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# Introduction: Mapping East Asia's Cinemascape

*Vivian P. Y. Lee*

The global popularity of films from East Asia has drawn critical attention to the overlapping territories of national and transnational cinemas. The phenomenal success of East Asia's popular cultural products in capturing Asian and Western markets has prompted critical rethinking of the epistemology of "Asian culture" and the geopolitical importance of the region as an intermediary between the local and the global.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, an expanding body of critical writings on non-Western national cinemas has shown that filmmaking has been a site where indigenous aesthetic traditions are brought into productive dialogues with Western norms. In the last ten years or so, the cinemas of East Asia, if not Asia as a whole, have been the subject of numerous books and anthologies. Whether focusing on specific national cinemas or adopting a more "pan-Asian" and transnational approach, these works have underscored the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary thrust in contemporary scholarship.<sup>2</sup> To this must be added the increasing attention to the interconnections between cinema and the political economy of the region's cultural industries and mass media.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that "East Asian cinemas" denotes a regional configuration of film art and practices, the term is also infused with the cultural politics and imagination of "East Asia" as an "idea in process," for, as Hunt and Leung argue, East Asian cinemas' "*mutating* currencies of transnationality" indicate a globalism more complex and unstable than "Hollywoodization" or "Americanization".<sup>4</sup> Rather than designating a homogenous, free-standing regional cinema, this understanding of East Asian cinemas refers to a mutating network of film practices at the intra- and inter-regional levels. It also means that the cinemascape of East Asia is engaged in the geopolitics and the conflicting national discourses that make territorial and ideological claims on the "region".

## 2 Introduction

### Locating East Asia

The “idea” of Asia as a more or less homogenous cultural space—supported by claims of shared cultural traditions and historical experience—has lent itself to conflicting ideological and political agendas among nation states. The discourse on Asianism or pan-Asianism has a long history dating back at least to the age of imperialism, when the notion of “civilization” became central to the construction of Western hegemony over the non-West.<sup>5</sup> Between the two World Wars, one main thrust of Asianist discourse was its anti-West agenda, as former colonies started their nation-building projects at full speed. By the 1970s, a new regionalism devoted to economic and social development came to the fore of the national agendas of many Asian countries.<sup>6</sup> Asianism, therefore, has never been a homogenous term with a fixed spectrum of meanings. Rather, as Taizo Miyagi suggests, it is “a trend that tied together the various [political, social, and cultural] impulses.”<sup>7</sup> The global realignments of economic and political power since the 1990s have ushered in a new phase of Asianist discourse. “Asia” as a political and cultural imaginary comes to represent conflicting values and aspirations both at the level of intra-regional competition and in the race for economic and political pre-eminence in the global system of nation-states.<sup>8</sup> Commenting on the new Asian regionalism, Leo Ching calls it “a geographic reality and a constructed discursivity that is both spatialized in its transnational deterritorialization and yet reterritorialized in specific configuration bounded by historically invented geography.”<sup>9</sup> Ching cautions against the deceptiveness of an Asian identity mediated by cultural images: the “Asiatic imaginary,” he argues, is an impossibility precisely because “Asianness” has nowadays been turned into a commodity in the still pervasive “relations of unequal exchange and domination” among the world’s nation-states.<sup>10</sup>

The country under considerable critical spotlight in this ongoing debate on the Asia imaginary is, not surprisingly, Japan, although its long history of economic and cultural hegemony in the region has since the late 1990s been challenged by China and South Korea. While the eagerness of Japan to “re-enter” Asia after World War II has manifested mostly in economic terms, in the realm of popular culture Japan’s “consumption of Asia” (that is, images of cultural otherness) constitutes another center of gravity in the complex interplay of Japan’s post-war identity crises and a nostalgic yearning for an “Asia” on which the nation projects its longing for lost dreams.<sup>11</sup> Yet cultural traffic among East Asian societies does not happen on a one-way street. Chua Beng-huat argues that the very concept of an East Asian Popular Culture

encompasses the production and consumption of cultural products at different locations where these activities take place, as well as the disjunctive economic, political, and social relations among producers and audiences in their respective localities.<sup>12</sup> Audience positioning is thus a “situated” phenomenon involving active participation, and provides a key to understanding the role of popular culture in fostering new affiliations and mutual identification in East Asia.

