Dal Yong Jin & Dong-Hoo Lee

The Birth of East Asia
Cultural Regionalization through Co-Production Strategies

Introduction

East Asian cultural producers have rapidly increased co-productions over the past several years. The Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean cultural industries have produced cross-cultural outputs, including films, television dramas, and music. Local cultural industries and producers in East Asia have begun pooling financial and cultural resources, which is a useful means to compete with cultural products from other regions, particularly those from Hollywood, and have produced a few cross-cultural hits since the late 1990s.¹

Unlike in many other parts of the world, co-production strategies in East Asia are relatively new phenomena. Until a few years ago, East Asia was viewed as a jumble of provincial cultural markets. Cultural works in Japan, China, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan were made largely for domestic markets. Barring a few exceptions, local filmmakers and broadcasters never collaborated out of their countries.² Local and/or national cultural industries took the stance that they should protect and maintain national culture, or “the body of values, practices, and identities, because they believe national culture deemed to make particular nations different from others.”³ For East Asian producers, “the meaning of culture (and thereafter cultural products) is something which we have that others have not.”⁴ As in many countries, television particularly remains primarily a national phenomenon in East Asia, and the domestic state plays a significant role in shaping national television systems.⁵

Producers in the region, however, have increasingly turned to international co-productions since the late 1990s, because the Pan-Asian co-production mode takes advantage of the joint consumption cost structure. It entails jointly developing and producing film and television programs with attributes which make them accessible to audiences in more than one national market.⁶ Filmmakers and television networks, including independent producers, are now rapidly reaching beyond their local and national audiences to attract regional and global viewers.

This article examines the recent trends of co-productions in East Asia to map out cultural regionalization in the region. Considering that co-production strategies are relatively new phenomena in East Asia, first, this paper attempts to provide a general documentation of co-productions in the broadcasting and film sectors. It discusses why the region has adopted a co-production system by exploring an economic angle to explain the interdependence of television program and film flows, especially since the late 1990s. The paper also brings into focus the relationship between
THE BIRTH OF EAST ASIA

culture and economic factors while investigating the driving force behind co-productions in East Asia. Finally, it examines whether co-production among East Asian countries, which has been considered one of the most significant factors for cultural regionalization, has played a key role in the growth of regional integration in the content of co-produced cultural products.

To investigate these questions, the paper has offered political economy approaches in parallel with a textual analysis of the content of co-produced films and television dramas. This paper, first of all, articulates the relationship among cultural products, industry, and cultural politics in production. At the textual level, this study aims at exploring the uniqueness of co-produced dramas and films in genre, theme, and style. From the perspective gained from the angle of political economy as well as textual analyses, it intends to generate new insights into the emerging discourse of cultural regionalization in East Asia and its implications for globalization.

The Rise of Cultural Regionalization

Over the last decade, cultural product flows in the same region have been made possible by information flows through television programs and films from the same region, including in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Several countries in Latin America, including Mexico and Brazil, have reduced the import of television programs from industrialized countries such as America and Europe to secure their own programs. Furthermore, they have expanded their exports of indigenous television programs with their unique character to neighbouring countries in the same region.

East Asia has experienced a very similar situation in recent years. Several countries, first Hong Kong, followed by Japan and Korea, have increased their cultural penetration of the same region. Asian broadcasters are expanding their operations within the region; therefore popular culture in East Asia, more attuned to local tastes, routinely crosses national boundaries, although global media firms are still increasing their operations in Asia. As television program producers in Mexico and Brazil have created programs for Latin America, the producers in Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea have made programs for the East Asian cultural market.

However, it was rare to find direct cultural cooperation in East Asia until the early years of the twenty-first century, with a few exceptions, such as co-productions between the Hong Kong and Korean film industries in the 1970s, as well as between Hong Kong and Japan. A few countries have expanded their cultural penetration based on technological development and advanced programs; however, they have not developed co-production strategies, which are critical for cultural regionalization. Although cultural flows in the same region initiate cultural integration, they do not guarantee cultural cooperation among local producers. Cultural regionalization, as a form of practical collaboration between two-three countries in the same region, rarely existed in East Asia. Cultural regionalization could be “the (empirical) process which can be defined as a process of change from relative heterogeneity and lack of cooperation towards increased cooperation, integration, convergence, coherence and identity in culture within a given geographical space,” which is a broader concept of collaboration than cultural product flows.

Cultural regionalization can also be understood as a comprehensive and multidimensional process, which implies increasing regional cooperation and integration with respect to a number of dimensions, not only political and economic, but also cultural dimensions. Such effective trans-border structures have to be embedded in the local institutions and correspond to a certain commitment of the people on both sides. In other words, cultural integration in the same region should be the extension of collaboration and cooperation in terms of co-productions between broadcasters and film makers, as well as music studios, in different countries.

