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Introduction: Rethinking Asian Media and Film

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Abstract
This Introduction pulls together the main themes of the papers in this special issue, which covers major regions in Asia from Japan, Korea and China to Indonesia, India and Iran. The papers are all critical of the implications of imposing Eurocentric and metropolitan frameworks on the diverse assemblages of practices of producing, distributing and engaging with Asian media and film. Bringing a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds to bear, the contributors question existing approaches and concepts, reconsider what should count as objects of study and propose new theoretical approaches appropriate to the study of such large and rapidly changing industries. What emerges, however, is the extent to which issues of knowledge and power permeate not just the debates, but also the critiques. Drawing upon the papers, the Introduction concludes by suggesting the possibilities of a more rigorous and sustained analysis in terms of practice.

Keywords
Asian media, Asian film, critical approaches, Eurocentrism, practice

Saying something useful, let alone original, about so protean a topic as Asian media and film in a slim special issue might seem foolhardy. Were the aim to add to the existing body of empirical knowledge this would be so. That is not our purpose here. The contributors set out to be at once critical and imaginative. Rejecting the common-sense, capitalist image of knowledge as (ac)cumulative, our concern is to question the presuppositions that underpin current approaches and to explore creative ways of addressing what we consider important and under-studied issues in the parts of Asia that we know best. We wish not to enunciate, but to question and to encourage heterodoxy in thinking about media and film in different parts of Asia and beyond.

This collection makes no attempt at systematic coverage of Asian media or film, a goal we consider misconceived. The practices around producing, distributing, using and commenting of media and film in each country are sufficiently diverse, labile and partly unknowable that we might turn the issue around and ask who produces such summative knowledge, for what purposes and for whom? Rather than fit facts to a predetermined framework, we start

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by examining trends particular to different societies or regions. Such an interrogation leads us to question the adequacy of conventional approaches: what Kuhn called "normal science" (1970). Granted the industrial, geo-political and intellectual importance of Japan and Korea, the Chinese-speaking world, India and, perhaps less acknowledged Indonesia and Iran, the regions and so the authors largely chose themselves. Not least, each promised to raise quite different kinds of issues — which they did. The results are complex, rich and surprising.[1] As the overriding rationale was to elaborate new approaches to Asian media or film, given limits of space, we have of necessity been brief in our engagement with the existing literature.

Have we not made the task unnecessarily difficult by addressing both media and film? After all, they are often studied in different departments or even faculties. The separation rests on questionable assumptions such as that art film, being for élites, calls for literary and aesthetic inquiry; whereas commercial film and television, being mere entertainment, is better suited for the study of mass society (see Inden, this collection). The distinction tells us more about those asserting the difference than about the subject matter, especially with the convergence of platforms and industries in a digital era. Setting aside disciplinary and institutional divisions enables the sometimes sophisticated theoretical and philosophical approaches of film studies to interrogate media materials in fresh ways. Media studies brings complementary expertise in analysing the industrial and social contexts of production, reception and use. The papers use an intimate understanding of the societies under examination to question and to play different bodies of theory against one another. What emerges is how existing approaches act as straightjackets and leave much of interest beyond inquiry. The uncomfortable implication is that conventional training in a single discipline may be ill-suited to address such complex subject matter intelligently or imaginatively. It is worth noting that the authors all have singular linguistic and regional expertise, and write about media and film studies from diverse backgrounds. Berry comes from Chinese Studies, then Film and Television Studies; Hobart from Social Anthropology and Anthropology of Media; Inden from History and South Asian Textual Studies; Iwabuchi worked for Nippon Television Corporation before specialising in Media and

[1] The original invitation was from Farid Alatas to edit a collection on trends in Asian media. At the risk of making matters even more difficult, I asked to include Asian film. Practically, it was impossible to arrange for the busy contributors to meet or exchange drafts; and to impose a template ran against the whole point of rethinking. So, the only guideline to the contributors was an invitation to bring their disciplinary expertise to extrapolate from their special areas what they considered striking issues theoretically and empirically that might have broader relevance to Asia and beyond.

Cultural Studies; Khiabany's background is Media and Communication Studies; and Sreberny's is History, Sociology and Psychodynamic Counselling.

