Return to / of the Political Popular in Cultural Studies in Asia

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Abstract

A major impetus for the flourishing of Cultural Studies in Asia in the early 1990s was the phenomenal economic growth in East Asia. One of the major consequences of this was a massive expansion of consumer culture. As a result, there emerged a significant transnational regionalization of media culture, including film, television drama, variety show, and pop music, engendering a rich body of academic research in East Asian pop culture. In contrast, as the East Asian developed economies enter a new phase of global capitalism, one characterized by recessions, the disappearance of jobs and outsourcing, stagnant wages and unemployment, asset hyperinflation, and rising income inequalities, the region has witnessed the emergence of an important form of extra-parliamentary street-level "politics of the popular" in the form of "occupy" movements. These movements provide Cultural Studies practitioners in Asia with the opportunity to return to the analysis of the "popular" as a cultural political concept.

Keywords: pop culture, popular culture, Stuart Hall, Sunflower Movement, Umbrella Movement

Introduction

Taking off from the concept of the "historical conjuncture," Larry Grossberg argues that Cultural Studies should be radically contextual, with the aim to intervene in the present.[1] To think a program of research projects for Cultural Studies in Asia necessitates that we examine the current historical configurations of societies in Asia as the immediate horizon of relevance. There are several elements in the current historical conjuncture in Asia that we need to consider.

First, with the exception of Japan, which was a colonizing imperial nation, China and Thailand, which were never colonized but suffered at the hands of colonial power of the West, all the other Asian nations are postcolonial nations.[2] All were trapped within the politics of the Cold War. The idea of the "Cold" War is Eurocentric because it was only in Europe that the two forces of communism and liberal democratic capitalism were at a stalemate. The confrontation between the two ideological blocs had resulted in very hot wars in East and Southeast Asia. From the beginning of the Korean War in 1950 until the end of the protracted decolonization liberation war in Vietnam in the early 1970s, every colonized nation in Asia experienced insurgency conflicts and civil wars between communists and coalitions of capitalist interests. By then, capitalism had already succeeded in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore; and socialism began its retreat in Asia, with China marketizing its planned economy in 1978.

Concomitant to the rise of capitalism in Asia as part of the globalization of capitalism was the collapse of the *real* socialism in the communist countries. At the end of the 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the symbolically very significant tearing down of the Berlin Wall reuniting Germany heralded the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism over communism/socialism. The collapse of "real" socialism in Europe spawned an entire academic subfield in political science of the so-called "democratic transition" theories: the assumption was that "liberal democratic capitalism" would be the teleological end of all modern states and when the entire world became liberal democratic and capitalist, it would be the "end of history."[3] With the rise of capitalism, the 1970s to mid-1990s was an optimistic time for East Asia. The

seemingly unstoppable double-digit economic growth and the rapid expansion of the middle class drove, first, the expansion of consumerism as everyday culture, and secondly, the expansion of civil society, the proliferation of NGOs and social movements which pushed for political democratization. These duel tendencies were most evident in Korea and Taiwan, which transitioned from military-backed authoritarian states to fully democratically-elected governments; not surprisingly, then, these two Asian countries were the poster-boys of the democratic transition theorists. The overall optimistic developments was conceptually and discursively represented as the dynamics of the "New Rich in Asia" by a group of left-leaning political economists who specialized in Southeast Asia—in the Asia Research Centre of Murdoch University in Western Australia. The Centre organized a series of workshops under the "New Rich in Asia" project, which resulted in five edited volumes entitled the *New Rich in Asia Series*, published from 1996 to 2001, covering issues of democratization and opposition politics, gender relations, industrial relations, consumerism, and everyday cultural practices.[4]

