

# Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia: Time for a Regional Paradigm?

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Over the last two decades, Japanese popular culture products have been massively exported, marketed, and consumed throughout East and Southeast Asia. A wide variety of these products are prominently displayed in the region's big cities. Many Hong Kong fashion journals, for example, can be found in either the original Japanese or Cantonese versions. Japanese manga are routinely translated into the local languages of South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan, and China, and they dominate East Asia's comic book market. The Japanese animated characters Hello Kitty, Ampan Man, and Poke'mon are ubiquitous, depicted on licensed and unlicensed toys and stationary items in the markets of every Asian city. Japanese animation, usually dubbed, is the most popular in its field, particularly in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Astro Boy, Sailor Moon, and Lupin are animated characters seen in almost every shop that sells anime in Hong Kong, Singapore and elsewhere. In China's big cities, too, Japanese popular culture products fill local stores, opening doors into the country's expanding cultural market, though in some markets they also face stiff competition from Korean and Chinese products.



**Army of Kitty-chans, Hong Kong, April 2004**

The success of Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia has occasioned a flood of academic writing, notably in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, and ethnography. The majority of works have focused on particular examples, emphasizing the reaction of audiences to cultural exposure in relation to the global-local discourse (Allison 2006; Craig 2000; Ishii 2001; Iwabuchi 2004; Martinez 1998; Mori 2004; Otake and Hosokawa 1998; Treat 1996). These studies consist of specific case studies with a strong tendency to privilege the text and its representational practices. No single study has yet comprehensively assessed the newly created Japanese cultural markets in East and Southeast Asia, nor framed these issues within a regional paradigm.

This article proposes a regional paradigm for analyzing the dissemination of culture throughout East and Southeast Asia, including Japanese popular culture. Not only does it seek

to capture the expansion of popular culture into several national markets, but it provides a topology of East and Southeast Asia's cultural flows by highlighting the region's geopolitical, economic, and societal densities and specificities.

### Textual Analysis and Representations

In explaining the success of Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia (but not in America or Europe), some authors suggest that "cultural proximity" determines the trajectory of cultural flows. They maintain that Japanese popular culture embodies a certain "Asian fragrance," which resonates with local consumers. According to this view, cultural confluence is geo-cultural and not simply transnational. Writing about Japanese TV dramas in East and Southeast Asia, Iwao Sumiko has introduced the concept of "shared sensibilities" (1994: 74), Honda Shino the "East Asian psyche" (1994: 76), and Igarashi Akio "cultural sensibility" (1997: 11). "Cultural proximity", however, cannot explain why some Japanese popular culture products have also been successful outside of this region (for example, Japanese animation in the United States in recent years), or why Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese or other pop cultural products have fared well in certain markets but not others. Certainly it cannot explain why Taiwanese youth, for example, prefer for the most part to buy Japanese rather than Chinese products, or why Thai students listen to American music, which is ostensibly not as "culturally" close.



Japanese magazines in Taipei, November 2006

On the other hand, others have argued that Japanese popular culture products are "faceless" (see Allison 2000; Shiraishi 2000). That is, the appeal of Japanese popular culture derives from being non-national and therefore highly transferable, to the extent that it is no longer recognized as "Japanese." In this way, Japanese popular culture is gradually being indigenized and incorporated into the local popular culture up to an unrecognizable degree.

However, consumers in East and Southeast Asia seem aware that many cultural products originate in Japan. University student respondents to interpretive surveys with in Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Seoul, readily identified as Japanese the range of animation, music, and comics, even when these were translated into local languages.[1] They also distinguished among Japanese popular culture products, other imported products, and local imitations. Many of the respondents were able to name a variety of local television dramas, animations, and songs that were based on Japanese originals. This suggests that Japanese popular culture products are not completely "faceless" in the sense that they represent a recognizable line of products associated with Japan even as they become steeped in local cultures through translation. In other words, while these products do not embody Japanese

traditional values or philosophies they are recognized as “Japanese” at the very moment when they are incorporated into other cultural confluences.



