School of Social Sciences  
Academic Year 2014-15 Term 2

IAS201 POPULAR CULTURE IN ASIA  
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PRE-REQUISITE/ CO-REQUISITE/ MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE COURSE(S)  

Nil

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines popular culture in a range of Asian countries in light of recent economic and political transformations in the region. It explores the ways in which consumer fashion, popular practices, entertainment and media messages are shaped by class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and generational relations, as well as by rural-urban differences and contending political ideologies. It considers how globalization and westernization intersect with indigenous and national traditions in the region.

COURSE GOALS

This course aims to cultivate in students a critical understanding popular culture in Asia, in terms of content and audiences, as well as the social, political, economic, historical and institutional contexts in which various forms of popular culture are produced, practised and consumed.

Specific Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Understand the various ways of defining popular culture  
- Understand how texts and practices of popular culture in Asia may reinforce divisions in gender, ethnicity and social class, and how they may constitute a form of resistance towards the established social order  
- Understand the historical, social, political and economic contexts of production, distribution and audience reception of popular culture in Asia  
- Gain a critical awareness of the multi-directional transnational flows of popular culture in Asia, and grasp the theories and conceptual frameworks for explaining audience consumption of foreign cultural products  
- Appreciate how fan subcultures form around the consumption of Asian popular culture and how fans challenge media production with their own fan works  
- Develop skills in analyzing popular culture texts

ASSESSMENT METHODS

Group Project: 30 %  
Class Participation: 20 %  
Final examination: 50 %  
Total 100 %
**Academic Integrity**

The University takes a serious stand against academic dishonesty, which includes cheating in exams, plagiarism (copying others’ ideas or work without giving credit), submitting the same piece of work to different professors in order to claim credit in more than one class and so on. Students who commit such offences are liable for punishment, which can range from failing the assignment or subject, to expulsion from the University, depending on the severity of the offence.

**INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS AND EXPECTATIONS**

1. Lessons in this course will consist of lectures, screening of videos, as well as discussion and activities in class. Students are expected to engage actively in discussion or activities.

2. Students should observe basic courtesies in class. Turn off all mobile phones and do not use your laptops to purposes other than taking down lecture notes. Any student who engages in offensive or disruptive behavior will be asked to leave the classroom.

3. If you miss your class because of illness / official university events, please submit a copy of your medical certificate / official leave of absence to the course instructor.

**CONSULTATIONS**

Please email for an appointment.

**CLASS TIMINGS**

One 3-hour session per week

**RECOMMENDED TEXT AND READINGS**

There is no textbook for this course. Course readings will be distributed to students via eLearn.

**WEEKLY LESSON PLANS**

**Week 1**

**Introduction**

**Defining Popular Culture**

The first lecture in this week provides an introduction to the course structure and its requirements. Students will learn about the various ways in which popular culture is defined and the problems with these definitions. We will also discuss criticisms towards popular culture as “mass culture”.

Food for thought:

- If a cultural product is popular, does it have less value than something experienced by an elite few?
- If a cultural product is mass produced for financial gain, is it less artistic and intellectual?
- If a cultural product is popular, does it mean it cannot encourage critical thought about society?

**Week 2**

**Globalization and popular culture**

*Intra-Asian flows of popular culture*

The first half of this lecture deals with transnational flows of popular culture in the context of cultural globalization, by addressing the anxiety towards cultural imperialism, the resurgence of local particularistic identities and the formation of hybrid cultural forms. The second half of the lecture emphasizes intra-Asian flows of popular culture and the rise of regional collaborations in cultural production. A central question that we want to consider is: How can popular culture become a form of soft power for nations?


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**Week 3**

**Japanese Popular Culture and Soft Power**

From anime, manga, J-dramas, J-pop, video games to icons of “cuteness” such as Hello Kitty, Japanese popular culture has achieved worldwide popularity, and its cultural industries have been regarded as a model to be emulated by Asian countries seeking to export their cultural products globally. What makes Japanese popular culture so successful globally? We will look at the international appeal of Japanese popular culture through Koichi Iwabuchi’s concept of “cultural odourlessness”, the influence of Japanese popular culture on cultural markets in Asia, and particularly the reception of Japanese TV dramas in various Asian economies such as Korea, Taiwan and Singapore.


