Article

Commodifying Asian-ness: entrepreneurship and the making of East Asian popular culture

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Abstract

This article examines the linkage between entrepreneurship and the making of popular culture in East Asia. The central argument presented here is that the notion of entrepreneurship is central for understanding and conceptualizing the process of constructing trans-national markets for popular culture and for building new circles of 'Asian' recognition. In other words, entrepreneurial vision is not only transforming the local cultural markets by underpinning a region-wide cultural production system but also un-intentionally spurring feelings of 'Asian' sameness. The study itself focuses on four cases of entrepreneurship which exemplify the driving forces and the intended and unintended consequences of entrepreneurship, and outlines the wider theoretical and methodological implications for this concept by defining the relations between structural determinism and human agency in popular culture.

Introduction

In the past two decades in east and south-east Asia (hereafter East Asia),[1] new markets for popular culture have constantly been created, invigorated by the trade and reproduction of popular culture products and consolidated through the cooperation of companies and promoters engaged in producing and commercializing culture. Popular culture commodities such as movies, music albums, animation series, television programs, and fashion magazines, originating in places like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong

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Kong, have been massively circulating throughout this region, reaching consumers over different national and linguistic boundaries, and providing the potential for the emergence of a transnational East Asian popular culture (Chua, 2004; Jin and Lee, 2007; Otmazgin, 2005).

Entrepreneurship is a key element in the process of commodifying[2] and marketing popular culture. In search of profit, entrepreneurs in popular culture – both individuals and companies, within and outside of the established industry – are constantly seeking business expansion opportunities in East Asia's emerging popular culture markets through converting innovations, culture, fashion and the like into commercialized products. They act in the same way as other business-driven entrepreneurs: carving new marketing channels, looking for new producible materials, and exploiting diverse forms of promotional means to interest potential consumers in their products and services.

However, entrepreneurs are more than agents delivering commodities across markets. They represent a major force of organizational change. In order to implement their strategy, they establish new organizational arrangements, create new ventures, or initiate change in existing organizations, gradually altering the structure of the popular culture business. Moreover, although the motives of entrepreneurs are purely commercial, in East Asia their activities have important unintended consequences of spurring feelings of 'Asian' sameness. They not only propel the trade and consumption of popular culture commodities and construct the necessary mechanisms for it, but they also create a sense of Asian-ness in the form of a commodity. In order to reach a wider pool of consumers, entrepreneurs invent new cultural products and cultural genres by intentionally attaching them with certain images, motifs, and feelings associated with 'Asia'.

The recent emergence of 'pan-Asian' movies is a glaring example. These movies combine a mixture of motifs and influences extracted from various localities and traditions across Asia. Movies like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Initial D*, *Jan Dara*, *Musa*, and *2046* are ambitious co-productions not bound to a singular market in terms of production and marketing. Low production costs in 'cheap' places, such as China, Thailand and Malaysia provided the right incentives to relocate productions. A strategy designed to approach the widest range of audiences has brought about a marketing strategy focusing on the East Asian region. The result is not only transnational commercial success but also movies offered as 'Asian' to people both in Asia and in the West.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the role of entrepreneurship in East Asia's popular culture production and marketing system by looking at four different cases of entrepreneurship which have a major impact on the construction of a regional popular culture market. In particular, the article looks at the way companies recruit, develop, and frame individual creativity and bottom-up initiatives as a part of corporate success. The central argument presented here is that the concept of entrepreneurship is central for understanding and conceptualizing the process of constructing transnational markets for popular culture and new circles of 'Asian' recognition. Stated differently, entrepreneurial vision is not only transforming the local cultural markets by underpinning a region-wide cultural production system, but also unintentionally spurring feelings of 'Asian' sameness within the cultural geography of East Asia.

The article starts by defining the role of entrepreneurship in popular culture, emphasizing that in this field entrepreneurs operate in an especially dynamic environment, affected

by both macro-economic and socio-cultural conditions. These special conditions, it is argued, force entrepreneurs to take an especially innovative form and achieve an intimate proximity with consumers. The article then closely analyses four cases of entrepreneurship in popular culture: corporate, illegitimate, collaborative, and constellation-based. The first case is Japanese companies which regionalized their cultural production formats and know-how through their involvement in producing and commercializing music and television programs in East Asia during the 1990s. The second case involves the manufacturing and marketing of pirated versions of popular culture products in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea. This case shows that informal and illegal entrepreneurship has been extremely important in cultivating new markets for imported popular culture goods, mediating between the state's censorship and the actual market demand. Third, the article looks at attempts made by Korean and Japanese companies to initiate co-productions involving artists from both countries, in spite of the contentious historical and political relations between the two countries. This case underlines the potential of entrepreneurship to overcome historical and political disagreements through economically driven transnational collaborations. The last case is music companies in Hong Kong and Singapore which attempt to create a new musical genre depicted as 'Asian music' in order to reduce production costs and break into new markets. The conclusion discusses the role of entrepreneurship in popular culture and outlines the wider methodological and theoretical implications of this concept.

