Temptation of control in the globalizing culture industries

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"Culture industries of Asia" is the immediate topic that comes to our mind when we are invited to do this Special Issue of *Global Media and China*. It is indeed the most distinctive yet problematic topic in this region. It also happens that this Special Issue was prepared at a time when we were participating in the Digital Media Studies Conference organized by Beijing Normal University on the topic "Perspectives and Approaches of Creative/Culture Industries." While Kim serves as a keynote speaker of the conference, Fung is the convener of it. Then, naturally, as it turned out as well, the keynote presentations and papers become the core set of manuscripts for this Special Issue. Together with other submissions to the issue, we were able to harvest seven papers which are gathering under the banner of culture industries with relevance, quality, and innovation.

Media globalization is a notion easily paired with cultural globalization as both are inseparable in most cases. The discourse on cultural globalization has to certain extent replaced that of cultural imperialism thesis in the last couple of decades (Mirriees, 2013). But, in reality, the rising new technology and dying old cold politics probably could not force the cultural imperialism thesis out of stage if the thesis was simply true. The discourse of cultural globalization, as we critically understand it, can just be a camouflage of cultural imperialism. Admittedly, the weakest point of the cultural imperialism thesis was within itself, and it was an over-confidence in the power of media and untested belief in the brainwash effect of media contents. It still narrates the assumption that the more you watch Donald Duck, the more you believe the United States is right. But as the global cultural order and hence its cultural flow become so much complicated with the advance of communication technology, transforming global politics, and a rising China, a simple interpretation of the global effect of culture and media based on cultural imperialism seems too simple.

Yet the cultural imperialism thesis has provided many valuable insights and opened critical viewpoints for the balanced interpretation on the ideological preferences and distortions. In Fung's (2013) *Asian Popular Culture*, it clearly points out that in many of the Asian states, its popular culture is still dependent on Western capitals and multinational corporations (MNCs), although some of them have successfully and consciously discontinued its connection. That is why we could understand that the discourse of cultural imperialism is still conserved in the media authority of

China today. In fear of unhealthy contents, the authorities screen out much of the global contents for the benefit of people and nation. But the desire for controlling media and thereof culture invites clashes and failures both inside and outside. On one hand, media and culture industries have their distinctive logic and nature that go against political coercion and commercial enslavement. Articles in this issue try hard to voice on this point together. On the other hand, culture industries of China have continuously lifted its bamboo curtain away from the stage in the past decades. But the process is slow and made complicated with lots of tensions. More than half of the papers published in this issue are addressing the tensions in one way or another. In other parts of Asia, as other papers told us, the same observation is still true. Media and cultural systems have built upon strong national characteristics for most of the time ever since they were created. State is still the primary boundary for the production, distribution, and consumption of media in their forms and contents. Language and culture are safe and natural lines of demarcation.

In the long but thought-provoking essay, *A new model for understanding global media and China*: "*knowledge clubs*" *and* "*knowledge commons*," Hartley, Montgomery, and Li argue that the state and capital are two hurdles for the open knowledge system:

> The universalism inherent in the idea of the World Wide Web is hedged about by commercial and state adversarialism on all sides. The interests of citizens in open knowledge are routinely undermined by their own governments and by corporate heavyweights.

State's desire to control the media and culture, which is an open knowledge system, often places its agenda at the risk of killing the creativity and creative industries for which the state itself produces futuristic proposals and dreams. According to the authors,

> Popular culture is a prime site for the non-utilitarian production and enjoyment of knowledge. Playing with available systems, ideas and things is a good way to explore their unexpected capabilities and potential. Popular culture as a whole can be seen to have this future-forming effect, the more so in a democratising and modernising era, when the choices of the many—"the popular" in that numerical sense—become the currency of success for politics, culture and economics alike, a process whose consequences have barely begun to unfold.

The state's desire for controlling the media appears again in the second paper of the issue. The bumpy road toward network convergence in China by Zhao gives us a detailed observation on the recent development of digital media industries focusing on the tensions between the state authorities and business competition. Media convergence began with the technological dimension when digitalized platforms disrupted the traditional walls between different channels of contents, such as newspapers, radio, television, film, and music. The digital technology in communication also removed the division of telecommunication and broadcasting. This technological convergence was immediately followed by industrial convergence in which media businesses cross the rivers to enter into different markets. Now, market demarcation has to be renewed, and the regulatory convergence is in order. Ever since digitalization came in the information and communication industries, this sequence has happened in most of the developed societies. What is making the Chinese case more complicated (or simplified?) is the strong presence of political control and censorship on platforms and contents. Zhao provides rich explanation on the interplays among major actors, including the Omnipotent SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television).

Lim's paper on the current situation of media development in East Asia and policy issues provides a helpful review for readers to understand some of the ongoing issues in the region. Singapore and China are in particular attention in the paper. Both societies, along with other East Asian places such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, are showing extremely fast development of media technologies and businesses. Yet both are confronting tensions with regulatory authorities although the contents of the tensions are not the same. China stays away from Facebook and Google for the sake of Chinese government's contents control on the web, but the authority justifies its policy with excuses that the domestic market is protected and the indigenous technological developments are promoted without the foreign services. China wants to push the development of platform and contents industries to a global level, but the tight political control over the industries seems to cast limits for the desire. East Asia is also a region where the young "digital natives" are growing fast in huge multitudes, and they are writing a new grammar for the uses of digital media.

