

# **East Asian Pop Culture: Consumer Communities and Politics of the National**

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## **Abstract**

A mix of Japanese, Korean and Chinese-languages pop cultures have become progressively part of the routine, daily diet of media consumers in East Asia, albeit uneven flows and exchanges between the three streams remain, with Chinese-languages products garnering lower audience shares in Japan and Korea relative to the Japanese and Korean products in ethnic-Chinese dominant locations of PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Each location has its own mix of dedicated consumers of the three streams of pop cultural products. Consequently, a network of transnational consumer communities, from active fans to occasional consumers, has emerged in the region. These transnational consumer communities exist 'beneath' the official international relations in a region where traces of colonial histories and Cold War antagonisms remain. While the potential for people-to-people exchanges might insidiously change mutual perceptions among the consumers, there are at present no structural avenues for these pop culture consumer communities to percolate upwards to intervene in the international processes.

## Introduction

At the beginning of a new century, discussions on media in East Asia has apparently displaced the concerns with ‘cultural imperialism’ of the West, namely the US, to one that celebrates the ‘arrival’ of East Asian pop cultures in the global scene. Several landmark achievements can be noted for a sense of the presence of East Asian pop culture in the global entertainment market. This is most evident in the presence of ‘Asian’ cinemas in the global circuit.

The presence of Chinese language(s) film industry includes two distinct groups: First, the globally market table established People’s Republic of China (PRC), such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who in the past few years have become increasingly inclined to produce big budget movies aimed a global audience, particularly in the *wuxia* genre. Second, a group of Hong Kong directors and actors who are able to traverse the continents and work on both sides of the Pacific, between Hollywood and Hong Kong; this group includes directors John Woo and Jackie Chan and actors such as Chow Yun Fatt and Jet Li. In many instances, the productions of both groups have in the past few years been focused on ‘action movies’, particularly *wuxia* genre.

In the development of an internationalized *wuxia* genre, surely the breakthrough film was Taiwanese-American director, Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), which has been credited/criticized for ‘internationalizing’ the genre such that, “There are practically no untranslatable local data of any sort in the film; the director has made sure that the spectacular action flights are rendered both aesthetically and culturally approachable. The whole point is to popularize a new transnational genre” (Chan 2005: 76-7). Perhaps, precisely because of this strategy to satisfy the global rather than the Chinese audience, the film did rather poorly at the box office in PRC and Hong Kong (Teo 2005), although it achieved its aim and was very well received internationally. Following this success, Zhang Yimou directed two visually very pleasurable but critically light weight *wuxia* films, *Hero* (2000) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004); both failed to gain recognition in the Hollywood Academy Awards, while Chen Kaige directed the mixed genre, ‘fairy tale fantasy-wuxis’ film, *The Promise* (2005), to date the most expensive film to be produced in the PRC and nominated as the country’s entry for the year’s Academy Best Foreign Film competition.

In the series of these successive films, there has been a noticeable progression towards what may be called ‘pan Asian’ cinema: In *Crouching Tiger*, one saw the co-starring of ethnic-Chinese actors and actresses from the PRC, Hong Kong and Malaysia; in *House of Flying Daggers*, the Taiwanese-born Japanese actor, Takeshi Kaneshiro<sup>1</sup> was added to ethnic Chinese stars; in *The Promise*, Japanese actor Hiroyuki Sanada and Korean actor Jang Dong-Kun starred alongside Hong Kong actor Nicholas Tse and

actress, Cecilia Chung; finally, in Jacky Chan's *The Myth* (2005), he stretched across the continent to South Asia to include Bollywood actress, Mallika Sherawat, in supporting role to Korean actress, Kim Hee-Seon. It should be noted that these films have not met with either huge box office successes or critical acclaim; it seems a 'right' formula has yet to be found but the experimentation is likely to continue, at least into the near or medium term future. Nevertheless, these pan-East Asian efforts are another symptom of the globalization of East Asian pop culture.<sup>ii</sup>

