Commitment to the studies of East Asian media culture connections

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Significance of East Asian media culture connections
In the last two decades, the production capacity of media cultures such as TV, films and popular music has been considerably developed in East Asia. Media culture markets have become synchronized and producers, directors, actors as well as capital from around the region have been working across national borders. Trans-Asian promotion and co-production of media cultures have become commonplace with the collaboration and partnerships among media and cultural industries. These developments are suggestive of a trend that media globalization eventually enhances regional connections, leading to the flourishing of various production activities and the formation of new connections among audiences in East Asia. In the studies of cultural globalization, the West and the Rest tend to be equated with the global and the local respectively. Even in the discussion of cultural hybridization, the Rest is supposed only to receive, imitate, appropriate and/or hybridize the West, no matter how actively producing local media cultures in the process. It is true that East Asian media cultures have long hybridized American cultural influences in local contexts, but cultural mixing is also actively generated among East Asian media cultures. Remaking of successful TV dramas and films of other parts of East Asia are frequently done and Japanese comic series are often adapted for TV dramas and films outside Japan. Dynamic processes of trans-Asian cultural fusion and inter-textual reworking cannot be fully comprehended by a simplifying notion of Westernization or Americanization.

Media cultures from other parts of East Asia are also finding unprecedented trans-Asian acceptance. Although it is questionable whether media culture consumption engenders an East Asian identity, it undoubtedly promotes mutual understanding and self-reflexive dialogue among people of East Asia. Mutual consumption of media cultures such as TV dramas, films and popular music has offered people more transnational repertoires for reflecting on their own lives and socio-political issues. It deepens people’s understanding of other society and culture and encourages them critically review the state of their society and even historical relationship with other parts of East Asia. Sympathetic watching of Japanese or Korean TV dramas has, for example, encouraged audiences in various countries in East Asia to have a fresh view gender relations, lives of the youth and justice of their own societies through the perception of spatial-temporal distance and closeness of other East Asian modernities. The mediated encounter with other Asian modernities makes many people in East Asia mutually appreciate how common experiences of modernization, urbanization, Westernization, and globalization are similarly and differently represented in other East Asian contexts and realize that they now inhabit the same developmental time zone with other parts of East Asia through. While consumption of media culture from other Asian countries might evoke a perception of nostalgia of Orientalist kind, nostalgia also productively induces a self-reflexive thinking as is clearly shown by the consumption of Hong Kong or Korean media cultures in Japan having undermined a historically constituted idea of Japan’s superiority over the rest of Asia. Furthermore, everyday practice of media consumption engenders actual cross-border contact. No small number of people eventually visits other Asian cities, meet people there, starts learning local languages, joins transnational inter-net fan communities, and even re-learns the history of Japan’s colonialism in the case of Japanese audiences. Media cultures have thus connected East Asia in dialogic manners; dialogic in the sense of critically and self-reflexively rethinking one’s own life, society and culture as well
as socio-historically constructed relations and perceptions with others through sympathetic consumption of East Asian media cultures.

These developments put new perspectives into the studies of media and cultural globalization, which have long been dominantly derived from Euro-American experiences, especially in terms of the progression of dialogic transnational connectivity. However, this does not mean that East Asian media culture connection has entirely an autonomous operation and escapes uneven power relations. We need to consider how globalization process unevenly interconnects the world in ways to surpasses a West-Asia binary and permeate Western and non-Western regions and how the global power configuration intervenes transnational connections shaped through East Asian media culture circulation. Especially significant in this regard is the rise of the global governance of media culture connectivity and diversity—the interplay of the transnational alliance of media and cultural industries, the upswing of cultural inter-nationalism, and the states’ growing interest in branding the nation via media cultures. What sort of cross-border dialogues it promotes? How “Asia” is newly connected and whose voices are not included? Critical interrogation of these questions is indispensable if we are to engage with a project of envisioning and materializing East Asia as a dialogic communicative space, in which a creative combination of research and teaching would play a vital role.

