In 2005, the discussion board at the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) site for Rob Marshall’s new film, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, was flooded with users’ debates over the film’s cultural authenticity. Set in 1920s and 1930s Japan, the film tells the story of the life of a Geisha, a highly-trained traditional Japanese female entertainer who usually served men of power and money with her musical and dance performances, sophisticated conversational skills, and sometimes her own exquisite presence itself. To portray such a unique Japanese cultural tradition, however, the filmmakers chose three internationally famous stars of Chinese ethnicity to fill the main roles. As soon as it was announced, the seeming mismatch of the cast and their roles immediately provoked controversy among moviegoers both East and West. At the release of this Hollywood blockbuster romance, media all over the globe started to extensively report on the production of the film, how the three main Chinese actresses toiled over a six-week “Geisha crash course” for a realistic representation of their roles, and how the studio lot of Culver City in Los Angeles was transformed into a huge replica of Gion, Kyoto, the well known “Geisha district” in Japan.

Obviously, all these scrupulous efforts by the filmmakers did not seem to impress the majority
Editor's Introduction

of ethnically Japanese audiences. Their discontent over the inadequate representation of Geisha culture in this film rang loudly and vehemently in cyberspace both in English and in Japanese.

On the other end of the spectrum, Chinese audiences were infuriated by the film for a somewhat different reason. Their discomfort mostly originated from the fact that one of their most famous film stars, Zhang Ziyi, played the role of Geisha, a profession which is widely misunderstood outside of Japan as one comprised of prostitutes or paid female escorts. Additionally, although more than half a century has passed since the end of the Second World War, most Asian countries are still not free from the unpleasant memories of the Japanese colonial period. Especially whenever the yet-to-be-resolved issue of the former “comfort women,” the forced sex slaves for the Japanese military during the Pacific War, resurfaces during political negotiations among East Asian countries, people in this region are reminded that history has not passed, but stays in the here and now. With such a lingering memory of colonial Japan, it is not easy for nationalistic Chinese audiences to accept their female star playing the shameful role of a subservient “doll” of Japanese men. It hurts their national pride.

Some Western audiences might shrug at this, not understanding what the fuss is about: when there is an endless list of cross-cultural casting in Hollywood, what makes this case so special? Eventually, the producers of the film stated their stance over this dispute in a letter to the editor of The Los Angeles Times: “Casting a film should never be subject to a political litmus test. Films such as ‘Memoirs of a Geisha’ allow audiences to travel across borders and peek behind cultural curtains to discover the universality of human emotions.”

Reading this, as an ethnic Asian, I instantly recognized the difference between what the seemingly magnanimous Western producers intended in the film and what the realistically infuriated Asian audiences felt through this film: when the producers wanted to project the “universality of human emotions” in this film made through an East-West collaboration, Asian audiences saw the particularities of their own cultural and historical experiences. Where did the miscalculation happen? How? Didn't the Asian participants in this film predict the trouble when they crossed the Pacific to make this film? Was the controversy an indicator of the Hollywood filmmakers’ overblown confidence in their decisions, or was it, in fact, part of a well-planned promotional circus that they wanted to utilize to draw more attention to this film in a wider global market? Are the commonality and the specificity of human experiences mutually exclusive concepts? Hinted at by the recent interesting cultural disputes over this East-West cinematic collaboration, which traveled even wider than the film itself, this issue of *Spectator* delves further into the various questions and meanings that are provoked and induced in the process of such transnational media co-productions.

In fact, the practice of co-productions among different national media industries has a long history both in the East and West. Not surprisingly, the modes and significances of such cultural practices have also proven to vary widely depending upon when and where such collaborations take place. Film and TV co-productions all over the world usually occur through the voluntary participation of the involved countries in recognition of the increased economic value of such media commodities and as a process of a postcolonial renegotiation of global cultural hierarchy. This, however, is not the only way that co-productions happen. Some earlier examples, such as those seen in the careers of European émigré filmmakers in Hollywood during the World War periods or Chinese-Japanese or Korean-Japanese cinematic co-productions during the colonial period, demonstrate that the collaborations were mostly inevitable for the filmmakers of colonized countries under pressing socio-political circumstances.

Whereas there are occasions in which co-productions are undertaken in the form of the merger of finances, some other cases also involve the exchange of various cinematic talents, such as directors, performers, or technical crews. The effects of such cultural practices are manifested in diverse areas. The changes from a national to a transnational production mode in media industries reconfigure their industrial operations, as well as transform the textual qualities of the final products. Often times, the media creators anticipate providing a cultural space where all the differences
and discrepancies among different communities can be harmoniously resolved in the co-produced media. Sometimes, however, whether intentionally or not, the end results further mobilize national and historical sensibilities within participating countries as is seen above in the controversy surrounding *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

In investigating all of these varied forms, outcomes, and significances of the specific practice of cultural creation, what makes this inquiry almost evenly relevant to all of us is that such media co-productions resemble and best reflect the mode of larger inter-national and interpersonal interactions of the world that we live in. Operating under the pressing socio-economic and cultural imperatives of globalization, the world today constantly drives us to think beyond the boundaries that we draw, the space that we occupy, and the ideas or ideologies that we hold on to. And all this is done through connecting the entire globe as one imaginary mega-community. With such a shrunken distance between ‘us’ and ‘others,’ we experience what Iwabuchi Koich calls, “a world where familiar difference and bizarre sameness are simultaneously articulated in multiple ways through the unpredictable dynamic of uneven global cultural encounters.”