The historical conjuncture that motivated the political economic analysis of the "New Rich in Asia" project, interestingly, also motivated the inauguration of the critical moment in the development of Cultural Studies in Asia. In 1992 and 1995, Chen Kuan-hsing organized two major conferences in Taiwan, entitled Trajectories I and II, respectively. According to Chen, the background to the conferences was: first, the "shifting of gravity of the global economy towards the Asian continent, heralded by Japan in the 1980s, was later amplified by the so-called four tigers: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore…. It is already on the way to the Chinese mainland and will last for at least the next two or three decades." This global economic shift brought the whole of East Asia and, subsequently Southeast Asia, to global attention as academics and business and political leaders sought explanations for the rise of Asia in global capitalism.[5] Chen further pointed out that the changes that were taking place locally in Taiwan (and I would add in other localities) coincided "with the great transformation of Asia, the Third World, and the structure of global capitalism in the so-called 'post-Cold War Era.'" Finally, these changes posed "an urgent necessity to

understand the world in different terms, more flexible, more dynamic, and more explanatory. This set of problematics and concerns was the driving force behind the Trajectories project."[6] Selected essays from the two conferences were subsequently published in the edited volume, *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. From this beginning, the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies project grew from the publication of the academic journal, the inaugural issue in 2001, to include a bi-annual international conference, a bi-annual summer school for graduate students in Cultural Studies, and a summer camp for young Cultural Studies teachers; these events are held in different times and at different locations throughout Asia. More generally, the rather awkward concept of "inter-Asia" has been widely accepted and adopted by the global academic community and has now become a "conventional" idea. The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies project reflected the optimism of the rise of capitalism in Asia but maintained a critical attitude towards this rise, emphasizing the political element of contemporary cultural practices under globalized capitalism in Asia, which is why the project includes social movements as a central part of its programs.

Beyond the IACS project, however, it was the expansion of middle class consumption and the development of consumer culture that received the most productive attention. Partly because this was part of the larger globalization of consumer culture, some called this process the "democratization of luxury," something that was enabled by developing Asia as a low-cost production base for the mass production of European and American brand consumer goods, for distribution in areas which have reached a certain level of economic development and wealth. In response, consumption and consumerism emerged as a very active field of academic research; for example, there emerged studies in the semiotics of advertisements, food, fashion, and studies in all the modes of leisure and travel. In short, the concept of "consumption" was expanded to include both material and immaterial objects, such as media culture "consumption." A general theme was, not surprisingly, the relations between all these modes of consumption practices and middle class identities and subjectivities, including the ideas of "consumer sovereignty"[7] and of the "active audience" in the study of media

practices.[8]

The development of the idea of an "active audience" was picked up in media studies in Asia partly as a consequence of the regionalization of Japanese TV dramas and pop music in the early 1990s. This was followed in the 2000s by the so-called Korean Wave. The regionalization of both Japanese and Korean pop/media culture was enabled by the rapid advancement of the new media technology facilitating a variety of different modes of distribution, in broadcast and/or narrow-cast, personalized or anonymous, stationary or mobile, small, big, and super-big screens. Secondly, of equal significance, it was facilitated by the historically well-established regional distribution network of Chinese language pop cultural products embedded in the Chinese diaspora in East Asia and Southeast Asia, a network which has its beginning as far back as the early 20th century. Thirdly, the expansion of media pop culture consumption was enabled by the economic growth throughout the East Asia region and the expansion of consumption in general, even though this element has been implicitly taken for granted rather than explicitly considered in the analysis of media pop culture. The regionalization of flows, distribution, and consumption of East Asian pop/media cultures—TV, film, music, and games—quickly became a very active area of academic research and an important constitutive component of Cultural Studies in Asia. Through it all, the rising middle class, particularly the youth, has been represented as highly materialistic and an active participant in the rapid expansion of all modes of consumption, including pop/media culture.