The latest entry into the globalization of East Asian pop culture is, of course, the so-called 'Korean Wave', since the mid-1990s. An editor of a volume of essays on Korean cinema, enthusiastically pronounced, "South Korean cinema is finding its place in the sun" (Stringer 2005:1). Korean movies made their debut in the world through the Hollywood-style blockbuster *Joint Security Area* (2000) and *Shiri* (2002). Both films translate the Cold War tension of North-South Korean divide into agonizing personal relations, which drew resonance from international audience. A second genre of Korean films popular in the late 1990s was what might be called 'gangster comedies', such as *My Wife is a Gangster* (2001), putatively the first Korean film to be sold to Hollywood for remake, and *Guns and Talks* (2001). In these gangster comedies, criminals are let off all accusations and guilt and punishments. They are 'humanized' by their ineptitudes and goofiness in other aspects of their daily lives. These comedies played side-by-side with violent action movies, such as *Friends*, a supposedly true-life story of three men growing up in Pusan in the 1950s. Along with the films that were commercial successes had been smaller films that are well known among serious film viewers, such as *301/302*, being the numbers of two apartments in which two neighboring women "act out femal symptoms of overeating and under-eating in cleanly modern spaces, haunted by traumas of childhood abuse and a claustrophobic marriage, evacuating the seeming prosperity and stylized success of a well-ordered life" (Wilson 2005:255), and *Il Mare* (2000), a fantasy in which two lovers meet across vast expanse of time.

The flow of Korean films into the global market has been continuous since, constituting part of what has come to be known in East Asia as the 'Korean Wave'; Hanliu (韩流), Hallyu in Korean, Hanryu in Japanese. By mid 2000, in an essentially consumption space like Singapore, Korean movies have become part of routine offerings of the movie houses and television stations. They range from completely unmemorable, mass and mindless entertainment ghost stories and teenage comedies to aesthetically critical films by known directors, such as Kim Ki Duk's films of highly aestheticised isolated worlds that contain within them everyday violence wrapped around, if not entirely sublimated, by a thin line of 'Buddhist' philosophy, as in *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* (2004), or of Korean mysticism, as in *The Bow* (2005),<sup>iii</sup> to more 'philosophical' commentaries on the emptiness of vengeance extracted through extreme violence in Park Chan Wook's Revenge Trilogy – *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, *Old Boy* and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* - seek out and are sought by their respective audience

segments as part of the entertainment scene in the city.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, undoubtedly, Hollywood continues to dominate globally in the production and distribution of films and the struggle to contain Hollywood imports, such as the quota struggle in Korea, continues in different parts of Asia; a struggle that is made all the more difficult with the Asian countries rush forward to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). Nevertheless, Chinese language(s) and Korean films have certainly made a quantum leap into the global entertainment market and are likely to continue to have their place in critical film festivals around the world and juxtapose themselves against the dominating presence of Hollywood in mass entertainment.

### **Transnational TV Dramas in East Asia**

Perhaps, the earliest entries into the global pop culture entertainment markets are Japanese animation, *manga* and video games, which according to Iwabuchi (2002:257), are ‘culturally odorless’ because they contain little explicit Japanese content; indeed, the animation and manga figures have always been intentionally rid of Japanese features and resemble no one ethnic group. The products continue to be the main stays of Japanese pop cultures to the world, especially the US, where animation programs are regularly dubbed into languages that are more palatable to local audiences. In East Asia, however, the most important pop culture export has been serialized television dramas, from the mid 1990s. The commercial success of Japanese TV dramas is an exclusively East Asian phenomenon as such drama series has no market in the West. The success has also spawned development, growth and export of TV drama productions in all locations within East Asia, resulting in a crisscrossing of product flows, generating transnational consumer/viewer communities across the region.

The truly trans-East Asia Japanese pop culture in terms of popular reception – the consumer bases in every locations far exceed those of pop music and films - throughout the region in the past decade and a half are undoubtedly the ‘trendy’ drama in the 1990s. The serial dramas are called ‘trendy dramas’ for obvious reasons: The story line is generally melodramatic romance – love gain, love lost with plenty of agonizing twists and turns - among urban young professionals. The viewing-visual pleasure comes from the fact that, the characters on screen, regardless of major and minor, are very well-dressed in designer clothes, live in cosy small apartments, eat in expensive – usually Western – restaurants in the high end entertainment district of the city and, above all, all the actors and actresses are beautiful men and women. Although the production cost was phenomenally expensive,<sup>iv</sup> with up to 50% going to pay the beautiful cast, the local Japanese market, in the euphoric days of the ‘bubble economy’, was able to support the cost. With this ability to recover the finances of the productions, producers were not concerned with exporting the dramas. The subsequent popularity of these drama series was therefore a surprise to the