Reflecting on and promulgated by such increased contact among heterogeneous societies and cultures, contemporary media co-productions not only continue their past traditions but also renew their practices in accordance to the changes made around global media industries. The current practices differ from those of the past in terms of the frequency of instances of co-production, the diversified mediums and technologies involved, the wide geographical span that is interconnected through such cultural convergences, the widely multidirectional flow of capital, and the gradual decentrality of powers and influences among collaborators. Also, as was indicated earlier, there is also voluntarism.

Proliferating in the new environment, today’s co-produced media products offer cultural amalgams where we witness the encounter of universality and the particularities of human experiences and the coexistence of history and contemporaneity. It is in between such dualities where the plentiful meanings of such media are created. Homi Bhabha says, It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed ‘in-between’, or in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)?

What the current issue of *Spectator* intends to highlight is the potential of the media co-production to act as such an interstitial cultural space where the various combinations of different “parts” of social and cultural identities lead to new understandings of oneself and others. Accordingly, all the essays in this volume address diverse meanings as well as practices of co-productions across the globe. The mediums dealt with in each discussion also vary, from mainstream commercial cinema, alternative modes of cinema such as independent documentaries or omnibus films, to TV series. Some authors observe the conspicuous presence of “Global Hollywood” or other American media industries in the production, distribution, and reception of the products of hybrid culture, whereas others pay more attention to the recently increasing intra-regional collaborations that help reconfigure the flow of power, capital, and ideas in the global “mediascapes.”

Although this volume spends the most space on discussing the practices of co-productions since the 1990s to comply with the recent heightened academic interest in this period, it does not mean to bracket this period as deserving of more attention than others in observing this specific cultural phenomenon. Each practice, in fact, needs to be understood as being situated in the longer history of similar cultural activities across the globe. In that sense, the first essay by Chris Wahl, “‘Paprika in the blood’: On UFA’s early sound films produced in/about/for/with Hungary” provides us with valuable insights into the past history of European film co-productions during the late 1920s and the early 1930s. Wahl questions and traces the reasons why two films that the then giant German studio UFA ambitiously made in collaboration with the Hungarian film industry, “Melody of the heart” and “… and the plains are gleaming,” ended
Editor’s Introduction

up as failures, resulting in the discontinuation of film co-productions between the two countries. In its exploration of the factors for the failures of these two films through the correlation of the technological innovations of the Hungarian national film industry and the emerging political threats of Nazis in Europe at the same time, Wahl’s essay makes us think about the social and political as well as the cultural conditions in which cinematic co-productions can be nurtured.

The earlier failures however do not dictate the visions and possibilities of such cultural collaborations in global media history. The next two essays introduce counter-examples, asking us to further consider what kind of imperatives and requirements lead to well-stabilized regional co-production systems. Tamara L. Falicov’s “Programa Ibermedia: Co-production and the Cultural Politics of Constructing an Ibero-American Audiovisual Space” directs our attention to Latin American film co-productions promulgated by “Programa Ibermedia,” the co-production funding pool sponsored by Spain, Portugal, and Ibero-American countries. In her study, Falicov not only analyzes the success of Programa Ibermedia in revitalizing the Ibero-American film industries but also the limits of such an institutionalized co-production fund that must negotiate the different levels of interest and the influences of multiple countries. Especially through her analysis of the four stereotypical characterizations of Spaniards in the films produced through Programa Ibermedia, she penetrates into the ambivalent and complicated feelings of Ibero-American filmmakers toward this co-production funding system and its most influential country, Spain.

“The Birth of East Asia: Cultural Regionalization through Co-production Strategies” by Dal Yong Jin and Dong-Hoo Lee, finds another model of such regional media co-productions in East Asia. Their essay first carefully maps out the history of media co-productions both in TV and film in East Asia since the 1990s, when the frequency of such collaborations began to rapidly increase. In the process, the explanations for the newly condensed interests in East Asian co-productions during the period are found at the intersection of the market-driven economy of media industries, the fluid national identity of co-produced products, and the overall trend of deregulation in cultural policies in Asia. Although the authors agree that co-productions are mostly proven to be an economically viable option in the region, at the same time they warn of the “cultural discount” effects resulting from such cultural regionalization, as exemplified in the TV series Friends and the film The Promise.

Both the hopes and limitations of regional co-productions are also revealed in detailed analyses of individual media works as well as in larger historical overviews. And the same is true for alternative as well as mainstream media forms, too. Stephanie DeBoer’s “Tokyo on the Move: Omnibus Asia and the Limits of the Link” looks at two early 1990s media projects, Southern Winds and Asian Beat, designed as omnibus films, co-produced by numerous Asian countries with Japan as the headquarters of production. The initial hopes and visions of such omnibus works, as is indicated by DeBoer, are wholesome ones: linking contemporary Asian countries through the common terms of their emerging capital and media technologies. However, she argues that such “transparent” confidence in Asian solidarity implicated in these omnibus projects is in fact constantly challenged and questioned by the latent differences between Japan and the rest of postcolonial Asia, reflected in the making of these films.

