

ESSAY 4

“COOL” ASIA IN A LOCAL CONTEXT: East Asian popular culture in a New Zealand classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Of course popular culture matters, and East Asian popular culture, in particular, matters greatly. During the past two decades, popular culture produced in East Asia has been widely disseminated and consumed all around the world. The study of East Asian popular culture became an integrated part of the education curriculum. Popular culture courses are successfully integrated in tertiary academic curricula all around the world. Currently all universities in New Zealand, except one,¹ offer at least one Asian popular culture course of some kind as part of Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Language and Literature, Anthropology, Arts and Design, Asian Studies, and occasionally Sociology and History. This reflects a multidisciplinary approach to the study of popular culture, providing an opportunity to analyse popular culture through different methodologies, asking different research questions and serving different agendas.

The study of popular culture offers multiple ways to engage multiple/different objects of study that often underpin, but are ignored by mainstream education. Popular culture can be used as a lens through which to examine societies' history, culture, politics, literature, music and any sphere of public life. If we study popular culture in ways that link students' interests with pop culture on one hand, and the object of study with a disciplinary orientation (social theory, literary critique, political theory, economic theory, historiography, communication studies) on the other, we can encourage the development of self-reflexive readings of both the origins' and the hosts' cultural engagements. In this essay, I will explore how teaching of popular culture using examples from East Asian popular culture and especially visual media has contributed towards constructing cultural identity of the students enrolled in the undergraduate course titled 'East meets West: East Asian Popular Culture and Its impact on the West'. The underpinning question

¹ Lincoln University is a predominantly agricultural, business and environmental studies institution and does not have many social science or humanities courses including any popular culture related courses.

is: What is the relationship between New Zealand students' exposure to East Asian popular culture icons and their self-constructed 'Kiwi' cultural identities?

EAST ASIAN POPULAR CULTURE IN CLASSROOM CONTEXT

The study of popular culture is firmly embedded in academic discourse and popular culture courses are in demand from students as never before. Still, the pedagogy of popular culture remains predominantly ignored by academics. Possibly there is something 'uncool' in looking at pedagogy, even if it is pedagogy of popular culture, when you can actually analyse 'cool' popular culture itself. Henry Giroux made a similar observation in 1994 when he asked: "What is it about pedagogy that allows cultural studies theorists to ignore it?" (Giroux, 1994, p. 130). Since then a number of publications on pedagogy of popular culture, mainly from the United States and the United Kingdom appeared in the 1990s and 2000s. The majority of these works are edited volumes based on practitioners' experiences of integrating popular culture in their teaching, and popular culture engagement with critical pedagogy (Tisdell and Thomson, 2007; Dasgupta and Weaver, 1999; Buckingham, 1998; White and Walker, 2008). Two publications by Henry Giroux himself, *Disturbing pleasures, learning popular culture* (1994) and *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education* (1993), introduced some pathways for combining his theories of education, critical pedagogy and popular culture in the classroom and beyond. These small steps notwithstanding, because a growing number of academics have embarked on the path of introducing popular culture to their students, some hard questions about the pedagogy of popular culture still have to be answered².

The central issue is not only what can every discipline learn from popular culture, but also how can popular culture become a successful tool of learning for different disciplines. The fact that it is such an attractive tool of learning for students does not make it easier to answer the question of what we, as teachers of popular culture, want our students to learn and understand when we use this powerful tool in our classroom.

The course *East Meets West* was introduced in 2003 as a part of a suite of 'global electives' for all students enrolled in degree level programmes, e.g. Marketing, Business Management, Sports Management, Communication Studies etc at Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand. However, the majority taking the course were Bachelor of Arts [BA] students majoring in Japanese, Chinese or European languages. Some students were choosing to study Asian languages and, first of all, Japanese language to satisfy their obsession with East Asian popular culture. Japanese popular culture certainly played a key role, but interest in popular culture from other East Asian countries was equally present. Since 2010 the majority of students enrolled in this course were students enrolled

² A similar observation is made by those authors who have written on the subject of East Asian popular culture pedagogy. See, for example, Mark McLelland (2013) and William M. Tsutsui (2013)

in Communication Studies. Similarly to the BA students, their interest in this course was equally determined by their previous engagement with East Asian popular culture.