All the papers are deeply critical of existing theoretical approaches as adequate to deal with current trends in their respective regions. Each proposes an alternative framework of inquiry. Iwabuchi rejects both nationalism and internationalism as banal models for media studies, but notes that ideas such as the nation have taken on a second life in Japan as a nodal point for articulating popular imaginings. Berry similarly dismisses not only the international, but also notions of system and structure, as insufficient to understand how film production in the Chinese-speaking world works transnationally, understood as a Deleuzian assemblage. Khiabany and Sreberny identify serious problems with the Eurocentrism of international media studies, including simplistic dichotomising such as The West *vs.* The Rest, or The Metropolitan *vs.* The Native. Inden discusses how existing approaches fail to come to grips with Indian commercial cinema. He shows how Indian practices of constituting, engaging with and evaluating film-as-spectacle make sense of many puzzles and raise new questions. Hobart argues that media and communication studies in Indonesia and elsewhere have to ignore much of what is important and interesting in order to maintain the semblance of viability. He suggests an alternative analysis of Indonesian television as performances comprising assemblages of practices.

The grounds for rejecting existing approaches are not doctrinaire, but because they are no longer fit for the purpose. Between them, the contributors consider the theories available to be manifestly inadequate. So, therefore, are the objects of study they postulate and the methods they advocate. Each author develops his or her own critique and considers how we might rethink what is at issue. In so doing, they draw on current debates from internationalising or de-Westernising media and film studies to the relevance of concepts such as culture, discourse and practice.

One starting point is Curran and Park's *Dewesternizing Media Studies* (2000), which highlighted how pivotal Eurocentric frameworks are in communication studies. Unfortunately "this approach reifies a Eurocentric understanding of nation and its ideological assumptions of coherence of language, cultural tradition, history, political system and so on" (McMillin, 2007: 10). McMillin set out an alternative using post-colonial discourse, which "represents a framework for studying the continuing ideological effects of colonialism" (2007: 13). It did so by bringing a range of contemporary concepts to bear, such as gender roles, ritual — for example, rituals of media consumption — by which she claimed post-colonial theory "subverts the Eurocentric hegemony in the field" (2007: 15). Granted its reliance on a singularly Euro-American academic

language and with little recognition of the cultural variability of the key concepts from ritual to consumption, quite how it does so is not clear. The problem is that "this analytic category and disciplinary frame is itself the outcome of Western theorisation is frequently overlooked, so that even in the attempt to escape the 'West', it is continually reinscribed in a hegemonic manner. Indeed, we might argue that there *is* no escape, no 'outside' in which to find refuge" (Khiabany and Sreberny). That problem is one that the contributors confront in different ways.

In *Asian media studies*, Erni and Chua noted that a general situation has existed in the field for over four decades, whereby Western methodologies and epistemologies have been largely accepted as a guiding light and "the local" was accepted as the recipient or the context of their glow. For a long time this was the *paradigmatic* predicament of Asian social-scientific research, since it was developed within a much broader historical and geopolitical framework of Third World international development and modernisation. Even today, many Asian media studies research communities, associations and their journals have persisted in conducting their research according to methods and problematics often originally articulated in Euro-American contexts (2005: 2; all emphases in the original unless otherwise indicated).

To redress such "Unthinking Eurocentrism" (Shohat and Stam, 1994), Erni and Chua turn to anthropology: "While audience research does not and cannot answer all questions about, the realities and politics of subjectivity, its ethnographic epistemological impulse comes closest to the heart of the matter" (2005: 4).