Japanese producers and came as surplus profit when it happened.<sup>v</sup>

These drama series penetrated the regional markets through different channels. In Hong Kong, for example, according to Iwabuchi, the promotional efforts of local partners were far more important than those of the Japanese producers, who were not keen in developing the foreign markets. In a situation in which more than 90% of the local audience are already captured by the two free-to-air television station, TVB and ATV, with their almost exclusively local produced Cantonese language dramas, Japanese drama series was a significant vehicle for STAR TV, then a relatively new cable television provider, to establish its presence in airspace and to garner its share of the local audience; consequently, its active promotion of the drama series. Similar arrangements with cable TV stations in Taiwan were establishment, after a period of piracy in which agents for Taiwan TV stations would travel to Japan and brought back videos and DVDs of the drama series to be broadcast without license. Such cross border arrangements gave “Japanese TV industries more confidence in the exportability of Japanese TV programs and incentives for forging business tie-ups with Taiwanese [and Hong Kong] media industries for the programs’ promotion” (Iwabuchi 2004:7) In the PRC, the dramas are most commonly distributed by pirated VCDs and DVDs and often, with increasingly sophisticated computer-mediated information technologies, circulated by ‘communities’ of fans themselves: one fan would download the episode from the television broadcast, another would subtitled the dialogue and upload it for public access (Hu 2005: 176-180); more of such fan communities later.

In Korea, the postcolonial ban on importation of all Japanese cultural products was not lifted until October 1998, with the Joint Declaration of the New 21<sup>st</sup> Century Korea-Japan Partnership. However, the ban did not make Korea impermeable to Japanese popular culture; even the government-owned Korean Broadcasting Station was guild of illegal importation (Han 2000:14-15). With a constant steam of underground importation, Japanese popular culture have been ‘copied’, ‘partially integrated’, ‘plagiarized’ and ‘reproduced’ into Korean products; so much so that, Kim Hyun-Mee suggests that “Japanese [pop] culture in Korea has already set its roots deep into the emotional structure of Koreans’ (2002:4). Once the ban was lifted, Japanese pop culture flowed freely and smoothly into Korean pop cultural spaces. And in 2002, the first Japanese and South Korean co-produced television drama series, *Friends* – about the relationship between a Korean man and a Japanese woman – was broadcast in both locations simultaneously, making not only a pop culture event but also a ‘political’ one in Korean-Japanese relations.

These trendy dramas serials were runaway successes in the rest of East and Southeast Asia. The essays in *Feeling Asian Modernities* (Iwabuchi, 2004) analyse the receptions - the meaning-making processes of consumers - of the Japanese trendy dramas in different consumption locations throughout the

region. According to the editor, Iwabuchi, these dramas had generated “intense sympathy many young East/Southeast Asians have come to feel toward the characters in Japanese dramas, and the way they have learned to cope with the meanings of their own modern experiences through the urban lives depicted in the Japanese TV dramas” (2004:2). In sum, the Japanese TV dramas have become a vehicle by which the consumers in the region thread through their own experience with capitalist consumer modernity, a concern that will be taken up later in the essay.

After almost a decade of production and popularity, Japanese trendy dramas lost its vitality and its presence in the region lapsed. Nevertheless, Japan television drama may be said to have already set the standard for the others in East Asia to follow: “The Japanese concern with the visual, in combination with their advanced technology, ensures that Japanese television is often very pleasing to the eye. Sets are technically well designed and the photography is excellent...If television is used as a means of relaxation and escape, as opposed to education and enlightenment, it may be very enjoyable to lose oneself among the images without having to bother with the search for ideas’ (Stronach 1989:155). This is evident in the Korean TV dramas that followed in the footsteps.

At about the same time, the television screens in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore began to be filled with imported Korean TV dramas. If the exporting of Japanese TV drama series were serendipitous to the Japanese industry, the exporting and of Korean TV drama series is in contrast a conscious industrial strategies of the industry and government. The flow of Korean TV dramas constitutes, without doubt, the most significant component of the ‘Korean Wave’. Much like the way STAR TV in Hong Kong used Japanese dramas, new or smaller or marginal television stations in the region also used imported Korean TV dramas as an industrial strategy to establish their presence among local and national audiences.