The aim of the course has been to explore the influence of East Asian popular culture on the Western popular culture. The main emphasis was on visual popular culture, e.g. anime, film, advertising or street fashion. However, other genres or types of popular culture were also considered. This course was an integrated part of Asian Studies, and was thematically linked with three other courses, including *Introduction to East Asian History*, *Contemporary East Asian Society* and *Doing Business in East Asia*. If students had been exposed to history, sociology, politics and business studies in East Asia, then there was a knowledge base for me to work with. This meant that teaching about topics that were perceived to be 'fun' had the potential to develop interesting and culturally esoteric responses from students, as we see below. Not only would students who enjoyed East Asian pop culture get to see more of it in class, at home, in cinemas, and in their city, they would also learn how to locate it within the context of globalisation, and appreciate it in the context of their own cultural identities.

People in the West, including New Zealand, often unconsciously become attracted to cultural products from East Asia due to its ubiquity. In class we tried to contextualise such an interest by answering the following questions: What does this consumption of East Asian popular culture really mean? What does it tell us, not only about the popular culture itself, but about us as consumers of this culture? How do we understand different popular cultural genres produced in a very different and unfamiliar cultural context? The course was not just about popular culture produced in the local context, which makes it more familiar, but about popular culture produced in East Asia. From the start I was interested to find out if these cultural differences manifest in popular culture actually mattered for my students. Had they even noticed them? And, if the students noticed these differences, how could they explain them? The underlying question for me, as I was developing the course, was to unpack the meanings behind my students' choice or interest in certain popular culture products. Influenced by the inspiring ideas of the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and others, the course *East meets West* has been my chance to explore the relationship of pedagogy to the popular culture of East Asia.

The attractiveness of teaching popular cultural for me was not just in the motivational role of popular culture, which made learning more attractive for the students, but in establishing a learning environment that enabled students to locate themselves in a social, cultural and historical environment, and to evaluate this environment with the help of East Asian popular culture. One of the underlying motives of critical pedagogy is "understanding how student identities, cultures, and experiences provide the basis for learning" (Giroux, 1993, p.182). My aim was to try to unpack students' reading of popular culture texts, and to identify possible links between the text and their cultural identity. The choice of popular culture was determined by the course aims, to explore

the transnational flow of East Asian popular culture to the West. To achieve these aims, the students were invited to contrast movies produced in East Asia with some Western movies that were potentially influenced by Asian cinema, or simply by Asia, or vice versa, e.g. *Akira* (Otomo Katsuhira, 1988) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Anno Hideaki, 1995-96) and *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999), *Shall We Dance?* (Suo Masayuki, 1996) the 1996 Japanese film with its 2004 American remake (Peter Chelsom, 2004), *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki Hayao, 1997) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009). There were also films with Bruce Lee, Jacky Chan and Jet Li to discuss the development of the Martial Arts movie genre and its popularity among the Western audience. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (Quentin Tarantino, *Kill Bill*, Volume 1, 2003; *Kill Bill*, Volume 2, 2004) was the natural choice of a Western movie influenced by Martial Arts; just remember the yellow sports costume that Uma Thurman wore, a total replica of the Bruce Lee yellow costume from the iconic *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973). Chinese films included *The Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994), *Farewell my Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993), *The Road Home* (Zhang Yimou, 1999), *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2004) and *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, 2004) - the directors of all these films belong to China's 5th generation of filmmakers. These filmmakers grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and witnessed some dramatic moments in recent Chinese history, including the Cultural Revolution, which are often reflected in their films. Among the Korean films studied were *Shiri* (Kang Je-Gyu, 1999), *Joint Security Area* (Park Chan-Wook, 2005), *Chihwaseon* (Im Kwon-taek, 2002) and *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003) from *The Vengeance Trilogy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003-2005) to introduce the Korean wave. Also there were a number of Western films that were set in Asian countries, or were linked with Asia and Asian cultures. Among these films were the well-known *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003), *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003), the Disney cartoon *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft, Barry Cook, 1998) and the less well known Australian film *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003). Said's concept of orientalism helped to analyse some of these Western movies with Asian themes and to depict how certain stereotypes about East Asia and the 'us-other' dichotomy are reproduced in these films (1978).

