Book Review: Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, Eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*  
Hong Kong University Press, 2008

*East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* is, above all, significant as the first English-written book that deals with the recent global dissemination and popularity of South Korean pop culture, a phenomenon which is commonly referred to as the “Korean Wave” or Hallyu. Although the term “Korean Wave,” coined by Chinese mass media in the late 1990s, includes diverse cultural products, such as Korean cinema, television shows, and music, this anthology places Korean television dramas and the stardom phenomenon resulted from the popularity of these dramas at the center of its analysis of the consumption and circulation of Korean pop culture across Asia. As the editors point out, this anthology, whose contributors consist of scholars from Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, aims to create an academic niche in the study of popular cultural flow, suggesting it should not be limited to U.S.-centered cultural globalization. Hence the collection of essays explores the various modes of production and reception of Korean television in East Asia by situating the popularity of Korean TV dramas among Asian viewers within transnational and post/colonial discourses.

The essays in this anthology focus primarily on the arena of consumption—that is, on audience studies rather than text-oriented textual analysis. For this reason, many of the essays endeavor to analyze the reception of the most successful TV dramas, such as *Winter Sonata* (Gyeoul Yeonga, 2002) and *Jewel in the Palace* (Dae Jang Geum, 2003), which gained huge popularity and thus signaled the emergence of the Korean Wave. The authors ask the following questions in their attempts to follow the transnational success of these dramas; why does the Korean Wave matter? And what makes the Korean Wave uniquely different from the popularity of American or Japanese popular culture in East Asia? Most notably, some of the essays try to answer these questions by illuminating the region’s still-contested modern history (colonial pasts, rapid economic growth, and abrupt social changes ongoing in East Asian countries, for example) and thus explaining the reception of Korean dramas in conjunction to traumatic histories and memories. For instance, through the analysis of the “foreignness” of imported TV dramas among different audiences in Korea,
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China, Singapore, Vietnam, and Japan, Chua Beng Huat argues that for Japanese, the rest of East Asia represents “Japan’s past,” evoking nostalgia, “while the rest of East Asia has a tendency to read Japanese pop culture as representations of an ‘imaginable’ and ‘desired’ future” (89). Koichi Iwabuchi also suggests that nostalgia is “a key feature” in the reception of East Asian pop culture among Japanese viewers. However, he also notes that this sense of nostalgia when consuming Korean dramas “has more to do with personal sentiments and memories” and “this leads to more self-reflective post-text activities,” such as learning about Korean culture and even studying Japanese colonialism (244). Along lines similar to Iwabuchi’s argument, Yoshitaka Mori highlights the historical and political effects of Korean TV consumption on Japanese viewers. In examining the popularity of Winter Sonata, which was so popular among middle-aged Japanese women that it generated “Winter Sonata” theme tours to South Korea, Mori asserts that Japanese housewives’ watching Korean dramas at home may not be “political” in the narrow sense of the term. However, Mori points out, the reception of Korean drama significantly changed the way how those Japanese women spoke about Korea, offering an alternative discourse beyond “the two official discourses, liberal or nationalist,” to “re-construct” the Korea-Japan relationship in different ways (140). Yet, when reading some of these essays as a member of a generation who grew up watching numerous Korean dramas, I could not help but keep asking which Korean drama(s) the authors meant by “Korean drama.” For example, Angel Lin and Ávin Tong argue that Korean dramas have more appeal to audiences in Hong Kong and Singapore than Japanese and Western dramas because Korean dramas place “greater emphasis on the portrayal of familial relationships, family values and sexual morality” (105). This statement problematically disregards the diversities and tensions within Korean TV dramas and conforms to the image of Korean dramas (and Korean culture in general) as homogeneous and integrated.

As the concepts of transnationalism and globalization became predominant in academia, the traditional concepts of nation and national identity have been further challenged in media studies, raising the question, among others, of exactly what constitutes national cinema or national culture. In this regard, it is worth noting that the anthology does not approach the Korean Wave as a Korea-specific (or Korea-oriented) cultural phenomenon. As Keehyeung Lee aptly points out, the Korean Wave is “a highly complex and multilayered formation that is composed of real, imagined, and hybrid cultural practices, a diverse range of lived experiences, and sets of powerful discourses which exist at national, translocal, and transnational levels” (175). By crossing the disciplinary boundaries and by interrogating the multifaceted receptions of Korean TV dramas across different nations and regions, the contributing authors collectively suggest that the transnational framework that moves beyond the limits of national borders is not only necessary but essential, particularly when audiences are engaged. Through the analysis of the regional circulation of Korean television within the East Asian-specific sociopolitical and historical contexts, East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave successfully achieves its goal of providing an alternative theoretical discourse to U.S.-centered transnational cultural studies.

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