In Singapore, in 1999, the local monopoly newspaper publisher, the Singapore Press Holdings ventured into commercial television with two free-to-air stations, one in English (Channel I) and the other in Mandarin (Channel U)<sup>vi</sup>. The locally produced programmes of the English language channel were abject failures and the studio was shut down within less than two years of its establishment. Programming was reduced to news and programmes imported primarily from the US. The Mandarin channel, on the other hand, was able to carve out and take away a significant segment of the audience through a combination of broadcasting Korean dramas and local variety shows which look and feel like shows in similar genre from Taiwan, which in turn are very similar to those in Japan; the general formula seems to be high energy, rapid-fire commentaries from the team of programme hosts, whose entire focus is on making fun of, or embarrassing whoever appear on the show with the hosts. The popularity of the Korean dramas pushed the competing channel to similarly import such series, leading to a constant bidding war

between the two stations for the same drama series; such that by the late 2003, there was at least one Korean TV drama series on one Singapore television screen every night.

Similar industrial strategy to establish an audience base was used in 2004 by the local Hunan Satellite TV Station in the PRC. It propelled itself into the national broadcasting space by successfully buying the rights to the popular period Korean dramas series, *Jewel in the Palace* (打长今), about the rise of the first female imperial court physician in the Chosen Dynasty in Korean during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The station, instead of negotiating with the Korean producers, obtained the rights from the Taiwanese distributor, beating its competitor from Shanghai for the series and successfully claims its place in the national broadcast space.<sup>vii</sup>

One of the most surprising impact of Korean television drama on local audience in East Asia is to be found in Japan. The drama series, *Winter Sonata*, was first shown on NHK, the national terrestrial station, owned cable television on late night, in 2003. Popular request caused it to show it again in 2004. Meanwhile, its popularity began to receive media coverage. Then, on 3 April 2004, the star of the series Bae Yong Joon arrived at Tokyo airport and 5000, largely middle aged female fans turned up to welcome him. Thus began the ‘*Winter Sonata*’ phenomena. Following which NHK rebroadcast the series on terrestrial stations in April 2004. Although it was broadcast at half an hour before midnight, it still picked up recording viewer ratings; leading NHK to rebroadcast plans at a later time in the same year. According to Mori (2005), NHK earned about 3,500 million yen (US \$3.5 million) from *Winter Sonata* related products, including 330,000 sets of DVDs and 1,220,000 copied of the novelized book. The series also propelled Bae into superstardom in Japan, spawning the so-called ‘Yon-sama’ (Brother Yon) phenomenon.

Beyond the television screen, *Winter Sonata* also spawned several behavioural changes among its Japanese middle-aged female audience. Their active fandom brought media attention to a group of media consumers who has been hitherto largely ignored by the media into the limelight. Their very public celebration of the star, Bae, made themselves a media phenomenon, generating new ideological commentaries and gender politics. They travelled as tourists to the sites where the television series was shot, transforming televisual sights to tourist sites, significantly increased the flow and modifying the character of Japanese tourists to Korea, which has been hitherto a destination of sex tourism for Japanese men (Hirata 2005). The narrative and the characters-on-screen changed the images and views of the consumers regarding Koreans hitherto held by the consumers, who might have seen the Koreans, including Koreans who have been long resident in Japan, as ex-colonized, marginal people. Not only have the attitudes towards Koreans changed, many began to imagined themselves as ‘cultural brokers’ who will work to bridge the cultural and attitudinal gaps between the Japanese and the Koreans (Iwabuchi 2005).

In 2004 and 2005, locations where ethnic-China population predominates had their own high impact Korean drama series in the earlier mentioned, *Jewel in the Palace*. It was first exported to Taiwan, dubbed in Mandarin. Then, it was screened on TVB in Hong Kong, this time dubbed in Cantonese to record breaking audience ratings. As mentioned earlier, the Taiwan dubbed version was re-exported to Hunan Satellite Television station, and broadcast nationally. And eventually, it was also broadcast in Singapore on cable television, twice; thus completing the circuit of all the predominantly ethnic Chinese locations in East Asia.<sup>viii</sup>

As a rule, almost all dramas exported from Korea are of contemporary, young, urban, romance category; historical period costumed drama are not exported because audiences in the rest of East Asian cannot presume to have the requisite knowledge of Korean history to sustain their interest in the usually longer series of historical drama. In the instance of *Jewel*, the ‘close’ cultural affinity between the *Chosen* Dynasty period and Chinese history was an important bridge to its success among ethnic Chinese audience; for example, the written texts in the drama, from imperial edicts to recipes for food and medicine, were all written in Chinese scripts. This not only reduces the demand for knowledge of Korean history but also facilitates ‘indigenization’ through dubbing and subtitling. Riding on this affinity, the Hong Kong television station took additional efforts to ‘indigenize’ the Korean drama; for example, by providing brief explanations of the narrative before each episode, give the Chinese language equivalent of the ingredients in the menu or medical prescriptions.