**East Asian mass culture network**

A constructive way of analyzing the issues of media and cultural globalization would need to locate transnationally shared structural forces and their interactions that often operate contradictorily but inter-constitutively in terms of homogenization-heterogenization, decentering-recentering and transnationalization and nationalization. These pairs of seemingly opposing vectors have made global media culture circulation and connection more complex and inconsistent, yet not in a way to radically transform the unevenness underlying them since a deep-seated marketization logic make them operate for the purpose of commercialization.

The rise of East Asian media culture needs to be considered in this context, in which the global advancement of highly market-oriented production of media culture has made uneven power configurations decentralized, dispersed and interpenetrated in the world. They have been shaped chiefly by cross-border partnerships and collaborations among local and transnational media culture industries of various advanced countries including non-Western regions, which has advanced the integration of markets and capital on a global scale. The inroads East Asian media and cultural industries have made into Hollywood and the global diffusion of East Asian films, animations and video games actually illustrate the advancement of transnational industrial collaboration as clearly seen by the globalization of Pokemon and Miyazaki films. To penetrate East Asian markets, Hollywood has also become keen to employ directors and actors, the remaking of Japanese, Korean and Hong Kong films and (co)produces Asia-related films. It could be argued that Hollywood’s incorporation of East Asian films shows uneven power relations between the US and East Asia, since “Asian” contents need to be modified to the taste and style of Hollywood whose main target audiences are those in Euro-American countries. More recently, the Hollywood studios began actively producing “Asian” media cultures by setting up local branches in prosperous cities. However, while Euro-America still occupies a central position, the corporate governance of global cultural economy facilitates the rise of East Asian media cultures through the strengthening of mutually constitutive disposition of Western and East Asian media cultures.

It should also be noted that the activation of regional media flows has also been organized in ways to
produce a new international hierarchy with the rise of regional sub-centers such as Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai and Bangkok, among which transnational corporate partnerships, co-production and mutual promotion are put forward. Imperative issues regarding the political economy of media and cultural globalization such as intellectual property rights and international division of cultural labor are also brought to light within the region. Japanese animation companies’ outsourcing of the basic labor of animation production to Korea and China highlights the exploitation of cultural labor in a transnational scale and the policing over copyright infringement in East Asian cities is increasingly tightened in a way to favor corporate interests of major media and culture industries at the expense of the interests of cultural workers and audiences.

Transnational alliance of media and cultural industries facilitated the process of global localization or glocalization, which the logic of flexible capital, as suggested above, to accommodates itself to seemingly opposing forces promotes. Globalization does not promote a straightforward homogenization but rather gives rise to the diversification of media cultural repertoires in many parts of the world. With the advancement of globalization, a series of cultural formats such as genre, narrative style, visual representation, digitalized special effects, marketing technique, idea of coolness through which various differences can be adjusted have been disseminated, shared and deployed by media industries. In this respect, it is incongruous to deny the enormity of American cultural influences, as demonstrated by the prevalence of television format business and film remaking, many of which are of American origin, however, it is again through the advancement of transnational alliance of media culture industries of many parts of the world that has deeply promoted the glocalizing enterprise of manufacturing tailored diversity.

At the same time, the glocalization process has engendered a further institutionalization of the national as cultural form for the national market functions as the most profitable local market as the unit of commercialized cultural diversity. Accordingly, cultural specificity of the national as the major local unit is more and more constituted by globally shared cultural formats. As Urry argues, “nationality gets more constituted through specific local places, symbols and landscapes, icons of the nation central to that culture’s location within the contours of global business, travel, branding”. This has accompanied the development of what Urry calls “global screen”, through which national culture is mutually appreciated and global cultural diversity is enjoyably consumed. Since the 1990s, we have witnessed the substantial increase in global media spaces through satellite and cable broadcasting and the internet audiovisual sites as well as global media events and gathering opportunities of sport events, film festivals, TV format trades, food showcases and tourism, in which cultures from many parts of the world are exhibited, introduced, competed with each other and mutually recognized as national brand in the international arena. While globalization processes displace the significance of national borders in some cases and contexts, they also brought about re-nationalization in others. Rise of international branding showcases are one of the significant such instances. Globally shared culture formats do not just provide the basis for the expression of national cultural specificity but also generate an “inter-nationalism” that urges people to conceive the nation as the unit of global cultural encounters and highlights national cultures in an essentialist manner.