### The national and the regional in East Asian cinemas

A key arena of cultural production in East Asia involving multiple localities of production and consumption is cinema. The worldwide success of contemporary East Asian films and the internationalization of the region’s film industries have been a heated topic in academic discussion in the last few years. With the exception of Japan, cinema arrived in Asia at a time when many Asian nations were besieged by grave domestic crises and foreign intrusions.<sup>13</sup> The development of local (national) cinemas also coincided with Japan’s rise to a major imperial power in the region. Japan’s colonization of Taiwan (1895), annexation of Korea (1910), and finally full-scale invasion of China (1937) marked the darkest moments of this chapter of “shared history” of these nations, leaving behind still-open wounds in the respective national psyches. The decades that followed the end of World War II saw the founding of the People’s Republic of China and the “retreat” of the KMT regime to Taiwan (1949), the separation of Korea into North and South (1945), and the economic take-off of Japan in the 1970s followed by the rise of the “four little dragons” (Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore) in the 1980s, which also marked the beginning of China’s rise to world-power status in the wake of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). On the culture front, East Asia’s “soft power” is mainly felt through its popular cultural products and a dynamic visual culture, such as Japanese *manga*, “modern romance” TV dramas, *anime* and horror films; Hong Kong action films; Chinese martial arts and costume drama films; Korean blockbusters and the so-called *Hallyu* or Korean Wave;<sup>14</sup> an emerging Asian “auteur cinema”; and more recently regional co-productions evincing a self-conscious “pan-Asian” awareness. The deepening integration of regional markets, consolidation of industry structure, and intra-/inter-regional collaborations have created an unprecedented occasion for a reconfiguration of these “cultural empires”. This latter portion of “shared history” demarcates that politically sensitive yet culturally and economically versatile space in which films are produced, distributed, and consumed.

## 4 Introduction

The “regional” as a critical framework thus has to mediate the tensions arising from the differential power relations, historical memories, and local realities that are still structured, partially if not wholly, on the basis of “nation” (or what Yingjin Zhang calls “nation-people”<sup>15</sup>) in a broad sense. Writings on national cinemas have generally focused on the cinematic representation/contestation of the nation or nation-state, and the negotiation between indigenous traditions and what were considered “modern” cinematic codes in the evolution of a national cinema. Chinese cinema scholarship has produced a fascinating account of how these various positions are argued, debated, rethought, and revised, particularly the controversy over the exact meaning of the “nation” and the “national” when applied to Chinese or any non-Western cinema in today’s globalized world.<sup>16</sup> In the early 1990s, the “New Korean cinema” came into being against a long history of political repression and state interference. Beginning with the political democratization in 1992, the massive program of commercialization and globalization orchestrated by the state and large multinational corporations (*chaebols*) has given rise to the phenomenon of “record-breakers” or Korean blockbusters.<sup>17</sup> Turning to Japan, the country’s relatively earlier admission to international (art) cinema through the works of luminaries such as Mizoguchi Kenji, Ozu Yasujiro, and Kurosawa Akira has meant that Japanese cinema studies in the West have produced a substantial body of literature, from an aesthetically-oriented, neo-formalist mode of inquiry to ideological and political critique.<sup>18</sup>

As Davis and Yeh point out, the “national cinema” model cannot adequately address the region “as an interconnected whole that is susceptible to global political fluctuations and multinational capitalism.”<sup>19</sup> While East Asia “remains a differentiated, conflicted region” rather than a homogenous whole,<sup>20</sup> government policy and structural changes in the last decade have also brought about further regional consolidation and internationalization of the film industries. In this connection, cinema as a cultural industry subject to the vicissitudes of economic globalization/regionalization and national policy regulations provides yet another critical angle from which to reconfigure the field of East Asian cinemas. In their discussion of “Northeast Asian regionalism,” Berry, Liscutin, and Mackintosh caution against the unequivocal embrace of “culture” as a means for individual liberation and empowerment that is written into official cultural policy statements:

postures on internationalization, cultural exchange, and globalization may not only be about the promotion of a harmonious world order.

They are also about projecting one's own national prestige, presence, and influence through a jockeying for position in a regional and global market structured by relative strength of economic—now linked to culture—and/or political power. ... Regionalism is far from minimizing or eradicating marginalizations and oppressions. ... As part of globalization in the twenty-first century, it replicates, reproduces, and regenerates them, if in slightly different form.<sup>21</sup>

One of the more visible impacts of economic globalization on East Asia's film industries is the industry-wide shift toward co-production, which has become a dominant mode of practice in the mainstream commercial cinema. While co-production in Asia has had a long history dating back to the 1940s,<sup>22</sup> since the late 1990s, co-produced films have gained a stronghold in the Asian film market. As Stephen Teo notes, successful "pan-Asian" films are able to invoke a sense of "universality" through the manipulation of setting, costume, characterization, and narrative.<sup>23</sup> Far from being culturally innocent, this universality is the result of commercial and ideological calculations. No doubt co-productions can mobilize a diverse range of cultural, financial, technical, and artistic resources in the production of mega-blockbusters across national boundaries. However, it is also true that a majority of the recent co-productions are primed for the China market, while more and more films labeled "pan-Asian" are effectively "pan-Chinese" in terms of language, cast, and content. Economics and cultural power, after all, are important denominators in the co-production enterprise.