The transnationalization of East Asian pop cultures, particularly films and television drama is most visible in an essentially consumption space such as Singapore. By mid 2005, the Korean Wave has become a steady flow, mixing readily with the earlier established Japanese pop culture and the long standing Chinese language(s) pop culture. The flows from these three sources into Singapore are enough to feed almost the total programming on the earlier mentioned, free-to-air Channel U, which has refashioned itself as the ‘Asian Pop Culture’ channel. Also, the unequal flows of products remain. Japan continues to be a largely an exporting country to the rest of the region, the success of *Winter Sonata* notwithstanding. Korean pop culture is a constant supply into the other locations. Chinese language(s) materials remain more widely consumed than the imports from Korean and Japan within predominantly ethnic-Chinese locations, with occasional spikes of a very popular singer, film or particularly, drama series from any of the production locations in the region.

### **Transnational Audience and Community**

Of the three medium of pop culture – music, films and television dramas - the impact of the drama series on the cultural practices and cultural changes of the audience is most pronounced and tractable. This

reflects the state of existing scholarship in the analysis of East Asian pop culture. There is currently very little scholarly work on Asian pop music, particularly comparative and transnational analysis and even less is focused on audience/consumption practices.<sup>ix</sup> Whereas there is an expanding literature on Asian films, scholarly works tend to focus on the 'national' characters of films, especially of the relations between the film text and the historical, political and cultural contexts from which these films are made.<sup>x</sup> It is only in television drama that the focus on audience reception has been received sustained scholarly analysis; the same appears to be true in media scholarship in the West.<sup>xi</sup>

This state of affairs is significantly determined by the character of the medium in question. Of the three medium, music and film make much less demand on audiences in terms of sustained interest; consumer attention is required for no more than a few minutes in the case of a song, and usually no more than a couple of hours in the case of a film. On the other hand, television serial drama demands audience's viewing at regular intervals, usually once every week for one episode. Many other activities need to be sacrificed or at least displaced in order to stay home to catch the weekly episode. Efforts have to be made to video-record the episode if missing it cannot be helped and time had to be found to watch the taped episode before the next instalment is screened in the following week. The demands amount to an active participation with what is on screen, with each episode drawing the audience progressively into intimate virtual relationships with the characters in the drama. Beyond the individual, audience interest is sustained by the routine write ups in local newspapers, entertainment magazines and by more immediately fellow audience, who are always ready to dissect the last episode and anticipate the next collectively. Such sustained audience consumption practices is a necessary condition that enables the analysis of reception to a drama series. It is also a condition for the formation of communities of consumers.

A persistent question that arises from the transnational distribution and consumption of East Asian pop culture is, specifically, whether consumption leads to an emergent 'pan East Asian identity'. I believe this question is too conceptually and substantively ambitious: The process of individual identity formation is one of unending layering and interaction of cultural knowledge acquisition. In this constellation of inputs leisure activities, such as pop culture consumption, are for most people largely residual, engaged in only after the necessary routines of everyday life are done. Unlike other spheres of everyday life, such as family, formal education or work, there are no social institutions that can enforce compliance and payoffs in pop culture consumption. In addition, pop culture products are always short-lived. Affection of most consumers and fans for an auteur director, a star, a musician or a particular drama series is, with few exceptions, ephemeral, changing very rapidly with the latest trends and icons, in both objects and artists. Consequently, for the overwhelming number of consumers the impact of pop culture consumption on individual identity formation is likely to be rather weak and suggestion of 'lasting'

effects on identity formation is difficult to establish.

Nevertheless, many ex-consumers and ex-fans can and do readily recall in fond nostalgia, the period of life when such consumption was an important part of their daily life. For truly avid fans, the pop culture of days gone by is not only etched into the memory but might even in some ways change the individual's personality and life trajectory. For example, as mentioned above, many middle aged Japanese women may have changed their attitude, permanently, towards Koreans as a consequence of the watching the Korean TV drama, *Winter Sonata*, and idolized its star, Bae Yong Joon.

