urry (2003) calls a "global screen," an internationalized site through which national culture is mutually appreciated and global cultural diversity is consumed. This development not only provides the basis for the expression of national cultural distinctiveness but also institutes an international interface, which highlights the specific nationality of cultures and propagates the idea of the nation as the unit of global cultural encounters. It can be argued that nation branding renders the narration of the nation as being highly commercialized, de-historicized, and incoherent, but such a notion endorses the essential ownership of national cultures with the indication of cultural genes or DNA (e.g., Cho, 2011), and fails to acknowledge that national boundaries are discursively drawn in a way to suppress various socio-cultural differences and disavow their existence as constitutive of the nation (Kaneva, 2011).

Researchers also need to critically examine whether and how a policy concern on the enhancement of political and economic national interests through the international promotion of a nation's media culture accompanies the (dis)engagement with cultural diversity as well as other issues relating to multicultural situations. For example, one of Japan's cultural policy statements states that the advancement of international cultural exchange, rather than the use of military power, is vital to the creation of a peaceful world where cultural diversity is mutually respected and celebrated, and multilateral understanding and dialogue is promoted.[7] However, soft power policy in Japan actually promotes a particular kind of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, which does not adequately address diversity within the nation-state or any serious concerns regarding the inclusion of culturally diverse citizens as equal members of Japanese society. This is demonstrated by the expansion of the Japanese international broadcasting service, NHK World, in 2009 at the cost of promoting linguistically and culturally diverse TV programs (see Iwabuchi, 2012). The rapid development of soft power and other related pragmatic cultural policies, such as creative industries and cultural diplomacy is in sharp contrast to the lack of policy discussions on intensifying cultural diversity in Asian countries. Although the two might not have a direct causal

relationship, it is worth investigating whether and how the intensification of national border control and an inadequate attention paid to cultural diversity within the nation conjunctively work with the policy discussion of soft power to demarcate further the exclusivity of national cultural borders. As soft power has become a global dominant discourse, an inter-Asian comparative approach would enable us to understand how it similarly and differently works in various contexts within Asia and how inter-Asian interaction and rivalry, which is engendered by the intensifying soft power competition, collusively discourages the engagement with cultural diversity within the national borders.

Toward trans-Asian collaboration

This paper has discussed the necessity of further developing studies on Asian media culture connections in terms of Asian modernities, trans-Asian connections and dialogue, and soft power competition and re-nationalization. A key approach to advancing this research is through inter-Asian referencing and comparison. Recently, the notion of "Asia as method" has regained intellectual currency; Japanese thinker Takeuchi Yoshimi developed this idea in the 1960s. To use Chen's words, its value lies in "using Asia as an imaginary anchoring point can allow societies in Asia to become one another's reference points, so that the understanding of the self can be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt," and the fact that "historical experiences and practices in Asia can be developed as an alternative horizon or perspective, and seen as method to advance a different understanding of world history" (Chen, 2010: xv). The development of trans-Asian media culture flows and connection also shows great possibilities of constructing new knowledge from Asian experiences about self–other relationships and offering alternative views of the world through self-reflexive inter-referencing and cross-border dialogue.

Such inter-Asian referencing requires a de-nationalized viewpoint toward and dialogic engagement with issues of transnational media and communication in Asia. When highlighting transnational media flows and connections, the common assumption is that exclusive national

boundaries are displaced. However, this does not necessarily problematize and overcome the self-evidence of national borders. The socially constructed idea that national boundaries are kept intact as "transnational" is subtly over-powered and replaced by the framework of the "international," which remains inattentive to socio-cultural diversity within and across national borders. Researchers have argued that globalization and transnational cultural flows do not dispense with national borders but resituate and rework them in a new configuration of global cultural power (e.g., Hannerz, 1996). If trans-Asian media culture connectivity can be advanced in a dialogic manner, "methodological nationalism" must be transcended more consciously than ever[8], as it has been strengthened and deeply instituted through the growing interaction of neoliberalism, marketization and states' cultural policies, which discourage states from tackling global issues, such as the promotion of cultural diversity and rise of jingoism.

Transnational circulation and intersection of various flows of capital, media culture, and people interconnects Asia both spatially and temporally, materially and imaginatively, as well as dialogically and antagonistically to highlight the historically constituted relationship and regionally and globally shared emergent issues. To examine whether trans-Asian media and communication facilitate the formation of a dialogic communicative space in the region where diverse voices, concerns, and problems intersect beyond national borders, researchers need to actively engage in cross-border collaborative projects. Such trans-Asian collaboration is less a detached and compartmentalizing form of international comparison but a reciprocal engagement with the issues of transnational media communication in Asia. As power configurations of cultural globalization are constantly shifting, on-going collaborative examination of how uneven globalization processes interfere with media culture connections in Asia is essential. Furthermore, trans-Asian collaboration aims to advance a sense of sharing and togetherness. In the world of intense cross-border interconnection and enormous uncertainty, so many issues and diverse voices are "sharable but not necessarily or inevitably shared" (Silverstone, 2006: 91). To tackle globally shared issues such as the violent impact of global capitalism, a widening gap between rich and poor, grave

environmental problems, intensifying transnational ethno-cultural flows and growing cultural diversity, and the rise of jingoism and racism, learning from the experiences of other cultures and societies, and conversing over transnationally shared issues, is required more than ever. Transnational media communication plays a significant public role in the promotion of cross-border dialogue with regard to these issues. This inaugural issue of *Asian Journal of Journalism and Media Studies* is one such constructive attempt at promoting trans-Asian collaboration.

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[1] For example, in the English language academy, see: Berry, Mackintosh, and Liscutin (2009), Kim (2008), Chua and Iwabuchi (2008), Iwabuchi (2002, 2004), Hayashi (2004), Erni and Chua (2005), Fung (2013).

[2] Regarding media co-production in East Asia, see Jin and Lee (2007), Moran and Keane (2004).

[3] A prominent example is *Meteor Garden* (Liuxing Huayuan), a Taiwanese TV drama series and a Japanese comic series. The drama series became highly popular in many parts of East and Southeast Asia, so much so that Japanese and Korean versions were later produced. Most recently an unofficial Chinese version was also produced. A chain of adaptations of a girls' comic series (*shojo manga*), *Hana yori dango*, which is widely read in East Asia, shows regional socio-cultural shared-ness as well as differences. See Le (2009) for an intriguing analysis of the Korean version of this program.

[4] E.g., Iwabuchi (2002; 2004), Kim (2008), Chua and Iwabuchi (2008), Lee (2008).

[5] *Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2009*, which was issued by the Asian Development Bank, reports that only ten Asian countries have an Internet usage rate of more than 20%.

[6] In my own research, I tend to look at how audiences became more critical of their own lives, society, and other cultures without closely analyzing how gender or ethnicity is represented in the original texts. See Iwabuchi (2002, 2004).

[7] *A Report by the Discussion Group on the Promotion of Cultural Diplomacy* (Bunka gaiko no suishin nikasuru kondankai houkokusho), July 2005.

[8] As for the critical discussion of "methodological nationalism", see Wimmer and Schiller (2002).