Japanese-style “cosplay” in Seoul 1, March 2005

Iwabuchi Koichi (2002; 2004) provides rich evidence of the popularity of Japanese television dramas in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Bangkok, South Korea, and mainland China. Arguing that “cultural proximity” cannot explain the consumption of Japanese popular culture, he concludes that Japanese popular culture products represent “modern” ideas that consumers strategically choose.

In *Recentring Globalization* (2002), Iwabuchi situates the rise of Japanese cultural power in globalization processes. More specifically, he sees the modernizing role mediated by Japan as complementary to the globalization process. In Iwabuchi’s view, Japanese media companies have exported the Japanese experience of

indigenized Western culture to Asia (20). In this way, Asian people no longer consume “the West”, but rather a Japanese-indigenized or hybridized product (105).

Iwabuchi’s edited volume *Feeling Asian Modernities* (2004) is one of the most sophisticated attempts to theorize the content and flow of Japanese popular culture. Contributor Lisak Yuk-ming Leung analyzes two popular Japanese dramas that debuted in Hong Kong in 1992 (*Love Generation*) and 1997 (*Long Vacation*). She finds that the Japanese ganbaru message (“to strive and to struggle hard”) has traveled across Asia through Japanese TV dramas that “embody ganbaru messages in a new guise” (91). Ganbaru behavior is depicted by the dramas’ urban heroes, who “have been struggling in work and in relationships... encouraged by their counterparts to strive on” (92). Viewers, for their part, have adopted the ganbaru message in varying intensities across age groups (100-102).

In the same volume, Yu-fen Ko argues that Japanese idol dramas play a role in Taiwan’s “latent ambivalence of ‘anxiety and desire’ for modernity” (108). In this context, Japanese dramas represent the “real life problems” that Taiwanese confront (108). Lee Ming-tsung’s study, too, finds that “the cross-cultural practices of imagining in Taiwan and experiencing in Japan facilitate a transformation of cultural orientation to and self-identification with the dominant other, Japan” (130). Siriyuvasak Ubonrat’s study of Bangkok and Dong-Hoo Lee’s study of South Korea similarly highlight the ways in which Japanese popular culture products “project modernities.”





**Hamasaki Ayumi on an advertisement poster in Shanghai. August 2004**

These studies provide solid testimonies for the acceptance of Japanese popular culture, some even suggesting that the act of cultural consumption leads to strong identification with Japan. The acceptance of Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia is especially noteworthy given Japan's colonial past and the ongoing disputes over Japanese historical memory (see, for example, Morris-Suzuki 2007; and Shibuichi 2005). Whatever the suffering that imperial Japan inflicted on its neighbors in the decades leading up to the end of World War II, locals eagerly consume and practice Japanese popular culture. This suggests that, under certain circumstances, war memories and historical grievances may have at most limited impact on the acceptance of popular culture, particularly among youth separated by the experience of colonialism and war by two generations.

South Korea, which experienced 35 years of Japanese colonial rule, has long been sensitive to the inflow of Japanese culture. The South Korean government banned the importation of Japanese culture during most of the postwar period, until a four stage opening policy was introduced by President Kim Dae-jung in 1998. However, even before the removal of the ban on imports, a variety of pirated Japanese popular culture products were widely consumed, being readily available from street vendors and shops. For example, approximately 10 percent of South Korea's music market in the 1990s consisted of Japanese music. Karaoke bars also contributed to the popularity of Japanese music by offering a big repertoire of Japanese songs. Moreover, through antennas and satellite dishes, millions of South Koreans routinely accessed television programs from Japan.[2] The South Korean case indicates that even in places which were previously occupied and colonized by Japan, consumers are able to distinguish between the way they view history or politics and the way they relate to popular culture.



**Anti-Japanese poster featuring Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro in imperial Army uniform, Seoul, April 2005**

**Everything is Global**

Globalization theorists describe a homogenizing world in which the evolution of business and cultural networks increasingly shape peoples' economic destiny, identity, and culture (for example Druker 1993; Hannertz 1991; Huntington 1996; Kotckin 1992; Robertson 1991; Schiller 1976; Tomlinson 1991; and Wallerstein 1991). While some equate globalization with Americanization, the Asian experience, notably the dissemination of Japanese and other Asian cultural forms throughout Asia and beyond, complicate this picture.



