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Japanese Popular Culture and its Re-definition from the Peripheries

Japanese studies scholarship on popular culture is on the rise in Southeast Asia. At the bi-annual conference of the Japanese Studies Association of Southeast Asia (JSA-ASEAN), which has been held since 2009, three out of 83 presentations addressed Japanese popular culture in 2006, whereas in 2016, 12 out of 143 presentations were dedicated to that subject field. The apparently small numbers are only the tip of the iceberg though. The JSA-ASEAN conference is a bilingual conference, where presentations are delivered either in English or Japanese. This limits the presentations to regional scholars who are able to present in English or Japanese. If one were to access the scholarship published in the national and local languages, one would be confounded by the sheer number of students and scholars writing on Japanese popular culture. But Southeast Asian scholarly engagement with Japanese popular culture as a subject field shows methodological flaws due to a general lack of active theorizing that is characteristic of the region. Thus, global scholarship tends to disenfranchise, often unconsciously, research from the global periphery of Southeast Asia, which is criticized below through a review of journal articles, edited volumes, and opinion pieces concerning Japanese popular culture. This paper will also present a method utilized by young scholars who attempt to remedy the current situation.

The most often-used framework is political scientist Joseph Nye's soft power theory which was revolutionary in the early 1990s as it highlighted the ability to affect others by attraction rather than coercion or payment (see Nye, 1990; 2004; 2017). Initially utilized to explain the American global influence beyond economic and military power, it was later applied to other countries as well. Journalist and editor Douglas McGray contextualized Nye's soft power approach in the context of Japan, parti-

cularly, with respect to cultural products such as anime and manga, and named it "Gross National Cool" (see McGray, 2009). This led to a surge of respective scholarship on a global scale. In the process the initial framework has come to be overlooked, namely, the discipline of international relations which Nye's research focused on. With respect to Japan, this obscuration poses a problem, as an active policy in regard to McGray's proposal only began in 2012 due to postwar diplomacy which was complicated particularly in relation with Japan's former colonies who were suspicious of the Japanese government's actions. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) proposed its Cool Japan Strategy in 2012, established the Cool Japan Fund in 2013, and finally started the Cool Japan Initiative in 2014. Thus, conscious promotion by the Japanese government began at the earliest in 2012 targeting markets such as the USA and Brazil in the Americas, China, South Korea, Singapore and India in Asia, and France in Europe. In 2014, this was extended to Cambodia, Indonesia and Taiwan in Asia, and Nigeria in Africa. Yet, culture-oriented research on Japan's soft power tends to forget this timing, assuming the Japanese government played an active role from the very beginning when Japanese cultural products entered other countries. Furthermore, it should be noted that within the context of Southeast Asia only Singapore, Indonesia and Cambodia have been explicitly included in Japan's governmental strategy.

With regard to the spread of Japanese popular culture in Asia, cultural studies scholar Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) is often cited, especially his observation of the "odorlessness" (or statelessness, Jp. *mukokuseki*) of transnational flows which has helped de-center the hegemony of American mass culture, earlier conceptualized as McDonaldization by sociologist George Ritzer (1993). For popular culture research, Iwabuchi's discussion has been meaningful as he has shed light on Japan-derived cultural flows in East and Southeast Asia. In contrast to Ritzer's McDonaldization which is tainted with the "fragrance" of the "West," Iwabuchi demonstrated that what attracts consumers to Japanese culture is its perceived "odorlessness," and that is precisely what makes Japanese products appear familiar to consumers regardless of where they are located. Although contemporaneous to Nye's soft power theory, Iwabuchi's cultural studies framework has only recently caught the attention of Southeast Asian scholars.

In his book, Iwabuchi criticizes popular culture scholarship that essentializes how consumers are influenced by the Japaneseness of a cultural device, while his own fieldwork focused primarily on the Japanese

side which claimed odorlessness. However, research on Southeast Asia has revealed a widespread practice of "creative misreading," that is, attributing Japaneseness or "Japanese odor" indiscriminately to anything coming from Japan (see Barvo, 2012; Kartikasari, 2018; Yamato, Krauss, Tamam, Hassan & Osman, 2011; Hien, no year). Such studies enhance the practice of decentralizing American cultural hegemony by replacing it with Japan as center, assuming global reach as a cultural superpower despite the fact that Japan was only ranked 14th in the *Soft Power 30* issued by Portland Communications and the University of South California (see Portland Communications, 2018), where it was also stated that "culture" has been Japan's weakness. In Monocle's *Soft Power Survey* of 2017/2018 Japan ranked higher but in 4th place (Monocle, 2017). Despite being influential in Southeast Asia, what the above-mentioned surveys indicate is that global soft power, particularly through culture, has not de-centered the West, the USA (for *Soft Power 30*) and Canada (for Monocle). Iwabuchi's critique of soft power diplomacy is that of being unilateral; meaning that culture flows only from creator to consumer, instead of bilateral; including the recognition that the involved parties are both cultural creator and cultural consumer, or even multilateral; wherein both parties' cultural creation and cultural reception is a result of transnational cultural flows from several countries (see Iwabuchi, 2015). Iwabuchi's transnational theory also acknowledges that the transnational flow of Japanese popular culture is still unilateral.

