East Asian pop culture and the trajectory of Asian consumption

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Abstract: This article focusses on Chua Beng Huat's work on the East Asian pop culture that became more prominent in East and Southeast Asia from the 1990s, when the circulation of multilingual and multi-format pop culture started to exceed linguistic, ethnic and national boundaries. It argues that Chua's work indicates that the pop-cultural production and innovation that support the globalisation and regionalisation processes in East Asia need not be national in origin but can hail from different national origins – and this despite the existing political realities of the region and its history of political fractures. He cautions, though, that the national-popular can also be marshalled to defeat the border-crossing potential of an inter-Asian pop culture. What is the 'Asia' imagined or being represented in such cultural production? Chua's work is also distinctive in that it deals with the political and economic conditions that underpin mainstream pop consumption as a socio-cultural phenomenon, instead of examining consumption as identity politics. The article concludes by noting the significance that Chua as an institutional builder has played in enabling the study of East Asian pop culture in the region.

East Asian Pop Culture and the Trajectory of Asian Consumption

Professor Chua Beng Huat's work on East Asian pop culture is significant in the manner by which the development of a multilingual and multi-format pop culture can be indexed against the emergence of the 1980s "East Asian Miracle" economies that, perhaps unsurprisingly, deepened a regional desire for modern cultural formations that could accompany this expansive economic buoyancy. His earlier work on consumption and its link with urban culture goes back to at least 1990, with his essay "Steps to Become a Fashion

Consumer in Singapore". Many of the essays or articles related to Singapore have been collected in *Life is Not Complete without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore*.¹ Beng Huat's fundamental stance is that consumption inevitably increases with an emerging middle class, and during the Miracle years, "sustained economic growth had translated into a rapid expansion of consumerism as part of daily life", so that

[i]ndeed by the time of 1997 economic crisis in Asia, the broad-based expansion of consumption had already been established in most of the affected locations in industrialised East and Southeast Asia[...] spawned not only by rapid economic growth in contemporary Asia but also by the global expansion of consumerism.²

That is to say, increased consumerism relates to both national and regional economic growth and in relation to the expansion of consumerism worldwide – the different levels interact and it is not one level that is paramount. The clear implication is also that the 1997 crisis will not in itself dampen the ongoing "expansion of consumerism".

The following assessment by one of the few American cultural critics to even notice "resurgent" Asia in the 1990s, Fredric Jameson, of (the weakness of) Japanese cultural power at the height of their bubble economy underlines a central issue on cultural productivity and the sustaining of everyday economic development that Beng Huat's work unintentionally but in effect questions:

[I]t does seem to me that fresh cultural production and innovation – and this means in the area of mass-consumed culture – are the crucial index of the centrality of a given area and not its wealth or productive power. [... Despite] Sony's acquisition of Columbia Pictures [in 1989] and Matsushita's buyout of MCA [in 1990], ... the Japanese were unable to master the essentially cultural productivity required to secure the globalization process for any given competitor. Whoever says the production of cultures says the production of everyday life – and without that, your economic system can scarcely continue to expand and implant itself.³

Jameson, unsurprisingly, was unaware of the wave of Japanese pop culture in East and Southeast Asia occurring at the precise point of the publication of his chapter in 1998. The important implication of Beng Huat's work is that the "cultural productivity" that could support and "secure" the region's interconnected economic system need *not* be national, but could come about from a number of different national locations – Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea – and *jointly*

reproduce the cross-border “production of [a] daily life” that reinforces the region’s ongoing capitalist production, even if the challenge of regional nationalism continues to exist.⁴

Equally important in relation to Beng Huat’s achievement in this inter-Asian arena of both social and cultural study was the related institution building undertaken at the Cultural Studies Cluster that he started in 2005 at the Asia Research Institute (ARI) of the National University of Singapore (NUS); as he puts it himself in the Interview that appears in this volume, “The Cultural Studies cluster was instituted because it was an emergent field in Asia and yet to exist in NUS.” His leadership in the Cluster created a distinctive space where interdisciplinary work on pop culture of not only East Asia, but also of Singapore, Southeast Asia and South Asia across a variety of media was enabled, and a productive network of scholars fostered.

