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# Genre in Asian Film and Television: New Approaches

Edited by Felicia Chan, Angelina Karpovich and Xin Zhang, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011

Reviewed by Andrew Dorman

Given the deluge of material currently available on the subject of Asian cinema, the arrival of any new publication in the field of Asian media studies is invariably greeted with questions of whether there is a need for yet another edited volume. Not only have Asian cinema studies been plentiful in recent years, there have also been numerous efforts to rethink the concept of Asian cinema in terms of modern globalisation and the transnational. *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide* (ed. Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham, 2006), *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film* (Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-Fai, 2008) and *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (ed. Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, 2009) have all made excellent contributions to the scholarly recontextualisation of Asian cinema, while *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic* (ed. Koichi Iwabuchi, Stephen Muecke and Many Thomas, 2004) has negotiated the interdisciplinary links between film and television in relation to globally-circulated Asian media.

*Genre in Asian Film and Television* shows that there is still a need for this kind of study by demonstrating ways in which multiple Asian cinemas can be discussed collectively without losing sight of cultural specificity. However, this study tends to be overly broad in its scope, criss-crossing between an array of subjects including Japanese animation, televised theatre in Bali, Tamil cinema, the Hindi horror films of the Ramsay brothers and the work of Japanese director Seijun Suzuki to name but a few of the featured case studies.

The volume demonstrates an awareness of the complexities engendered in the study of such a broad and loosely-defined category as Asian film. In their introduction, Felicia Chan and Angelina Karpovich outline ways in which Asian film and television can be discussed collectively in terms of genre and specifically how genre operates under different historical, political and cultural conditions. (5) The book is structured into three sections - non-fiction genres, mainstream genres and genre and cross-cultural representation. This last section is particularly strong within the study and features a key contribution - 'East Asian Pop Culture' - by Chua Beng Huat, a chapter that addresses cross-cultural interactions of

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production, representation and reception outlined by Chan and Karpovich. Chua convincingly argues for the existence of a pan-East Asian pop culture industry that has emerged in light of American mass-entertainment hegemony. Taking into account flows of television dramas and to some extent film and music, Chua identifies a criss-cross of regionally-produced pop culture that has constituted a 'routine consumer culture' across East Asia:

Side by side with American pop culture, in every major urban centre in East Asia...there are dense flows of pop culture products from same centres into one another, although the directions and volumes of flows vary unevenly amongst them. (224)

Yet while Chua underlines the establishment of a pan-East Asian pop culture based around a collective consumerism, he also maintains the central position of 'foreignness' and thus cultural difference in pop culture consumption, whether discussing Korean television dramas popular in Japan or political opposition in China targeted towards the popular Taiwanese singer Chang Hui Mei.

Chua also looks at how the foreign is both 'domesticized' in the form of dubbing and 'preserved' as a culturally-distant spectacle. However, despite this, the transnational circulation of television seems to generate a collective 'we-feeling' among spectators, a level of audience identification based on 'being human' which Chua suggests results in a more regionalised identity:

A less inclusive mode of identification than 'humans/ anyone' takes the form of 'I' identity with the character because we are 'Asians', which ideologically also says 'we are not like non-Asians'. This generates and affirms a sense of 'Asian-ness', despite cultural differences between the production and consumption locations, and may be a manifestation of what is conceptualized as 'cultural proximity'. (233)

It is on this basis, Chua argues, that a desire for a pan-Asian identity is based through the consumption of popular culture products. (233)

Cobus van Staden looks closer into the appeal of the 'foreign' in his analysis of the anime series *Arupusu no Shoujo Haiji/ Heidi, a Girl of the Alps* (Isao Takahara, 1974, Jap) and the Japanese representation of Europe through animation. Viewing anime as a globalised cultural phenomenon, van Staden emphasises the role of exoticism in global, cross-cultural reception, with Europe providing a 'safe exoticism' for a Japanese spectatorship, (180) as well as audiences in other national contexts. Both Chua and van Staden situate transcultural flows of production and reception within wider continental and global contexts while other

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contributors provide more nationally-focused investigations of film and television genres.

For example, Valentina Vitali focuses on Ramsay brothers' horror films in order to question what socio-cultural factors made these films possible in India in the 1980s. Vitali suggests that these films can be read as historical documents linked to the collapse of the Congress Party and the idea of a more secularised Indian society and the resultant resurgence of religious discourses. In the chapter 'Everything Masala? Genres in Tamil Cinema', Michael Christopher also takes a more nationally-focused approach, arguing that despite some aesthetic similarities with the cinemas of south India, Bollywood cinema made for Hindi-speaking audiences is not crucial to cinemas in southern Indian cinemas. (101) In these chapters a close analysis of Indian horror and martial arts genre conventions highlights both a collective national and political experience and regional disparities within India.

Despite the strengths of the textual and historical analysis throughout *Genre in Asian Film and Television*, particularly in the chapters by Vitali and Christopher, the overall study is perhaps too broad in its scope and vague in some of its aims and objectives. At times it is difficult to see how certain sections, such as those by Chua and van Staden, fit alongside more specific national cinema studies included in the text. Having said this, Chan, Karpovich and Zhang have compiled a collection of intriguing and at times original studies that not only provide new approaches to Asian media and the consumption of it, but also suggests ways in which national and genre cinemas can be reconsidered beyond the standard positioning of Asia vis-à-vis the West.