My initial concern about the need to update this course with ever changing popular culture products proved not to be a problem, as my students often acted as my advisors. They brought new films every year including some that have not even been dubbed in English. When a new *Karate Kid* (Harald Zwart) film was released in 2010, the students suggested it should be contrasted with the original 1983 (John Avildsen) film. *The Ip Man* (Wilson Yip, 2008-2013) trilogy, when the first film was released in 2008, became another 'must'. Negotiating the film list for the course brought students a feeling of empowerment and satisfaction.

The course assessment included a research project in which the incorporation of one aspect or genre of East Asian popular culture into the New Zealand context was considered. The list of specific questions allowed students to explore

the impact of the chosen popular culture genre on the West, mainly on New Zealand, and also to reflect on their own choice of a particular popular culture genre. For many students this assignment provided an opportunity to reflect on their own fandom as they usually choose the object of their own passion for analysis. For quite a number of students it became very important to be self-reflective in explaining their own connection with popular culture, and in some cases the impact of East Asian popular culture on their cultural identity. In their essays students made a variety of links between East Asian popular culture and their own cultural identity by localising global popular culture.

CULTURAL SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND POP CULTURE

Martial arts movies are always favoured by students. In the words of one of them:

As a child, growing up in Northland, we never had mentors or advisors around to inspire us. Therefore, watching Chinese Martial Arts movies inspired my entire neighbourhood in Tikipunga, Whangarei, to take up Kung-Fu in our backyards in an attempt to emulate what we saw on-screen. During this period, the absence of father figures led Kiwi children of different ethnic backgrounds to look up to or admire Kung Fu actors, so in turn, they adopted martial artists as symbols of inspiration and security. Māori culture has a rich history of ancestral warriors yet modern families never had 'warriors' around to protect them and their homes. Hence the attraction of a one man army protecting his people and culture was found in the majority of Chinese martial art films. Martial art movies were seen as a form of escapism from real life and, in extreme cases, the characters seemed mythical and mysterious.³

There is strong interrelationship between Chinese martial arts movies and the (self)exploration of personal cultural identity of the writer. The absence of fathers in some families, the identification of a clear gap between Māori warrior culture and the absence of such 'warrior' figures or role models in real life, not only attracted Māori youth and especially boys to the particular genre, but also influenced their own cultural identity. Analysing Bruce Lee movies the same student suggests:

[Martial arts films] had an impact on my friends and family, growing up in an environment where domestic violence was common. Bruce Lee films inspired us to learn self-defence and teach our friends how to defend themselves from their violent parents. This engagement with my peers made us closer, increasing the soft-power of Chinese martial arts films in our minds.

³ All quotations in this paper are from assignments written by students during 2011 and 2012 and used with the permission of the authors. The names and personal characteristics that can identify the authors have been removed.

This engagement with the text and the course expressed in self-reflective writing, positioned this student as cultural producer and enabled him to rewrite his own cultural experience or cultural identification through an engagement with East Asian popular culture. The meaning of martial arts movies as a particular genre has expanded through the student's interpretation, and brought it into the context of Māori culture. The motif of a warrior, who protects his/her family and his/her culture, is at the centre of this discourse. Martial arts movies provided this particular student and his peers with the role model of a fictitious warrior, who protected their idea of home, and also protected themselves from violence in their own homes. The proximity to East Asian popular culture is seen through appropriation of martial arts movies and constructing a hybridised identity. This brings together martial arts warrior culture and Māori warrior culture, which the student had heard about but had not experienced in reality, and this was the main motif of this essay, also found in work by other students.