Beyond Binary Oppositions in Pop-Cultural Formations

What is the image of “East Asia” that surfaces through the burgeoning pop culture that we see since the 1980s? And does it exceed clichéd binary notions of the local and localities in opposition to the universal and hegemonic modern West?

There are a number of positions that Beng Huat takes that mark his writing from his studies on Singapore to his later examination of East Asian pop culture. One key position follows from how consumerism and consumerist culture from “elsewhere” interact with local desires for consumption, given economic development: he was and remains against a notion of blunt Americanisation or cultural imperialism, if that meant that the “invasion” of Western goods and culture under the condition of rising prosperity would threaten the cultural identity of Singapore youths. This stand similarly applies to various forms of Chinese-language pop music that circulated in the city-state in the 1980s and 1990s:

Indeed, a major teenage phenomenon in Singapore is the “fandom” of Mandarin and Cantonese pop-singers from Taiwan and Hong Kong. The reference point for Singapore’s youths is, therefore, a global mix of images of “youth”, instead of

confusion. However, consumption of global images unavoidably passes through local cultural and political conditions.⁵

The local does come along with the difference from various “other” cultures West and East – viz. the “global mix” of Euro-American and Hong Kong- and Taiwan-related pop cultures; but this comingling and therefore erasure of binary positions does not confuse and does not eradicate but instead *passes through* the lens and practices of the local – even when what arrives are supposed notions of Chineseness that from some perspectives ought to directly relate to a city-state that is 75 per cent ethnic Chinese. If any binary discourse of “‘Asian’ versus ‘Western’ values”⁶ is to be rejected, so are discourses on *the* Asian or even *the* Chinese. “Us” impinging upon “them” is too simplistic an analytical take in the study of inter-Asian cultural production.

Chua Beng Huat also tends not to be overly concerned with the theoretical and analytical considerations of what he calls “postmodern writers”, here referring to some versions of cultural studies criticism done on both sides of the Atlantic,⁷ which treat style as the resistant expression of subjective individual or collective identities. Instead, his focus is on “the political and economic conditions that underpin consumption as a social cultural phenomenon, at a time when these conditions have been often neglected by many analyses which are focused on consumption purely as a form of identity politics”.⁸ It is not that he rejects identity politics as a pertinent issue in the then-pronounced mode of cultural (and indeed literary) studies criticism in the 1980s and the 1990s; rather, Beng Huat rejects the study of consumption “purely” (as he emphasises it) as identity politics, as that ignores the significance of mainstream pop culture and its relation to the imagining of a transnational Asia – when it is often argued, there is no such cultural entity as Asia.⁹

As the East Asian pop cultural scene quite surprisingly expanded in the 1990s – it

commenced with what I call the first but smaller regional Japanese wave in the 1980s, then the much-more pronounced Japanese wave transpired in the 1990s,¹⁰ followed of course by the Korean wave or *Hallyu* from the late 1990s – beyond the then-dominant confines of Cantonese and Mandarin TV dramas, film and pop music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, the trajectory of Beng Huat’s work on Asian consumption and middle-class formation expanded to cover “Asia”. It was one thing to have some sort of ethnic Chinese realm of cultural circulation, even if a number of Chinese languages have to be taken into account, but Cantonese or Mandarin speakers consuming foreign-language TV dramas in Japanese or Korean at a popular and not high-cultural level? That was new.¹¹ Beng Huat wrote (accurately) in 2000:

It is obvious that the [1997] economic crisis has not, and will not, lead to a regression to before the days of the “miraculous” growth of the 1960s. When recovery comes around, and as confidence expands, the “consumption of lifestyles” will surely begin again.¹²

But no one could have fully anticipated the massive and rapid developments that transpired.