This study is based on in-depth interviews conducted by the author with 65 cultural industry personnel in Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Bangkok, and Seoul between April 2004 and June 2006. They include personnel from prominent music and television companies as well as government officials, officials from affiliated media-related organizations, academics, media specialists, and media promoters. The interviews included three types of question:

1) General questions regarding the local cultural markets, especially regarding music, television, and the piracy markets.
2) Questions regarding their promotional efforts and cooperation with other companies and agents in commodifying and marketing popular culture.
3) Questions about their views on various aspects of contemporary culture, society, globalization, and politics in East Asia.

What is entrepreneurship in popular culture?

The majority of studies of entrepreneurship – rooted in economics and business management – emphasize the importance of entrepreneurship at the micro-level and macro-level of economic development and as drivers of economic growth, job creation, and competitiveness in an era of globalization (McGrath and MacMillan, 2000; Marsh and Mannari, 1986; Morris et al., 2008). For these studies, entrepreneurship represents a dynamic process of change brought by the implementation of new ideas and creative solutions, based on the vision to recognize opportunities, take calculated risks, and build a solid business plan. Ronstadt's definition is a typical representative of this attitude (1984, quoted in Kuratko and Audretsch, 2009: 3):

> Entrepreneurship is the dynamic process of creating incremental wealth. This wealth is created by individuals who assume the major risks in terms of equity, time, and/or career commitment of providing value from some product or service. The product or service itself may or may not be new or unique but value must somehow be infused by the entrepreneur by securing and allocating the necessary skills and resources.

From an organizational point of view, entrepreneurship has the potential to overcome institutional rigidities and initiate change. It is the process whereby an individual or a group of individuals form new organizations or perpetuate innovation within organizations (Sharma and Chrisman, 1999: 19). The purpose of this organizational change is to create superior vehicles in order to implement the entrepreneurial strategy or to improve operational efficiencies (Kuratko and Audretsch, 2009: 8–9). According to a succinct description offered by Raymond Kao (1989: 9), entrepreneurs 'can spot a business opportunity – an unmet need, a new or better way of doing something – and act on it, putting the resources required and building new organizations'. Studies in the field further explain that entrepreneurship can take place in different contexts, e.g. within established organizations, as an independent activity, or between organizations (Cooper et al., 2000: 115; Gartner and Starr, 1993: 38).

The study of entrepreneurship has expanded in recent years to include new fields such as ecology, governance, and technology, and carried out by various scholars in disciplines such as sociology, political science, and psychology. However, in spite of the growing academic interest in entrepreneurship and the importance of this concept in today's economic life, the literature on this topic lacks a distinct professional identity in the sense that it does not include cross-level and cross-disciplinary academic research (Thornton, 1999: 20). In the field of popular culture, where both economic-commercial and socio-cultural forces are involved, the shortage of cross-disciplinary conceptual and empirical evidence is noticeable. With regard to East Asia's cultural industries, there are no studies – as far as I know – that directly analyse the impact of entrepreneurship or systematically employ this concept to capture the dynamic of popular culture production and marketing.[3] In other words, there is no conceptualization of both the conditions and the impact of entrepreneurship in the making of popular culture in East Asia.

From a methodological point of view, however, it is essential to look at the different contexts in which entrepreneurship is taking place. Although the purpose of entrepreneurs remains the generation or valorization of profit, entrepreneurship is determined by the specific economic and structural conditions and as such may take a variety of forms. As Thornton (1999: 23) argues, 'because the challenges of founding new organizations vary in context, different types of enterprises are likely to require different types of entrepreneurs'. In other words, entrepreneurs' decisions are made within a specific set of conditions, constraints and institutions, which obviously has an impact on the outcomes. For example, internationally based entrepreneurship has a seemingly different mode of conduct from that of entrepreneurship focused on one country or one area of the country. Internationally based entrepreneurship needs to negotiate through national, societal, and sometimes linguistic boundaries, and manage different impediments and regulations issued by the state. In politics, entrepreneurs work differently from their counterparts in, for example, finance. Political entrepreneurs' main purpose is to gain political power

through exploiting resources, mobilizing people, making promises, or entrenching themselves politically during social or economic turbulence (Sheingate, 2003).