Distancing Pop from Popular Cultures

Before proceeding with the proposal for an analysis of popular culture in Asia, it is necessary to note the analytical distinction between the concepts of "pop" and the "popular." Within the academic convention of media culture studies, it is common to treat the term "pop" as merely an abbreviation of the term, "popular." In this way, the designation of "pop" culture as "popular" culture, with the two terms generally used interchangeably. Drawing again on the work of the late Stuart Hall, I

suggest that the "pop" be analytically treated as a particular case of the "popular." In a short essay, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," Hall defined "popular" culture as the culture of the "masses," in contrast and in dialectical tension with "elite" culture.[9] Popular culture is learned organically as part of the "growing" up or socialization process which imparts to the subject his/her sense of identity in and of a community. Popular culture thus has no clear progenitor or origin; it is already "there" in the locale into which one is born; it is that which one acquires as one's own, as an "ordinary" member of the group. Hall argues that popular culture is constantly in resistance and in struggle with elite culture. Consequently, it is always at risk of being appropriated by the elite culture. Simultaneously, however, it has the revolutionary potential to overthrow the elite culture, as in the case of successful peasant rebellions; for example, the successful Communist Chinese revolution in which the peasantry destroyed both the urban-based KMT military regime and the feudal landlord-dominated society in one fell swoop.

   "Pop" culture, on the other hand, is constituted by commercial commodities that are consciously produced by capitalist enterprise for profit. Its primary purpose is mass entertainment. Instead of being organic to everyday life and learned over time as "tradition" or "cultural heritage," the constituents of pop culture are intentionally given very short life in circulation and use, in order to make room for the production, distribution, and consumption of the next cycle of products, so as to constantly generate profit and capital accumulation. As a generic category of cultural commodities, which may be said to embrace a wide range of items from film to TV programs to music to fashion and food, these commodities may be widely, and therefore popularly, consumed; this process serves to explain the collapsing of the term "pop" into the "popular." However, any specific and particular item of "pop" commodity, such as TV drama series, may actually generate very little consumer interest. It will therefore fail to be "popular" in the market. Indeed, in the pop culture business—films, songs, TV programs, and fashion designs—failures exceed successes, which is partly why successes are so celebrated. A commercial commodity is only concerned with a consumer's ability to pay, regardless of his/her social

class. Ideologically, rather than engaging intrinsically in political class struggle, critical theorists, such as Theodore Adorno, have argued that as a medium of mass entertainment, pop culture diffuses class tensions and produces a somnambulist acceptance of class divisions among the masses. This argument has now largely been displaced, if not rejected, by the idea of the "active" audience/consumer, who productively interprets and appropriates the "meaning" of the particular pop culture item for his/her instrumental reason and use.

It should be noted there have been historical instances where the "popular" and the "pop" have coalesced into a unified force for social change. The most memorable instance of this process in contemporary history would be the very important role pop music played in the 1960s student rebellion, the anti-war and the civil rights movements in the United States of America. It was a time when rock musicians sang of rebellion; their music became the anthems of the rebellious youth. However, even in such instances, the "political" and the "pop" remain distinct elements. This is evident from the fact that these pop music pieces have lives of their own as consumer commodities, outside the political movement. Bob Dylan continues to reproduce his 1960s "revolutionary" pieces in new compilation records for successive generations of his fans. As we shall see, the conceptual distinction between "pop" and "popular" culture is critically important for the analysis of the current politics of the youth in East Asia.

The Present Conjuncture in East Asia

In 1997, the seemingly unstoppable "turbo-charged" capitalist economic development abruptly came to an end in the Asian Regional Financial Crisis. The economic "restructuring" imposed by the multilateral financial organizations on the crisis-struck countries, such as South Korea and Indonesia, resulted in a severe economic recession, the rise in unemployment and a generally intensified hardship for all working people. The only positive outcome was the bringing down of the military-backed authoritarian regime of Suharto in Indonesia. By the beginning of the 21st century, the market economy has certainly

triumphed over the planned economy in Asia. However, the same cannot be said of liberal democracy. The universalizing desire of liberalism, particularly the American version, has been frustrated by the persistence of communist state structures in the Asian socialist nations, such as China and Vietnam. In the other Southeast Asian nations, the progress of liberal democracy has been disrupted by the resurgence of religiosity, particularly conservative Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia and conservative Buddhism in Myanmar and, to a lesser extent, Thailand.