We might say that the essays collected and reworked for Beng Huat’s *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture* (2012)¹³ collectively ask the question: is there really such an entity now apparently pop-culturally imagined into existence called “East Asian Pop Culture”? The book deploys a distinction between “pop culture” (profit-driven mass entertainment) and “popular culture” (“the larger cultural sphere that encompasses the everyday life of the masses in contradiction to and contestation with elite culture” [9]). As cultural critic Meaghan Morris observes of Beng Huat’s scholarship in “‘Doing’ Cultural Studies: Chua Beng Huat on Popular Culture” (this volume),

One distinguishing feature of Chua Beng Huat’s work ... is that it stays close to common meanings in methodologically significant ways. [*Structure, Audience and*

Soft Power] ... certainly begins with [Stuart] Hall's basic distinction between the commercial products of the cultural industries and popular culture understood as "the larger cultural sphere that encompasses the everyday life of the masses in contradiction to and contestation with elite culture". However, unlike many scholars who share this starting-point Chua does not use it to divorce the study of media production from that of consumption practices. From the outset he situates both as participating along with governmental forces in the creation of a "cultural economy". Furthermore, he maintains across all his work an emphasis on the *largeness* of the popular as an encompassing cultural sphere.

Morris's observation further indicates why the question of minority resistance is not prioritised in Beng Huat's work, as that emphasis would detract from the flexible and multiple examination of pop culture taken in interaction between the media companies and the large audience that they desire – and so, another binary opposition is breached, that of the producer and the consumer. Conjoining producer and consumer in turn allows an understanding of how the two may then in turn relate to a third entity, the "governmental forces" that may seek to foster "a cultural economy" and perhaps even obtain soft-power benefits from the "*largeness* of the popular" in question. The possibility of engaging with such "*largeness*" then allows us to think in turn about the "Asia" that emerges from the producers of an Inter-East Asian Pop Culture.

The socio-cultural phenomena surveyed from the 1990s, along with a significant amount of the research in the field that Beng Huat has reviewed, taken together, he concludes, "constitute a larger entity of East Asia Pop Culture as a loosely integrated cultural economy" (5). So an actual integrated regional economy exists, even if loosely so, and there *is* a more *socio-cultural* sense of the East Asian that comes about: the audience reception to (particularly) television dramas "evinces the emergent possibility of a sense of the 'pan-East Asia/n', which does not amount to a stable identity but, nevertheless, retains a certain coherence" (xii).¹⁴ We definitely see *something* – but what *exactly* is it that we see?

While Beng Huat modestly describes *Structure, Audience and Soft Power* as an

“introductory text” that “parasitic[ally] ... draws on the existing [research – and especially empirical research –] material in order to attempt a relatively coherent mapping of the contours of the object of analysis” (1), the book is more an innovative setting out of what he believes are the most salient intellectual and practical approaches to enable flexible research strategies and approaches to pop-cultural studies of East Asia to escape the trap of being stuck in binary oppositions. Fundamentally, the book thinks through, first, the boundary crossings that are incurred in both pop-cultural production and consumption (specifically, the audience reception of pop programmes or performances); second, the need for comparative analyses to gain non-national perspectives on cultural phenomena; third, the possibilities of imagining East Asia, given the existing political realities of modern East Asian national-state formation and a historical record of conflicts; and fourth, the difficulty in gaining any effective national “soft power” advantage from pop-cultural success, when we take into account the regional history of political fracture. As with Beng Huat’s earlier work on consumption on Singapore, the existence of the local makes larger regional(ising) or global(ising) culturalist imperatives challenging. However, he cautions that *local* here can also be mobilised by states to become the national-popular or national-cultural that can defeat the border-crossing capacity and potential of inter-Asian pop culture (I will return to this issue).

How does Pop Culture Asia Exist?

The research approaches listed above as to how East Asian pop culture might be examined is in accord with Beng Huat’s emphasis to think on “the political and economic conditions that underpin consumption”¹⁵ rather than content. The content of any cultural product is evanescent, here today and gone before it is barely tomorrow, though content

necessarily constitute[s] some of the empirical material for analysis. The larger analytic interest should be oriented towards the structures and modalities through which the products partake in the political, social, cultural, and economic material relations within the different locations where the products are produced, circulated, and consumed (12).

