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Recentring globalization: Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism

Abstract

Book review of: *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. By Iwabuchi Koichi. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002. 288 pp. \$59.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

Keywords

culture, japanese, transnationalism, recentering, globalization, popular

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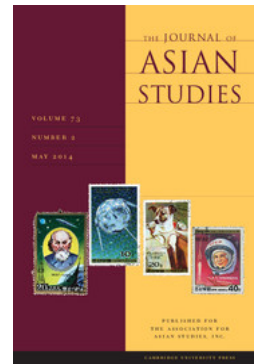
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Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism.
**By Iwabuchi Koichi. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002. 288 pp. **
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Matthew Allen

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deleterious effects of both the U.S. military forces and tourism development to the island's population and its ecosystem. Angst describes how a woman farmer in Onna Village built the Churasa Soap Factory, in which donated cooking fat and oil is recycled to make handmade soaps that are sold to support the small factory. And, Asato Eiko, in an impassioned, if less than robust, essay titled "Okinawan Identity and Resistance to Militarization and Maldevelopment" (she incorrectly states that the Okinawa Marine Exposition, which commemorated reversion, took place in 1973, not 1975 [p. 236]), shows how Kudaka Island, five miles in circumference, has devised a system of common land ownership by which the fate of the island's territory is determined through the will of the community rather than market forces. The independence of a two-person factory and a five-mile island does not come close to fulfilling the dreams of local autonomy that the majority of Okinawans embraced during the reversion movement. Yet, they and the recent flood of creative activity in Okinawan fiction, music, and film are bold assertions of regional identity that stay long in one's mind.

DAVINDER BHOWMIK
University of Washington

Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism. By KOICHI IWABUCHI. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002. 288 pp. \$59.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism is an engaging and timely book. Its focus on Japan and Asia in the context of debates about Western-centric globalization processes is fresh and welcome. It is a complex book with a simple message. By examining the popular cultural flows between Japan and Asia through a theoretically informed historical lens, Koichi Iwabuchi posits that Japan's new "cool" in Asia is part of a new "transnational" phenomenon which foregrounds Asia. Although many authors have examined globalization and its impact on local communities, most of these studies have incorporated accommodation/resistance to U.S.-driven merchandizing, product placement, and so on. Certainly, the lens of "Western" perspectives has colored the interpretation of globalization, critics, and supporters alike (see the works of Arjun Appadurai, Samuel Huntington, and Edward Said as obvious examples).

Iwabuchi brings a new voice to debates on globalization through his engagement with what he more accurately terms "transnational" flows of capital, people, ideas, and artifacts from a Japanese perspective of the global. His fluency with both Japanese and English sources gives him considerable range, and his analysis of recent trends in vernacular reporting of the relationship between Japan and the concept and reality of Asia is incisive and well informed. He argues convincingly that Japan's place (historical, political, and economic) in Asia influences both Japanese and Asian production and consumption of intra-Asian popular culture.

Iwabuchi's thesis is a fascinating combination of textual analysis of (Japanese and East Asian) popular culture and the (mostly Japanese) vernacular media, political-economic commentary, and deconstructionist interpretation. Locating today's flows of popular cultural products and entertainment-related equipment within an historical dimension in which the rise of Asia in the new millennium has occurred, Iwabuchi posits that Japan's historical aggression in Asia, and America's "lingering" political-

economic presence in the region are still tropes of significance in defining the relations among globalization, localization, and the Sony-originated concept of “glocalization” in Asia.

Although Iwabuchi’s analysis privileges Japan, it also critiques and complicates any over-simplified notion of Japan in the context of the production and consumption of popular culture. Yet, one of his more interesting observations—that of the “odor” of products made in Japan (and elsewhere, for that matter)—is predicated on the existence of essentialized values that can be applied to nations, in this case Japan. The idea of odor is worth expanding here. Iwabuchi argues that certain goods, in particular popular cultural goods, carry with them “odors” related to the culture in which they were produced. He uses the example of Japanese *mukokuseki* (no nationality) animation, which is designed apparently to represent specifically non-Japanese characters. By removing ethnic characteristics from the animations, Iwabuchi argues that the nationality of the producers has decreased significance, and that such productions are more able to be sold internationally. He cites the case of *Pokemon* and its reformation for U.S. distribution. It is quite debatable, though, whether *mukokuseki* animation is recognizable as carrying a Japanese odor. Those of us brought up with Tezuka’s Japanese animation—*Astro Boy*, *Kimba the White Lion*, and so on—would argue that although the characters may have been rendered “international,” in practice they are immediately identifiable as “Japanese.” Indeed, the Tezuka-penned characters, which were widely imitated within Japan, have arguably become symbolic of Japan and have generated many Asian clones, as well as Japanese imitators.

Such minor criticisms aside, Iwabuchi’s analysis of popular cultural flows within Asia is disarmingly honest in its interpretation of motivations for Japanese expansion into Asia and in its appraisal of the production, reception, and consumption of popular cultural goods in both Japan and Asia at large. Interviews with Japanese television executives responsible for planning expansion of their products into Asia reveal perceptions of clear hierarchies of power. Japanese companies, initially concerned with being substations for interpreting U.S. popular culture to the rest of Asia, reproduce the structures of power that inform contemporary economic relations between Japan and other nations in Asia. Moreover, he argues, there are echoes of prewar and wartime perceptions of Japan’s place in Asia, a situation that does not necessarily work to Japan’s advantage.

Iwabuchi does not lose sight of the bigger picture throughout his book. He may concentrate on executives’ perspectives of markets rather than consumers’ experiences of products, but he is able to retain his focus on the question of globalization and its impact in Asia. By emphasizing the intraregional flows of capital, products, intellectual property, and popular culture, he argues convincingly for a reassessment of the meaning of globalization in the early twenty-first century. He has written a fascinating, well-researched, and original book.

MATTHEW ALLEN
University of Auckland

The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan. By BARBARA SATO. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003. xiv, 241 pp. \$59.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

This book depicts Japanese modernity (*modan*) through the discourses and images of “new women” in the 1920s and argues for its continuity through World War II.