Economically, since the early 2000s, the developed world, including the developed economies in Asia, has entered into a "growth without increased employment" phase of global finance capitalism. Technologies have replaced human labor in many areas of industrial and service production, creating unemployment for both middle age workers and the new young entrants into the labor market, as jobs disappear. Wealth has displaced labor as the most efficient means of capital accumulation; consequently, the rich get richer, middle class wages stagnate, and the working class suffers a declining income position, exacerbating income and social inequalities. In developed Asia, this new economic condition is compounded by the demographic transition characterized by a low birthrate, a low marriage rate, and a rapidly aging population; all of which point to a "slow growth" economy in the immediate future and beyond. Then, in 2008, global capitalism was hit by a global recession precipitated by the American sub-prime mortgage collapse, from which all economies are still recovering. Fortunately, the 1997 Asian Regional Financial Crisis was something of a forerunner of the 2008 global recession. The earlier crisis had forced many of the East Asian countries to restructure or otherwise reorganize their economies for greater resilience against financial shocks; in consequence, they have not been as affected by the 2008 recession, as certain of the Western European economies, such as the PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain). The optimism of the New Rich era is well and truly over. Middle class expansion is still progressing in the later wave of export-oriented economies, such as China, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam but has slowed down in the developed countries, such as Japan and Singapore. Inflation in real estate effectively put homeownership out of reach of successive

generations of the young, who face underemployment in low-wage jobs, the current so-called 22K Taiwan dollars starting salary or 880K Korean won jobs, or actual unemployment. Consumption has generally declined in the face of recession, in spite of the ubiquitous Chinese tourists roaming the world. The question is: what kinds of issues emerge under such changed conditions that are germane to Cultural Studies analysis? Among the possible issues, I want to address those related to the sphere of "popular culture." But, first, a methodological note.

Inter-Asia Referencing

To conceptualize inter-referencing Asia as methodology, we must first contrast it with a background of conventional East-West referencing. Take economic development, for instance. Capitalism has had more than two hundred years of history in the US and has an even longer and deeper history in Western Europe. In contrast, with the exception of Japan, capitalist industrialization in the rest of Asia began in earnest only in the early 1960s. Several of the Asian countries have been able to leapfrog into becoming complex industrial economies within one or two generations, lifting a significant proportion of the population out of poverty into an expanding middle class. With a historical temporal distance of more than two hundred years, little wonder in every instance of Asia-Euro America comparison, the Asian location will unavoidably come up short on a whole constellation of capitalist developments. As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, Asia ends up permanently in the "waiting room of history," either playing "catch-up" or performing a belated arrivalism relative to the West.[10]

   In contrast, Asian countries share approximately the same time line in capitalist development. Japan's export-oriented industrialization for the globalized market was quickly emulated by Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, and subsequently, by Malaysia and Thailand, then Indonesia, post-socialist Vietnam, and China. The contemporary economic landscape shows that the outcomes of these similar industrialization processes have achieved different levels of relative success across the region. Since the shared history of postcolonial

nationhood and late capitalist development places the Asian countries on relatively the same historical timeline, inter-referencing them is an exercise within a temporally coeval and historically horizontal frame, in contrast to the temporally distant and historically hierarchical frame of comparing Asia to Euro-America. Substantively, temporally coeval, structurally horizontal inter-Asia referencing enables an analyst to strategically identify specific instances in which comparison can meaningfully generate new insights and understanding of the relative social, cultural, economic, and political development in Asia.[11]

The Return of the Political Popular

One of the very fruitful developments in Cultural Studies in Asia during the halcyon days of rapid economic growth, consumerism, and the expansion of the middle class was the research into East Asian pop culture, particularly Japanese and Korean drama serials and pop music and their extension into the consumption of food, fashion, and tourism. By the end of the 2000s, the regionalization of Japanese and Korean pop culture has become "business-as-usual" for the producers, part of the routine programming on local television stations for regional importers, from China to Vietnam to Singapore. In consequence, for consumers, the "heat" and "excitement" of the "Korean Wave," for example, has cooled, with only the occasional blip when a particular serial or star catches fire. Meanwhile, towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, throughout the region, the economy has entered a different phase of global capitalism, especially within the developed economies: growth without increasing employment, rising income inequalities, the stagnation of middle-class income, and the threat of jobs lost because of technology and/or outsourcing, the receding affordability of hyper-inflated assets, especially housing, and above all else, the increasing plight of the underemployed and unemployed.