In popular culture, entrepreneurship is understood as the organizational change brought about by entrepreneurs identifying market opportunities and converting innovations, culture, fashion and the like into commercialized products. It is possible to recognize two forms of entrepreneurship. The first is 'individual entrepreneurship', referring to initiatives and actions undertaken by individuals directly engaged in innovating, producing, manufacturing, or marketing cultural commodities such as music albums, movies, television programs, animation, computer games, and comics. A second form of entrepreneurship, which is relatively overlooked in the existing literature, is 'company-based entrepreneurship'. This refers to companies and organizations whose work depends ultimately on a form of *creativity* that must be handled carefully, extracted and mobilized as a part of corporate success. This 'company-based entrepreneurship' not only amounts to initiating new popular culture productions, but depends ultimately on recognizing, co-opting, and framing bottom-up creativity – both within and outside of the organization – before eventually turning it into a commercialized set of products.

Entrepreneurship in popular culture has several key characteristics. First, in popular culture, business entrepreneurship takes an especially innovative form and operates within certain structural and cultural conditions. On the one hand, the driving forces for entrepreneurs are essentially economic. Entrepreneurs in popular culture, like their counterparts in finance, trade, or industry, are forming new ventures and establishing new organizations in order to supply existing demand and generate profit. On the other hand, popular culture entrepreneurs work in an especially dynamic environment where consumers tend to change their mind swiftly, and where products have a very short marketing period (think, for example, about the marketing period of a music CD, a movie, or a television drama). Their work is affected not only by the macro-economic conditions that cause fluctuations in consumption, but also by the sometimes frantic changes in consumers' style and fashion. This has important organizational implications. Because of the innovative and swiftly changing environment, the large companies need to reconfigure themselves to act like small companies in terms of achieving market specialty and creating a close, even intimate familiarity with the consumers. In this business, entrepreneurs have to be on constant alert for new cultural trends and preferences, find creative ways to promote their initiatives, receive feedback from the market, and react swiftly.

A second important feature of the popular culture industries is the relative ease with which to realize the entrepreneurial vision. Because individual creativity is at the very heart of cultural work, it is easier to commodify and produce cultural creativity by relatively low-cost methods. Accessible digital equipment, such as cameras, music instruments, or video editing equipment, enables the initial realization of everyday creativity and reduces production costs, while the internet can facilitate the rudimentary marketing of packaged cultural content. In the popular culture business, there is also considerable autonomy for entrepreneurs to facilitate change, in contrast to the process of change in a traditional and rigid factory production line, which is fundamentally a rational, systematic, and highly organized process (Negus, 1992: 46). Entrepreneurship in the business of illegally reproducing and distributing popular culture commodities (as we shall see later, pirates are also entrepreneurs) exemplifies this process: in these operations, the

technology that enables the manufacturing and transfer of fake products is relatively simple, at least in comparison to more technologically advanced industries, such as automobiles and electronics. Think about pirated music albums, movies, and animation series. All that is needed is a recorder to burn pirated CDs, VCDs and DVDs, and a few VCRs to illegally record and distribute the products to awaiting consumers.

Third, because they are dealing with culture, the work of entrepreneurs has wider social and cultural implications for consumers. Unlike counterparts in other fields, in popular culture entrepreneurs not only generate value in the economic sense, but also value in terms of feelings, identifications, and perceptions. In other words, cultural commodities – more than other commodities – are likely to express new aspirations and provide the context for people to fulfill a wide range of social and personal attributes and purposes. Think, for example, about the role of Hollywood movies in introducing the 'American way of life', the Beatles representing British pop culture, or the impact of Japanese anime on the way youngsters in Asia become fascinated with Japan. After all, buying a pencil, a chair, or a television set is different from watching a movie, reading a comic book, or listening to music. The difference is in the way popular culture products promote messages and narratives, which has a wider potential to shape people's thoughts, identities, and even view of space (Story, 1999: 128). Entrepreneurs in popular culture, thus, not only construct mechanisms for commodifying and marketing popular culture, but unintentionally disseminate ideas, emotions, and sensibilities together with the commodities.

Corporate entrepreneurship: Japanese music and television companies in East Asia

Japanese music and television companies, which have expanded their operations into East Asia in recent decades, provide the first case study. Since the end of the 1980s, a few Japanese music and television companies have been synchronizing their businesses by looking for business expansion opportunities overseas. A growing number of them started to take an increasing interest in the emerging markets of East Asia and intensified their efforts to establish a presence there. Their expansion abroad initially took the form of collaboration with local companies and distributors who knew the local markets better. However, once they had obtained enough knowledge of the local markets, they gradually assembled efficient machinery of their own for exporting and commercializing their experience in cultural productions.