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**Week 4**

**Gender and popular culture in Asia: Rise of alternative masculinities in East Asian popular culture**

Through popular culture, the society tells us stories about what it means to be a man or a woman. Gender is not only about femininity, but about masculinity too. In this lecture, we will discuss the rise of alternative “softer” models of masculinity, particularly in the images of “pretty boys”, in East Asian popular culture. We will also look at the blurring of gender boundaries in the rise of androgynous images in mainland Chinese and Taiwanese pop idols, as well as Korean TV dramas.


Week 5  Fandom, Participatory Culture and Asian Popular Culture

This session focuses on fan cultures and practices that have developed around the consumption of Asian popular culture. We will seek to understand fandom and creative works produced by fans through Henry Jenkins’ concept of “participatory culture”. In particular, students will learn more about the practice of **vidding**, which refers to fan production of song videos based on re-working TV dramas and films.


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Week 6  Term Project Briefing

Students will be briefed on the detailed requirements of their term project, and allocated into their project teams.

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Week 7  Analysing the Korean Wave: From K-dramas to K-pop

The ascendancy of South Korean popular culture across various countries in Asia has sparked a fervour for all things Korean, including interest in Korean cuisine, fashion, movies, television dramas, Korean celebrities and popular music. This phenomenon has been termed as Hallyu, or Korean Wave. Korean TV dramas (K-dramas) were at the forefront of this cultural diffusion, and the first part of the lecture will deal with the various factors that contribute to the success of K-dramas in Asian markets outside South Korea. While the consumption of K-dramas has stabilized and K-dramas have become a routine staple on the programming schedules of many Asian economies, Hallyu now enters into a Second Wave with the new craze towards Korean idol pop music – otherwise known as K-pop. The second part of the lecture is centred upon the star-making system of the K-pop industry, and the importance of social media in the global distribution and fandom for K-pop.


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Week 8  Recess

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Week 9  “Pop Culture China”

The transborder flows of popular culture across ethnic Chinese communities in various parts of the world consist of dense traffic of television dramas, popular music, films, literature and comics, in multiple Chinese dialects and variations of its written script – a phenomenon termed by Chua Beng Huat as *Pop Culture China*. We will focus on the transborder circulation of Chinese-language television dramas, how China, Taiwan and Hong Kong specialize in different genres, and the emergence of mainland China as a new centre of production in the geo-linguistic Chinese TV market. We will also touch on Chinese pop music, particularly Mandopop, by examining elements of hybridity in Jay Chou’s music and how his music exhibits a “politically neutral” form of Chineseness. 


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**Week 10**

Term Project Consultation

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**Week 11**

Thai Popular Culture

We will examine Thai TV dramas (*lakorns*) in terms of their characteristic features. Although *lakorns* have been perceived as formulaic and often associated with older TV viewers, recent productions have attracted younger teenage audiences (who are otherwise K-pop fans) to domestically produced television programmes. We will also look at the rising popularity of Thai *lakorns* in mainland China, and the role of social media in the marketing, distribution and consumption of Thai *lakorns* by mainland Chinese viewers. The topic will end with an introduction to the main genres of Thai popular music, and whether Thai pop has the potential to grow beyond its domestic market.


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**Week 12**

Singaporean Cinema

In this session we will trace the historical developments of Singapore’s film industry from the golden age of Malay cinema, to the revival period in the mid-1990s. We will look at how the films of Eric Khoo, Jack Neo and Royston Tan function as counter-discourses and critique towards the orderly, materialistic and achievement-oriented society of Singapore.


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**Week 13**

Project Presentations

Course Review

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**Week 14**

Revision

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**Week 15**

Examination