Over the last few years, several East Asian countries have shown a trend towards the cultural regionalization of media content to suit the cultural priorities of their audiences. Local producers in Korea, Japan, China, and Hong Kong have found their partners in other countries for the production of cultural goods and the distribution of co-produced products. Beyond producing and exporting their products to neighbouring countries, they have begun to co-produce films,
movies, and music, which is the foundation of cultural regionalization. East Asian producers have collaborated to form alliances that endorse the emergence of a regional market for culture, facilitate trans-national bypasses to connect individuals and communities, and provide cultural content to the imagery of a region.\textsuperscript{13}

More importantly, unlike political regionalization, defined as a state-led project designed to reorganize a particular regional space,\textsuperscript{14} local producers and people in East Asia have been major actors in cultural regionalization. As Schiller points out;\textsuperscript{15} transnationalized investment, product sourcing, and distribution patterns are being actively and extensively forged; and that culture industry programs are assembling most-desired audiences in new and increasingly comprehensive ways.

Indeed, it is crucial to understand the characteristics of cultural regionalization in East Asia as a form of state-society complex model. Not only the role of the nation-state is important in the process, but there were major non-state actors playing major roles in the historical process because cultural regionalization is not a top-down, state-driven phenomenon, but a bottom-up, market- and society-induced process.\textsuperscript{16} This article aims to contribute to this ongoing debate on cultural regionalization with the cases of co-production trends and strategies in East Asia.

**Emerging Co-Production Strategies in East Asia**

East Asian broadcasters and film producers have expanded co-productions, and they have circulated their products effectively in East Asia through their partner producers in those countries. Several network broadcasters and film producers in East Asia have provided essential services for local companies as new product sourcing, while distributing television dramas and films in their countries. In the 1980s and 1990s, a few documentaries were produced by the co-production system between countries in East Asia, for example, between KBS (Korea) and NHK (Japan). However, it is a very recent trend that broadcasters of Asian countries produce dramas together, and this co-production is on the rise since the successes of the first several dramas as evident in audience ratings and increased revenues from advertising.

There are several different dimensions of co-productions between broadcasters and film producers in East Asia. Local producers make television programs in other countries by using talent and actors in two or three countries, while the local broadcasters almost simultaneously and jointly share production costs to reduce risks. New investment from other countries has also been a new source of product sourcing, because these joint-products appear to be a real profit potential for the broadcasters. Several producers have collaborated in marketing in recent years, as well. Beyond sharing talent and capital, many network broadcasters have systematically adopted co-production strategies. In addition, there has been a joint-venture co-production, which is an integration of media industries and capital, although it is still in its infancy in East Asia. These developments overlap and are not mutually exclusive; therefore, co-production strategies using different levels of collaboration are made possible in a single cultural product.

To begin with, East Asian broadcasters have expanded their co-productions, in particular, in dramas since 2001. MBC (Korea) and TBS (Japan), Fuji TV (Japan) and MBC, CCTV (China) and KBS (Korea), and Jet Tone Film (Hong Kong) and SBS (Korea), have jumped into drama co-productions, as if competing with one another. The first prominent co-production drama in East Asia was made between Japan and Korea. In 1999, the Japanese TV network TBS proposed to KBS to co-produce a drama in the midst of the rapid penetration of Korean dramas in East Asia. However, MBC, another Korean network, and TBS got the first contract and co-produced *Friends*, a love story transcending their countries. After a long process of production, *Friends* aired in Japan first in 2002, and followed in Korea in the same year. The two broadcasters co-produced *Friends* as a symbol of cooperation between the two countries, aiming at the FIFA World Cup co-hosted by the two countries; and, it was relatively successful in terms of its viewing rate. Regardless
of some conflicts between the two broadcasters due to their styles and production environments in the process of programming, it recorded 15% and 17% viewing rates in Japan and Korea, respectively.17

The success of Friends in both countries has expedited co-productions in East Asia. MBC and Fuji TV in Japan co-produced the second drama between the two countries, Sonagi: Malice After the Rain in November 2002. Again, in most cases, the broadcasters invested the same amount of production costs and an equal number of actors and actresses while airing the dramas co-produced at the same time in both countries. However, because of different production costs between countries, the content of the contracts varied. For example, for the drama Sonagi, Fuji TV invested $2.8 million, while MBC spent only $400,000.18

The consecutive successes of co-produced dramas between Japan and Korea have developed co-productions in other countries, such as those between China and Korea, as well as between Japan and China. In 2004, KBS and CCTV in China co-produced a TV drama titled Beijing My Love—the 20-episode drama tells of the struggles in the lives and career of two young, trendy people from the two countries. The story was shot in many places that are unique to Beijing, including Fu Xing Road and Shi Cha Lake, as well as Jeju Island in Korea, and the beauty and dude cast line-up includes Korean actor Kim Jae Won, Han Chae Young and Chinese actress Sun Fei Fei.19

Co-productions in East Asia sometimes have crossed over several countries. Fuji TV in collaboration with companies in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Korea, produced and directed the popular star-search program, Asia Bagus (Asia is great) in the 1990s.20 In 2003, China, Japan, and Korea co-produced 101st Proposal, a remake of 101st Marriage Proposal of Fuji TV (1991), a Pan-Asia television series that weaves together the most dazzling TV stars and the biggest names in TV production from China, Japan and Korea. The famed Korean actress Choi Ji Woo, Taiwanese actor Suen Hing, and China’s Huang Zhi Wei worked as co-stars, and the drama was aired on CC TV 2 in China, Fuji TV 721 in Japan, and Home CGV in Korea, respectively.