The prospect for the young in Asia has changed radically from those in the rapid growth years; the future had turned bleak. For example, in Singapore where unemployment is not a problem, those below their forties palpably feel two sets of emergent realities. First, they sense that

materially the most prosperous time for the nation is over, as the country faces intensified competition from other economies, domestically rising costs of living, hyper-inflated housing costs, even with subsidized public housing and from now on, low single-digit annual economic growth. Secondly, they have the existential sense of a loss of larger "meaning" as the major obstacles to nation-building appear to have been overcome. From now on, there is only the dull compulsion of struggling to make a living, albeit a materially rich one. In such conditions, where it has been argued that competitive politics had all but disappeared under the rule of the single hegemonic People's Action Party, which has enjoyed uninterrupted popular electoral support for the past five decades,[12] political competition returned to the center stage in this island-nation in 2011. In the general election that year, the Party suffered a visceral shock: it garnered only 60% of the popular votes cast and lost seven contested parliamentary seats. This was both the lowest proportion of the popular vote and the highest number of lost seats in its fifty-year history as a ruling party. Significantly, this "reemergence" of political contestation in Singapore has taken place within an orderly set of electoral procedures because the Singaporean electorate does not doubt the legitimacy of the state. The same cannot be said elsewhere in East Asia.

Elsewhere in Asia, where the ruling party has lost its political legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens for different reasons, political dissent perforce takes on extra-parliamentary dimensions, mostly as popular street protest, rallies, demonstrations, and occupations. In recent regional history, there have been student demonstrations in South Korea and Taiwan (the decade of the 1980s) that led to the democratization of these two countries: the People Power Revolution that successfully removed the kleptocratic Ferdinand Marcos from the presidency in the Philippines in 1986; the occupation of Tiananmen Square against the Chinese Communist Party leadership which ended tragically in 1989; the nightly anti-American beef candle-light vigil in Seoul (2008); close to a decade (2005-2014) of alternating Red and Yellow Shirt Movements in Bangkok, Thailand; and finally, the most recent instances of the Sunflower Student Movement or Occupy Taiwan Legislature Event in Taiwan and the Occupy Hong Kong Central "Umbrella" Movement,

both in 2014. All of these instances are "popular" movements in Hall's sense of the political "popular": they are mass movements from below that challenge the established elite politics. They were the result of the widespread erosion of public trust and credibility in institutional politics and the absence of the ability of these states to reform themselves due to the deeply institutionalized circulation of the same corrupt politicians in the state institutions, including in the incumbent ruling parties. The only alternative for reform became the direct democracy of the streets. This street-level extra-parliamentary politics as a widespread phenomenon provides us with the opportunity to think through the "politics of the popular" from a comparative perspective, inter-referencing the different historical and spatial points in Asia. For reasons of space, the following discussion will be limited to the Sunflower and the Umbrella Movements as illustrative examples of political popular analysis.

The Return to the Political Popular: Preliminary Observations on the Sunflower and Umbrella Movements

Undoubtedly, the most immediate reference points for both the Sunflower and Umbrella Movements were the larger Arab Spring movement that toppled several authoritarian governments in the Middle East and the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York that spawned occupation activities across the US and beyond. In particular, the Occupy Hong Kong Central draws its symbolic resonance from its New York counterpart. Closer to home, the Sunflower Movement and the Umbrella movement drew support and encouragement and sought tactical information exchanges from each other because they shared a common protest target. The Sunflower Movement was protesting against the progressive integration of the economies of Taiwan and China through a series of trade agreements, while the Umbrella Movement was protesting against the overall control that China exercises over Hong Kong politics and its other affairs, as a mode of internal colonization, the so-called "one country, two systems." Thus the protests against the respective local political institutions, the Kuomingtang (KMT) majority legislature and the Hong Kong Chief Executive Office are in reality a mediated step

towards the real target of the protests, China, which lays claim to both territories as its own. This larger context is ideologically constructed not only in terms of the sovereignty of Taiwan and Hong Kong as independent "nations" but also "communist authoritarianism," "liberal democracy," and "human rights"; the ideological contest of the Cold War is being re-inscribed over a local set of politics.