The entrepreneurial drive of these companies was based on generating profit in this region's emerging markets through utilizing knowledge and experience accumulated in Japan. In the 1990s, these companies were far superior to their East Asian counterparts in terms of commodification, production, and marketing, and were in a position to offer products and services which were not yet available in the local cultural markets. Companies like *Rojam, Amuse,* and *JET TV* became engaged in various television productions in East Asia during the 1990s, managed by an experienced team of Japanese producers. Their operations included recognizing media-related opportunities, initiating production using Japanese capital, public relation strategies and know-how, and marketing the final products to local audiences. An integral part of their work involved the usage of

Japanese-made cultural production formats, like Japanese pop idol style, 'trendy' television dramas, and variety shows, which were still relatively new in East Asia.

Take *Rojam*, for example. *Rojam*'s main strategy was based on the promotion of music and television exposure conjointly. The key person in *Rojam* is the famous Japanese music producer, Komuro Tetsuya. Once a singer himself, Komuro is one of Japan's leading pop music producers, considered by many a marketing genius who helped make the *Avex Trax* label one of the biggest forces in the Japanese music business. Komuro is personally responsible for the success of Japanese pop idols such as Amuro Namie, Kahara Tomomi, and Yoshida Masami. Komuro's idea was to utilize his experience in producing pop music in Asian markets. For that, he teamed up with the Hong Kong-based television station *TK News* to establish *Rojam*. In the 1990s, the company produced music talent programs, where popular taste was gauged and new talent was discovered, later to be produced, packaged, and offered to a variety of new credulous consumers. The exposure of some of Komuro's produced artists in *TK News* increased their popularity. The singing talent competitions that were produced using Komuro's know-how were broadcast on *TK News* and contributed to the station's popularity. But Komuro's entrepreneurial drive did not stop there and *Rojam* continues to looking for new opportunities. In 1999, riding on Shanghai's growing entertainment market, *Rojam* opened a discotheque in the city's luxurious Nanjing-Lu district, sponsoring DJ concerts and talent competitions, which were then relatively new in China.

Amuse is another good example. *Amuse* is a Japanese television company which established its own branches in Hong Kong in 1991, in China in 1995 and in South Korea in 2000 to explore media production opportunities. Its regional branches were especially active in promoting joint productions with local companies, targeting the Chinese-speaking markets. The *Amuse* branch in Hong Kong teamed up with local companies to co-produce various television programs in the 1990s. In China, together with *Shanghai TV*, *Amuse* co-produced a television documentary named *Shanghai People in Tokyo,* which was broadcast on Chinese television in 1995. The company's branch in China was actively engaged in finding and producing music pop stars by holding large open auditions in major cities in the country.

JET TV (Japan Entertainment Television) was another entrepreneurial attempt designed to sell Japanese musical and television content to the newly arising affluent middle-class audience in East Asia. *JET TV* was established in 1995, and until 1999 broadcast from its base in Singapore to seven destinations in the region: Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. *JET TV*'s broadcasts mainly included Japanese television dramas, variety shows, and cartoons, which were also dubbed into English, Mandarin, and Thai. *JET TV,* however, did not stay in Japanese hands for long, as it was eventually acquired by Taiwanese and Hong Kong-based companies in 1999 and in 2002.

For these companies, the entrance into East Asia was part of an intentional strategy which utilized their experience in managing and marketing commodified culture. The drive of these companies was based on a desire to generate profit in East Asia's newly expanding consumer markets by promoting their products and initiatives to audiences outside of Japan. Their importance, however, exceeds the mere

commercializing of products and services. They have affected the organizational aspect of popular culture in East Asia by disseminating cultural production formats which have gradually become a model for the local popular culture industries. In places like South Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan, Japanese cultural productions are seen as adaptable models and as a means for advancing local popular culture production (Otmazgin, 2008: 90–92). The most prominent example is the impact on Korean productions. In the so-called 'Korean Wave', Japanese production formats were extensively extracted and used in the production of Korean television dramas and Korean pop music (see, for example, Siriyuvasak and Shin, 2007).

Illegal entrepreneurship: East Asia's pirated markets

In East Asia, piracy[4] has played a major role in circulating popular culture commodities, bypassing governmental censorship and introducing new products to wider audiences at accessible prices. The popular culture pirating operations have flourished concurrently with East Asia's rising cultural consumption demands in the 1990s and were greatly assisted by the fact that territorial boundaries of culture have always been transient, making any attempt at legal control extremely difficult (Pang, 2006: 3). They were also helped by the laxity in enforcement by the local police in places like mainland China, Hong Kong, and Indonesia, and by the unwillingness of many governments in this region to combat piracy due to lack of awareness of the damage inflicted by intellectual property violations.

Entrepreneurship in manufacturing and marketing of pirated versions of popular culture products is especially noteworthy because entrepreneurs in this sector have managed to operate within two conflicting boundaries: a regime designed to regulate culture and legally define the work of the culture industries, and the demand of people who perpetuate 'copying' and buy cultural products in spite of them being illegal. However, the opportunities in East Asia's cultural markets compounded with the lack of an effective enforcement taskforce to supervise and tackle piracy provided the right incentives for entrepreneurship.