A similar epistemological impulse is at work here. A critical approach, exemplified by reflexive ethnography, requires relating metropolitan to local categories and usage, so raising the ineluctable problem of double discursivity. It involves recognising situated practice, which examined dispassionately rarely fits participants', let alone academics', models. These limits of social scientific knowledge are perhaps most cruelly revealed in studies of audiences. The large sums spent on surveying audiences disguise how thoroughly audiences need engineering to be made measurable, let alone thinkable. They are articulated: directly by being framed, edited and spoken for, indirectly in being recognised through and trained to use acceptable codes, and infantilised (Hartley, 1992). Producers' disclaimers notwithstanding, what people make of and do with what they watch and read remains elusive and partly unknowable (Ang, 1991; Nightingale, 1996).[2] In their absence, a core element of communication — the

[2] Techniques of interrogation, be they surveys, interviews or focus groups, only extract answers to pre-articulated questions in pre-established frameworks. There is also a difference between "what people are able to articulate … as opposed to what they understand and think

recipients or interlocutors — must be imagined to fit the frameworks. So, however welcome, such prosthetic use of ethnography cannot address two major epistemological concerns. How do you address practice, which contradicts neat models? And how do you represent other people's ways of thinking and acting without unnecessarily transforming them through the formidable universalising techniques developed by what Asad called "strong languages" such as English (1986)? How, without imposing your own presuppositions, can you write about something as inchoate as "Asian subjectivities"? Serious inquiry into how people from different societies, classes, gender ascriptions and so on talk about and evaluate themselves and others under different circumstances shows such generalisations to be not just facile or trivial, but inherently hegemonic.

Erni and Chua's primary concern, however, was with "what are the processes, phenomena, events, and discourses that suture 'media' and 'politics' together in such Asian contexts as Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, India, China? To what extent do various media practices reflect broader political situations and political contestations found in specific Asian locales?" (2005: 1). While still relevant, the present contributors treat power as more complex and pervasive than just institutional politics. For instance, the scale of East Asian cultural production makes "culture" more than an uncomplicated political or economic positivity (Iwabuchi, Berry). To Iwabuchi, "the globalisation of soft power, I would suggest, has given rise to what can be called brand nationalism, which pushes forward a different kind of manoeuver for the administration of culture, whose key concern is the promotion of the production and its international circulation of attractive media culture for the sake of national branding" (Iwabuchi). And when should we problematise national politics itself and treat what happens as mass-mediated performance (Hobart)?

Criticisms and Suggestions

What issues do the contributors consider particularly germane? Iwabuchi and Berry offer complementary critiques of "methodological nationalism", that is the assumption that nation states are, or should be, the primary units of analysis for Media and Film Studies. If they are not, Iwabuchi argues, concomitantly

about" (Nightingale, 1996: 63). How people engage, and what they do, with what they watch are effectively unknowable, not least because of sheer numbers and the diversity of circumstances. Arguably audiences are part of the broader difficulties in explaining the masses, the ordinary or everyday (Roberts, 2006). That something is difficult to know about is a poor excuse for ignoring it.

recourse to banal inter-nationalisation and globalisation becomes problematic. It does not follow though that the nation disappears. With the rise of East Asian mass-mediated culture industries, Iwabuchi notes a seeming paradox: "While the national is still relevant as contextualised articulation of meanings out of transnationally circulating cultural forms, the 'distinctiveness' of the national is re-articulated not in reaction to but only in tandem with cross-border cultural connection and globally shared cultural references and forms." For example, brand nationalism not only commoditises "culture", but also re-articulates how people are invited to imagine themselves and others with potentially far-reaching consequences. Iwabuchi argues that the rise of this new form of cultural capitalism and so "banal inter-nationalism has made methodological nationalism no longer just an academic matter but a part of people's mundane practice."

Iwabuchi's paper raises broader theoretical issues. What happens when scholarly concepts like the nation-state, culture or identity are re-articulated through the culture industries and enter popular usage? Through innumerable acts of reiteration such as branding "the nation" acquires new, loaded connotations and references. So, when Iwabuchi insists we engage with the lived worlds of ordinary people, he invites us to shift from current universalistic concepts to ideas as used and reworked endlessly through the mass media in daily practice. However, such demotic vigour should not be mistaken for the intellectual validation or rejuvenation of these concepts. For here lies an unacknowledged epistemological trap. If nation, culture, identity, etc. constitute at once the framework for, and the object of, analysis, confusion becomes almost inevitable. The seeming self-evident truth of arguments that fail to make a rigorous distinction runs the risk of mistaking profound insight for mere circularity. And that bulwark of academic self-justification — the superiority of the knower to the known — becomes perilously porous.