The co-productions in drama have been indeed booming. In 2005, SBS Production, an independent drama production company in Korea, established a joint broadcast production with MTA in Indonesia,21 and MBC established a China branch in Shanghai to participate in the sitcom production with SMG.22 BB-TV in Thailand and DHB Media in Korea jointly co-produced a drama in Thailand, which was aired in April, 2006.23 DHB Media dispatched domestic production teams, including producers and writers, to Thailand to produce a drama using Thailand actors. SBS, the third-largest Korean network, also produced a new drama, Trees in Heaven, in Japan and aired it on both Fuji TV and SBS in 2006. SBS shot the entire episodes in Japan, partially casting Japanese actors and actresses. Funan TV in China and MBC also got the contract for a new miniserie, titled Good Morning Shanghai, in July 2006. As of October 2006, several TV dramas are also under co-production in Asia, including Maze and Chef of Love (Korea and China), and Scene of Coriander (Vietnam and Korea).24

Co-productions in films in East Asian countries are also prospering increasingly. Film co-productions in East Asia have had a relatively long history. Several producers in Asia had already co-produced films together before the twenty-first century; however, in the midst of the rapid growth of co-productions between broadcasters, the number of film co-productions is also rapidly on the increase. The combination of a well written screenplay, talented director and popular actors is the main reason for co-productions in East Asia.25 Japan, China, Hong Kong, and Korea have invested together for movies, and they share locations, actors, and contents, including Musa: The Warriors, a Korean-Chinese co-production shot in China. Taiwan and Japan produced Yi Yi together. Japanese producers have also shown their interest in cross-border cooperation with China, particularly Shanghai. In 2002 Toei in Japan and Shanghai Film and TV Group shot the action and adventure movie, T.R.Y., set in early-twentieth-century Shanghai, featuring Japanese star Yuji Oda and Chinese star Shao Bin.26

This is only the tip of the iceberg. Seven Swords, the co-production movie among Hong Kong, China, and Korea in 2005, was made in three languages, including Cantonese, Mandarin, and Korean. The action movie by Tsui Hark, in which
seven warriors come together to protect a village from a diabolical general in seventeenth-century China, was nominated as the opening film for the 2005 Venice Film Festival. *The Promise*, made by Chen Kaige with a Korean actor Dong-Kun Jang as well as a well-known Japanese actor, Hiroyuki Sanada, was also nominated for the Golden Globe award in 2006. This action and adventure film, also known as *Wu Ji*, is the most expensive film in Chinese history, with a budget of $35 million.\(^7\)

In addition, China, Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong co-produced a fusion movie, *Battle of Wits*, in 2006, through co-investment of $16 million. The four film producers in these countries divided the production costs evenly. This movie was made by a Hong Kong director with two co-stars from China and Korea; however, the original script came from Japan. *Daisy*, filmed by Korea I Production, was also a fusion-style Asian movie. I Production put together a Hong Kong director, a Japanese music director, and Korean actors. In 2006, Taiwan's Chang-Hong Channel Film & Video Co. and China’s Shanghai Film Group also announced its co-production of new film, titled *Slam Dunk*. The $10 million project started shooting in May 2006, with a release planned in time for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.\(^8\)

There are other significant resources for co-production. Most of all, film festivals and international film agencies have become major resources for co-productions. Film co-productions have been highlighted in many countries since the launch of the Asian Film Industry Network (AFIN) in 2005. Several film organizations in Asia, including the Korean Film Council, UniJapan, the Federation of National Film Association of Thailand and Vietnam Media together founded the AFIN to engage in various cooperative ventures and exchanges, as well as in varied joint overseas promotion activities.\(^9\) Since the China Film Promotion International and the Singapore Film Commission also took part in the official ceremony of the launch of the agency as observers, it is fair to say that East Asian countries greatly expanded their cooperation to share and exchange information, manpower, and finance for films while...
THE BIRTH OF EAST ASIA

promoting the sales of films in the region. Through the AFIN, Japanese production companies, Toho, Kadokawa, and Nippon TV, and the Korean media company, CJ Entertainment, also co-produced a horror movie titled One Missed Call: Final in 2006. This movie was directed by Manabu Asou, a Japanese director; however, it cast actors from both Japan and Korea, and was shot mainly in Korea.