This assertion is to be noted for certainly both literary and cultural criticism have not perhaps been thorough enough in siting their analyses of pop culture or subculture within the pertinent socio-political and economic contexts. Nevertheless, Beng Huat's position I think requires some qualification, and I shall return to this later. The point here is that he makes effective use of this grounded and material approach in his book to thinking through Pop Culture Asia.

Importantly, the concern with "political and economic conditions" and the question of "Asia" is part of the overall trajectory of the journal project of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* itself that Beng Huat has been involved with from its inception. The original editorial statement for the journal firmly lays out the agenda:

Since the 1980s, a pervasive rhetoric of the "rise" of Asia has come to mean more than the concentrated flow of capital into and out of the region. It has come to constitute a structure of feeling that is ubiquitous yet ambiguously felt throughout Asia. Historically, this feeling of the "rise of Asia" is complicated by the region's colonial past. While Asia's political, cultural and economic position in the global system will continue to fluctuate, there is a need to question and critique the rhetorical unities of both the "rise" and of "Asia". ... [The journal's] political agenda is to move across: state/national/sub-regional divisions, scholarship and activism. ... For this reason the project is more interested in generating new questions or finding ways of asking questions differently, than providing fixed answers.¹⁶

The appearance of a multilingual and multi-format East Asian pop culture that, since the 1990s, followed but also exceeded the cultural and other boundaries of what Beng Huat calls "Pop Culture China" therefore can be taken to be *part* of the emergent "structure of feeling" that is "ubiquitous [and] yet, ambivalently felt". Japanese and then Korean pop culture from the 1990s seemed, as it were, comfortable with the predispositions of

“globalised” capital – and so, there is the debordering both of pop music as a medium and of the national-linguistic spaces of pop music and culture. Can such new cultural productions overcome the older fractious nationalisms from the Cold War and before? Beng Huat’s work pushes onwards the process of “generating new questions” on the “‘rise’ of Asia”. His research agenda for East Asian pop culture has fed into what has become featured in the journal itself, and *Structure, Audience and Soft Power* in a sense looks back retrospectively not only to what he has attempted individually but what through the journal and his personal and institutional interaction with scholars in the region – particularly through the work of the Cultural Studies Cluster at NUS – has helped enable into intellectual and academic existence.

I now offer what I take to be some of the most acute insights that emerge from the trajectory of Beng Huat’s scholarship and proposed methodology in *Structure, Audience and Soft Power*. To begin with, there is a reminder that new communication technologies, the expansion of TV stations and innovative means of broadcasting content through satellite TV and then through the internet has helped the circulation of TV dramas from Japan and South Korea in the region. Drawing upon the work of Shim Doobo and others, he also reminds his reader that the political context of the weakening of authoritarian regimes allowed for the liberalisation of the media: pop-cultural expansion did not occur in a void. And in relation to the prominent presence of new cultural production in the region, Beng Huat elevates TV drama production as their most significant form, as he observes that film screenings and pop music have smaller audience numbers.

There is also a vital chapter on Pop Culture China in the book. By this he does not mean pop culture that emerges from mainland China but the *complex totality* of pop-cultural production in various Chinese languages – mainly from Taiwan and Hong Kong. It is

noteworthy that the burst of Japanese and then Korean dramas and pop music that emerge from the 1990s follow the existing distribution flow of Pop Culture China, and new possibilities of “Asian” identity/ies are enabled, given the layered flows of culture:

Without the massive and well-established Pop Culture China market and its audience that receives the Japanese and the Korean pop cultures within different Chinese languages, flows and exchange and exchanges between Japan, Korea and other particular East Asian locations would be merely *bilateral* rather than *regional* [emphases mine] (5).

This chapter offers a salutary but significant reminder to not forget the forms of Chinese cultures that were and are essential to the rise of a now seemingly cosmo-glossy East Asian-ness, especially when we take into account the ongoing Korean pop (or K-Pop) attempts to exceed East Asia and to circulate into the USA¹⁷ – the final postcolonial pop-cultural frontier – and recently into Latin America.¹⁸ Beng Huat’s inter-Asian adumbration of the link of Pop Culture China to the newer East Asian pop culture has not been significantly picked up by the existing scholarship and thus awaits further investigation to understand how this connection modifies an idea of “Asia” beyond (the now-clichéd) notions of Chinese business networks.