All this points toward new questions and new possibilities in our understanding of East Asian cinemas as a concept "in process" without losing sight of the "differentiated, conflicted" nature of such a configuration. This observation makes a case for an analytical framework that recognizes the productive tensions between the local/national and the regional/global: it is informed by the inherent instability and contingency of the very "idea" of East Asia and its multifaceted cinematic traditions and cultural imaginations, as well as more recent changes in the global and regional political economy. Instead of imagining *one* regional cinema, it attends to pre-existing and emerging traits, patterns, practices, and relations of production and consumption, especially those whose nuanced connections have not yet been fully accounted for. While cultural policy and economic globalization can blur and redraw the boundaries of any national or regional cinema, in the new global order cinema can still afford to be a powerful means of (popular) cultural imagination and identity articulations whose material origins

remain the local realities and experiences, where the regional and the global obtain tangible form and substance. This volume of essays aims to bring into dialogue different ideas of East Asian cinemas, seen as a polysemic site of textual, contextual, aesthetic, and ideological inquiry and critical reflection.

## Themes and chapters

The chapters in this book are organized into four thematic clusters, but the scope and arguments of the individual chapters are not necessarily bounded by this framework; more often than not issues and questions overlap, and some of them can be productively juxtaposed. The two chapters in Part I, "Filmmaking, Film Industry, and the Film Market," look at how globalization has brought about new patterns of migration and adaptation among filmmakers and film industries. Song Hwee Lim's "Transnational Trajectories in Contemporary East Asian Cinemas" traces the careers of Asian directors and sheds light on lesser noticed dimensions of their transnationalism. Encompassing prominent figures such as Ang Lee, John Woo, Wong Kar-wai, Jia Zhangke, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Mingliang, and numerous emerging talents from Southeast Asia, Lim's analysis maps out four transnational trajectories in their careers, namely Hollywood remakes, intra-Asian borrowings aimed at a mass audience, translingual filmmaking, and intra-Asian intertextuality, the latter two being more auteurist in their orientation. In Chapter 2, "Hollywood's Global Strategy and the Future of Chinese Cinema," Hong Yin and Zhiwei Xiao trace the historical trajectory of Hollywood's expansion into the Chinese and Asian markets and reflect on how economic and cultural policy, industrial infrastructure, and ideology have both shaped and constrained the development of China's national cinema, and how China can effectively position itself in the global competition for cultural markets.

Part II, "Genre and Transnational Aesthetics" puts together four chapters on film aesthetics and film genres in a transnational context. Gina Marchetti's "Bicycle Thieves and Pickpockets in the 'Desert of the Real': Transnational Chinese Cinema, Postmodernism, and the Transcendental Style" maps out a contour of Chinese cinematic realism in a close-reading of two films by Patrick Tam and Jia Zhangke through the prism of the "transcendental style." Originally used by Paul Schrader in his study on Bresson, Dreyser, and Ozu, the transcendental style "uses the mimetic properties of the film image to point beyond the 'real.'" Through a comparative textual analysis of Tam's