The manufacturing and marketing of pirated VCD versions of Japanese television dramas in Hong Kong provides a typical example. At the end of the 1990s, there was a high demand for Japanese television dramas even though many of them were not legally released for viewing in Hong Kong. Entrepreneurs soon recognized the opportunity and constructed an efficient mechanism not only for manufacturing and marketing pirated replicas of popular dramas, but also adjusted them to local needs by adding subtitles. These operators were capable of running their businesses with high capitalist efficiency and employing workers skilled in language translation, commercial design, and VCD production, as well as in packaging, smuggling, and marketing pirated merchandise. In this way, a replica of Japanese drama can be completed within one to two weeks after the drama has been broadcast on Japanese television (Davis and Yeh, 2004: 250; Hu, 2004: 211–215).

Another example is Taiwan. Here, entrepreneurial vision has also shown that it is possible to overcome political and historical disputes. In Taiwan, in spite of a ban on the importation of Japanese culture between 1974 and 1992,[5] Japanese popular culture

was widely present due to the lucrative market of pirated items containing Japanese television dramas, music, animation, fashion magazines, and manga. According to one witness, 'despite the official ban, Japanese songs and video programs can be heard and rented in every record and video rental store; Japanese fashion and information magazines (or their Chinese versions) are readily available, even from street vendors. Today [1991], Japanese language learning has shifted from the technical to the practical, from the pedagogical to the commonplace, suggesting a better knowledge and a stronger affiliation with contemporary Japan.' (Ching, 1996: 189). A vivid example, which demonstrates how resilient entrepreneurship in popular culture can be, is the reproduction and marketing of pirated VCR cassettes of Japanese television dramas. In the 1980s, Japanese NHK morning television dramas were extremely popular in Taiwan. These serialized television series depicting the lives of 'simple' Japanese, which were broadcast on Japanese television during the morning hours, were illegally recorded and immediately translated into Chinese by Taiwanese students while still in Japan. The translated tapes were then sent with passengers' luggage on regular flights to Taiwan. They were then passed on to contact persons there, reproduced, and offered for rent in local video-renting stores in Taipei on the evening of the same day! (This example is from Ishii, 2001: 26–27).

The case of South Korea reveals a similar story. The country, which experienced 36 years of colonization under Japan, has been sensitive to the inflow of Japanese culture and banned the importation of Japanese culture during most of the post-World War Ⅱ period. However, Japanese music, television programs, movies, and anime series, were often smuggled in, copied, and offered for sale at street stalls and stores. A few entrepreneurs have recognized the demand for Japanese popular culture but fearing the Korean governments' regulations have had to find creative ways to mediate. This was possible in Karaoke bars, for example, which offered Japanese music tunes without the Japanese lyrics themselves. The word 'karaoke', which was prohibited in public as a part of the Korean governments' censorship, was written in the Roman alphabet. Consequently, South Koreans did access Japanese music through karaoke, in spite of the ban (Otake and Hosokawa, 1998: 186–187).

Entrepreneurial operations in this field can be summarized as follows. First, the reduction of duplication and manufacturing costs by using cheap reproduction devices like DVD and VCD recorders. Second, bypassing or ignoring copyright infringements and formal regulations issued by the state. And third, the transfer of cheap replicas of cultural commodities to a new range of potential consumers through the utilization of local connections and intimate knowledge of the market. These operations clearly demonstrate entrepreneurship's ability to overcome formalities and supply market demand under politically restricted conditions, and even to transcend historical and political disputes which exist on a country-to-country level.

Collaborative entrepreneurship: Japanese-Korean co-productions

Since the end of the 1990s, a few collaboration attempts between Japanese and South Korean companies have been taking place, though high production costs still serve as an impediment, keeping these attempts in an embryonic stage. The importance of these

collaborations, rather, lies in their overall entrepreneurial exploration of the probability of a rise in Japanese-Korean cultural productions and in their attempt to provide the vision for the cultural industries to look beyond their immediate domestic market. The mere existence of Japanese-Korean collaborations is especially noteworthy given the contentious historical and political relations between these two countries. South Korea has a strong post-war legacy of objecting to the ideological and moral challenges that foreign cultures and lifestyles have instigated. In the Japanese case, traumatic memories from the time Japan imposed its own culture during its occupation and colonization of Korea are also compounded.

The Korean government, for its part, had taken defensive measures against the inflow of Japanese popular culture and banned its importation or sale until a gradual opening policy was introduced in 1998 by President Kim Dae-Jun, designating certain products to be allowed into the market as a part of normalizing relations with Japan (Yim, 2003: 143–144).