Indeed, a particular aspect of Beng Huat’s thinking on “Chinese culture” that should not be missed is a critical aside as to how we can think of Chinese culture(s) outside of mainland China. Pop Culture China itself, he stresses, is a *decentred* structure and identity: “The configuration of Pop Culture China is materially and symbolically without center; any search for a cultural center would be in vain” (39). With multiple language productions in *Hokkien* Chinese or *minnan hua* ([or *minnan* language] and the differences in what that language signifies in Singapore, where it is repressed and fading, and Taiwan, where it is also called “Taiwanese”¹⁹), Cantonese and Mandarin, and the challenges that also arise when producers try to subtitle programmes for different Chinese-language markets in demarcated

national contexts, the term “Chinese” as a term of reference becomes problematic:

Within the contemporary context, following the practice of Singapore, “Huaren” [Chinese people] can be adopted as a nation-neutral but ethnically- and culturally-marked identity, reserving the term “Chinese” for those who are citizens of China and who could be of Han descent, or be from any of the officially-recognized “minority” nationalities. In this context, local sentiments have provided, and will continue to provide, the necessary ideological resources for the construction of differences between Huaren of different locations, rather than building on any idea of a shared “Chinese” identity (37).

The above is partially a critical response to Shih Shu-Mei’s concept of the Sinophone, which represents her attempt to circumvent the increasing dominance of the mainland as *the* central reference for a monolithic Chinese identity.²⁰ While Chua is aware of the ideological work that Shih intends, in view of the multiple Chinese languages even in pop cultural production, he enquires: if “‘Francophone’ refers to speakers of French and ‘Anglophone’ refers to speakers of English, then to which Chinese language [never mind the added complexity of English-speaking Chinese-Singaporeans] does the ‘Sino’ in ‘Sinophone’ refer?” (35). Of course, he is well-aware of China’s rising significance as a locale for consumption and potential production of mass culture – and the possible nationalistic reinforcing of monolithic notions of being Chinese that is detrimental to the region’s plural Chineseness: “China ... is likely [in due course] to emerge as a major exporter of pop culture in the near future: evidence is already observable. Until then, with Taiwan and Hong Kong as intermediaries, Japanese and Korean pop culture is [sic] incorporated and integrated into the larger East Asian Pop Culture sphere” (16). What are the unknowns for regional cultural production and reception that the future portends in relation to China?

The above does not mean that Chua thinks audiences sit down and feel “East Asian” in some direct sense when watching East Asian TV dramas: he offers empirical research that indicates that *both* identification *and* distancing can occur when audiences respond to

Japanese and Korean teledramas. Dubbing the programme into the domestic language can make it more local – but there is also a pleasure in watching foreignness and famous regional icons on TV, such as Tokyo Tower or the Bund. Inter-Asian pop culture offers a not-quite-post-national experience that is, however, still multicultural. This point follows from the earlier work on Singapore on the foreign being filtered through the lens of the local. Still, his thinking that the partially domesticated sense of a national foreignness that does not quite go away, combined with his observation that those who do not consume East Asian Pop Culture will *outnumber* those who do, lead to his conclusion that any Japanese and Korean reach for “soft power” through pop-cultural exports will be hard to fulfil:

the pop culture sphere rubs up against the larger public sphere of which it is a part. In every case, the ensuing contest is ideologically unequal, reinforced by the unequal size of the non-audience of imported pop culture. The sign of the “nation”, and with it the imagined national public sphere and national culture [i.e., the national popular], is discursively/ideologically and strategically only available to the non-audience population (134).

“East Asia” can be culturally evoked; but this trans-local identity can also be defeated by calls to national solidarity – an older national modernity can still defeat the desire for a more multicultural post-national identity.

