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While much originated in Europe and the United States, a significant proportion of the new and global popular culture has been produced in and disseminated from East and Southeast Asia. Since too less attention has been paid to the role of States and cross-state cultural interactions, the book edited by Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin and Eyal Ben-Ari is appealing. With *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia*, readers are provided with a precise analysis on State, political power, and industrial and economic policy as they both shape and are shaped by popular culture.

In the past, cultural policies represented ways for governments to emphasize and reinforce nation-building or prevent infiltration of “foreign” cultures. Cultural policies often involved regulating, shaping, and managing cultural tastes. Implemented through building museums and monuments or promoting “national sports” (sumo in Japan, taekwondo in South Korea, etc.) for example, the strongest expression of cultural policies is found in censorship.

It is only recently that issues related to popular culture have been added to bilateral and multilateral negotiations between East Asian countries (with a special emphasis placed on intellectual property violations). Since the 1990s, the production and export of popular culture products has reached a massive scale, gradually gaining the attention of governments and the mass media. The success of the cultural industries generated a major shift: State policies centered both on its potential for enhancing countries’ so-called “soft power” and the possibility of cultivating lucrative exportations.

The concept of popular culture has actually to be questioned (Otmazgin & Ben-Ari, 2012, pp. 6-7), especially because the Western-based distinction between high and popular cultures is less relevant to the way massively produced cultural commodities are perceived and consumed. Moreover, in East Asia, the distinction between popular culture and high culture is less evident in everyday life than in the West, since many practices that might be labeled as elite have become the domain of a huge middle class.

Popular culture and soft power

Nye (1990) used the term soft power to describe the growing importance of non-traditional means a country can wield to influence another country’s wants. Throughout the book, many contributors discuss why and how popular culture can be investigated within the soft power frame. Even if the discourse over soft power that has emerged over the past 15 years has increased awareness of the potential for extracting the “power” of popular culture to serve State ends, soft power as a concept may not be able to fully capture the dynamics of how people consume, appropriate, conceive, and indigenize imported culture and norms (p. 16).

Several case studies show the methodological challenges authors face with the use of the concept of soft power. For example, Galia Press-Barnathan (Chapter 2), who examines the links between popular culture and international relations, makes clear the distinction between the use of soft power as an analytical tool and its employment in political, popular and intellectual discourses. She also warns about the difficulties to establish a clear link between the diffusion of cultural products and the acquisition and exercise of soft power by Asian major powers.

Even if some States engage in systematic public policies to promote them, the export of content industry goods that are supposed to provide soft power is determined in the last resort by economic logic and economic actors. Even if pleasure is said to be the main motivation for consuming cultural goods, Jean-Marie Bouissou (Chapter 3) underlines that

this consumption stems primarily from their availability, quality, and price, like the consumption of any other good (p. 47). It is meticulously illustrated in his research about the “Manga diplomacy” in four European countries and the use of characters from Manga and animation in order to convey abroad messages that intend to promote Japanese interests or policies.

Policy making and popular culture

Several contributors examine popular cultures in the context of policy-making and the inspiring role of South Korea governmental policy throughout Asia since it has initiated in the mid-2000s its own digital content promotion to support its digital media industry. According to Jung-Yup Lee (Chapter 7), South Korea’s policy exemplifies one specific way in which the State managed different geographical scales and how national culture was redefined less as the source of coherent cultural identity than in relation to transnational trade.

Two authors investigate Japan’s aspiration to become a “content superpower” and the Japanese government shift, around 2004, from a century-long practice of promoting traditional arts to supporting the popular culture industry under the banner “Cool Japan”. Souichirou Kozuka (Chapter 6) examines the use of copyright law as a new industrial policy and Kuhee Choo (Chapter 5) investigates Japan’s global promotion of its content industry. It appears that what initially began as an economic strategy to establish Japan’s economic and cultural power within the global, mostly Western, market later turns into an image promotion that has been adhering to Japan’s long history of self-essentialization and orientalizing in face of the Western “other”.

Cultural policy and the dynamics of censorship

The last section of *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* questions cultural policy and censorship. It is actually noteworthy that popular cultural products may promote inter-Asian hate and may also manipulate historical animosity to stimulate sales. Kwai-Cheung (Chapter 10) gives an accurate insight on this issue through several popular culture productions and their relations with some of the major historical controversies and enmity between China, Korea, and Japan.

Two contributors, Laikwan Pang (Chapter 8) and Marwyn S. Samuels (Chapter 9), investigate on the State censorship in China. The first one examines China’s first importation of foreign (Japanese) cultural products after the Cultural Revolution. He shows how a depoliticized notion of “cultural policy” replaced “cultural politics” as the normative State-culture relations. He also argues that State attention to culture shifted in late 1970s and early 1980s from political propaganda to pacification, and while both entertainment and intellectual culture manifested a pluralization, they were also increasingly depoliticized.

Contrasting with a monolithic view of State censorship, the study of Marwyn S. Samuels about “the vagaries of State censorship” in China echoes Cherian George’s (Chapter 11) contribution about Singapore’s theatre and film practitioners who have successfully negotiated for the relaxation of censorship rules. The concessions sought and secured are limited, but they are significantly greater than the regulatory reforms requested by professional journalists. According to the author, one reason for this difference could be contrasting levels of autonomy; some fields of cultural production are less tied than other fields to the political and economic powers.

The picture that emerges from the chapters in this volume underscores a number of contradictions and tensions between State policies and the creative industries. As many of the contributions demonstrate, there is an inherent tension between the policy side with its emphasis on intentionality, planning, and foreseeable consequences, and the dynamic, unintended, often not fully planned nature of the production and dissemination of popular culture. Some contributors like Kwai-Cheung Lo (Chapter 10) discuss the diffusion of

cultural products that may also spur fears of cultural dominance and invite resistance from importing societies.

As underlined by Jean-Marie Bouissou (Chapter 3), the effects of soft power based on popular culture are almost, by definition, slow and work best when not pursued by governments. But while older economic and cultural policies were used to be pursued separately, popular culture is nowadays an interface of cultural and economic policies. As Jung-Yup Lee (Chapter 7) explains, the process we can observe now is both the culturalization of the economy and the economization of culture.

The twelve contributors of *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* have various disciplinary perspectives (political science and international relations, political economy, law and policy studies among others). Although comparative and multidisciplinary perspectives are predictably both stimulating and limiting, the book will certainly provoke more research in a near future. *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* will be of interest to students and scholars of Asian culture, society and politics, the sociology of culture, political science, and media studies.

References

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