Theorizing Japanese popular culture presents a problem, as most scholars focus on countries recognized as centers of either culture creation or culture consumption, assuming a universality of application. In this issue of *Orientaliska studier* women's media researcher Fusami Ogi traces how "manga" became a global term upon recognition from the West. This poses a problem to scholars from Southeast Asia who try to understand the global phenomenon of Japanese popular culture within their own domestic spaces. Southeast Asia is not necessarily one of the centers, as for example the non-acknowledgement of Southeast Asian particularities in academia shows. In 2012 the Japanese Department at the National University of Singapore invited scholars to engage in a two-day conference on "Teaching Japanese Popular Culture." Yet, the focus of the papers and discussions still dwelt on global centers, which gave the impression that the pedagogy introduced by the presentations could serve as a universal model. In the same conference, there was only one round-table discussion addressing "Strategies for Teaching Japanese Popular Culture in Southeast Asia" and featuring scholars from Southeast Asia or

based in Southeast Asia. This marginalization was repeated in the subsequent publication which was comprised of 10 chapters but did not include any contribution from the roundtable discussion (see Shamoon and McMorran, 2016).

In his monograph *Asia as Method* (2010) cultural studies scholar Kuang-Hsing Chen attempts to provide a solution by suggesting a deimperialization process in Asian academia with respect to Western frameworks. Chen calls for a liberation from US-American cultural hegemony and Eurocentric ideas. His proposal of multiplying points of reference within Asia and his detailed reading of Japanese pan-Asianist intellectual Yoshimi Takeuchi is quite tempting, especially considering the abovementioned examples of how centers tend to forget that peripheries are also part of global phenomena (see Vukovich, 2013). Chen's proposal has been used in research on Japanese popular culture and its effects, influences and consumption in Southeast Asia, as it unshackles from theories that are unwieldy or unmanageable in local spaces. Indonesian scholar Ranny Rastati studied hijab cosplay in Indonesia and the perceptions regarding its authenticity (2017). While fans' reception and motivations are topics in which cosplay research generally engages, Rastati's research adds the dimension of a religion, Islam, and the choice of women to be hijabi or not, which is not a topic of concern in "theories of the center."

However, a major critique of Chen's theory is that in the act of decentering US-American and Eurocentric concepts, it recenters Asia and Asian scholarship, which has actually resulted in a surge of research by Southeast Asian and area studies scholars that through case studies essentializes their own cultural space as something "different" and "unique." But such a particularization runs the risk of hampering global dialogue or even attracting interest as it ends up suggesting that Southeast Asian spaces have had no global connections because of their difference. The previously mentioned Rastati, for example, passes over the global reach of Islam and the fame of activists like Maliha Fairooz, who is not only a hijabi cosplayer but also a documentarist of hijabi cosplay at the New York Comic Convention, and Hijabi Hooligan who was featured in *BBC Stories*. This paper proposes a more moderate use of Chen's framework, one that challenges the notion of theory as global and universal as such a notion may have an exclusivist reach.

In 2015, the Japanese Studies program of Ateneo de Manila University hosted a conference entitled "Manga and the Manga-esque: New Perspectives on a Global Culture." We invited scholars of manga studies engaged in problematizing approaches to the topic, especially the apparent divi-

sion between Western/English-based and Japanese-based scholarship. Among the issues highlighted were the conflicts regarding definitions of "manga," for example, in media scholar Febriani Sihombing's presentation on "Analysis of the Terminology 'Komik Indonesia' in Indonesian Comics" and comics artist Suraya Md. Nasir's presentation entitled "Domestication of Japanese Manga Representation in Malaysia." In a way, these papers may have looked like case studies highlighting Indonesia and Malaysia as special spaces with regards to the consumption and creation of manga, but upon closer reading of their publications (Sihombing, 2014; Nasir, 2018), it becomes clear that they challenged how scholarship, domestically and internationally, prevented the recognition and study of "hybridized works" — or what was temporarily labelled by the 2015 conference as "manga-esque" — through operational gatekeeping and the search for "authenticity." Global scholarship focused primarily on Japanese manga and its consumption in translation, forgetting that consumption can lead to new local creations. This oblivion led, for example, to the early rejection of such hybridized works as *Mahou Shounen Breakfast Club* created through the collaboration of webcomic creators New Zealander Katie O'Niell (artist) and US-American Toril Orlesky (author) in 2015. Rejection was not only directed at works of Original English-language (OEL) manga, it also prevented the study of such hybrid creations (see MacDonald, 2015).