Film festivals and forums have also played a significant role in the process of co-production of films. In 2006, for example, the Hong Kong-Asia Film Financing Forum (HAF) selected 25 projects to be presented at the co-production maker held in March at the same year. HAF’s goal was to bring together filmmakers and financiers to encourage co-productions and co-ventures. The co-production market expected to attract five hundred film insiders, ranging from financiers, bankers, and producers, to buyers, film funding groups and distribution companies. In 2005, HAF successfully finished seven co-production projects, including three which were in production as of January 2006. From TV dramas to films, East Asian producers have experienced a huge scale of co-productions, appealing not only to local and national audiences, but also to regional viewers.

Finally, several projects teaming up companies of the two countries are in the pipeline, and even Amuse Pictures of Japan has opened a Korean subsidy to handle its slate of Korean pictures. Sony Pictures Television International (SPTI) of Japan established its co-production joint venture with Hun Long Film Digital Production, a unit of China Film Group (CFG), in 2004. CFG will hold a 51 percent interest in the joint venture, and it will focus on producing high-definition TV dramas and digital films, while looking for distribution opportunities in international markets. Hong Kong’s e-Sun Holdings and Singapore’s MediaCorp also packed in a $28.6 million joint venture in a giant step towards achieving leadership in Pan-American film in 2001. e-Sun Holdings, one of Hong Kong’s leading multimedia companies, planned to invest 50 percent in a new production company. From the change of talents and actors to joint ventures, collaboration for co-productions is on the rise in East Asia.

Contributing Factors for Cultural Co-Productions in Asia

There are several dimensions to the rise in co-productions in East Asia: diverse product sourcing, economic and technological exchange, change in media policies, and the cultural proximity of East Asia are just a few. As a reflection of this complexity, co-productions utilize production sites and creative labour from one another, lessen the financial burden, and increase the products’ appeal in the regional market. Through co-production, local film companies and broadcasters can receive funding and support for the distribution of their programs in other countries, while learning about the advanced technologies of their counterparts. East Asian producers also can develop better programs than before, thanks to the cooperation amongst them.

Historically, co-production practices in the cultural sector, in particular, filmmaking, developed as a solution to the impossibility of securing large budgets for films made in smaller countries. Pooling of financial resources is undoubtedly the major reason for the large number of co-productions that many countries, including the Eastern European countries after the Berlin Wall, came to be involved with in the 1990s. Increasingly, producers are unable to raise the funds necessary for a world-class production from the domestic market. However, an international joint venture generates this level of funding through the financial contribution from a foreign partner.

As in the case of Battle of Wits, which was produced by four countries, the most significant reason for co-production has been commercial profits. The production cost of $16 million for the program was one of the largest in East Asia; therefore, film companies wanted to reduce the risk by dividing the cost evenly while expanding expected profits by distributing the film in the East at the same time. As Hoskins points out, they needed co-production because local producers were unable to raise the funds necessary for a world-class production from the domestic market in order to compete effectively with the global majors.

As another form of financial pooling, for local producers, foreign stars can attract audiences and financing from abroad. Increasing the exchange
of actors and actresses is certainly a good strategy to appeal to regional audiences, from a financial perspective. For Jan Dara, the first Hong Kong-Thailand co-production movie, screened in 2001, it was the creative casting choice that made the film Pan-Asian. The Hong-Kong based film production company, Applause Pictures, convinced the Thai director to use a movie star from Hong Kong, Christy Chung, because of its possible contribution to the international sale of the film. Applause Pictures believed that the film received ten times more attention than it would have without Chung, because people in Asia are quite unfamiliar with the Thai language, but might be familiar with the Chinese language, although it is not guaranteed. In addition, talent can be found cheaply in places in other parts of East Asia. For example, as of 2001, a director of photography charges $5,000 for two months' work in China and Thailand, fifteen times less than the going rate in Hong Kong. Indeed, the co-production strategies among East Asian broadcasters and film studios have been a new source of product sourcing, because these joint-products appear to have significant profit potential for these cultural industries.

Co-productions also allow companies to keep the costs of sales and transactions low, in that the co-produced programs sell productions to one another and thus do not have to go through bidding procedures and can have smaller sales and accounting departments. In other words, low production costs in cheap places provide the right incentives to relocate the production of the movies and TV programs. This enables them to absorb the costs involved in introducing new products, which smaller firms cannot do, and therefore to compete more effectively in the emerging global market.

In addition, co-productions also permit market control in the sense that a corporation, which owns its own production companies and movie theatres or television networks, is guaranteed simultaneously a source of supply for its outlets and the exhibition/broadcast of the output it produces. As in the case of the joint-venture between SPTI in Japan and CFG in China, co-productions lead to the consolidation of corporate control over the market from the moment of the product's conception to its consumption. Many broadcasters and film firms are seeking synergy effects through collaboration or cultural convergence. Access to a partner's market is likely to occur, because the foreign partner is likely to have better knowledge regarding the distribution process in his/her domestic market and better connections to key players.