Berry's paper questions reliance on methodological nationalism by showing how it misrepresents the actualities of film production. Calculations of film output by the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, which conventionally are treated as separate national territories, bear little relationship to the practices of financing, producing and distributing films. "National statistics obscure and distort our understanding of the emergence of East Asian transnational cultural formations in general." Noting the loose terminology, Berry argues for a "critical transnationalism". This rejects "national cinema" as an adequate theoretical model, which can address both cross-border and local cinemas and which includes cinemas that "challenge ideas of stable national cultural identity". Uncritical quantification, sloppy or absent definition, common-sense (in Gramsci's terms) use of concepts combine to disguise the highly

questionable presuppositions of such accounts, which favour easy communicability and the appearance of neatness, precision and certainty at the expense of rigour and critical thinking.

Commenting on the new international order in which "corporations have greater relative autonomy from the state in regard to the economy at least and can operate economically across state borders more easily", Berry refuses the simplistic narratives of corporate capitalism. Drawing on Hardt and Negri, he notes that "... this order is driven by the fantasy of achieving ... the smooth space of Empire". The argument can be taken further. For Hardt and Negri, this new empire is in "omni-crisis", as "there is no *place* of power — it is both everywhere and nowhere", because "capital tends toward a smooth space defined by uncoded flows, flexibility, continual modulation and tendential equalization" (2000: 190, 327). Tinkering with the existing frameworks of bounded classes, structure and system simply fails to address what is happening: "If the logic of the system drives nation-states, the logic of assemblage drives the transnational." A shift is overdue from the theoretical frameworks that justified the world order of European nation states and colonialism to those that underwrite contemporary capitalism.[3] So Berry concludes: "What remains to be ascertained is whether the kind of Deleuzian 'becoming' that assemblage is constitutes a route away from liberal capitalist society, or a new stronger form of it, or, in some hard to imagine way, both all at once."

The epistemological critique is developed further by Khiabany and Sreberny who note that claims to internationalise or de-Westernise media studies impale themselves on a false dichotomy between "metropolitan universality or nativist hegemony". In Iran, this latter has become an explicit political strategy through a "rhetoric of 'de-Westernisation' " developed, not coincidentally, by a former professor of International Communication in the USA. Khiabany and Sreberny identify six problems with purported de-Westernisation. First, the idea of "the West" as a singularity raises questions as to who represents it as such to whom and for what purpose. Second, the conditions of knowledge production under capitalism are foundational for media studies. Third, very complex processes are condensed to simple categorical (The West *vs.* The Rest) or

[3] For a supposedly critical profession, academics can be surprisingly unreflexive about the social conditions under which they produce knowledge. Deleuze and Guattari (on whom Hardt and Negri drew for their analysis) were at pains to point out how in Europe state apparatuses supported "royal science" which depicted a neat, stable, structured world and marginalised alternative accounts. So, uncritically carrying over an idealised account from one historical formation to a much later one involves anachronism. Under the conditions of world capitalism bent on integration, ideas of space, time, labour, the subject, the state (just think of the etymology), etc. all need to be rethought (1988: 489–492).

logical binaries (Either/Or, rather than Both/And). Fourth, how translatable and viable is theory beyond its metropolitan centre? Fifth, the alternative of nativism almost invariably involves the search for imagined authenticity (with its play on logocentrism and Eurocentrism; Derrida, 1998). Sixth, argument is beset by reductionism through essentialising and reifying the notion of culture. Together these comprise a thoughtful review of presuppositions implicit in writings about non-Western media, the relevance of which the authors show in an analysis of the role of the media in Iran as an authoritarian state, which has echoes elsewhere in Asia.

A second strand of Khiabany and Sreberny's argument addresses the supposed neutrality and objectivity of media studies itself. International communication "focused on the critical analysis of Western corporate expansion *into* non-Western societies" risks imposing a teleological narrative of modernity. Nor is the role of media scholars innocent. They continue: ". . . as Western academia is increasingly organised along business models, to produce the kind of graduates coveted by multinationals, it is imperative to interrogate the various agendas involved in drives towards 'internationalisation'. It appears that as ever more foreign students study in English-speaking universities and as more non-Westerners have been trained in its theories and approaches . . . ironically, the demand to internationalise the curriculum supports the corporatisation of the university sector in the US, UK and elsewhere by which foreign students are reduced to cash cows." Under the circumstances, claiming the impartiality and objectivity of media studies demands singular intellectual illiteracy or myopia; or else disguises a disingenuous marketing ploy.

