Introduction

Historicizing globalization—Popular musics in Asia and beyond

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This Special Issue of Global Media and China focuses on popular music, an influential form of contemporary media culture, studied through a unique mixture of theoretical analysis and multidimensional methodologies. The aim is to contribute to broadening the field of global media studies, opening it to a variety of music-related disciplines and debates that allow us to gain more insights into changes occurring during processes of globalization. At a time when globalization has been challenged by political and commercial conflicts, theoretical arguments about digital gaps and the digital divide (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Watkins, 2012), and critiques of data universalism (Milan & Treré, 2019), we argue for a greater historicizing of the global media and popular music culture through the theoretical interventions and empirical studies in this Special Issue.

Popular music has been an important research field within media, communication, and cultural studies. The circulation of recorded and performed music has been linked to the globalizing mass media of radio, film, and television since early in the 20th century. As a form of techno-culture, and now digital-culture, popular music has undergone several turning points of media formats—from LP, cassette, and CD to streamed content on digital platforms—and these have greatly affected musicians, performers, listeners, governments, and industries. The impact of these media formats has received most coverage in discussions of popular music and digitalization.

However, there is a general tendency for studies of media to emphasize contemporary cultural phenomena and technologies while ignoring historical lineages or the trajectories of development. By historicizing globalization through the study of popular music, we mean that greater attention should be paid to contextualizing the research objects in a specific time and place. Locating this within a diachronic perspective of change and continuity would allow media researchers to fill the gaps between various historical narratives about different regions, genres, and communities. A historical perspective can also help us to develop more dynamic maps of the geographical flows of popular music and media across Asia.

The global flows of popular musics into, across, and out from Asia have been theorized according to different perspectives and models, from cultural imperialism to cultural globalization, to Asianization.
The concept of cultural imperialism, according to Dave Laing, developed as an idea of the left describing the cultural analog of international political domination. “It depends,” argued Laing (1986), “on an analogy between the historical colonizing role of Western nations in politically subjugating the third world and the current role of transnational media and electronics corporations” (p. 331).

Arjun Appadurai (1990) challenged the limits of the cultural imperialism approach, theorizing the global cultural economy “as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models” (p. 6). The “disjunctive flows” that Appadurai identified can be seen as initiating a post-imperial model for analyzing global culture. However, the “disjunctive flows” were sometimes concealed by the homogenizing tendencies of global pop music, and the diversity of sounds from the specific time and places was often misleadingly subsumed within a western-centric conception of hybridization. This has led to calls for an approach to these issues that can understand specific processes of Asianization as an Asia-specific version of modernity and globalization (Chang, 2017). While scholars from the Inter-Asia pop music studies represent the core of this movement, Fung (2019) also warned that the extreme act to relocate the Asian process of development could easily lead to the fallacy of Asian exceptionalism that could close the door for possibilities of any global dialogues.

Taking K-pop scholarship as an example, among the enormous K-pop academic narratives, one of the most impressive stories is about how the K-pop potentially challenged the old global cultural hierarchies centered by the western world, and evolved to become new possibilities of globalization and modernity especially in the Asian area. Under the radar of globalization and post-colonial theory, the core theme of such studies is to examine how local fans from across the world use K-pop to represent their transnational identities, modern imaginations, and cultural inclinations in their own locality and its cultural milieus. As a result, the sudden rise of Korea as a cultural upstart transmits a glimmer of hope to those with similar colonial historical experiences of having been cultural subalterns (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015; Maliangkay & Song, 2015). For historicizing the development of Asian pop, Siriyuvasak and Shin (2007) assume a new Asianism/Asianization with “postmodern nationalism” by exploring Thai youth’s consumption of K-pop in the process of cultural appropriation vis-à-vis their “national” cultural formation in changing socio-cultural contexts (Siriyuvasak & Shin, 2007). The globalization of K-pop allowed scholars to rethink processes of Asianism/Asianization, the implication for which can be applicable to those music genres in other geographical regions of Asia. For example, in the Chinese context, the consumption of K-pop by Chinese fans is characterized by a highly digitalized network of cultural economy sustained by fans’ consumption under a social-political governance (Zhang & Fung, 2017).