Students, including those who are too young to vote, featured prominently as the "leaders" and participants, especially in the Umbrella Movement, adding a new dimension to the politics of the popular. This development caught many observers and established and older local activists by surprise. In the case of the Umbrella Movement, the initial impetus to occupy the central area of Hong Kong came from a group of adult democracy activists, including an academic, a lawyer, and a church minister. However, they were beaten to the punch by the students and were subsequently forced to join the occupation earlier than they had planned. The high participation of youth has inscribed the two Movements with a definitive set of characteristics not seen in previous demonstrations, especially at the level of cultural-symbolic politics. In no particular order of importance, the following observations are offered as a rough sketch for particular research into the two Movements and, perhaps more generally, into the overall concept of an Occupy Politics.

First and most obviously, the presence of the youth suggests that this is politics of the future conducted in the present. In this instance, the explicit political themes of the two protests against the current ruling regime and ultimately against China appear to have provided a veil for the fear and anxiety of younger people regarding their uncertain economic future, in both locations. This "veiling" has enabled the youth to project their protest onto a larger screen and into a higher cause, namely "democracy" in the Umbrella Movement and the "economic survival" of small Taiwanese service industries in the Sunflower Movement. This greater social projection inscribed on the process a political correctness that, intentionally or otherwise, tended to displace the youth's legitimate grievous concerns about their future. If expressed centrally as the reason for the protest, like the explicit theme of the "99% against 1%" of the Occupy Movement in the US, such concerns

would render the youth vulnerable to accusation of irresponsible action, disrupting public and political order for their own selfish economic interests. Undoubtedly, the economic anxiety and the demand for more "accountable" politics were co-present in the two Movements, with the explicit political themes acting, perhaps, in Roland Barthes' semiotic vocabulary as an "alibi" for economic interests.[13]

Second, while there might have been initiators of the demonstrations, the "mass" that eventually formed and constituted the Movement was an inchoate gathering of participants, as individuals or as groups, with very different reasons for being there, from mere spectatorship, to commitment to the explicit political causes to the adrenalin rush of anticipated violence and other pleasures. For example, the large gathering that poured into Occupy Central after the police sprayed the students with pepper spray was clearly one without organization and leadership. The unfolding processes, *in situ*, transformed those gathered into a "crowd"—a statistical concentration of people is transformed into a "crowd" by a common focus—and subsequently, into a "mass" as a collective political force, ironically in the Maoist sense of the concept rather than the one used by Critical Theory to designate the "faceless" and "mindless" consumers of pop culture. The transformation into a mass movement was undoubtedly facilitated by the local and international media which consistently represented those gathered, pictorially and discursively, as a "whole," concretized with human faces of those who self-selected or who were selected by the media to represent the "mass," glossing over the ideological fissures and interest fragments that might exist. An ethnography of the occupy sites that can provide a synchronous descriptive analysis of the multitude of activities of the individual and group participants would be immensely valuable to our understanding of the *in situ* transformation from a statistical number of individuals to a crowd and then, a mass movement. For this purpose, the photographic and video recordings of the sites might be better suited to capture the simultaneity of the transformative processes.

One ethnographic element in the Umbrella Movement that prominently stood out were the rows of tables, constructed *in situ* by volunteer carpenters, at which the student-occupiers labored away at

their school work, part of the orderly behavior of the occupiers as a whole. The image, widely disseminated in the commercial and social media, was, of course, semiotically loaded: if minimally, it reinscribed the conventional belief that East Asian societies value education highly, it also suggested that the students, as responsible youth well aware of the importance of educational achievement for their financial future, nevertheless felt compelled to be at the occupation precisely because it was their future that was at stake. This tended to suppress the possible suggestion that they were at the occupation site for purely negative reasons. Finally, in contrast, the orderliness of the students' behavior implicitly referenced the unruly appearance of similar occupations elsewhere in the world.