Inter-nationalism of media culture encounter

This dynamism is clearly shown in the development of East Asian media flows and has a significant bearing on regional cross-border dialogues. A pertinent question is how the market-driven structuring forces of media culture globalization have an impact on whose voices and concerns are not included in East Asian media culture connections. East Asian media culture connection has brought about not just cross-boundary dialogues but also cross-boundary
disparity, divisions, antagonism and marginalization in various overlapping ways. The disparity in the material accessibility to media culture is still serious. Although digital communication technologies have blurred the boundaries of producer and consumer, diversified cultural expressions and facilitated cross-border connections including those among marginalized people and activists working for them, a question remains regarding what kinds of connections are promoted and through which media texts, and whose voices and what kind of issues are not well attended to in an emerging East Asian cultural public sphere. As market-oriented and corporate-driven East Asian media culture connections have been advanced, a trans-Asian mass culture channel has been loosely institutionalized, in which nationally dominant media cultures are mutually promoted and consumed. Most media texts that media and cultural industries promote to circulate in the region are commercially and ideologically hegemonic ones in each country and socio-culturally marginalized differences and voices within the nation tend to not well represented. This is indicative of the fact that the studies of East Asian media culture connection tend to focus on self-reflexive audience consumption of other Asian media texts at the expense of critical examinations of the representations of media cultures that are circulating and shared within East Asia. While the critical studies of queer cultures, ethnic minorities, migrants in the media representation have been much conducted in the national context, the same is not true with those on the East Asian media culture connection. It is required to examine political economy and representation of East Asian media culture connection seriously concerning the issues of inequality and marginalization in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, region, class, migration/diasporas.

This point is related to how East Asian media culture connections prop up the resilience of the national framework by the penetration of inter-nationalism as discussed above. It has been argued that transnational cultural flows and connections do not displace the significance of the nation but rather highlight its reworking. What has become conspicuous is the rise of inter-nationalized governance of media culture diversity, in which the national is considered as the unit of global cultural encounter and national cultures are mutually consumed in various inter-nationalized cultural occurrences. Nationalism that is provoked by the rise of inter-nationalism also takes a banal form. To appropriate the term coined by Billig, banal inter-nationalism pushes a propensity that when one discusses international mobility, encounter and connection, one is apt to implicitly assume the cardinal existence of the delimited national cultural boundaries to come across. Such conception of the nation as organic cultural entity not just endorses essential ownership of national cultures with the indication of cultural DNA, but also fails to bear in mind that national boundaries are discursively drawn in a way to suppress various socio-cultural differences within the nation and disavow their existence as constitutive of the nation. A pertinent issue in relation to East Asian media culture connection is the ambivalence regarding the empowerment of diasporas and migrants by the rise of economy and culture of “home” country. A researcher of Asian-Australian studies stated about the persisting stereotypical images of Chinese diasporas in Australia: “As we become more dependent on the dollars from the economies of Asia, I would hope that the vestige of 19th century orientalism will fade away”. It might be the case that the rise of Chinese economy would not just improve international images of China but also enhance social recognition of those diasporas/migrants who identify themselves and are identified as “Chinese” in the host society. However, there is a thin line between the empowerment of diasporas by their association with the images of the home country and the confusion of their identities and differences with those living in the home. This is evident when we consider how an inter-nationalized media culture connection overwhelms and suppresses local multicultural politics. In this context, inter-Asian mediated connections tends to enhance a particular kind of internationalized cultural diversity and encounter in a way to exclusively highlight national cultural boundaries. For example, the
popularity of Korean media cultures in Japan has generated people’s self-reflexive perception of South Korea, but it also promoted a confused recognition of resident Koreans many of whom have been born and brought up in Japan through the mirror of the present South Korea\textsuperscript{20}. Multicultural and postcolonial questions are subtly suppressed as an international relationship of Japan and South Korea is much underlined.