The cultural industries in both Japan and South Korea, however, continue to cooperate, mostly undisturbed by occasional disturbances of history and politics. This cooperation makes good economic sense. In economic terms, collaborations and co-productions in popular culture, which involve costly production and promotional campaigns, are a way of sharing risks against bad decisions. By producing something which is both 'Japanese' and 'Korean', the target audience immediately increases (the Japanese and Korean population together constitute over 175 million people, most of whom define themselves as middle-class). For Korean entrepreneurs, especially, looking beyond their immediate market is more of a necessity and they accordingly invest more than Japanese companies in integrating their activities in East Asia. This is because they do not have as big a domestic market as their Japanese counterparts. Thus, for South Korean companies the expansion abroad is their only way to significantly grow, while in the Japanese case, the domestic market remains the first priority (author interview, Marketing Manager, *Universal Music*, Seoul, 4 April 2005).

The case of the talented female singer Boa is perhaps the most successful example of Japanese-Korean collaboration, and demonstrates the potential of cross-border cultural productions. Boa is currently one of the most famous pop stars both in Japan and in South Korea. The young star, who is often referred to as 'Korea's Britney Spears', was born in South Korea but with the help of the management of a Japanese company, *Avex Trax*, debuted in Japan at the age of 13. Her phenomenal success in the Japanese market – the second biggest market in the world – was repeated in South Korea under the management of South Korea's *SM Entertainment*, one of the country's leading music companies. In 2002, the star was the first non-Japanese Asian singer ever to top a million sales in Japan, and since then she has released an album at a rate of almost one a year, all sung in Japanese and all charting highly, in tandem with releases in South Korea (*Robson,* 2009). Under the management of *SM Entertainment*, she is now attempting to break into the Chinese market. In a BBC interview aired on 1 August 2005, her agent declared that he wants Boa to be the number one pop star in Asia. Boa continues to be overwhelmingly popular in both Japan and South Korea even in times when the animosity between the two countries is high, which shows that collaboration in the making and marketing of music may not be disturbed by politics.

Boa's transnational appeal is not an entirely new trend. Japanese entrepreneurs, recognizing the marketing potential of Japanese music in East Asia, had been promoting Japanese music artists as 'Asian' idols even earlier. The success of Hamasaki Ayumi, one of the leading female Japanese singers, illustrates this strategy. Hamasaki Ayumi, the best selling Japanese music artist in East Asia, is considered by many as an Asian diva. Apart from commercializing her music, she frequently appears on commercials and advertising campaigns throughout this region. As a part of a strategy to popularize her music in East Asia, she occasionally arrives for promotional concerts. At the *MTV* 2002 awards show in Singapore, for example, she was featured in front of a crowd of 7,000 – and 150 million more households across Asia – dressed in a kimono she designed bearing the Chinese characters for 'love', 'peace' and 'future'. Following her publicized tour to Hong Kong and Singapore, her manager revealed that the singer's strategy is to gain an even larger following in Asian markets (*Cullen*, 2002). Other prominent Japanese music companies have attempted to market their artists as 'Asian', in order to achieve better sales in East Asia. Artists like Nakamori Akina, Amuro Namie, Hirai Ken, the duet *Chemistry,* and the boy bands *Wind* and *SMAP,* have attained superstar and cultural idol status that has exceeded their mere status as singers, often becoming fashion models for young East Asians.

In television, Japanese-Korean co-productions had less success. Their importance, however, lies not only in the productions themselves but also in tightening cooperation and providing a substantial framework for future collaborative projects. Relatively successful co-productions include television dramas such as *Friends* (2002), *Sonagi, an Afternoon Showers* [sic] (2002), and *Star's Echo* (2004). These dramas depicted youngsters' love stories, which transcend national boundaries, cultural differences and difficulties. In these dramas, the Japanese heroines and Korean heroes succeed in both their romance and work. *Friends* is a four-part mini-series co-produced by Korea's broadcasting company, MBC, and the Japanese TBS. When it was aired in February 2002 it drew great attention in the two countries, earning a 14.8 percent television rating in Japan and 17.5 percent in South Korea. *Sonagi, an Afternoon Showers* was simultaneously aired in Japan and Korea in November 2002 and received a 14.3 percent television rating in Japan and 13.2 percent in South Korea. *Star's Echo*, a two-part mini-series aired in January 2004 in Japan and South Korea, received a rating of 9.1 percent.[6]

The cases discussed above show that entrepreneurship can also come in the form of collaboration. The collaborations presented above were initiated and promoted by cultural industry personnel uninterested in history or politics. Rather, their aim was to develop their business and explore new producible materials. Nevertheless, they created commodities and genres that transcend country-to-country relations and may reach consumers beyond the protective shield of the state. These shared commodities can be consumed by different people in different countries and produce additional 'value' which is not merely economic.