I conclude this section with two responses to Professor Chua’s vibrant intervention in the realm of East Asian pop-culture studies. The first response is to the question of “content”, mainly narrative content, as it appears in film and television dramas. Pop-cultural content in dramas of course can be (and often is) clichéd and disposable, but some programmes will have either possess more high-grade and imaginative content or might stand out as representing or even creating a possibility-filled socio-cultural moment. For example, Fuji TV’s *Tokyo Love Story* (1991; *Tōkyō rabu sutori*) was the drama that helped lead the revived Japanese cultural wave in televisual dramas in the 1990s. Its gender-role-

breaking heroine was unhesitating in her choice of the man she wanted, even if she does not win him in the end from his more socially submissive former high-school classmate.²¹ On display was an emancipated attitude that contrasted with, say, the heroine of the film *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), with Suzie's dependent attitude on her American hero. *Tokyo Love Story* was a surprise hit in Taiwan, Hong Kong and, in 1997, also in China, translated as *Dongjing Ai de Gushi*. Tokyo itself, as the foremost East Asian metropolis, seemed a key part of the serial's popularity.²² Perhaps unsurprisingly, the urbanising-industrialising developments related to the East Asian economic success in the 1980s, resulting in possibilities (and difficulties) of new ways of being-in-the-world, would be enmeshed with cultural production from the 1990s onwards. Film and, it might be added, televisual dramas are aesthetic technologies suited for the representation and narrativising of social worlds – here worlds related to a putative regional economic system. Narrative figurations, Fredric Jameson has contended, have a “structure [that] encourages a soaking up of whatever ideas [are] in the air[.... Film as] narrative [text] today conflates ontology with geography and endlessly processes images of the unmappable [world capitalist] system”.²³ The studying of key content in representative or otherwise significant productions require some understanding of “the structures and modalities through which the products partake in the political, social, cultural, and economic material relations” (12).

The second response pertains to the significance of pop music – more specifically its live performance, recording and distribution/broadcast – in relation to how, as Beng Huat phrases it, the “statistically overwhelming presence of a passive audience can be transformed into an audience ‘community’ or ‘communities’” (104). We can take to heart what he indicates is at stake in the making visible of a consuming community – be it through a live concert, fans turning out for stars appearing at a shopping centre, etc.:

First, the individuals that gather, without any prior organization, become aware of others who share the same passion, and hence gain subjective, individualized realization of being part of a community, however ephemerally, with the others. Second, the constituted crowd is inevitably transformed into a “spectacle” by media [or I might add recording companies’] attention (106).

Beng Huat opines that “the conventional popularity of foreign-language pop music in any consumption location has always been limited to a smaller population of dedicated fans, largely because the majority of the potential audience do not possess the requisite skills to appreciate the lyrics of the song” (2). The language gap is certainly a challenge, and yet the ongoing spectacularisation of K-Pop that has exceeded the scale of J-Pop from the 1990s, and then, from about 2005, its overtaking TV dramas to become the main component in *Hallyu*, make us rethink the significance of music and its present role in the imagining of contemporary Asia. The regional live concerts, from Tokyo to Jakarta, by K-Pop stars since at least 2010 (with the singers singing and speaking in Japanese, and to a lesser extent in Mandarin and English²⁴), and the DVDs that are recorded of such concerts, fulfil the community creating process as Beng Huat outlines it and become one major way to encourage the consumption of Korean pop music. A trans-local staging of Asia transpires in the concerts, in which – as a Japanese performance studies colleague of mine says of some contemporary Japanese performance – “‘the national’ is assumed as given, but somehow, something oozes out of the ‘national’ boundaries, to the extent that those boundaries become opaque, almost invisible, though not necessarily subverted”.²⁵

Institution Building

Finally, there is the question of Beng Huat’s role as an institution builder. The Asia Research Institute at NUS was set up in 2001. On its website, we are told that: “The mission of the Institute is to provide a ... resource for research on the Asian region located at one of its

communication hubs. ARI engages the humanities and social sciences broadly defined and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines.”²⁶ The Cultural Studies Cluster in ARI that Beng Huat has led since its inception since 2005 has been exemplary in being interdisciplinary in its orientation to the study of popular culture beyond the limitations of single disciplinary orientations such as film, theatre, literary studies or the sociology of culture; and its fellowship programme has brought in senior and junior scholars from universities from both more and less developed economies – the Cluster therefore has indeed been a “resource” for scholars from East, Southeast and East Asia, creating a space where intellectual engagement is *both* inter-Asian *and* with the metropole. This last matter has been vital in ensuring that the questions that may be asked come about with the region’s own concerns kept firmly in view. The regional and then international reputation that the Cluster has since gained is intimately tied to Beng Huat’s own increasing reputation in the area of cultural studies, especially through the establishing of the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* and his expanding interest in popular culture.