Third, the two movements demonstrated an adeptness in using or manipulating the aesthetic-symbolic dimension inherent in political practices. For example, both movements quickly seized impromptu on objects, transforming them into symbols of the protest. The Umbrella symbol was the political elevation of the ordinary umbrella used by protestors to protect themselves against the weather and the pepper spray used on them by the police, an act that was instrumental in the mobilization of hitherto uninvolved Hong Kong citizens to join the occupation. In Taiwan, the sunflower was adopted as the movement's symbols after 1000 sunflowers were sent by a florist to the protesters, perhaps for his own reasons but possibly referencing the 1990 student demonstration for democracy, known as the Wild Lily Movement. This is because the demonstrators there wore lilies, and that flower was used as a symbol for democracy. Once elevated and adopted as the respective symbols of the two Movements, these symbols gain additional semiotic values, which are then inserted anew into the activities of the demonstrators. In addition, the occupiers and their sympathizers spontaneously generated a large number of poster art, strips or screens of Chinese calligraphic scripts and other art objects as representations or commentaries on the Movements. Fortunately, many of these spontaneous art products from the Umbrella Movement have been archived. This body of aesthetic-symbolic objects constitutes a rich source of texts for cultural studies analysis.

Fourth, in this age of social media, mass demonstrators are well aware of the need to actively promote their activities as "media events." In both Movements, all available electronic means for disseminating the visual images of the occupy site activities were pressed into use by the youth, who proved especially savvy with this social media. The constant streaming of visual images and texts were calculated to gain maximum media exposure and reportage. These instantaneous social media postings tended to generate a more intense affective response than the longer "hard" and "factual" printed news analysis. Obviously, analysis of the Movements must extend beyond an *in situ* ethnographies of cultural practices: it also needs to examine the social media representations of these events by the different parties and the effects they might have had on the unfolding of the different stages of the occupation.

Fifth, the "politics of the popular" intersected with the "popular of pop culture" in the appropriation of particular pop music pieces as unofficial "anthems" of the Occupy Movements: The Umbrella Movement adopted *Hai Kuo Tian Kong*, by the Canto-pop band Beyond and, the Cantonese version of *Do You Hear the People Sing*, from the popular stage musical *Les Misérables*; the Chinese title for the song loosely translates as *Who Has Not Awoken?* Meanwhile, the Sunflower Movement adopted *Island's Sunrise* (島嶼天光) by the indie band Fire Ex (滅火器樂團) from Kaohsiung. The melding of "pop" into "politics" within popular cultural appropriations showed that the demonstrators were not ignorant of pop music and that youth engagement in the two activities were not mutually exclusive. This raises the need for research that offers a more rounded, holistic representation of youth in Asia through their cultural practices.

A final significant feature of the two "occupy" movements was that the participants' lack of interest in the occupation of state power. This disinterest had its own logic: mass participation with multiple and individualized grievances—but one "convenient" target; a loose, organic organization without a dominant, centralized leadership. This collective was organized for a specific reason and duration and disperses when the objectives were achieved. Here, an important distinction between the two Movements should be noted, as it is potentially conceptually

consequential. The explicit goal of the Umbrella Movement was for a full franchise and a fully-open electoral contest for the position of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, without pre-qualified candidates sanctioned by the China central government. Nonetheless, it was clear to the occupiers from the start that they were unlikely to be successful in achieving their goal: this was an open secret of the Movement. In this sense, its goal was an abstraction rather than a concrete demand. This posed serious questions as to how the occupation could end "successfully" and, indeed, it ended with the court issuing an order for the removal of the occupation which was executed by the police with the use of force in some instances. In contrast, the Sunflower Movement had the very specific goal of preventing the KMT government from proceeding with the Cross-Straits Service Trade Agreement, which would allow service enterprises from China to enter the Taiwanese market, the fear being that the better capitalized Chinese enterprises would soon cannibalize the small local service industry businesses. The Movement was ultimately successful in stopping the railroading of the Agreement through the Taiwanese legislature, and the students were able to declare victory and end the occupation. These difference conclusions to the two Movements suggest that conceptually, it might be more useful to think of the Sunflower Movement as an instance of what Partha Chartterjee calls, "political society,"[14] constituted by a conventionally unrepresented group of individuals who come together united to protect or demand a specific common interest. According to Chartterjee, when the goal is achieved, the united political society disbands, disappearing again into invisibility.