Ostensibly, all these are facilitated by digitalization and platformization, a technological factor identified by scholars of K-pop for Asianization and de-westernizing media narratives. Actually, nowadays, digitalization and platformization has propelled popular music cultures toward polarization. At one extreme, it is about the way social media and digital platforms have facilitated sharing, increasing connectedness across time and space, participatory cultures, and possibilities for transnational connections and transborder dissemination. At the other extreme, algorithmic monitoring and recommendation systems, datafication, and commercialization of online activities have generated digital fragmentation, divisions, and segregation. These are two extreme ends of a continuum, within which there can be dynamic flows of music and musicians across and between these poles.

Within this broader context, even in the digital era, academic and commercial discourse about popular music can still be heard across and within three geographical levels: local, Asian, and global (Matsue, 2013). Shin (2017) has expressed a similar model of “niche, ethnic and global
operations” when analyzing the production and circulation of East Asian popular music. These three levels, however expressed according to different categories, provide lenses for understanding various aspects of popular music cultures such as identities, genres, industries, and places. These three levels can be applied to different historical media periods to understand changes and continuities of popular music practices and processes. This model allows us to think critically about the transitions between different media up to the present digital era, instead of exaggerating the effect and changes of digital media.

This Special Issue attempts to document articles as well as arguments that contribute to the long-term task of critically examining beneath the surface phenomena of globalization, historicizing Asian popular musics, and uncovering cultural forms and practices that have often been fragmented and decontextualized by the global flow of culture, especially in the digital era. It considers the challenges, possibilities, and contradictions generated by the globalization of popular musics in and beyond Asia.

The first paper by Keith Negus provides a theoretical understanding of popular music by featuring the countervailing forces of nationalism and cosmopolitanism for popular music practices, in particular, focusing on current phenomena of digitalization and global media corporations. Through popular music, these two forces can operate at two levels, that of the nation-state and transnational corporation, generating multi-direction powers which could configure the discursive practices in the political, economic, and creative field. By reflecting upon the two ideological forces of nation states and cosmopolitan communities, Negus shows how sometimes popular music forms a border, and at other times it breaks borders as the wheels of history turn.

Based on studies of entertainment magazines, Meicheng Sun and Kai Khiun Liew remap the collective memories about the globalization of K-pop in 1990s China. They addressed the importance of fandom, important role of broadcast media, in particular, television, prior to digitalization. The article contributes to understanding the growth and significance of the media of television in China and cultural and media relationships between China and South Korea that form backdrop under which cross-border flow of K-pop takes place.

Utilizing the participatory observation of music industry events and interviews with practitioners, Haekyung Um explores the connections between China, South Korea, and the United Kingdom and researches collaborations of industries and government organizations. Focusing on cases such as Liverpool’s Sound City festival, Beijing’s Modern Sky, and Seoul’s Zandari Festa, this article provides a detailed statistical report on transnational popular music collaborations from 2013 to 2019. She narrates how live music operates among music industries and city governments, providing evidence about the historical importance of music scenes in the streaming music era.

Qian Wang adopts a Foucauldian cultural studies methodology to study modernity and globalization in the 1980s in China by examining the “western” disco music and place of clubs. He frames his theoretical analysis by bringing together concepts of desire, exoticism, and materialism to explore how disco music allowed for complex linguistic and cultural translations and articulations of “ethnic” Indian, Arabic, and Mongolian musical imageries and imaginations. His critical interpretations and analysis of specific tracks, genres, sexualities, and socio-political contexts demonstrate how disco music has challenged the order and beliefs established by the traditional doctrines of both Confucianism and Chinese socialism, while demonstrating how the private and personal experience of bodily desire is profoundly historical and social in its consequences.

In a nutshell, the articles included in this special edition offer a unique blend of theoretical analysis that brings together multiple texts, forms, and genres. As a characteristic of popular music
studies, apart from theoretical contribution, the articles incorporate insights from research on the perspectives of practitioners and intermediaries; institutional structures and political economy; studies of audiences, listening, and types of reception; and musicians and performers. Through both theoretical interventions and empirical studies, we hope to highlight the significant ways that the study of popular music can contribute new insights into our understanding of the history of media globalization in China and Asia, and across the world.

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