East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film

edited by Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-Fai. I. B. Tauris 2008. $89.00, hardcover; $31.00 paper. 272 pages

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Of the many recent publications on Asian cinemas, this volume stands out and fills an important void in transnational cinema studies. Many of the other books center on nations, genres, or trends, and even those that have globalization as a focus are nonetheless nation-based. With an emphasis on the mutating and the fluid, the editors position this volume in the ever-changing landscape of transnational film production and distribution. The concept of “mutating currencies of transnationality” (as expressed in the remake, the arthouse film, the cult/genre/auteur film, and the blockbuster) in transnational cinemas is a particularly useful one that speaks to both the recent phenomenon of the Asianization of Western films and the globalization of Asian films.¹

The editors frame one of the central questions—what is translatable?—by organizing the chapters around four sections that cover history, industry, crossover texts, and the Asianization of Western texts. Are there texts, for example, that are more “global” or translatable in nature and therefore more suitable for remakes? David Desser seems to think so in his chapter comparing Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai; Akira Kurosawa, 1954) with several notable remakes, both Japanese and otherwise (including an Indian remake). He argues that Seven Samurai was removed of cultural and historical specificities so that it was a text easily adaptable to other locales, historical moments, and even to outer space in the case of Samurai 7 (Toshifumi Takizawa, 2004), a sci-fi anime reimagination of the original.

Chapters from sections three and four in one way or another touch on the same question of translation and cross-cultural remakes. In “Remaking East Asia, Outsourcing Hollywood,” Gary Xu examines the recent trend of Hollywood’s remaking of popular East Asian titles and goes through some of the oft-cited reasons for their popularity, including the supernatural aura that defines some of the East Asian texts of the horror genre (such as Ringu [Hideo Nakata, 1998]). He concludes by arguing that the current trend of remaking Asian texts should be viewed in the context of Asia’s status as the world’s production center and that remaking therefore is Hollywood’s way of outsourcing. That said, Xu suggests the emergence of a trans–East Asian cinema as a counterrtrend in which East Asian filmmakers are collaborating to “assert an East Asian identity.”

The question of “translation” is also brilliantly examined by Adam Knee in his chapter, “Suriyothai Becomes Legend: National Identity as Global Currency.” This chapter compares and contrasts the original version of Suriyothai (Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2001) that was released in Thailand to the one that was released internationally; Knee provides a nuanced reading of what happens when “culturally specific” texts are removed from their initial contexts. Herein lies the irony and contradictions of how a “national” text needs to remain culturally specific so as to cater to an international art house cinema audience that desires to see the different and the exotic, while simultaneously being denationalized to remain readable and salable (or pre-salable) in a global film marketplace.

Section two of the book focuses on industry practices that contribute to the uniqueness of, and paradoxes associated with, different “national” film industries in the face of a rapidly changing global film market. Chris Howard’s chapter, “Contemporary South Korean Cinema: ‘National Conjunction’ and ‘Diversity,’” for example, examines specifically a phenomenon he terms “national conjunction,” in which the importance of the local film market in South Korea is viewed as a combination of “patriotic consumption” and the domination of the market by three major local distributors/exhibitors. Even recent efforts to diversify the local market in Korea are not without a “nationalistic” influence. In the discussion of a global film market in which the role of a “national” cinema is increasingly questioned, Howard’s chapter makes a strong argument for the important role of the nation and its cultural policies in shaping a national cinema in a transnational context. More specifically, in South Korea, where the film market is vertically integrated and oligopolistically structured, wide-releasing record-breaker films are turned into “national events,” raising important questions of the collusion between the film industry and the government. Nikki J. Y. Lee’s chapter, “Salute to Mr. Vengeance! The Making of a Transnational Auteur Park Chan-wook,” likewise argues that the nation is closely tied to the discourse of global cinema.

4 Ibid., 92.
Another issue raised in the volume is the tension between Hollywood and the East (e.g., Gary Needham’s chapter on Hong Kong musicals) and the localization of Hollywood genres. Who is borrowing from whom, and who is in the position of power to claim the original, become crucial in the locals’ effort to face up to Hollywood. The export and localization of Hollywood genres and the transmutated end products attest to the complexity of the process of reterritorialization.

The editors should be commended for their vision and presentation of this well-thought-out and well-edited volume. While the quality of work inevitably varies among chapters, the collection is in general very sophisticated. Leon Hunt’s chapter, “Asiaphilia, Asianisation, and the Gatekeeper Auteur: Quentin Tarantino and Luc Besson,” serves as an eloquent conclusion to some of the questions raised throughout the volume. Viewing them through the postcolonial concept of “yielding” and of the dynamics between the core and the peripheral, Hunt discusses Quentin Tarantino and Luc Besson as two very different kinds of “gatekeeper auteurs.” Hunt describes Luc Besson’s “art of displacement” and his role in shaping film d’action in France (especially via the text of District 13 [Banlieue 13; 2004]). More specifically, Hunt is concerned with how Frenchness is reinscribed in this genre that was inspired by the “spectacle of the real” displayed in the Thai film Ong-Bak (Prachya Pinkaew, 2003), which was in turn inspired by Jackie Chan’s Hong Kong action films. Tarantino’s role is linked to the intersection of technology and history as factors that differentiate the new cinephilia from the old. While Tarantino’s desire to both “be” Asian and “have” Asia is seen as “the fantasy of orientalist immersion,” and one that is “simultaneously reverent and aggressively territorial,” Luc Besson’s EuropaCorp films are, on the other hand, not viewed simply as opportunistic in their exploitation of popular Asian texts.

Focusing on the transvergent by examining “crossovers, remakes, hybrids and co-productions,” this timely collection addresses some of the most important and interesting issues facing an increasingly complex field of transnational Asian cinema studies, and contributes to a dialogue that is long overdue.

6 Ibid., 228.
7 Ibid., 233.