

Japan



Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, *The Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia*

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IN RECENT YEARS, Japan's role as a prolific producer of popular culture with global influence has become more and more evident. In 2011, the Japanese government officially recognized the potential of this "soft power" and launched a "Cool Japan" campaign dedicated to branding the nation as "culturally exciting" and simultaneously promoting "economic gains by boosting sales of both popular culture and general consumer products" (176). This critical mix of abstract quality (cool) and concrete quantity (economic gains) neatly characterizes Japanese popular culture itself. It also makes Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin's recent book on the political economy of Japanese popular culture an important and timely contribution.

Even as it complements a growing body of work dedicated to exploring Japanese popular culture, this book is unusual in its explicit focus on political economy in contrast to studies that consider popular culture from a more content-based and localized perspective. Indeed, Otmazgin sets out to give the reader a broadly contextualized big-picture view of Japan's popular culture prominence, particularly within the region he calls "East Asia." And this is the other critical focus of his work: the role of popular culture in the process of regionalization.

Fortunately for the reader, Otmazgin is very clear about defining some of these potentially thorny terms—such as "popular culture," "regionalization," and "East Asia," not to mention "political economy." Perhaps most significant and "controversial" (21) is his argument that the East Asia region cannot simply be defined by national borders but rather by "its sociocultural densities and the dynamics of popular culture flows within its register" (48). Specifically, he suggests that throughout Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and China, urban middle class consumers—in cities such as Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, Taipei, Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Manila—are not necessarily linked by institutional or political forces but by economic and cultural channels connected to Japan and each other, and contributing to the constitution of a region.

Otmazgin offers these broad technical and theoretical foundations in his first two chapters, and then goes on to explore details and dynamics of these economic and cultural flows. In chapter 3, for example, he outlines the characteristics of the Japanese domestic popular culture market, suggesting that the reciprocity between the cultural industries and consumers distinguishes the Japanese model from the so-called Hollywood model.

In the next chapter, Otmazgin discusses the dissemination of Japanese popular culture throughout East Asia particularly starting in the 1990s, a decade exhibiting

“important qualitative and quantitative differences” (90) when compared to earlier periods. Focusing especially on the case of the music industry, the author explores the ways in which Japanese industry collaborates with local producers and distributors in other countries. He also discusses piracy: despite bans on the importation and sale of many Japanese cultural items in South Korea and Taiwan, illegal reproduction was rampant and therefore products were widely available. Even though Japanese producers did not directly benefit from these sales—and indeed were the victims of criminal activity—the popularity of pirated products sowed the seeds of interest in future, legally imported products. In a sense, then, illegal and legal markets complement each other to produce a mutually profitable spiral of consumer interest.

In chapter 5, Otmazgin suggests further that the regionalization of East Asia through popular culture is not only informed by the establishment of markets and the dissemination of products (content), but also by the promulgation of “structural arrangements to commodify and commercialize popular culture” (125). That is, in addition to the products themselves, Japanese companies have essentially exported a set of processes—“formats” as opposed to “content”—that can be adopted on a local basis within other East Asian countries. In addition to the circulation of the products themselves, Otmazgin argues, it is the similarity of these formats that helps to define an East Asia region.

My brief summary of chapters and ideas here does not do justice to the complexities of the economic, political, and cultural issues explored in this text. Indeed, Otmazgin’s project is an ambitious one. Particularly for those of us who study the meanings of Japanese popular culture items—anime, manga, video games, and the like—from an ethnographic, literary, or cultural studies perspective, the framework outlined in this book helps us understand how a particular text/item gets into the hands of a particular consumer. By shedding light on market forces, distribution networks, and governmental policy, the author illuminates the structure of relations connecting producers and consumers across national boundaries in this disparate region. The research is based on a wide range of sources, statistical data, and interviews, and Otmazgin writes in a clear, jargon-free style. Each chapter is neatly capped with a concluding section that summarizes the argument, and the final chapter itself provides a helpful overview of the main points.

Indeed, the structure of the book is remarkably clear given the ambitions and complexities of the project, but a few places might have benefited from a deft hand in editing and shaping. There is, for example, some overlap between the introduction and chapter 1 and the reader wonders why these two chapters were not sutured together or, alternatively, better differentiated. Similarly, a number of ideas and assertions are repeated throughout the text; this can be helpful for reinforcement but when passages are very similar (as in one example from pages 104 and 144, in which identical statistics are repeated with almost the same wording), it gives the reader a sense of *déjà vu*.

Having said that, the plethora of statistics Otmazgin has assembled is immensely revealing and clearly provided. It also, however, suggests one of the great difficulties in pursuing this sort of research: the timeliness factor. The data here, often presented in helpful tables and graphs, is all fairly recent, but popular culture is always a moving

target and one wonders how much has changed even in the two years since the book was published—particularly given the unprecedented challenges of the Great Recession. None of this undermines the overall sweep or historical value of the book, nor does it diminish Otmazgin's broader theoretical points, but it does remind us of the transience of popular culture and the statistics associated with its analysis.

This is an important book and recommended reading for anybody interested in popular culture in East Asia. With its bold attempt to shine light on political economy, however, it ultimately may prove more valuable because of the shadows that remain. Examining the political economy of Japanese popular culture makes us wonder even more what it is that makes popular culture *popular* in the first place. Otmazgin perceptively explains that despite lingering resentment against Japan because of its military and imperial incursions in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as ongoing regional conflicts (for example, disputed islands; visits to Yasukuni Shrine), "Japan's popular culture has managed to overcome these feelings and find broad acceptance among audiences in East Asia" (172). To this reader at least, economic explanations cannot fully answer questions as to why Japanese popular culture products were in high demand (and therefore pirated) in South Korea and Taiwan even during a time when "they were officially banned by the local authorities" (116). That is, the demand preceded the supply—but what inspired the demand in the first place, especially when governments were still conscious of Japan's postwar pariah status in the region?

Another provocative suggestion that merits further investigation is that popular culture contributes to regionalization "not only at the institutional level" but also "at the personal level, by offering—at least to a large sector of the region's urban population—shared experiences that can lead to the cultivation of common lifestyles and conceptions" (22). Otmazgin goes on to explain that an "unintended consequence of the creation of regional markets is the regionalization of taste that has resulted from different people in different places experiencing the same cultural products" (181). At first glance, such an assertion may seem clear enough, but one wonders how sites as disparate in terms of history, language, and culture as Manila, Seoul, Singapore, and Beijing can have a "shared" experience—even if they all have middle class urban consumers. Moreover, if the Japanese formats being adopted are subject to localization, then we also wonder what, ultimately, constitutes sameness or "common lifestyles and conceptions."

Otmazgin does not set out to explore these lifestyles and conceptions, but his comments here leave a critical opening for other scholars. He explains that his "study endeavors to show that it is possible to understand the expansion of Japan's popular culture in East Asia by looking at the mechanisms by which the industry works, rather than focusing solely on the content of the products or on the narratives and images they reflect" (164). His work is enlightening and significant in this regard, but leaves us with provocative and meaningful questions. As a necessary complement to more literary, anthropological, or cultural studies interpretations, his analysis also ultimately reminds us that in order to understand popular culture in East Asia—and whatever commonalities may be created or reflected by it—we need a robust mixture of both political-economic and also nuanced cultural inter-

pretive perspectives. We need the big picture as well as the finely etched details. This book is a significant contribution to an emerging discussion: it reminds us that political-economic structures and specific on-the-ground content are always mutually constitutive.

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