In a different essay by another student, the particular case of a group of young Māori men was chosen, inspired by Dragon Ball Z [DBZ]. This is one of the most well-known Japanese anime, and the young men formed their own touch rugby team, the Saiyans Touch club, in the New Zealand city of Hamilton. The Saiyans are a naturally aggressive warrior race who play an important part in DBZ. The show's protagonist, Goku, belongs to this race himself. These men came to Hamilton to study at Waikato University and found themselves away from home and from their families. At a time when New Zealand rugby players had become a popular sporting commodity all around the world, including Japan, due to their sporting excellence, local Māori men drew inspiration from anime characters, even though these characters do not know how to play rugby. One of the founding members of the Saiyans Touch club explains the reason behind this club:

We all saw ourselves as being set apart from others, for a few reasons. Mainly we were Māori and on similar wave lengths at the time i.e. into our sports, social life we did together. We were kind of new to the Hamilton touch scene, we knew about the top two teams 'Xmen' and 'Tamatoa', who also tried to recruit us. But we thought we could make the competition more interesting by putting in our team; and since we all like watching DBZ the 'Saiyans' were hatched.

Similar to the first essay the author clearly positions herself or, more accurately, the group of young Māori men whom she describes, in the context of Japanese popular culture. The young men were her brothers. She discusses a new hybridised identity that emerges through problematising the relationship between the local Māori culture of New Zealand and the global phenomena of DBZ. Young Māori men were attracted to DBZ by a warrior culture displayed by DBZ characters and a strong feeling of belonging, brotherhood, family, whānau⁴, difference, but still very inclusive to those who were willing to share their interests and passion for touch rugby, and for DBZ.

⁴ Whānau is the Maori word for extended family that often include not just blood relatives.

Japanese car drifting culture in New Zealand was a topic of a different essay which again, similar to the previous examples, focused on a personal story of car drifting enthusiasts. This essay became more of an analysis of youth cultures in two countries, Japan and New Zealand. The student's lived experiences were written into her essay:

In a conversation that I had with Marve K'reem, one of the car enthusiasts at the gathering, he commented on the importance of modifying a car to make it individual so that it reflects his personality (Personal conversation, 8 August 2012)... Marve mentioned modifying the car himself makes the experience worthwhile and somewhat rewarding. He enjoys people appreciating his car, and showing off, he does not mind taking chances and taking part in illegal drifting to earn street status even if it means being caught by the police.

Echoing de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), the focus shifted in this essay from the producer/product, which originated in Japan in the 1970s within the car drifting culture, to the consumer(s), who became an active 'producer of consumption'. In her essay the student described the 'original' car drifting culture of Japan, and its arrival in New Zealand in the mid-1990s, when a group of Asian friends started to modify their cars and race around the rural roads around Auckland. However, the most interesting part of the essay is when the student introduced her ethnographic observation:

I had the privilege of spending a few hours on the back road between Hamilton and Cambridge with a group of young adults. They let me into their circle to ask questions and observe their drifting skills. While at the gathering, I did notice that some cars had neither registration nor warrant of fitness, because of illegal modifications. Most cars are only driven at night in rural areas; they have back roads they use so as not to be spotted by the police. The Land Transport Authority "Unauthorised Street and Drag Racing Amendment Act 2003" was passed, giving police the power to impound vehicles they suspect have engaged in illegal street racing or sustained loss of traction (also known as burnouts)" (New Zealand Police, 2012).

The shift from the description of a particular popular culture genre that originated in East Asia, which is the assignment requirement, to the personal story, where students describe their own, wants, needs, fears and desires through their engagement with East Asian popular culture made their connection with East Asia very personal and brought deeper meaning to them. This was not any longer a course about 'them', about East Asia and popular culture produced over 'there'. It became an opportunity to reflect about 'us' as students wrote about their own fears, hopes and every day practices where East Asian popular culture was strongly present. It was a clear transformation from active consumers to producers of hybridised forms of popular culture. The analysis of the student's writing follows James Clifford's description of cultures that cannot be found in stable "roots", but in "routes" that appear through various cultural

interconnections (Clifford, 1997). The course became a journey for discussing their own cultural identity through the means of East Asian popular culture.

Students' interest in East Asian popular culture manifested itself through a variety of topics students chose for their assignment. One of the students wrote her essay about an East Asian precinct packed with various shops, the majority of which were selling food along Teed Street in Newmarket, Auckland, a trendy district in the heart of the city. A simple engagement with the theory provides an important insight into the student's search for the meaning of Asia, 'Asians', and for her own cultural identity. In the student's words:

Orientalism explains the pre-existing knowledge of the Western people about Asia. I have mentioned Orientalism in this essay because Kiwi did not accept Asians at first. They were surrounded by the knowledge they already had about Asians, this knowledge was spread around the world by people from Western countries. I did not think about it at first, but when I was talking to a friend, I realised that when one visits an Asian shop on Teed Street, they do not say: "I am going to buy something from the vegetable shop." They just say, "I am going to the Asian vegetable shop." There is not any other vegetable shop in Newmarket except Asian shops. Why to say this?