Of course, pooling of financial resources is not the only major factor. The reasons are political as well as economic. The recent boom of co-productions in East Asia could be understood within the overall regional politics rooted in Asian countries. Most of all, co-productions are useful means to resolve program quotas in several countries. As is well known, terrestrial television networks are usually under governmental control and bound by strict restrictions regarding television programs. Considering the social and cultural impact of broadcasting services, various regulations have been imposed on content aspects. The stated aims of content regulations are generally related to culture and program standards. Content regulation has also been used to support the development of national programs and to place limitations on the use of foreign programs. Many countries around the world, therefore, impose a quota requirement for domestic programs on broadcasting services.

However, the changing policies of each government in the broadcasting sector to a more deregulatory mood have played a key role in spreading foreign programs in East Asia. As in many parts of the world, several Asian countries have program quotas in order to support the national broadcasting system and to maintain cultural identity. Due to the quota system, it is difficult to penetrate the local market; however, co-production programs are considered domestic programs in most countries. In Asia, Vietnam TV must air at least 40 percent of domestic programs in its national broadcasting; however, the country considers co-productions as domestic programs. Vietnamese broadcasters use co-productions to resolve the quota issue while learning production technique and saving production costs through co-productions with other Asian countries. In Korea, films jointly produced by Korea and Japan also automatically have qualified for local screening since the late 1990s. Where quotas are in effect, a treaty co-production enables the project to qualify as a domestic product. As La Peikang, proxy
of China Film Co-production Corp., said, “One of the benefits is that the co-production can be released in China as a domestic film, so it doesn’t have to be restricted by the quota system.”

Moreover, it is essential to understand that co-productions have been made possible because several East Asian countries have lifted the ban against other countries, particularly Japan. Due to its historical legacy of Japanese imperialism in the early twentieth century, Taiwan, Korea, and China had not allowed Japanese cultural products until the 1990s. With a few exceptions, there was no ground to co-produce TV programs, films, and music in the region. However, these countries have changed their cultural policies. The Taiwanese government lifted the ban against Japanese television programs at the end of 1993, and Korea followed in the middle of the global deregulation trend. These new cultural policies in the 1990s became turning points of cultural flows in the region as a form of export and import of cultural products, and in recent years, as a form of co-production. The changing cultural policy made East Asian broadcasters collaborate to produce cultural goods on different levels.

Finally, cultural factors play a key role in co-production strategies in East Asia. Cultural elements emerge as factors of comparative advantage in building up the Asian markets for audiovisual products. There are emerging domestic media companies in various parts of the world, in particular, for the same region or for the same ethnicity, due in large part to similar language and similar cultural backgrounds, such as companies in Mexico, Brazil, and Hong Kong. Media scholars as well as local distributors in East Asia commonly claim that the most important factor behind the popularity of Japanese and Korean cultural products in China and Taiwan since the early 1990s has been the similarity of these countries’ cultures.

As for cultural co-productions in East Asia, it is essential to understand that they are on the rise in the midst of the Korean Wave symbolizing the rapid penetration of Korean cultural products into Asia over the past several years, as well as a well known Japanese cultural penetration since the 1980s. The Korean Wave has in particular contributed to change the degree of collaboration among East Asian producers. Long accustomed to its status as East Asia’s foremost and somewhat insular movie nation with by far the biggest market at its disposal, Japan was not interested in co-productions in the film sector with other parts of the region. The situation has changed with the Korean Wave. Domestic films and Korean audiovisual products such as television programs and music have gained popularity as a cultural commodity in several parts of Asia. Korean pop idols are as successful in Japan as at home, and some Korean films, such as Shiri and JSA, have been major box office successes in Japan. Japan has shown its interest in film co-production with Korea since then. Co-productions with Korea’s booming film industry have now almost become routine for many Japanese film producers.

Countries in East Asia are ready to collaborate and integrate with other parts of the region because they have developed their own cultural characteristics differentiating them from others. Without first establishing their own unique cultural identity, they couldn’t easily be partners with other countries. Of course, this doesn’t mean the accomplishment of cultural regionalization in content. Although East Asia has shown its unique co-production strategies toward cultural regionalization, the complexities and ambivalence of lives in East Asia have been hurdles to integration of the content of co-produced cultural products. The next section therefore discusses the way in which East Asian cultural producers have developed cultural proximity as part of the integration of content, and whether their strategies have successfully attracted regional audiences.

Narrative Strategies of Co-Produced Dramas: Emerging Conventions and Dilemmas

Making Co-Produced Dramas

The production of cultural products, in general, is always accompanied by financial risks and the considerable uncertainties of a successful reception. Thus, producers and directors tend to make every effort to reduce these risks and uncertainties in production procedures, and consciously and unconsciously depend upon conventions. These conventions include reproducing familiar characters
and plots, installing popular stars and producers, relying upon well-known formats, genres, and cultural codes, and so on.\(^{34}\)

Although internationally co-produced dramas, which are usually promoted for market expansion, can use various resources, they face challenges from their expanded scale beyond national boundaries. To please larger-scale audiences and obtain popularity, these dramas try to use narratives that can be shared internationally. At the same time, they try to remain sensitive to their participants’ distinctive cultural resources, which help draw the audience’s attention. Compromising cultural “odor” and cultural “odorlessness,” in Iwabuchi’s terms,\(^ {35}\) is a great challenge for producers and directors who participate in international co-productions.