*After This Our Exile* and Jia's *Xiao Wu* with reference to their common source of inspiration, Bresson's *Pickpocket*, Marchetti traces the nuanced influences and shared philosophical and aesthetic insights among the Chinese and French filmmakers, so far an underexplored subject in critical discussions of these films, if not Chinese cinema in general. Transnational parody in action comedy is the theme of Eric Yu's chapter, "007 in Late Colonial Hong Kong: Technology, Masculinity, and Sly Humour in Stephen Chow's *From Beijing with Love*." Yu recasts Stephen Chow's 1994 action comedy in the context of the so-called Bondmania in 1960s Hong Kong, when the then crown colony was swept by James Bond movies and started producing its own versions of secret agents on screen. Yu's reading of Chow's parody of the Bond-prototype raises questions about the "cultural politics involved in fashioning a Chinese Bond in a late British colonial context," which is to be distinguished from Anglo-American Bond parodies such as *Casino Royale* (1967) and the Austin Powers films. Genre identity and genre mobility are the concerns of the last two chapters of this part. In "'Asia' as Regional Signifier and Transnational Genre-Branding: the Asian Horror Omnibus Movies *Three* and *Three ... Extremes*" Nikki Lee discerningly problematizes the generic label "Asian horror" in the production and marketing of *Three* (2002) and *Three ... Extremes* (2004), two pan-Asian omnibus films that serve as "models" for intra-regional and trans-regional projects. Lee argues that as a "brand-cum-genre," Asia Extreme conflates the regional signifier "Asia" with both horror and extreme cinema and "reconfigures" the identity of Asian genre movies brought together under one brand. Vivian Lee's chapter, "J-Horror and Kimchi Western: Mobile Genres in East Asian Cinemas," examines the process of transcultural adaptation in Shimizu Takashi's US remakes of his own *Ju-on* series and Korean director Kim Ji-woon's self-reflexive citations of the Western in *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird*. Tracing the hybrid generic origins of horror and the Western and their creative transformation in these films, she argues that these genre films belong to a new "global vernacular" through which the "lingua franca" of popular cinema is no longer the uncontested property of Western (American) cinema.

Part III, "Screen Cultures and Identity Politics," revisits the conflicted zone of cultural identity and national history in cinematic representations. In Chapter 7, "Rethinking a New National Identity in Heisei Japan: Neo-conservatism and Japanese Cinema," Kinnia Yau elucidates the origins of Neo-conservatism in contemporary Japanese politics and culture and how it has impacted film production in Japan. Her analysis of post-1990 war-related films and the filmmakers and stars associated

with Neo-conservative ideology reveals that Neo-conservatism will continue to influence Japanese politics, and will continue to “make its presence felt in Japanese cinema.” While at the core of Japan’s Neo-conservatism is the imagination of a new national identity, the very notion of a “regional identity” has become a floating signifier in the cultural traffic between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta. In Chapter 8, “Cinematic Imagination of Border-crossing in Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta: *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* and *Durian, Durian*,” Michelle Huang considers the aspirations and ambivalences of Hong Kong’s integration with the Pearl River Delta region at different phases of the ex-colony’s political transition. Her reading of the two films reveals the “myriad emotions and feelings evoked by border-crossing” and opens up “a window through which to see the (im)possibility of a regional identity of Hong Kong and the PRD.” The politics of national and regional identity continues to inform Ti Wei’s analysis of pan-Asian co-productions in Chapter 9, “In the Name of ‘Asia’: Practices and Consequences of Recent International Film Co-productions in East Asia.” Wei’s analysis of the contexts of production and film narratives of a selection of East Asian co-productions complements the discussion on transnational filmmaking and pan-Asian cinema in the foregoing chapters by drawing attention to issues of cultural power in the economic game of regional co-productions. Wei’s discussion sheds light on the relationship between cultural capital, cultural power, and the creation of an imaginary “Asia” on screen removed from the realities and experiences in the region. These reflections also resonate with some of the questions raised in the interviews with filmmakers in Part IV, the final part of this volume.

Film scholarship sometimes has to face the dilemma of creating a self-reflexive mirror insulated from the material realities and practices of filmmaking. The interviews presented in Part IV, “Interviews: Filmmakers on Filmmaking,” are intended partially to bridge the gap between academic scholarship and the “realpolitik” of the filmmaking world from the perspective of some of its “insiders” who have been actively involved in co-productions in Asia. In both Chapters 10 and 11, a critical introduction is followed by the author’s interviews with filmmakers working across the region. In “Framing Tokyo Media Capital and Asian Co-production,” Stephanie DeBoer puts together her interviews with prominent Japanese producers on Asian co-production from the vantage point of Tokyo, a leading “media capital” where “competing discourses” on co-production come into play. As such, these interviews “offer discourses to be interrogated” and also “suggest

frameworks for approaching the ideologies and formations" that constrain collaborative work "across national or local, regional, and global networks." To the extent that "media capitals" are "multifaceted yet deeply perspectival entities," the views from Tokyo can be interestingly juxtaposed with those from Hong Kong and Singapore, two filmmaking cities trying to gain a foothold in the fast-expanding China market. In "Working Through China in the Pan-Asian Film Network: Perspectives from Hong Kong and Singapore," Vivian Lee speaks with veteran Hong Kong filmmaker Joe Cheung Tung-cho, and Man Shu Sum of Raintree Pictures in Singapore, on the latest developments in China's film industry, the impact of co-production on local films, and their personal experiences in working in, with, and through, China. Hong Kong and Singapore are two key players in the pan-Asian co-production network with deep historical and cultural links to China, and their respective futures in the growing Sinophone film market deserve closer attention. It is hoped that these interviews can complement the academic scholarship in the foregoing chapters in sketching a more "panoramic" vista of the contemporary East Asian cinemascapes.