A documentary is another alternative form where numerous transnational media collaborations take place, which has earned little critical attention so far. In this situation, Stephen Michael Charbonneau’s “Global and Local Selves: (Dis)Placed Youth and Fraught Articulations of Home in the Global Action Project’s Peace of Mind” provides us with a refreshing perspective on this rarely explored area of documentary co-productions. Peace of Mind, the documentary that Charbonneau chose to analyze, features Israeli and Palestinian teenagers and was produced by the U.S.-based media organization, the “Global Action Project.” The initial intention of this media work was to project a certain universal quality of youthfulness among these teenagers politically standing at odds throughout Middle Eastern history. As is seen in earlier essays, however, here, too, reality subverts anticipated harmony and unification. For Charbonneau, the discrepancy is found in the constantly resurfacing mythopoetic
narratives that the Israeli and Palestinian people retain in recounting their lives in front of the camera, which challenges the producers’ utopian vision of reconciling or erasing their historical memories in this documentary.

In fact, all recent regional media co-productions can be interpreted as a response to the unsurpassed power and influence of Hollywood in one way or another. Such reactions to Hollywood’s domination of the global cultural imagination by East Asian audiences and media industries are investigated in the last two essays. Hye Seung Chung’s “From Die Another Day to ‘Another Day’: The South Korean Anti-007 Movement and Regional Nationalism in Post-Cold War Asia” examines the significance of Korean audiences’ boycotting of the twentieth installment of the “James Bond” franchise that was co-produced by the U.S. and the U.K.. Situating the case of cultural resistance at the juncture of numerous disputes over U.S.-Korea geopolitics, the long-standing history of (mis)representation of non-Westerners in numerous Hollywood films, including the “Bond” series, and the (re)claiming of Korean cultural authority with the emergence of “Hallyu” in Asia, this essay analyzes the cultural and political ramifications of this incident that effected the restructuring of global cultural solidarity beyond national and ideological boundaries.

While the above essay and some of the earlier discussions illuminate regional attempts at creating counter-hegemony against Hollywood, “So Close: Issues of Transcultural Remakes and Multicultural Reception,” by Hyung-Sook Lee, addresses the collaboration of regional media with Hollywood in paving the way to larger global markets. The essay examines how the different cultural status of the cinematic remake and its debasing double, the cinematic “rip-off,” is deliberately taken advantage of in the production and distribution of So Close, a Hong Kong film widely suspected of imitating Hollywood’s Charlie’s Angels. The film, however, is actually a co-production between Hong Kong and Hollywood, yet this fact was generally obscured in the promotion of the film and was left to individual audiences’ discernability. By analyzing the complex layers of translatability that are plotted into this seemingly shallow imitational text, the essay explicates a newly emerging tactic of the Hong Kong film industry to survive both in regional and global markets.

In addition to the seven critical essays, two interviews of transnational filmmakers are included in this volume. John Kreng and Hyung-Sook Lee’s “Remembering the Forgotten Name of an Asian Action Master: Interview with Director Chung Chang-Wha” delivers an interview with Korean director Chung Chang-Wha who built his transnational career in the Hong Kong film industry in the 1960s and 1970s. “Remaking Transnational Hollywood: An Interview with Roy Lee” by Daniel Herbert, on the other hand, brings us a conversation with Roy Lee, the Hollywood producer who has been in charge of numerous Hollywood remakes of Asian films in recent years. Although their careers are separated by more than thirty years of temporality, the insights and experiences of these two filmmakers will certainly enlighten us as to the realities of cultural collaborations in film industries across history and across geographical borders.

Lastly, Chun-Chi Wang introduces us to a new book by Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. Jenkins’ book discusses the increasing influences of fans and audiences, with the aid of new technologies, on the various aspects of the formation of American media. This issue of fan participation in media, and Wang’s review of it, insightfully closes this volume by reminding us of what initially motivated our current discussion of transnational media co-productions: global audiences’ reactions to Hollywood-Asian co-productions. Today, audiences influence media creation both domestically and transnationally.

Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden state, “space of the transnational is not an anarchic free-for-all in which blissfully deracinated postnational subjects revel in ludically mystified states of ahistoricity.” Their view well corresponds with the positions and perspectives of all the authors in this volume in their deliberation on the ways to maintain cultural and historical specificities together with the yearning for universal human commonality in scenes of cultural convergence. What kind of values are preserved, deleted, contested, and negotiated in the process? Why? Through our critical exploration of media co-productions in diverse historical, social, and cultural contexts, Spectator hopes to open up rather than to conclude discussions about the state of cultural interstices, hybridity, or heterogeneity,
EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

and their practical meanings and effects in the reality of global cultural productions.

Note to readers: In this volume, authors Hye Seung Chung and Hyung-Sook Lee introduce East Asian names in the order of last name followed by first name. The names of all the contributing authors are written in the opposite order.

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Notes