Ho's paper on the transformation of the cultural policy in Hong Kong from the policy of no-policy to a centralized and market-oriented cultural policy reviews extensively how the Hong Kong's cultural policies have moved the key points before and after the turnover in 1997. But it is probably not a very unique situation that happened only in Hong Kong. Around the turn of the century, the idea of cultural and creative industries had quickly traveled from the United Kingdom to other countries. The idea of creative industries was a British invention to revitalize the dying old cities in the hope of boosting the country's economy. And the concepts of creative industries, creative economy, and creative cities were simply too attractive to remain in the United Kingdom. Many other nations began applying the concepts, and Korea, for example, jumped quickly on the wagon under Kim Dae Jung's administration with new policies of developing cultural and creative industries. This was also propelled convincingly by the initial success of the Korea's pop culture in East Asian region. Television dramas from Korea picked high popularity in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. Perhaps the success of the Korean pop culture produced some stimulation to the governments of the receiving societies to take the industrialization of the culture more seriously.

Soh and Yecies' paper is looking at a rare case of the Korean-Chinese film remake and audience evaluations on the Korean original and Chinese remake. Interestingly, his data are drawn from the Douban community where people are posting various responses to the movies. So it is also a kind of content analysis on the Chinese virtual community built in the Douban community. Cross-border collaboration in culture industries has long been an attractive issue, but in reality it is neither easy nor common. Many of the co-productions or collaborations are much limited to co-investment or partial import of some of the production components, such as artists and directors. In the case of the *Miss Granny*, it suggests a new form of collaboration between China and Korea, as the CJ E&M initiated a localization strategy for multiple countries including China. According to the author, the case was a successful coproduction, and such project will find better and brighter future if continued. While there is little doubt that the experiment like this case will increase the chance of success in coproduction or transfer the production technology from Korea to China, another important factor can always intervene in the cross-border collaboration with China: the politics of Northeast Asia. There are only a few months of time gap between the writing of Yecies and this introductory essay, but the political tension among China, Korea, and the United States has heightened to high level as the United States began deploying the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea in excuse of defending the South from the North Korean missile attack. However, it is an open secret that the system is a part of the US missile defense network targeting China and Russia rather than the North. China expressed a strong objection to the THAAD deployment from the beginning, but the US and South Korean government pushed the plan against

all the objections not only from the Chinese part but also within South Korea. As a sort of economic retaliation, China blocked the imports of Korean programs and closed down some of the Korean Lotte retail shops in China as the company offered a Golf course it owned for the construction of THAAD base. All the tourism to Korea was also blocked by the Chinese government as of this writing in March 2017. The decade-long happy mood in cultural interactions is suddenly frozen due to the political crisis. This may last for a short while or for years. What is clear is that this kind of unpredictability exists in the region as a constant factor. The good collaboration in the culture industry between the two countries seems to have lost the valuable moment for further development at least for now.

Cheung's paper on the television music program *I Am a Singer* produced by the Hunan Satellite Television is bringing our attention to a number of interesting moments in the process of production and consumption of the border-crossing program. The format of the program originated from Korean television, so that is the first border-crossing. HSTV produces the local Chinese program and it is consumed by both China and Hong Kong. This is the second border-crossing. The performers of the show come from China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Thailand. So there is another border-crossing within the contents. In a sense, this program strongly bears the multinational or transnational hybridity from production to consumption, which has become an aspect of Chinese popular television today even under the close control of the regulatory authority that fears foreign influence upon domestic audience. The music program exploits high televisuality through mixing components from different genres such as music, drama, and reality show. The author points out that the hybridizing strategy of creating a synthetic genre is one of the key reasons of success. I think this is a significant point in terms of understanding the development of television genres. With the omnipresence of television entertainment, viewers of the contemporary society are so well accustomed to the grammars and conventions of the television programs. Media consumers of this century are well educated with high literacy on entertainment programs. In this circumstance, old formats look too simple to be excited, and the new and more complicated formats win the viewers' attention and meet their expectation. It is not difficult to find such a pattern in the developments of most media tests. To give an example, we can think of the classic Western movies and compare them with later ones in terms of the narrative construction. In the old classic Westerns, the storyline is pretty simple. Whites are good and Indians are bad; they fight against each other and Whites win in the end. In the later developments, storylines tend to become more complicated. There are good Whites and bad ones. Likewise, there are good Indians and bad ones. The fights and collaborations become more complex. Once viewers get used to the more developed format, they cannot be satisfied with the old simple formats anymore. Television genres of any kind have shown continuous developments from simple to more elaborated formats. The hybridity of the music program *I Am a Singer* is just a good example of the elaborated format.

I Am a Singer is also testifying an interesting reversal of the television reception between Hong Kong and China. Hong Kong used to be the window of modernity to Chinese audience for decades. Programs from Hong Kong television were supposed to be advanced and well-made, whereas the local Chinese programs are behind in their forms and contents. With the *I Am a Singer*, however, Hong Kong television shows suddenly seem to be older and less attractive to both Hong Kong viewers and mainlanders. Technologies of program format and production from Korea were exploited to produce this magic. Format imports from Korean television have made a big rush in the past few years in Chinese television, especially when the direct imports of the original programs were tightly controlled by the SAPPRFT.

Funding

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