The idea of this edited volume originally came from a two-day symposium entitled "Cross-cultural Perspectives on East Asian Cinemas" held at the City University of Hong Kong in July 2008. Additional chapters were subsequently received from colleagues who were not able to attend the event in Hong Kong. The editor would like to take this opportunity to thank all the contributors for their great effort, without which this project would not have been possible.

## Notes

1. Iwabuchi (2002); Chua Beng-huat (2004).
2. David Bordwell, Donald Richie, and Noel Burch on Japanese cinema are among the most-quoted names in Japanese cinema scholarship. The "national" cinemas of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (a "proto-nation" according to Chu Yingchi (2003)), have received due critical attention since the 1980s, as reflected in the burgeoning of "Chinese cinemas" scholarship worldwide. Studies on contemporary Korean cinema have flourished since 2000; see, for instance, Julian Stringer (2005); Hyanjin Lee (2000), *Contemporary Korean Cinema*; and Francis Gateward (ed.) (2007), *Seoul Searching*. Examples of a regional/transnational approach include Anne Ciecko (ed.) (2006); Iwabuchi et al. (eds) (2004); Chua and Iwabuchi (eds) (2008); Davis and Yeh (2008); and Hunt and Leung (2008). See also Morris, et al (eds) (2005) on the transnational influence of Hong Kong action cinema. Cf. discussion below.
3. See Berry et al (eds) (2009).
4. Hunt and Leung (2008), 5, original italics.

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5. Duara (2001), 99–121.
6. Morris-Suzuki (1998); Miyagi (2006).
7. Miyagi (2006), 3.
8. From Japan's post-war endeavors to re-embrace Asia as a nostalgic reflection of its past to Korea's (we may also add China and Taiwan in this category) struggle to assert its identity vis-à-vis a still powerful ex-colonizer (Japan), and from the formation of APEC and ASEAN to the emergence of the "Chinese sphere of influence," the region—and the world—seems to be witnessing a major reshuffle and realignment of power along regional lines.
9. Ching (2000), 237–8.
10. *Ibid.*, 243, 257.
11. Iwabuchi (2002), 548–51.
12. Chua (2004), 211–12.
13. "In Japan, film arrived as a commercial product ... there was thus no Japanese essence awaiting liberation by a few individual directors" (Donald Richie (2005), 10). This historical experience with the quintessential form of Western cultural modernity was very different from that in China and Korea, where cinema was quickly politicized and seized upon as a means for advancing national struggles. See, for example, Zhang Yingjin (2004), *Chinese National Cinema*, Chapters 2 and 3.
14. Also spelled as "*hanryu*" (Japanese) and "*hanliu*" (Chinese). Initially a term coined by Mainland audiences to describe the unexpected "invasion" of Korean TV dramas and cultural products in China the 1990s. It has been taken up as shorthand for this cultural phenomenon in the region. See, for example, Lee Keehyeung (2008), and Fang-Chi Irene Yang (2008).
15. Zhang Yingjin (2004), 5–7.
16. Zhang Yingjin (2004) and Berry and Farquhar (2006) adopt a flexible model to account for the relationship between cinema and the national, locating the national within transnational networks or "projects" in which "a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact upon each other in various types of relationships ranging from synergy to contest" (Berry and Farquhar (2006), 5). Lu and Yeh (2005) favor the term "Chinese-language film" to emphasize the geopolitical and cultural diversity of Chinese cinema.
17. For a discussion on the phenomenon of the blockbuster film from Korea and China, see Chris Berry (2003), "'What's Big About the Big Film?': 'De-Westernizing' the Blockbuster in Korea and China," in Julian Stringer (ed.), *Movie Blockbusters*, 217–29.
18. Aesthetic ingenuities alongside culture-specific subject matter is at the centre of many influential works on Japanese film, such as David Bordwell's *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1988), Donald Richie's *Ozu* (1974) and *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (2001/2005), and Noel Burch's *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (1979). More recent studies have shown an increased interest in cultural and ideological analysis, see n. 13 above.
19. Davis and Yeh (2008), 1.
20. *Ibid.*, 8.
21. Berry et al. (2009), 15.
22. For a discussion of the history of Asian co-productions, see Yau (2003). Also discussed in Teo (2008).
23. Teo (2008).

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