**Brand nationalism**

Inter-nationalized connectivity of East Asian media culture is further pushed by the state policy of national branding for the purpose of promoting the international circulation of nationally produced media cultures. While the media and culture industries have been most effectively attuned to the instrumental value of culture for commercial purposes, states have also shown a strong interest in using such media and popular cultures for the promotion of national interests, politically to enhance national brand images and economically for developing service sectors in which creative/content industries play a significant role. While the national policy of using culture in the pursuit of national interests is never new, the recent development signifies a new collaborative relationship between the state and media cultural industries, and between culture, economy and politics for the promotion of what can be called “brand nationalism”, which aims to opportunistically administer media culture for the enhancement of national interests in the international arena. For the states, media culture has come to be regarded as important politically for boosting “soft power” and “cultural diplomacy”, and economically for attracting capital and tourists and developing creative industries. “Cool Britannia” might be the best-known policy and practice of this kind, but in East Asia too, Korea, Singapore, China, Taiwan and Japan are keen to promote their own cultural products and industries to enhance political and economic national interests. Most famously, the Korean government has actively promoted Korean media cultures overseas since the 1990s, thereby contributing to the sweeping popularity of Korean media cultures, known as the Korean Wave\textsuperscript{21}. Motivated by Korea’s success, the Japanese and other East Asian government has also become active in developing the policy of promoting Japanese media cultures internationally in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

While it is highly questionable that brand nationalism is effective in enhancing certain national images, as a dominant social discourse, it has a wide public impact as it has accompanied material institutionalization and fiscal funding for the promotion of cultural export and, more importantly, it has facilitated a pragmatic discourse on the usefulness of (national) culture. What matters is its ideological closure for it effectively suppresses all serious discussions about the uses of culture in the service of wider public interests such as the encouragement of critical cross-border dialogue. States, for their part, work with it rather than regulating and controlling it for the public good, embracing two exclusive forces simultaneously—the one linked to the dynamics of the market, the other to the policing of national boundaries. Brand nationalism is, then, not just an opportunistic nationalist policy discourse on the uses of media culture but it legitimizes and is facilitated by the neoliberalism mode of media and cultural globalization. The states’ active backing of market-oriented globalization hinders rather than promotes the public discussion about the crucial issues of media cultural globalization and East Asian media culture connectivity as discussed earlier. While the development of creativity in the production of internationally appealing culture is emphasized in the Japanese discussion of national branding policy, it tends to lose sight of critical assessments of how transnational media and cultural industries dominate the production and distribution of culture, which has exacerbated the issues of the concentration of ownership on a handful global media conglomerates, their monopoly of copyright, and international division of new cultural labor.\textsuperscript{22}
Brand nationalism well interacts with banal inter-nationalism as well. While it is claimed in a cultural policy statement of Japan that the advancement of international cultural exchange, rather than the uses of hard military power will be key to the creation of a peaceful world where cultural diversity is mutually respected and celebrated and multilateral understanding and dialogue is promoted, brand nationalism actually aims to promote a particular kind of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, which does not well attend to diversity within the nation-state. In early 2006, for example, the expansion of international broadcasting service had begun being seriously discussed in Japan and the services commenced in February 2009 with a purpose of enhancing Japan’s national images in the world for the promotion of political and economic interests. However discussion of the service first started when foreign nationals residing in Japan complained to then Prime Minister Koizumi about the lack of broadcasting in Japan in languages other than Japanese. So, what was at stake in the beginning was the failure of the Japanese broadcasting system to provide due public service to people of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds who were residing in Japan. The question of the broadcasting system’s publicness, in the sense of doing justice to the diversity of citizens whose voices and concerns are not well reflected in the mass media, is indeed an urgent one. However, in the cabinet meeting a few days later, the concerns were translated into a strategy aimed at the enhancement of national images in the world by developing an English language international broadcasting service, which can be compatible with BBC World, CNN and CCTV International. Brand nationalism clearly suppresses a vital cultural policy engagement with the task of bringing the hitherto marginalized voices and concerns of various citizens into the public sphere, and of ensuring that they are heard.