**Starbucks in Shanghai, August 2004**

One weakness of the literature on Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia is its promulgation of a global-local paradigm. Most of these studies view the expansion of Japanese culture overseas as part of a global process and overlook the specificities of the acceptance, and a conspicuous impact of Japanese popular culture within the cultural-geography of this region. Stated differently, they view the "local" simply as a receiver and indigenizer, while Japan is regarded as both indigenizer and mediator to the "global." This tendency is a part of the wider phenomenon of engaging in contextual analysis and labeling the examined cultural practices as a part of a universal global process (see, for example, Craig and King 2002; and Hall 1995).

Interestingly, even those who do recognize the conspicuous regional acceptance of Japanese culture in East Asia, do so matter-of-factly. Prominent studies describing

“Japanization/Asianization” (Otake and Hosokawa 1998), “Pop Asianism” (Ching 1996), “Trans-Asian Cultural traffic” (Iwabuchi 2004), and “Pan East Asian popular Culture” (Chua 2003) tend to see these phenomena as tantamount to globalization in the East and Southeast Asian region. Because they do not consider the “region” as a viable unit of analysis, they fail to consider what kinds of role intra-regional relations shape the circulation and consumption of cultural products.

### Toward a Regional Paradigm

I argue that it is essential to view the “regional” not only as a process which facilitates cultural flows across national boundaries or as a manifestation of global-local relations, but as an analytical unit containing particular characteristics which differentiate it from other regions and localities caught up in globalization. This “region”, as I see it, cuts across the boundaries that separate the traditionally defined fields of “East Asia” (i.e., Northeast Asia) from “Southeast Asia”. Moreover, it is not merely a collection of nation states as a whole but is a product of the economic, societal, and cultural inter-penetration among East and Southeast Asia’s big cities and their consumer-oriented middle class population.

In East and Southeast Asia, regional economic inter-penetration over the last three decades (and not merely economic growth) have increased the salience of the region, whose formation has been generated by “market dynamism” and cross-border economic activities. This process continues with an emphasis on the informal, negotiated, and inclusive approach in regional policy, as some scholars have observed (Castells 2000; Frankel and Miles 1993; and Katzenstein 2002).

Although embedded in different spatial locations with different incomes, many leisure-time preferences and consumption priorities extend throughout the region. Today’s Chinese, Malaysian, and Indonesian urban middle classes can aspire to the same cultural access as their counterparts in Seoul, Singapore, and Bangkok. Their socio-economic power constantly generates demand for imported consumer goods and cultural products, invigorating the region’s consumerism and converging its markets. [3]



Mao and Doraemon, Shanghai, August 2004





Japanese style cosplay in Seoul 2, March 2005

Regional Cultural Confluences

The cultural landscape of East and Southeast Asia since the early 1990s is notable for the overlapping confluences of popular cultures, particularly American, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean popular cultures. Existing simultaneously and in varying intensities, they continually shape and reshape cultural scenes and lifestyles (Otmazgin 2005).



Beat Takeshi in Bangkok. February 2005

Consider these examples of the interpenetration of cultures from music and television. According to a preference survey conducted in December 2002,[4] Chinese pop music was the most popular in Chinese-speaking cities of the region. Over 93.0 percent of young Hong Kongers said they listen to Chinese pop music (more than double the rate of those who said they listen to Japanese music). In Taipei, 83.3 percent listen to Chinese pop music, 25.2 percent in Singapore and 76.9 percent in the three Chinese cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. American pop music was the most popular in Singapore (48.0 percent), followed by Bangkok (25.0 percent) and Seoul (24.5 percent). However, Japanese pop music was more popular than American or Korean pop music in Hong Kong and in the three major Chinese cities, respectively liked by 45.0 percent and 23.7 percent of those surveyed.