Sociologist Zoltan Kacsuk, another participant of the 2015 conference, discussed this issue theoretically in his presentation entitled "The Role of National Mediators in the Construction of the Global Meaning of Manga" which highlighted gatekeeping. In his recently published article entitled "Re-Examining the 'What is Manga' Problematic" (Kacsuk, 2018), he developed his arguments further, including a focus on aesthetics. This focus holds the potential to liberate and engage the global space through acknowledging hybrid media texts as objects of study regardless of cultural origin. Prior to this, sociologist Casey Brienza had challenged scholars to see a "Japan without Japan" through her edited volume *Global Manga: "Japanese" Comics without Japan* (2015). Now, Southeast Asians such as Sihombing and Nasir contribute to the global discourse of actively re-defining "manga." Sihombing first highlights how gatekeeping has prevented the labeling of local works as "Indonesian komiks," and the limitations of the notion of *gaya*, or style, in classifying new hybrid works. Nasir, on the other hand, not only actively practices this dilemma through her use of a hybrid style in autobiographical comics, but also traces how manga style became localized upon entering Malaysian comics.

However, manga studies addresses creation as much as consumption, which is another aspect in popular culture scholarship that is problematic. Fandom studies have highlighted the fact that the "Made in Japan" label is an important dimension in manga consumption: fans actively rejected early original English-language manga such as *Mahou Shounen Breakfast Club* as inauthentic. Furthermore, "country-wise" case studies of fandoms pervade the space. As fandoms are investigated by Southeast Asian scholars nationally rather than transnationally, these studies risk to fall into the same trap of essentializing national spaces and their "unique" fandoms like the research by Rastati introduced in the previous section.

While Kacsuk and Brienza's concepts allow for hybrid works to be studied, which includes their consumers, the consumption of "manga made in Japan" seems to homogenize the consumers under the label of "otaku." Anthropologists Patrick Galbraith and Thiam Huat Kam as well as media studies scholar Björn-Ole Kamm (2015) have challenged this term inside and outside of Japan by highlighting the diversity of identity and meaning that exists between fans who label themselves as "otaku." Adding a gender element to the issue of popular cultural consumption, feminist critic Kotani Mari (2007) contributed to the propagation of the term *fujoshi* (rotten girls) which refers to female fans consuming a particular genre in Japanese popular culture called boys' love (BL). The term would later be used, although contentiously, to refer to "female otaku." Through the critical analysis of fan labels, global fandom studies moves away from the consumption of "Japaneseness" as something that the concept of soft power attempts to impose. Cultural anthropologist Thomas Baudinette is paving the way with his paper entitled "An exploration of racialized desire in Japanese gay media: The case of Chinese men" (2016), where he acknowledges the "creative misreading" of consumers based on their perceptions of the respective media. Informed by the theory of cultural studies pioneer Stuart Hall (1980), Baudinette's fieldwork on the consumption of boys' love manga by Chinese gay men as part and parcel of gay porn media and their imagining of Japan as a "gay paradise," brings into global scholarship the necessity to understand the diversity of how a global phenomenon such as Japanese popular culture can be read. This counters a structuralist reading of media texts, which insists on treating, for example, boys' love manga as a genre consumed by "rotten girls" or *fujoshi*, and *fudanshi* or "rotten boys," without any treatment as being gay or pornographic.

However, rather than just recognizing the diversity of readings, gender historian Kristine Michelle Santos in her paper entitled "Localising Trans-

cultural Fan Literacies: Yuri on Ice as seen in #yoizineph" (2018) and her upcoming publication "Disrupting Centers of Transcultural Materialities: The Transnationalization of Cool Japan through Philippine Fan Works" highlights that Filipino fans are not only engaged in their domestic spaces but are also actively involved in a transcultural space via online English-language fan spaces where global fans meet, engage and shape or re-shape the discourse on the consumption of, in this case, the anime *Yuri on Ice*. This had already been theorized by fan media researchers Bertha Chin and Lori Hitchcock-Morimoto (2013) with the purpose to highlight cross-border fandoms and move away from Iwabuchi's transnational concept which only looks at single-nation consumption. The result of such recognition is to acknowledge the ability of transcultural fandoms to not only create, but also consume hybridized media. Baudinette in his paper on "Creative Misreading of 'Thai Boys' Love' by a Filipino Fan Community" (2018) not only highlights this transcultural activity of fans, but also presents how a creative center such as Japan is actively decentered by Thailand through the purposive consumption of Thai BL by Filipino BL fans.

The objective of this paper is to criticize global scholarship in its unconscious attempts to disenfranchise global peripheries. However, rather than prescribing a framework which simply juxtaposes periphery and center, this paper presents how a peripheral space cannot only engage, but also challenge global-centric scholarship through problematizing issues which such scholarship tends to overlook. The new and refreshing research by scholars such as Kacsuk, Brienza, Baudinette, Santos, Sihombing, and Nasir is pointing the way.

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