Beyond the question of individual identity formation, an artiste or a drama series is 'popular' precisely because they have statistically, large numbers of consumers. This statistical presence may be transformed into 'communities' of consumers, from avid fan clubs to 'occasional' community. A fan club consciously organizes the consumers into a 'community' of consumers who share affections for a particular artiste or a particular programme. Fan clubs are often established by the artiste or the production companies themselves, as a means of sustaining consumer interests in order to extend the longevity of what would essentially be an ephemeral phenomenon. Fan-club participation suggests a greater consuming passion than merely a residual leisure activity that fills out the day. An avid consumer often seeks ways to intensify the pleasure of consumption through active engagements with others similarly disposed. The Internet has become one of the instruments for such engagements among TV drama fans. The following is a summary of what happened to one of the series, *Pride*, recounted by Hu (2005: 177-178):

In January 2004, a Hong Kong fan, R, who is a skilled Japanese speaker, did the Chinese subtitling for *Pride*, a few days after the original broadcast in Japan. She thanks T and A for their supplies of the raw material, and when she made a mistake in the subtitling, she took care to insert a correction by thanking another fan for pointing out the mistake. The version of R's Chinese subtitling of *Pride* was extremely popular in the Hong Kong newsgroup through its online circulation by means of BitTorrent. [T]he marketing of another version of *Pride* produced by a Taiwanese-base leading pirated-Japanese-VCD company seems to be threatened, because R's version has already been so widely circulated among Chinese fans through the Internet. The inner passions for drama, fan friendship and performance/self-expression are displayed in the context of this Chinese translation/subtitling; being "acknowledged by a community of like-minded is a characteristically romantic structure of feeling".<sup>xii</sup>

Rather than accidental or residual activity, the language and technology savvy consumers/participants/members that constantly do the painstaking work of initiating and amending

translation/subtling of their favourite drama series are symptomatic of the passion of members of online communities, in which the hard work are done for nothing other than the benefits of the other members of the cyber virtual fan community, beyond the clutches of profit-oriented market players and the legal constraints of the nation-state.

However, the pop culture consumers/audience far exceeds fan club members, making it necessary to conceptualize the idea of 'communities of consumers' beyond the restrictive boundaries of fan clubs. Arguable, it is the larger and wider community of more casual or leisure consumers which accounts for the 'popularity' of a pop culture item, not the small number of avid consumers. Let us call these casual/leisure consumers passive consumers of East Asian pop culture. 'Membership' qualification to this wider community of passive consumers may be simply by the act of consumption itself. Potential members of this passive community of consumers are necessarily as widely dispersed across geographic space as the distribution radius of the pop culture products. The community is therefore both simultaneously local and transnational and transcultural. However, since consumption is largely a privatized activity in the home, the community of passive consumers remain for the most part invisible, as such consumers need not be aware of nor consciously seek to be part of a community of consumers. Nevertheless, there are social institutions and social occasions that make this community manifest.

The 'popularity' of a singer, an actor or a drama series is produced largely by media attention and coverage that they receive. 'Popularity' is therefore significantly engendered by other constitutive members of the media-culture industry, such as newspapers and magazines. Take the entertainment section of any newspapers in East Asia as an illustration. The page can be conceptualized as a 'community space' for the entire East Asian pop culture industry. Geographically, the boundary of 'East Asian Pop Culture' is defined by the places that appear regularly in it; namely, the production centres of Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei and very occasionally, Singapore. The space is 'peopled' daily with images and information of East Asian artistes: The likes of Bae Yong Joon in Seoul, Faye Wong (王菲) in Shanghai, Wong Kai Wei (黄嘉伟) in Hong Kong, Jay Chou (周结伦) in Taipei inhabit these pages at unpredictable intervals, more frequently in the rising phases of their careers and with diminishing presence when they are on the way out. These pages are read by an unknown number of readers, each reader unknown to another. A 'community of consumers' is instantly manifest should two or more readers happen to be co-presence at a social occasion/event, during which they participate, as part of free flowing conversation, in exchanges concerning the artistes, the films or television programmes reported in the pages. Such instances instantiate and materialize the 'community of consumers' of East Asian pop culture as an 'occasioned' and 'occasional' community, befitting the practices of the overwhelming majority of consumers, where consumption is leisure and entertainment, rather than as a primary focus of everyday life.<sup>xiii</sup>

Whether it is at the level of intense involvement of avid fan clubs or the leisurely level of occasional community, the different consumption communities of East Asian pop culture are inherently unstable. Membership will always be unstable and ever changing, as one fan grows out of it, a new one inducts him/herself, in quick succession; a process augmented by the rapid rise and fall of a constant stream of 'idols' and/or drama series. Consequently, while such communities of consumers are constituted both locally and transnationally, they are too ephemeral to be able to stabilize into effective 'organizations' in civil society to exert significant and effective influence in the wider society. It is here that one mode of linkage or relationship between the pop culture space and the public space can be delineated.