Conclusion

One could suggest that a major impetus for the flourishing of Cultural Studies in Asia in the early 1990s was the phenomenal economic growth in East Asia which resulted in a major expansion of the middle class. One of the consequences of this economic growth was the massive expansion of consumer culture that was reflected in the improvement of material life across the region. One of most important components

of the expanding consumerism was the emergence of transnational regionalization of media culture, including film, television drama and variety show, and pop music, engendering a rich body of academic research in East Asian pop culture.[15] As the East Asian developed economies enter its current phase of global capitalism in the first decade of the 21st century, characterized by recessions, disappearance of jobs displaced by technologies and outsourcing, stagnant middle class wages and high level of youth unemployment and underemployment, asset hyperinflation, and increasingly rising income inequalities, the region witnessed the emergence of extra-parliamentary street level "politics of the popular" in the form of "occupy" movements. These movements provide Cultural Studies practitioners in Asia with opportunities to return to the analysis of the concept of the "popular" as a cultural political concept, an aspect of the concept that have been eclipsed by the emergence of regional pop culture in Asia. Some points of potentially fruitful analysis are suggested in this essay through a preliminary analysis of two occupy movements in 2014; namely, the Sunflower Student Movement or Occupy Taiwan Legislature Event in Taiwan and the Umbrella Movement or the Occupy Hong Kong Central Movement in Hong Kong. Finally, beyond the scope of this paper, these two Occupy Movements could be placed in a lineage of other occupy instances and together they provide us with substantive resources for inter-Asia referencing analysis to generated potentially new and different knowledge from conventional East-West comparisons with non-Asian locations.

Notes

[1] Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 8-9.

[2] Surprisingly, in spite of the popularity of postcolonial theory with South Asian Cultural Studies scholars, the postcoloniality of East and Southeast Asia is seldom invoked, let alone theorized by Cultural Studies practitioners in East and Southeast Asia.

[3] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), xi-xxiii

[4] The volumes include Richard Robison and David Brown, *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonalds and Middle-Class Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1996); Garry Rodan, ed., *Political Organization in Industrializing Asia* (London: Routledge, 1996); Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens, eds., *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia* (London: Routledge, 1998); Michael Pinches, ed., *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia* (London: Routledge, 1999); Chua Beng Huat, ed., *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities* (London: Routledge, 2000); Jane Hutchinson and Andrew Brown, eds., *Organizing Labour in Globalizing Asia* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[5] See Wei-Ming Tu, ed., *The Triadic Chord: Confucian Ethics, Industrial East Asia and Max Weber* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophy, 1991).

[6] Chen Kuan-Hsing, "Preface: The Trajectories Project," in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Chen Kuan-Hsing (London: Routledge, 1998), xiii-xvi.

[7] Russell Keat, N. Whiteley, and N. Abercrombie, eds., *The Authority of the Consumer* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-5.

[8] A classic empirically-based study of the active audience is Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Operas and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methune, 1985).

[9] Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London: Person, 2007), 455-66.

[10] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 8.

[11] The logic of inter-referencing Asia has been elaborated by Chen Kuan-Hsing, *Asia as Method: towards Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 211-56; and Aihwa Ong, *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments or the Art of Being Global* (Malden: Blackwell, 2011), 13-14; I provide empirical examples in Chua Beng Huat, "Inter-referencing Southeast Asia: Absence, Resonance and Provocation," in *Methodology and Research Practices in Southeast Asian Studies*, ed. M. Huotari, J. Ruland, and J. Schlehe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 273-88.

[12] Chua Beng Huat, ed., *Communitarian Politics and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 41-56.

[13] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 131-37

[14] Partha Chatterjee, "Community in the East," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 6 (1998): 277-82.

[15] Chua Beng Huat, *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).