Constellation-based entrepreneurship: music companies in Hong Kong and Singapore

In the East Asia of today, music companies are operating in a highly competitive environment. Facing a shrinking music market caused by piracy and illegal downloading,

they are forced to look for new ways to increase profit through lowered manufacturing costs, and by exploring new ways to reach consumers, and looking for new producible materials.

One of the ways to increase profit is to produce music constellation albums which include collections of songs by different artists. These albums, known as 'constellation albums', do not require the production of new materials but rather repackage existing songs. Constellation albums also have a wide marketing potential as they are offered to a wider set of audiences from different regional and linguistic boundaries.

A few entrepreneurs in Hong Kong have managed to produce successful constellation albums, offering them as 'Asian' music but in fact inventing a new musical genre. At *JVC*, for example, the workers managed to produce their own music collection in 2005, featuring the songs of some of the company's known artists. In an interview with the head of the office, he revealed that this was not an easy task: they had to coordinate the interests of the different artists and agents and go through long negotiations with the various copyright holders. He emphasized that producing this sort of album was their own idea and not a strategy initiated by the main office (author interview, General Manager, *JVC Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, 15 April 2004). Two other examples are *Sony Music Entertainment* and *EMI*, which launched their own constellation albums featuring each company's popular music artists, such as *Made in Japan* and *J Melon Pop Hits* (by *Sony*), and a series of albums called *Tokyo Café* (by *EMI*).

The *Avex Trax* branch in Hong Kong took the strategy a step further and in 2004 launched *The Best of J Pop*, a music CD with a VCD bonus. The album stayed in the top 10 of the foreign music chart in *HMV* shops for approximately three months (author interview, *HMV Marketing Managers*, Hong Kong, 17 April 2004). This album was not sold in Japan but from the very beginning focused on the Asian market, and as such was depicted as 'Asian' rather than 'Japanese' music. Following its success in Hong Kong, the album was further marketed in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan through the company's branches in these places. These constellation albums, it should be noted, are the result of bottom-up initiatives coming from people in the local branches of the music companies, and are not the result of a broader corporate strategy.

Sony Music Entertainment has also been attempting to create a new musical genre through initiating ground-level album productions. In 2004, the company produced a two-volume pop music collection featuring Japanese, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and South Korean music artists. The success of the album motivated the production of new volumes in 2005, including also Thai music. In an interview with a high-level *Sony* official in charge of strategic thinking in Asia, he revealed that the company's current attempts are to create a new, pan-Asian musical genre in order to market it among audiences from different national and linguistic areas in Asia. He believed that in the long term this market will develop. The company, thus, encourages its regional offices to produce constellation albums with an emphasis on transnational collaboration between music artists (author interview, Senior Director, *Sony Music Entertainment*, Hong Kong, 21 June 2005).

Another way for music companies in relatively small markets, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, to increase profits is through seeking new business expansion opportunities in Chinese-speaking markets. Hong Kong and Singapore are noteworthy cases given

their relatively small consumer market, being places of importation and consumption of popular culture rather than production and export. As Chua Beng Huat (2007: 286–287) explains about Singapore:

> As an overarching statement, it would be accurate to say that due to its small domestic market, Singapore is largely a consumption location for East Asian pop culture. It is a space inundated with television shows, movies, pop music, fashion, and food from all parts of East Asia. Consequently, Singapore's pop culture practitioners continue to insert themselves into industries and persistently invest in the regional entertainment economy.

In an interview with a high executive in the music industry in Singapore, he explained that the only way for the local music industry to survive in the global economy is to use its comparative advantage in the production of music. This, according to him, includes the existence of highly qualified creative and technical personnel, such as directors, sound engineers, camera operations, image editing, floor management, and design, as well as experienced producers who are able to mediate between the project and the wider cultural and economic surroundings (funding, market demands, distribution networks, etc.). Another advantage, he suggested, was to use Singapore's relative geographical and cultural proximity to both China and India, and the knowledge and information accumulated in Singapore about these markets, for marketing purposes. The task, according to him, is to persuade these markets that music artists from Singapore are not only 'Singaporean' but also 'Asian'. He thought that physical similarities between young East Asians (eyes, hair, body size) and behavior expressions (shyness and childlike excitement), made it easy to persuade Asians to accept Singaporean music artists as their own (author interview, Chief Executive Officer, Recording Industry Association, Singapore, 12 June 2004).

Conclusion

The propelling force beneath the operations described in this study is entrepreneurship in search of market expansion opportunities. As seen from the cases examined, company-based entrepreneurship is essentially the result of a bottom-up process of companies attempting to take advantage of the opportunities in the regional market by externalizing products and services, creating formal and informal production and distribution networks, expanding the reach of their marketing operations, and inventing new marketable genres. These companies are able to co-opt or recruit individual creativity, and then develop, frame, and turn it into a commercialized set of products.