Furthermore, brand nationalism does not promote or even discourage cross-border dialogue. Historical perception and representation has been one of the most contentious matters in East Asian media culture connection. We have recently observed that political issues such as territorial dispute have a shadow over the circulation of East Asian media cultures and East Asian media culture circulation has activated the vicious circle of (cyber) nationalism as shown by anti-Korean Wave and anti-Japan movement. This has been becoming more serious with the intensification of territorial dispute between Japan and Korea and China. To go beyond infertile nationalistic antagonisms and foster historical reconciliation, we need to continuously take sincere efforts to promote cross-border dialogues to enhance historical truthfulness. However, brand nationalism effortlessly tries to use media culture to overcome historical issues. In Japan, there has been a naïve expectation for the potential of media culture facilitating cultural diplomacy, particularly in terms of its capacity to improve Japan’s reputation and to transcend the historically constituted Japan’s problematic relations with other East and Southeast Asian countries. As was clearly stated in the 2005 White Paper of Economic and Trade Ministry that “without the spread of Japanese pop culture, anti-Japanese sentiment would be much stronger in Korea”, the increase in the export of media culture to Asian markets is naively believed to serve Japan’s cultural diplomacy as it would make Korean (and Chinese) youth who consume Japanese media culture more sympathetic with Japan and thus tolerant for the history of Japanese imperialism and colonialism. However, this belief neglects the bare fact that even if favorable consumption of Japanese media culture might change the images of contemporary Japan, this neither erases historical memory nor diminishes the importance of constant endeavors to facilitate transnational dialogue over the issue of historical reconciliation on its own term. Far from assuming that media culture has the magical power to overcome historical issues, it should be a matter of thinking carefully about how it might contribute to such a project.

Toward collaborative research/teaching
Transnational circulation and intersection of various flows of capital, media culture and people interconnects East Asia, both evenly and unevenly, intimately and indifferently, amicably and discordantly. If we are to further advance the new-fangled trans-Asian media culture connectivity constructively, we need to transcend inter-nationalism forged through the interaction of neoliberalism marketization and state’s cultural policy that discourages cross-border dialogue. In the world of intense interconnection and enormous uncertainty, where so many issues and diverse voices are “sharable but not necessarily or inevitably shared”, dialogue has indeed become key. To tackle with the violence of global capital, widening economic gap, serious environmental problems, rise of various kinds of fundamentalism, intensifying transnational ethno-cultural flows, and the growing cultural diversity in society, the practice of mutually leaning from the experience of other cultures and societies and of conversing over transnationally shared issues is required more than ever. Media cultures can play a significant public role—affectively, communicatively and participatorily—in the promotion of cross-border dialogue over those issues.