The Interview in this volume reveals how Beng Huat’s work on Singapore expanded over the years, and how much the journal project was instrumental in reshaping his intellectual trajectory:

I remember being asked why I do not write about “Asia”. ... But I could not do that, because I cannot write about things I do not have depth of knowledge. ... The *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* project took me out of Singapore and into the region.... Without the IACS project, this [ARI research cluster] would not have happened. ... Of course, all the other Asian network things that came along with our journals and the conferences that we have held [in relation to both the journal and the cluster] also provided [the] opportunities to regionalise myself.

And it can be noted that the establishing of the cluster was done right from the very start of ARI in relation to the interests of scholars in the region, and their understanding of the tasks to be addressed. Here we can go, again, to the Interview for Beng Huat’s own recollection of

his being “regionalised”:

As leader for the Cultural Studies in Asia research cluster, the first task was to convene an inaugural workshop, bringing in people [from] across Asia into discussion to set a research agenda for the cluster. Most of the participants ... have since become senior scholars in the field; Eric Ma and Esther Cheung from Hong Kong,²⁷ Koichi Iwabuchi from Japan,²⁸ among others. From this workshop, the cluster developed the pop/media culture research programme with more than creditable achievements, by way of publication, conferences and nurturing new initiatives, such as the annual Southeast Asian Cinema conference and the Asian Pop Music conference. I believe that most Asian pop culture scholars probably have been either a fellow or participants in our conferences. I am quite happy with the results of the past 15 years.

The Cluster’s record objectively validates what Beng Huat has to say: the beginning of the Cluster’s existence saw (in academic year 2005-06) a conference on “Asia’s Hsiao-Hsien”, a workshop on “Popular Elections as Popular Culture”, a workshop on “East Asian Pop Culture: Korean and Japanese TV Dramas”, a forum on “Discovery Channel’s *The History of Singapore*” and a workshop on “Cinematic Representation of the Tropical Urban/City”. The pace has not let up much since 2005.

Professor Chua Beng Huat’s work and intellectual generosity have taken many a good distance down the road in the study of East Asian Pop Culture; and this work also tells us that much more awaits to be done, given the paths that have been opened up.

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Notes

¹ Chua Beng Huat, *Life is Not Complete without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003). Beng Huat likes to respond, when asked what he does, “I watch TV serials – lots of them!” It is now apparent that the genealogy of his fieldwork sites goes back to the late 1980s, when his

initial fieldwork on Singapore consumption was undertaken in the confines of a now-defunct but edgy boutique, Man and His Woman, and the Ngee Ann City shopping centre.

² Chua Beng Huat, "Consuming Asians: Ideas and Issues", in *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*, ed. Chua Beng Huat (London: Routledge, 2000), 1, 2.

³ Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue", in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 67.

⁴ Cf. C. J. W.-L. Wee, "Imagining the Fractured East Asian Modern: Commonality and Difference in Mass Cultural Production", *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 197–225.

⁵ Chua Beng Huat, "The Emerging Culture of Consumption", in *Life is Not Complete*, 27.

⁶ Chua, "Consuming Asians", 28; the reference here is to the Asian values discourse that was occurring in the Singapore and the region more broadly from the 1980s to the 1997 Asian economic crisis.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ Naoki Sakai, "'You Asians': On the Historical Role of the West and Asia Binary", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 789–818.

¹⁰ C. J. W.-L. Wee, "Buying Japan: Singapore, Japan and an 'East Asian' Modernity", *Journal of Pacific Asia* 4 (1997): 21–46; and Chua Beng Huat, "Japanese Influence in Singapore: 'Where Got?'", in *Life is Not Complete without Shopping*. At that juncture in the 1990s, both writers underestimated the strength of Japanese pop culture.