> The collusion between philosophy [and so knowledge] and the State was most explicitly enacted in the first decade of the 19th Century with the foundation of the University of Berlin, which was to become the model for higher learning throughout Europe and in the United States . . . The end product would be "a fully legitimated subject of knowledge and society" — each mind an analogously organised mini-State morally unified in the supermind of the State. Prussian mind-meld (Massumi 1988: xii, my parentheses).

Arguably the collusion is now between knowledge and capital. The question that has exercised French scholars, tritely dismissed as "postmodernist" by many English-speaking scholars, is how to understand the conditions under which knowledge nowadays is produced, branded, purveyed, mass-mediated or imposed.

Neat theoretical formulations rarely fit historical and cultural actuality. As Inden shows, writings about Indian films generally oppose art house to commercial film, narrative to spectacle, aesthetic experience to escape, enlightenment or information to entertainment, reflexivity to instant gratifi-

cation, élite to masses. And slithering between these artificial antitheses often passes for exposition or even analysis. However seductive, suturing such divergent dichotomies is ultimately vacuous. By contrast Inden inquires into the practices through which Indians themselves constitute and understand commercial film. Far from narrative and spectacle being opposed, drawing on Foucault, Inden argues that

> they combine in producing definitive emotionally involving knowledge about the constitution of the world (cosmology) and of humans (anthropology) and making authoritative sensually stirring representations in audiovisual media about these topics as the *demonstrative function*. The popular Hindi film may exercise the demonstrative function through the practices of entertainment. Yet, we know very little about how entertainment in these films is itself constituted. What I try to do here is present, in skeletal form, the morphology of entertainment embedded in the Hindi film.

Rather than force Indian film to fit alien categories — formulaic, imitative, operatic, romance, melodrama — Inden inquires into how Indians have historically addressed entertainment.

> People commonly refer to entertainment in the form of a film as a *tamāśā* [a spectacle, which] . . . is an act, but it is of a special sort, one that has visual and aural sensations that will surprise and delight or even horrify . . . Witnessing a spectacle is supposed to elicit surprise, wonder, awe, astonishment, or admiration . . . [through] the enactments of two opposed emotions, ecstasy and despair, the emotions associated with paradise or its opposite, hell, and with spectacle as fun/comedic on the one hand and as calamity/tragic on the other (square parentheses mine).

Inden offers a response to Khiabany and Sreberny's argument that European theoretical hegemony is so comprehensive that there is no escape by pointing to the extensive historical and contemporary evidence of quite different ways of articulating the world. So the question may be: Under what circumstances do people ignore or deny their own cultural practices and become complicit in their own hegemonisation? Inden carefully circumscribes his analysis as a preliminary reconstruction. Further research into discursive difference would presumably involve complementary ethnographic inquiry into who, among producers, audiences, critics, etc., draws upon what cultural registers under what circumstances. Inden also throws down a theoretical gauntlet. What is presupposed by a universal — and so hegemonic — theory? In effect it must exclude entirely the cultural questions of how people articulate, evaluate, engage with and use film and media. The determining conditions, be they psychoanalytical, cognitivist or whatever, would have to unknown to the

participants but readily accessible to the superior intelligence of the analyst.[4] Quite how imperial do you like your theory?

Coming from ethnographic research into Indonesian television production and reception, Hobart starts by noting two disjunctures. As many competing disciplines claim authoritative knowledge of the mass media, agreement is nigh impossible within, let alone between, disciplines. And the neat academic concepts and models of each stand in startling contrast to the sheer profusion of practice. The apparent coherence of such scholarly models is only possible through "rarefaction" (Foucault, 1981), such as confusion over the object of study, omission and closure. Adopting a philosophically pragmatist approach to culture not as coherent, but as a site — or, better, moments — of contestation, Hobart treats "knowledge as discursive, as the shifting outcome of dialogue between different agents, instruments and patients, always open, unfinalisable and under-determined". Drawing on Nelson Goodman's famous response to the essentialist question "What is Art?" by asking "When is Art?" Hobart inquires "When is Indonesia?". So he asks: "Should we accept existing enunciations about Indonesia as self-evident rather than the contentious object of antagonistic representations?" and concludes that, "Indonesia as an imaginary community is the ceaseless activity of instituting an impossible object."