To cater to Asian tastes and, furthermore, to global ones, East Asian co-producers have searched for “narrative transparency,” to use Olson’s term,\(^ {56}\) to serve the capitalist logic of the market and to avoid cultural discounting. That is, they have looked for narratives that are universal enough to elicit transnational appeal. To compete with local as well as global cultural products, these narratives should have their own attractions and at the same time, allow comfortable, pleasant viewing positions for Asian viewers from different cultural backgrounds and historical specificities.

To understand how co-production projects driven by a great expectation for a pan-Asian market have materialized and how their end products have attempted to attract transnational audiences, this study analyzes two cases, *Friends* and *The Promise*. As mentioned, *Friends* is a television mini-series co-produced by Korean and Japanese broadcasters, and *The Promise* is a film made with a multi-national cast. Through each case’s narrative strategies, with a focus on theme, characterization, plots, and generic forms, this study takes a look at the characteristics of co-produced television and film dramas in the region.

**Romancing the Other: *Friends* (2002)**

*Friends* is a four-part television mini-series featuring the Korean star, Won Bin, and the Japanese idol, Kyoko Fukada. It tells a contemporary romantic story in which the Japanese heroine Tomoko (Kyoko) and the Korean hero Jihoon (Won) overcome all misunderstandings and difficulties and, finally, carry forward their “true love” across national borders. While Tomoko is a heroine who begins to live an active life after she meets Jihoon, he is a manly but sensitive hero who realizes his dream of becoming a film director as he falls in love with her. To set up its dramatic conflict, *Friends* employs a double love triangle: the Japanese heroine and the Korean hero are loved by a Japanese man and a Korean girl, respectively. The cultural barrier, the foremost element to trouble the heroine and hero, is often expressed in the form of love-triangles. These love-triangles generate misunderstandings and hinder the transnational love relationship between the Japanese heroine and the Korean hero. In the end, the heroine and hero are never distracted by their national counterparts, and the drama has a happy ending. It highlights youngsters’ pure love beyond national boundaries and cultural differences.

In characterization and plot structure, the drama intimately intertwines images of nationality and sexuality. While the Japanese heroine gets closer to a Korean man rather than a Japanese man, the Korean hero is attracted to the Japanese heroine’s feminine virtues. She is contrasted with the Korean girl, who is selfish, dominating, and sometimes immoral. The co-producers have employed the gendered characterization to appeal to the audiences in both Korea and Japan, especially Koreans who have collective memories as victims of Japanese imperialism. By designating a Japanese as the heroine, the drama tries to avoid any controversial image that can be associated with historically sensitive issues between the two countries; for example, the representation of a Japanese hero and Korean heroine would have brought up unpleasant historical memories of Korean “comfort women” during the Pacific War and the “kisaeng (courtesans) tour” during the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, as the drama foregrounds the lives of youngsters in the two countries and focuses on their unconditional love, it deliberately leaves out subject matters related to the older generation’s experiences. Thus, it provides a transnational love fantasy of the youngsters, which avoids evoking any possible controversies associated with historical bitterness.

*Friends* follows the conventions of the so-called trendy drama, which portrays the urban
THE BIRTH OF EAST ASIA

lives and loves of the young generation with stimulating audio-visual language. Since the late 1980s, the dramas geared to the cultural tastes of the youngsters have been produced first in Japan, and later in Korea. By putting the globalized consumer culture of the youngsters at the center of their attractions, trendy dramas have appealed to young audiences in many parts of Asia. Like many other trendy dramas, Friends represents the youngsters’ pure love and cultural appetite with style. In addition, it provides visual scenes in which its spatial settings frequently cross national boundaries. Tomoko and Jinhoon first meet in Hong Kong, where they are dislocated from their own nations’ territorial boundaries and put into a de-nationalized urban space. They often travel to their partner’s country in their pursuit of love. The aesthetically constructed imagery of these multi-national spaces often becomes the site of spectacles, and thus, the audiences can enjoy seeing each country’s landscape through the eyes of tourists.

The narrative framework set up by Friends has been reproduced in the following Korean-Japanese co-produced dramas: Sonagi: Malice After the Rain (November 2002) and Star’s Echo (2004). Although Sonagi takes a slightly different generic form (romantic thriller), they both convey a transnational romance between a Japanese heroine and a Korean hero. Along with the youngsters’ love story, the co-produced dramas employ cultural similarities and differences between two countries as their subject matters. They also insert scenes of local cities and landscapes, which are displayed as if to revive the sights of the tourist guide book, to add appeal to the audiences. Not only reproducing the gendered representation, but also adhering to the universal love-fantasy and the imagery with trendy audio-visual language, these co-produced dramas have stayed away from any controversies involving sensitive issues between Japan and Korea, and have been promoted to the broader Asian market, targeting young audiences.