Japanese Music CDs in Hong Kong, April 2004

In the same survey, Japanese television dramas were equal in popularity to American television dramas in Bangkok, but more popular in Hong Kong, Singapore and in the three Chinese cities. In Bangkok, Japanese and American television dramas were the most popular, equally preferred by 10.5 percent. In Hong Kong, Japanese television dramas came second, watched by 22.5 percent, compared with 7.5 who watched American television dramas, and 64.5 percent who watched Chinese television dramas.

In animation, however, Japan is dominant as East and Southeast Asia's biggest supplier of animation (TV series, movies, characters), surpassing American, European or other locally-made animations by a wide margin. In a 2004 survey of twenty-three animation shops in Hong Kong, for example, Japanese animated series occupied between eighty and ninety percent of all animated CDs, VCDs, and DVDs offered, supplemented by only a few Walt Disney animated productions.[5] In South Korea, in 2004 over 50 percent of the 474 hours of foreign animation broadcast on the 3 major regular channels (KBS, MBC, and SBS) were Japanese.[6] On cable channels the share of Japanese animation is even higher. On Tonibus, the highest rated cable channel, 93.5 percent of the foreign animation broadcast in 2004 was Japanese. On the other cable

channel, Aniwon, 90.2 percent of the foreign animation broadcast in the same year was Japanese.[7] In Thailand too, Japanese animated television programs are the most popular. Thailand's Channel 9 has broadcast an average of 3.5 hours of Japanese animation on a weekly basis since 1981. UBC, Thailand's biggest cable channel, has broadcast an average of 2 hours of Japanese animation every week in the five years from 2001-05.[8]

### Movies, Music, and Television

Regional collaborations between media companies and promoters are having a strong impact on the East and Southeast Asian cultural market. They serve as effective agents for the regional transfer of cultural commodities and cultural production know-how.

Pan-Asian movies are a conspicuous example of the dovetailing of Asian and Western motifs. They have gained great popularity in East and Southeast Asia, and to a lesser degree in the American market as well. Movies like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero*, *Jan Dara*, *2046*, *Initial D*, and *Musa* were all produced and marketed transnationally. Some are ambitious co-productions involving staff and actors from South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand.[9] Low production costs in places such as China, Thailand, and Malaysia provide an incentive to relocate production. The existence of potential consumers in regional and global markets encourages marketing strategies that target the widest range of audiences in East and Southeast Asia and beyond. The resulting products are affecting the way both regional and extra-regional audiences conceptualize "Asia."

Regional collaborations are taking place in music and television as well, testing the waters for the rise of an East and Southeast Asian popular culture and creating new cultural



genres. More than the broadcast media, music and television production in East and Southeast Asia seek to develop regional productions and to tap regional rather than global markets. Channel V is an important player. This Asian version of MTV is popular across East Asia. The channel introduces local and international pop and rock music to its wide cable television audiences. Channel V's music programs often categorize the featured music as "Asian music," which includes the pop music of artists and bands from different East Asian countries. Sony Music Entertainment is also working to create a pan-Asian musical genre. In 2004 it produced a two-volume pop music collection featuring Japanese, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and South Korean artists. The success of the album motivated the production of new volumes in 2005 that also included Thai music.[10]

In transnational television broadcasting, Rupert Murdoch's Star TV is Asia's biggest outlet, owning a wide variety of entertainment, news, and sports channels and creating a pool of consumers in 300 million homes ranging from China to India. Its strategy favors localizing content and broadcasting in Asian languages, especially Mandarin (Sinclair 1997).

Japanese music and television companies are important players. A few have been exploring markets in East Asia. Pony Canyon and Avex Trax, for example, two of the big six Japanese music companies, have moved from licensing agreements with local companies to opening their own branches. In the field of television, Amuse, Rojam, Fuji TV, and JET TV are notable. They engaged in various television broadcasts and productions in the 1990s, often based on Japanese formats, establishing ties with local companies and media organizations. These Japanese companies have not only marketed Japanese music and television programs, but have been seen as examples and models by local cultural industries in East Asia.