If, as the contributors agree, existing approaches are inadequate and there is a failure to stress practice, how might we proceed? Hobart proposes an account of practices articulated into overarching performances. In this sense, "performance does not represent the world: it creates or articulates it. So judging performance as inauthentic or fake is a category mistake. The question is whether it convinces and is effective. The mass media articulate discrepant practices by disseminating and naturalising particular representations of events." Hobart further problematises the academic penchant for seamless explanation by creating a tension between Judith Butler's analytical sense, everyday English usage and Indonesian ideas about theatre as performative, because people widely treat it "not as make-believe or mere entertainment . . . but as demonstrating and bringing to life — or bringing about — circumstances that deserves musing over and explicating to some audience." As television is the main mass medium, he then analyses key genres to argue the more general case for considering public life in the 21st Century as mass mediated performance.

[4] The philosophical issues have been argued in detail in Wilson, 1970; Hollis and Lukes, 1982; Overing, 1985.

Eurocentrism

Inevitably, behind any attempt to rethink Asian media and film lurks the spectre of Eurocentrism. What precisely though does Eurocentrism, or its supposed antidote "de-Westernising", mean? Following the helpful debate in Wang (2011), it is evident that such diverse concerns and arguments are crammed into, and essentialised through, these terms that they have become floating signifiers. The contributors to Wang and this collection often link Eurocentrism to culture. A problem that permeates discussion is the unacknowledged use of constitutive spatial metaphors. If culture is not — as politicians and media producers *inter alia* would have it — a bounded, coherent, transactable entity, but the occasion for struggle, then what is it centric about? "Centrism", like culture, reifies abstractions by emphasising stability, solidity, centripetalism and presence over the play of actions, utterances and commentary. By contrast, an alternative image of argument or dialogue brings out how diverse, fluid, contingent and even undecidable actions and events may be. It is unwise to conflate culture as an object of study, industrialised and commodised for mass consumption (Berry, Iwabuchi) with culture as an analytical concept, for which a critical account is needed. Even a minimal definition, "how we do things around here", is obviously open to contestation (Hobart, 2000). For example, Khiabany and Sreberny show how competing visions of what counts as "culture" are played out inside the Islamic Republic of Iran. So statements about culture and ethnocentrism — of which Eurocentrism is just a striking case — become the shifting, disputed outcome of rival practices of articulating and counter-articulating. Issues of ethnocentrism might then be more imaginatively considered as about double discursivity. In place of the convenient and often profitable business of reducing someone else's discourse to your own monologue, the challenge would be to appreciate that we are dealing with something like polyphony.[5]

There are then broader problems confronting the study of Asian media and film. For example, how much consumer capitalism, national politics and academic writing consists in reiterating monologue masquerading as choice and openness? Whose knowledge is at issue, for what purpose? The masses of the mass communication industries have been carefully edited and massaged into existence, whether as subjects portrayed or as recipients. So, to what extent

[5] The terminology is drawn from Bakhtin, who contrasted the familiar exercise of power through monologue with dialogue. Instead of reducing others to a single authoritative authorial account, a dialogic approach recognises '*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices* [with] *a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*' (1984: 6, my parenthesis).

do the masses as articulated by audience studies serve to inoculate media and film theory against the awareness that their preoccupations are those of a small élite of politicians, producers and academics, which have little bearing on what people actually do with media and film?[6] We could go on. However, to recap, our aim here is primarily to stimulate discussion. We shall have succeeded if we spur others to discuss, disagree with and go beyond us in the perennial project of rethinking Asian media and film.

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[6] Phrased differently, are we dealing with the promulgation of bourgeois myth (Barthes, 1973)? And what do we mean by the bourgeoisie here?