If we are to advance the project of trans-Asia as method that conceives and materializes East Asia as a dialogic communicative space, we should strive to connect diverse voices, concerns and problems in various, unevenly overlapping public sites, in which the national is still a major site but does not exclusively take over the public interests. Towards this, researchers’ role is first and foremost to offer critical interpretations and analyses of how uneven globalization processes interfere media culture connections in East Asia. But this should be accompanied by a commitment to contriving how to make use of produced knowledge for constructively coordinating the promotion of the sense of shared-ness and cross-border dialogue and mutual learning among various social subjects as citizenry banal practice. Here, the uses of media culture in teaching Japanese/Asian language, culture and society would play rather a crucial role. By seriously examining from various angles how globalizing structural forces and transnational interconnection are articulated in the specific local context of Japan and East Asia, researching and teaching of media culture can significantly contribute to a fuller understanding of social, historical and cultural complexity of the nation-state called Japan from a regional and global perspective. It can encourage students and various citizens outside classrooms to fully recognize the virtue of studying other societies and cultures, helping them to cultivate respect for cultural diversity and to gain a self-reflexive perspective on their own society and culture. Such a critical, vibrant studies foster dialogic, cosmopolitan thinking, locally, nationally, regionally and globally. This project of envisioning and materializing East Asia as a dialogic communicative space have a wider scope and relevance that expands the region and will be achieved only by forming transnational collaborations among researchers inside and outside of East Asia. We need to take this pedagogical question seriously more than ever in the age of inter-nationalized governance of cultural diversity and with the escalation of international disputes over territory ownership. Murakami Haruki recently warned that the nationalistic fever is something like cheap alcohol intoxication from which people will sooner or later sober up but it would seriously deter the advancement of cultural exchange. Since it is also facilitated by people’s deep sense of frustration in a neoliberalism world, cheap alcohol intoxication will die hard. It is time for each of us to seriously consider how to challenge it rather than just quietly waiting for it disappearing. The mundane sense of shared-ness and relatedness that the development of media-driven cultural connections in the last decade or two has fostered would be a powerful resource for this challenge but we need to make extra efforts to further develop inter-Asian dialogue out of it. This conference’s theme “interactive approach to teaching and learning” is very much relevant for this purpose and I believe that this is a great occasion in which we discuss collaboratively how to advance this rather ambitious but highly imperative project.


6 It can also be argued that those who are most offended by the continuing Orientalist representations in Japan-related Hollywood films such as Memoir of Geisha and Lost in Translation are less people in Japan than ethnic minorities of Japanese/Asian descent in the Western countries such as Asian Americans. See Koichi Iwabuchi, ‘Lost in TransNation: Tokyo and the urban imaginary in the era of globalization’, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 9 (4), 2008, pp.543-556.


13 Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2009, which was issued by the Asian Development Bank, shows the fact that just ten Asian countries have an internet usage rate of more than 20%.

14 In my own research on the regional consumption of Hong Kong and Hong Kong media cultures, I also tend to look at how audiences became more critical of their own lives and society as well as the perception of other cultures without closely analyzing how gender or ethnicity is represented in the original texts. See Koichi Iwabuchi, Recentering Globalization, 2002; Feeling Asian Modernities, 2004.


17 See Koichi Iwabuchi, Bunka no taiwaryoku (Culture’s dialogic capacity), Tokyo: Nihonkeizaishinbun Shuppansha, 2007, ch 2, pp31-74.


20 For a detailed analysis of the following, see Koichi Iwabuchi ‘When Korean Wave meets resident Koreans in Japan’, in Chua B.H and K. Iwabuchi (eds), *East Asian pop culture: Approaching the Korean Wave*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008.


24 A prominent example is the popularity of anti-Korea books in Japan. A most popular book is titled ‘anti-Korean Wave’ but its actual content is actually not much about the critique of Korean media cultures but more about a strong renunciation of Korean nationalism against Japan and those resident Koreans in Japan who allegedly support it. See Nicola Liscutin, ‘Surfing the Neo-Nationalist Wave: A Case Study of Manga Kenkanryu’, in C. Berry, J. D. Mackintosh and N. Liscutin (eds) *Cultural Studies and Cultural Industries in Northeast Asia: What a Difference a Region Makes*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009, pp.171-193.


27 Referring to the 2006 BBC survey of national images, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Taro Aso actually boasted of Japan being perceived as a most favorable nation in the world and proposed to further promote national brand power by exporting more attractive Japanese media cultures (especially manga and anime in his mind). However, he completely neglected the fact that in the survey two countries showed quite negative responses about the images of Japan, which were China and Korea.