Creating a “Transparent” Fantasy: The Promise (2005)

The Promise is a pan-Asian film directed by Chen Kaige, director of the acclaimed Farewell My Concubine (1993). With an internationally renowned production staff and multi-national cast, the film tries to deliver its mythological epic tale of fate and love. It tells the story of a love quadrangle among Quingcheng (Cecilia Cheung), Kunlun (Dong-Kun Jang), Guangming (Hiroyuki Sanada), and Wuhuan (Nicholas Tse). By portraying Quingcheng, the king’s consort, as the object of affection pursued by the three male lead roles, the film sets up a tragic love story in which no one can realize their love, as Quingchen has once accepted a deal from the goddess, Manshen, through which she can have lifelong comfort, wealth, and fame in return for the “small sacrifice” of losing everyone she loves. The story shows the misunderstanding, lies, obsession, fear, and betrayal among the four lovers, entrapped by the goddess Manshen’s prediction. However, it doesn’t remain a mere love story. While Quingchen and Guangming are trapped by the tragic destiny predicted by Manshen, and Wuhuan cannot get over his childhood trauma caused by Quingcheng’s betrayal, Kunlun challenges his life path as a slave who is always under his master’s control. By contrasting those who are caught by their own destiny with those who carve out a life through awareness of their own strengths, the film focuses on the Taoist theme of being the master of one’s fate. That is, it tells a philosophical story that portrays the transience of life and the freedom of self-enlightenment. Thus, Kunlun is not a romantic hero who gets through all his difficulties and finally takes Quingcheng in his arms. His ultimate role is to bring Quingcheng back to the time when she can have another chance — or to the place where the story began — rather than to consummate his love with her. As the theme of transcendental enlightenment overpowers the mundane love relations, the film’s love story loses its dramatic liveliness and tension, and falls into being a “flat” story covered by dazzling visuals.

While the film casts stars from different countries in East Asia, it assimilates them into the Chinese-speaking people of a “kingdom” in a mythic era, rather than assigning them roles that correspond to their national and cultural identities. As opposed to considering how it could portray these multi-national characters, it simply takes off their nationalities by placing them in a mythic world before history. Setting the story in a time when “gods and men lived side by side,” it consciously dodges issues of historical
authenticity or the constraints of the real world, as well as the cultural implications which would be carried by actresses and actors. Moreover, it is hard to locate the exact sources of the settings and props; they resemble those from China, Japan, and other cultural sources — even medieval, chivalric Europe. By hybridizing and exaggerating various material styles from Asia, the film provides a world of “simulacra,” in Baudrillard’s term, filled with signifiers that have some vague oriental quality. With its ahistorical and stateless spectacles, the film tries to appeal to pan-Asian audiences.

Although it choreographs some swordplay, following the genre of martial art films, the film’s main interest is in providing spectacles of fantasy. Rather than staging the swordplay and its related stories at its center, it merely appropriates the generic convention of martial art films, which creates spectacles through glittering movements of swords. It is not interested in the traditional themes of patriotism, heroism, or hierarchy of artistry, either. Rather than delineating the mental world of swordplay, it emphasizes one’s will to change destiny through self-enlightenment. This is not an offensive will to exercise justice or to pursue a sense of selfhood, but a defensive one to resist one’s predestined fate.

With The Promise, Chen Kaige, one of the leading members of the “Fifth Generation” of mainland Chinese filmmakers, shifts his filmic interest to the martial arts genre. In gaining strong support from multinational investors as well as the government, he joins the new trend of making martial arts films, which was started by the critical and worldwide box-office success of Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000). Since the film’s success in the West, projects that transform the martial arts genre into a global or pan-Asian cultural product have been continued. Zhang Yimou’s Hero (2002) and House of Flying Daggers (2004), He Ping’s Warriors of Heaven and Earth (2003), Tsui Hark’s Seven Swords (2005), Jackie Chan’s The Myth (2005), and Jacob Cheung’s Battle of Wits (2006) are examples. Chen Kaige’s The Promise also exemplifies the trend of a large-scale production which appropriates a martial art genre to appeal to pan-Asian and global audiences. By placing multi-national stars in the aesthetic space of a mythic world, it tries to provide eye-catching spectacles and a “transparent” narrative accessible to pan-Asian audiences. As it creates a decontextualized and ahistorical fantasy which depends on computer-generated effects, visual spectacles, and multi-national stars, it obscures any indicator of cultural particularity and historical specificity. Its excessive styles and overt emphasis on fantasy sacrifice in-depth characterization and dramatic probability.