Then I realised that this knowledge that Westerners have about Asia is wrong. For me, being an Asian myself, I never use this word for myself and I have never heard someone from Korea, Japan or China, say that they are Asian. I do agree that Asia is the continent from where Asian people came from. But in my view the word 'Asian' is given by Westerners to describe people from Asia because they cannot differentiate them. There are many countries which are part of Asia and Westerners cannot name each of them. So making the process easy for themselves, they started calling all the people from Asia, 'Asians'.

The East Asian shopping precinct as a choice of popular culture was perfectly justified. Packed with Asian shops, Teed Street is a popular 'place' where 'Asian' people come to buy their groceries, visit a Chinese doctor, eat at one of the local Asian restaurants, or simply meet with friends. The place always feels crowded with shops, goods and people, creating an image of being on the streets of an Asian city. It is also very close to Broadway, the main shopping street of Newmarket, occupied by various clothing, accessories and design shops. Teed Street, with its strong smell of Asian food, represents an Asian backyard of Newmarket, which is so close and so far away from the much more Westernised Broadway.

The place constructs a sense of hybridised Asia, home, for Asian people, and on the other hand, it creates a sense of 'other' for non-Asians that was expressed in the student's essay. The student uses Said's orientalism rather simplistically to explain the feeling of prejudice that was expressed very mildly

in the language that non-Asians choose: "I am going to the Asian vegetable shop." This simplistic engagement with orientalism helps the student also to understand why she may feel uncomfortable if she is labelled in New Zealand as 'Asian', and expands her thinking about 'others' of a different race or ethnic group.

Not all students were able to engage with cultural texts at such a personal level, but the majority definitely did. The engagement with East Asian popular culture created the possibility for many of these students to question their own cultural identity or identity of their friends and/or family, who were the subject of their essays/stories. This brings me back to the early days of popular culture studies. The Frankfurt School's critical theorist Theodor Adorno argued that the cultural industry had become the controlling mechanism over the masses (Adorno, 1973 and 1991). According to Adorno, the dominant culture subjugates the masses who are incapable of critical thinking, making them passive consumers unable to think consciously and to critique popular culture texts and messages. However, the work of these students showed how they construct their own meanings by using popular culture from East Asia creating a counterargument to Adorno's views. Their reading of cultural texts depends on their past experiences, their interests, their positionality (their ethnicity, gender, socio-economic group and sexual orientation), as well as the dominant culture. What is worth noting here is that through their writing experience these students were able to negotiate their own cultural identity and to ask some hard questions about race, ethnicity, gender and social order. The students' appropriation of East Asian popular culture was a reminder of the Gramscian view, that what is important about popular culture is not its aesthetics but its politics. For Gramsci popular culture represents conflict, where individuals become involved in negotiating power relations (Gramsci, 1971).

CONCLUSIONS

The course on East Asian popular culture evolved from another course that taught students about the complexities of contemporary East Asian societies and the relations of East Asia with the West using popular culture as an example. It became a course that allowed students to better understand themselves or, at least, to ask some hard questions through their engagement in East Asian popular culture. This brings me to the question about the role of this course in the undergraduate curriculum. Popular culture constitutes a part of social life where both producers and consumers of culture are actively involved in an interpretation of culture, often constructing very different meanings. The students enrolled in this course reminded me exactly of this reality.

The focus of the course gradually shifted from teaching about East Asia to a self-exploration of the students' own cultural identity through engagement with East Asian popular culture. As such, the disturbing pleasures discussed by Giroux associated with teaching popular culture became even stronger for me. Bringing popular culture into the classroom provides opportunities for educators to engage in interdisciplinary enquiry and to explore new theoretical territories, while engaging with critical pedagogy. Last, but obviously not least, the course is simply a joy to teach when your students experience a series of epiphanies while discovering East Asian popular culture; as well as themselves.

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