¹¹ See Koichi Iwabuchi, "Pop Culture's Lingua Franca: Language and Regional Popular Cultural Flows in East Asia", in *Babel or Behemoth: Language Trends in Asia*, ed. Jennifer Lindsay and Tan Ying Ying (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2003), 171–72. Media critic Iwabuchi notes that how exactly translation (subtitling of dramas or pop songs incorporating more than one language) or how "cultural translation" – that which comes about when the viewer feels that there is "cultural proximity" between the TV programme he/she is watching and his/her own urban context – lead to the creation of regional cultural "resonance" is not apparent to him, and this despite Iwabuchi's own pioneering inter-Asian work, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹² Chua Beng Huat, "Preface" to *Consumption in Asia*, xiv.

¹³ Chua Beng Huat, *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012). All further page references to this text will be given within brackets in the main text.

¹⁴ Elsewhere, Beng Huat adds that: "Paranthenetically, until now successful formula for a pan-East Asian film or television series seems to have eluded the regional media or industries" (*Structure, Audience and Soft Power*, 6).

¹⁵ Chua, "Consuming Asians", 6.

¹⁶ "Editorial Statement", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008): 1–2.

¹⁷ K-Pop bands steadily assault the USA, but the progress is slow; cf. J. D. Considine: "As Lee Ho-yang, who concocted hits for K-Pop acts T-ara, 4minute and Beast, told *The Korea Times* last year, it will take more than a mega-hit like [Psy's] *Gangnam Style* to conquer North America. 'America is a huge market with very diverse musical tastes and challenges,' he said. 'It's all but impossible to sweep it all with one shot.' Perhaps it's a mistake ... to think of the Korean Wave as a massive tsunami. Instead, it seems more like a steady flow, rising slowly but steadily seeping in" ("So Whatever Happened to Pop Music's Korean Invasion?", *Globe and Mail*, 8 January 2014 <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/so-whatever-happened-to-pop-musics-korean-invasion/article16243927/>> accessed 4 April 2016).

¹⁸ Anjani Trivedi, "Forget Politics, Let's Dance: Why K-Pop Is a Latin American Smash", *Time*, 1 August 2013 <<http://world.time.com/2013/08/01/forget-politics-lets-dance-why-k-pop-is-a-latin-american-smash/>> accessed 4 April 2016.

¹⁹ For an elaboration of this point, see Chua's "Taiwan's Present/Singapore's Past Mediated by the Hokkien Language", in *Structure, Audience and Soft Power*.

²⁰ See, for example, Shu-Mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007); "Theory, Asia and the Sinophone", *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 465–484; and "The Concept of the Sinophone", *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 709–718.

²¹ See Ōta Tōru, "Producing (Post)Trendy Japanese Dramas", in *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas*, ed. Koichi Iwabuchi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004). Beng Huat does make a reference to this drama in *Structure, Audience and Soft Power*, 18.

²² Cf. Yu-fen Ko: "Research on Japanese idol dramas in Taiwan point out that Taiwanese youths consider the urban Tokyo setting as the major reason for their popularity" ("The Desired Form: Japanese Idol Dramas in

Taiwan", in *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas*, ed. Koichi Iwabuchi [Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004], 118).

²³ Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 4.

²⁴ Cf. J. D. Considine: "However much the music industry might insist that the future is downloads, the big money in terms of artist royalties remains in CDs. At the moment, the United States remains the world's biggest music market overall. But when the sales figures are restricted to CDs only, Japan – where downloading hasn't caught on – becomes the top market" ("So Whatever Happened to Pop Music's Korean Invasion?").

²⁵ Uchino Tadashi, "'Database Animals' and the Avant-Garde: Materializing Transnational, Transient Subjectivities in Posthumanity", Workshop on "It Starts Now: Performance Avant-Gardes in East and Southeast Asia", Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 19-21 September 2011.

²⁶ Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, "Vision and Mission", <<https://ari.nus.edu.sg/Page/Vision-and-Mission>> accessed 7 April 2016.

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²⁸ Koichi Iwabuchi is currently Director of Monash Asia Institute in Australia.