These are only a few of the developments in the

regional cultural scene of East and Southeast Asia in the last few decades. They have created a new reality in which a wide domain of East and Southeast Asian youth, particularly the trend-setting urban middle classes, share a variety of cultural products and opportunities. In particular, millions of youth in Hong Kong, Seoul, Shanghai, and Jakarta covet the latest fashions from Tokyo, read Japanese comic books (translated or in the original), and watch Japanese animation series. However, they also listen to American pop music, watch Chinese dramas on television or DVD, and go with friends to watch the latest Korean movie.

### Concluding Remarks

Markets and communities in East and Southeast Asia are converging as a result of economic, social, and cultural forces. Throughout the cities of this region, especially, markets for popular culture and mechanisms for cooperation are being constructed, processes that lay a solid discursive and conceptual frameworks for regional cultural confluence.

Concurrently, companies, producers, and entrepreneurs have created what I call *platforms* upon which different people from different urban communities in East and Southeast Asia are able to access the same variety of popular culture. This is the space in which joint cultural productions and initiatives can be realized.

Cities are the central nodes where cultural flows overlap with consumerism on a grand scale. East Asia's megacities (Bangkok, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Seoul, Singapore, Taipei, Tokyo, Osaka, Kuala Lumpur, etc.) serve as matrices for cultural innovation, expansion, and mixing; they are where the construction of intra-regional and extra-regional consciousness culminates. In East and Southeast Asia, therefore, we should talk about a multi-layered process that links

and transforms metropolises, rather than confining our gaze to nation-state interactions.

The examination of popular culture flows in this light is both more detailed and more accurate than the discourse (and rhetoric) of global-local relations, with its implicit or explicit emphasis on universal homogenization often read as Americanization. A regional paradigm which takes account of local particularities, including the regional developments in the commodification and commercialization of culture, will better comprehend the region's cultural flows and its global impact.

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## Notes

[1] The surveys were conducted by the author with the help of local assistants, among 239 undergraduate students in Hong Kong (during June 2004), Bangkok (February 2005), and Seoul (April 2005). The questionnaires included 19 open ended questions and 2 multiple-choice parts, inquiring about the students' cultural

consumption patterns in general and Japanese culture in particular, and about their attitude and opinion regarding various aspects of Japanese society and state. I am grateful to Dr. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak (Chulalongkorn University) and Dr. Shin Hyun Joon (Sungkonghoe University) for their enormous help in conducting the surveys.

[2] Approximately 30 percent of South Korea's pirated market for music in the 1990s consisted of Japanese music. The South Korean pirated music market is estimated to occupy more than 30 percent of the entire market in the country, which means that illegal versions of Japanese music alone reach as much as 10 percent (Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry 2002). For more on the proliferation of Japanese popular culture in South Korea despite, and perhaps in part because, of the ban see (Kim 2004: 162-202; Otake and Hosokawa, 1998: 186-187; and Pack 2004).

[3] On East Asia's middle classes, see Chua 2000; Hattori et al. 2002.

[4] The survey was conducted by Hakuodo among 15-to-24 year olds, offering multiple-choice answers. See (Hakuodo News 2003). Available from: (<http://www.hakuodo.co.jp>).

[5] The survey was conducted by the author in randomly chosen shops.

[6] According to the government quota, at least 45 percent of animation broadcast on public channels must be local.

[7] Information given to the author in an interview with Korean Broadcasting Institute personnel in Seoul, April, 2005.

[8] Information given to the author in interviews with television station personnel, Bangkok, January- February 2005. According to them, Walt Disney-made animation is available in Thailand but in very small quantities.

[9] See coverage of these movies in *Newsweek*, 21 May 2001, 15 December 2004, and Special Edition, July- September 2001; and *Time*, 21 January 2002.

[10] The Sony Music Entertainment regional office in Hong Kong strategically encouraged its branches in East Asia to produce constellation albums that include transnational collaboration of music artists. Interviews in Bangkok and Seoul, February and April 2005.

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