Limits of Transnational Imaginations

The co-produced dramas have tried to create “image spaces” that transcend traditional cultural and national boundaries. Friends depicts a transnational romance between a Japanese heroine and a Korean hero, while The Promise provides a mythic fantasy where everyone struggles with his or her own destiny. Through a decontextualized love fantasy and an ahistorical and stateless epic fantasy, they deliver universal subject matters that stay away from any sensitive issues in the real world. They reconfigure the conventions of popular drama genres, such as “trendy” dramas and martial art films, with their multi-national casting and larger-scale spectacles. Especially by representing
Throughout East Asia, multidirectional popular culture confluences have been rapidly penetrating markets and encompassing local consumers. Based on the increasing collaboration among regional producers, a few characteristics of East Asia’s cultural regionalization can be discerned. Most of all, cultural regionalization in East Asia is a multidimensional process of an emerging region. The financial factor is one of the most significant aspects leading to the cooperation and integration of East Asia. However, the pooling of financial resources parallels political and cultural factors. Alongside the significance of economic and political factors, cultural values are indeed crucial in determining the regionalization trend, particularly in East Asia, as evident from the unique history of the region. As Joseph Straubhaar points out, for understanding the regionalization of television programs across multi-country markets, several factors, such as geography, language and culture, must be considered in the study of cultural globalization and/or regionalization.

Cultural regionalization in East Asia has been unique because of its historical and interdisciplinary perspectives. Several East Asian countries have shown strong antagonism towards one another’s cultural products, particularly to Japanese cultural products, over the last several decades, mainly due to their experience of Japan’s colonialism and military occupation. However, they have finally begun to overcome this historical hurdle. Cultural integration and cultural disintegration processes which take place not only on an inter-state level but processes which transcend the state-society unit and can therefore be held to occur on a trans-national or trans-societal level.

Cultural regionalization in East Asia has been unique because of its historical and interdisciplinary perspectives. Several East Asian countries have shown strong antagonism towards one another’s cultural products, particularly to Japanese cultural products, over the last several decades, mainly due to their experience of Japan’s colonialism and military occupation. However, they have finally begun to overcome this historical hurdle. Cultural integration and cultural disintegration processes which take place not only on an inter-state level but processes which transcend the state-society unit and can therefore be held to occur on a trans-national or trans-societal level.

Conclusion and Discussion

The first part of the twenty-first century has witnessed a number of border crossings in all spheres of cultural co-production in East Asia. Many attempts at collaboration have taken place, and regional collaborations between media companies and promoters have created alliances that have had a strong impact on the East Asian regional market. The number of dramas and films whose nationality is difficult to determine is growing, and once again, this is particularly evident if one looks at co-productions in East Asia. A variety of collaborative artistic projects have brought together previously isolated spheres. The filmmaking and TV programming processes are no longer confined within national borders, and national particularities determine cultural consumption even less.

42  FALL 2007
interests, sometimes combined with state-affiliated broadcasting and film services, have been both substantial and significant in East Asia since the early 1990s. Globalization and regionalization are complementary processes, given regions are important sites where the contending forces of global integration and local autonomy converge.

To conclude, co-productions are cumulatively creating conceptual spaces for the birth of East Asia. Regardless of some difficulties in integrating the content of co-products programs to appeal to East Asian audiences overall, co-production in East Asia is now on the rise; and consequently, cultural regionalization, which emphasizes collaboration and integration between countries in East Asia, is on the increase. The East Asian region is attempting to create regional cultural commonalities, as in Latin America and Europe, although it needs more time to create transnationally acceptable narratives, which will develop the construction of a shared Asian consciousness.

Dal Yong Jin is Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University, Canada. He finished his Ph.D. degree from the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign in 2004. His major research and teaching interests are globalization and Asian Media, the political economy of culture and media, and socio-cultural impacts of information technologies. He is the author of a book entitled Hands On/Hands Off: The Korean State and the Market Liberalization of the Communication Industry (forthcoming), and his recent work has appeared in several scholarly journals, including Media, Culture and Society, Telecommunications Policy, Television and New Media, and Information, Communication & Society.

Dong-Hoo Lee is Associate Professor in the Department of Mass Communication at University of Incheon in Korea. She received her doctorate from the department of culture and communication at New York University. She has published articles on transnational program adaptation and new media culture in Korea. Her research interests include media flow in the age of globalization, the cultural consequences of new communication technology, and medium theory.

Notes

2. Ibid., 56
THE BIRTH OF EAST ASIA

35. Tae Jung Kim, 2005.
44. Colin Hoskins, Stuart McFadyen and Adam Finn, 1999, 127-129.
46. For example, Canada has established more than 40 international co-production treaties since 1983, and such co-production treaties, while arranging for tax and financing incentives, also allow international productions to be considered local programming. This is significant in markets such as Canada and France, where local production quotas are a factor in obtaining airtime (Shawn Shimpach, “The Immortal Cosmopolitan: The International Co-production and Global Circulation of Highlander: the Series,” Cultural Studies 19. 3 (2005): 346-347.
63. Leo Ching, 2000, 244.