### **Pop Culture Space and Public Space**

The social space of commercial, profit driven media pop culture is part of but definitely not the equivalent to a larger 'popular culture' space which references the political arena which encompasses the everyday life cultural practices of the masses in contradistinction to the elite culture of a society (Hall 1994). Although part of the larger public and political space pop culture consumers, individually or as communities, are nevertheless confronted with the overwhelmingly much bigger non-consumer community, who might be imagined as 'organized' by their non consumption. In such confrontation, whenever it occurs, the non-consumer population tends to overwhelm the community of fans, who cannot count on the larger community of passive leisure consumers to come to their support. In such confrontation, the non-consumer population, designating itself as the 'people' on account of its overwhelming majority, can readily form a coalition with the 'nation-state', in the name of 'nationalism', against the communities of consumers. Three instances in the recent history of East Asian pop culture illustrate this politics.

First is the case of Taiwanese female singer, Chang Hui Mei (Ah Mei), the aboriginal Taiwanese singer. She performed the Republic of China (Taiwanese) national anthem, in 2000, at the inauguration of the elected president, Chen Shui Bian, who espouses independence for Taiwan from the PRC. She was immediately made a site for the enactment of the so-called 'Taiwan Straits' politics; the PRC government immediately identify her as a 'Taiwan independentist'. It forced her sponsors to cancel her endorsement contracts, removed and suppress all her images from public places and imposed a ban on her performances for one year. Prior to this incident, Chang was hugely popular in the PRC. It took her the next two years to work herself back to a concert in Shanghai. In this instance, the PRC government clearly realised the power of its consumer market and the impact of denial to this market would have on the career of any Chinese language(s) artiste.<sup>xiv</sup>

Then in 2004, her sold out concert in Hangzhou was cancelled by local police who 'feared' possible riot when a group of self-proclaimed 'patriotic' Chinese students protested at the concert site against her supposedly 'pro-independent' politics. The protesting students were able to claim the 'nationalist' space; a claim that was clearly not discursively available to the fans of the singer. This prompted Taiwanese media to suggest a 'tit-for-tat' banning of PRC entertainers in Taiwan. The Vice-President of the incumbent pro-independence Taiwanese government went so far as to suggest that Chang has to choose between her singing career and her nation, again draping her position with the cloak of the nation.

Second, the Korean Wave has given rise to anti-Korean sentiments among the non-consumers of Korean pop culture in different parts of East Asia; for example, in Taiwan, the counter-discourse dubs it the 'Invasion of Korean Wave', where the territorial Taiwan nation is implied. On the day that Bae Yong Joon visited Taipei to promote April Snow, self-fashioned Taiwanese nationalist rock musicians staged a concert to lambaste Korean pop culture and Bae himself.<sup>xv</sup> In the PRC and Hong Kong media professionals, including the renown Jacky Chan, have been reported to voice their protests against the extensive coverage in the media given to every visiting Korean artiste, which as mentioned earlier is a necessary part of the latter's 'popularity'. In these instances support for local artistes is seen as 'representation' and 'expression' of the national interest, the sign of the 'nation' has again been usurped by the non consumers of Korean pop culture, rather than by the fans, avid or leisurely.

Finally, the use of the 'nation' and the 'national', i.e. the larger public sphere, against pop culture sphere does not have to be transnational. It can happen within the nation itself. For example, in Korea, in 2004, Song Seung-Heon, the television actor had to abruptly abandon the shooting of a drama series when it became public that he had 'cheated' conscription by faking his medical record. Conscription is seen as the great 'leveller' of inequalities among Korean men and an expression of its new found democracy. Compounded with the lingering Cold War legacy of a divided Korea, any attempt to escape conscription is tantamount to an anti-patriotic act. At the time of this writing, it has been reported that the Taiwan authorities are investigating the popular singer, Jay Chou, who had been exempted from compulsory military service on medical grounds.