From a wider theoretical perspective, the 'entrepreneurial company' can provide the model for the desired relations between individual creativity and organizational structure in creative and knowledge-based industries, such as the information, telecommunication, design, and software industries. Because the production of popular culture is premised upon the cultivation and valorization of *creativity*, there is considerable autonomy for producers and technicians, within certain formats and genres, which stands in contrast to the metaphor of a traditional and rigid factory production line characterized by rational, systematic, and highly organized processes (Negus, 1992: 46).

People who create popular culture, like musicians, animators, scriptwriters, and other artists often have their own schedules and cannot be effectively forced to work within 'usual' working hours. They often need to find their own stimulating work environment.

The entrepreneurial operations discussed in this article, which are fed by people's innovations, have managed to facilitate a high degree of intimacy between the individual creator and the commodifying agent and construct rather dynamic mechanisms for promoting creativity. These entrepreneurial operations have important direct and indirect consequences. First, they have an impact on the organizational aspect of popular culture and on the way markets for popular culture are being constructed. The exploration and initiatives of entrepreneurs – motivated by the search to expand the reach of their products and services – are paving new marketing routes, gauging new materials, and encouraging the establishment of transnational mechanisms for producing and delivering popular culture commodities. Hence, entrepreneurship in popular culture is, ultimately, the process of identifying market opportunities, converting innovations, culture, fashion and the like into commercialized products, and forming new organizational arrangements to support and manage these operations.

However, entrepreneurship in popular culture also has the potential to change the way people perceive their own culture. As we saw, entrepreneurs are experimenting with the probability of a rise of new cultural genres depicted as 'Asian', in order to market these among a wider set of audiences in different markets. However, as these new genres are depicted and commercialized as 'Asian' they provide the context for people to develop an 'Asian' recognition. They create a climate where consumers can develop a new imagined 'East Asia'. Stated differently, the impact of entrepreneurs in popular culture exceeds mere economics and constructs new frameworks for delivering images, ideas, and emotions. Even if pan-Asian entrepreneurship is based on the commercial desire to capture a larger audience, it can still invigorate feelings of belonging to the same cultural space and convince people in places like Hong Kong, Japan, Bangkok, and Jakarta that they live in the same culturally constructed realm.

In this context, researchers should pay closer attention to entrepreneurship's unintended consequences and not only look at their economic and organizational impact. As seen in the cases discussed, entrepreneurship produces values that are not only money or political power, but values in the sense of emotions, identifications, and perceptions. This might even have an impact on the regionalism process in East Asia as these operations disseminate commonalities of images and conceptions and spread feelings of affinity among those exposed to the same circulation of popular culture products depicted as 'Asian'.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   In this article, 'East Asia' consists of both north-east Asia and south-east Asia. This term especially refers to the urban centers of Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Thailand, and the Philippines.

2   In this article, 'commodification' is understood as a series of active relationships dedicated
    to the transformation and commercialization of artistic or cultural materials into massively
    marketed cultural commodities. This definition is different from the original definition of
    'commodification' associated with the radical critique of mass entertainment by the members
    of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, who used this term to express their disgust at the
    industrial convergence of art and creativity in consumer-oriented economies. According to
    their view, when art is being devalued by repackaging it into a mass consumption commodity,
    it loses its tradition, spirituality, and other supposed moral high ground (see Adorno, 1991;
    Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973).

3   A noteworthy attempt is Chua (2004) who argues that the construction of an East Asian popu-
    lar culture is based on the commercial desire to capture a larger audience within Asia. The
    concept of 'entrepreneurship' is, however, not developed further.

4   I use 'piracy' in the sense of what Laikwan Pang (2006: 4) called 'direct product copying'
    referring to the production, circulation, and reception of creative works as fixed products. This
    is to differentiate from 'idea copying', which refers to the copying of themes, styles, ideas,
    characters, plots, etc.

5   In Taiwan, the importation of Japanese music, movies and television programs was banned
    after Japan officially re-established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China
    in 1972. The ban has been gradually removed since 1993 upon the normalization of relations
    between the two countries.

6   *Friends* tells a romantic story between Jihoon (Korean idol Won Bin), a son in a conservative
    Korean family and Tomoko (Kyoko Fukada), a Japanese girl, who together overcome all dif-
    ferences and difficulties. *Sonagi, an Afternoon Showers* is a two-part romantic thriller, star-
    ring Ryoko Yonekura and Ji Jinhee. *Star's Echo* stars Noriko Nakagoshi and Cho Hyun-Jae,
    featuring transnational love relations between a Japanese heroine and a Korean hero. For a
    contextual analysis of these dramas see Lee (2004).

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