In these three transnational and national instances, the pop culture sphere rubs up against the larger public sphere of which it is a part. However, the contest is in every case unequal. Indeed, it is unavoidably so because the sign of the 'nation', and with it the imagined national public space, is discursively strategically available to those who are non-consumers of imported pop culture and to those who use it against any perceived 'privileging' of the pop culture sphere; simultaneously, consumer

communities are denied the same discursive resource. These instances demonstrate clearly that any theoretical desire or conceptualization of a 'pan East Asian identity' emerging from the transnational expansion of East Asian pop culture will have to recognize that such an identity, if it emerges at all, will be one of doubled self-consciousness, in equal part of the differences within the region and the relative ease to identify with each other as against the 'West'.

## **Conclusion**

The flows of pop cultures within East Asia, including Singapore by virtue of its overwhelming majority of ethnic Chinese population, is by now routine and pop cultures from the different points of the region are integral ingredients in the regular diet of regional media consumers. Within this routinized consumption, most programmes pass unnoticed as part of the daily entertainment; however, there will always be occasional spike of a red hot star, singer or television drama that will create waves of excitement among consumers throughout the region. As a consequence, communities of consumers have emerged within the individual nations and transnationally, ranging from passionate fan clubs dedicated to single artiste or single programme. These emergences logically give rise to questions of whether the communities of consumers will in turn engender a 'pan East Asian identity' and whether the communities will be able to influence the regional politics that is still stuck deeply in international antagonisms that resulted from memories of colonialism, Second World War atrocities and the lingering Cold War. My own analysis, as presented, in this paper is that a 'pan East Asian identity' is possible, indeed glimpses of it can be gleaned from existing audience reception research, because the regional consumers find it easier to identify with the characters on screen, and the subsequent transformation of the actors into 'idols', in East Asia pop culture than those in American or European programmes. However, the emergent communities of consumers remain trapped within the nationalist politics of each component member state of the East Asia region and their ability to influence the larger political sphere is severely stunted.

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<sup>i</sup> For a pan-East Asian position and career of Takeshi Kaneshiro, see Tsai (2005).

<sup>ii</sup> I have excluded from this brief discussion the important works of Taiwanese directors who are critically important and very popular in film festival, art house circuits, such as Hou Hsiao Hsien and Cai Ming Liang. These directors cannot, of course, be neglected in any critical assessment of 'Chinese' cinemas.

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- <sup>iii</sup> For a discussion on how another Korean director, Im Kwon-Taek, uses Korean ‘traditions’ as a means of ‘globalizing’ his films in a process, see Wilson (2001).
- <sup>iv</sup> According to Ota (2004:74), it can cost up to 40 million yen per hour episode.
- <sup>v</sup> According to some observers, the Japanese TV industry continues to be rather reluctant in negotiating and releasing rights to TV stations in the region, in part because of concerns with intellectual property rights and piracy (Hu 2005: 172).
- <sup>vi</sup> ‘U’ sounds similar to the Chinese word ‘尤’, for excellent.
- <sup>vii</sup> Lisa Leung (2005) ‘Mediating nationalism and modernity: the transnationalization of Korean dramas on Chinese (satellite) television’. Paper presented in the Workshop on East Asian Pop Culture: Transnational Japanese and Korean TV dramas, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 8-9 December.
- <sup>viii</sup> The flows and exchanges of pop culture within the predominantly ethnic Chinese population locations has a long and deep history stretching back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and may be conceptually designated as one integral political economy and communication space, which I have called Pop Culture China (Chua 2001).
- <sup>ix</sup> See Shin and Siriyuvasak (2005); Chun, Rositter and Shoesmith (2004).
- <sup>x</sup> There is, for example, in the case of Chinese cinemas, Sheldon Lu (1997) and Zhang (2004), in the case of Korean cinema, see Shin and Stringer (2005) and, in the case of Hong Kong cinema see, Cheung and Chu (2004).
- <sup>xi</sup> The pioneer effort here being Jen Ang’s (1985) *Watching Dallas*.
- <sup>xii</sup> Hu is quoting Streeter (2003:649).
- <sup>xiii</sup> For details of the idea of newspaper pages as the ‘imaginary geography’ of East Asian Pop Culture, see Chua (2006).
- <sup>xiv</sup> In 2004, it similarly cancelled the already granted performance permits to a few Singapore singers after the then incoming Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, visited Taiwan in his ‘personal’ capacity.
- <sup>xv</sup> I owe these observations to Yang Fang-chih.