INTRODUCTION

Popular Culture and Regionalization

During the past two decades, Japanese popular culture products have been widely disseminated and consumed throughout East Asia. As a visitor to any of the region’s big cities can easily observe, Japanese popular culture is widely available as part of a confluence of American, Chinese, Korean, and other popular cultures. Many of the fashion journals sold in Hong Kong are from Japan, whether in the original Japanese or in a translated Cantonese edition. In virtually every big city in East Asia there are shops that specialize in Japanese-style clothing and accessories, updated with the latest fashions from Tokyo. Japanese comic books (manga) are routinely translated into Korean, Thai, Bahasa, and Mandarin, and they dominate East Asia’s comic book markets. Japanese animated characters, such as Hello Kitty, Anpan Man, and Poke’mon are ubiquitous, seen on licensed and unlicensed toys and stationery in the markets of just about every Asian city. Japanese animation (anime), usually dubbed, is the most popular in its genre. Astro Boy, Sailor Moon, and Lupin are successful examples of animated characters seen in almost every shop that sells anime in Hong Kong, Singapore, or Taipei. In bookshops and kiosks across this region’s big cities, it is possible to find translated or original versions of famous Japanese fashion magazines such as CanCan, JJ, ViVi, COOL, Cutie, Vita, Myojo, Brand, and nonno. Japanese music has also become well established in urban areas and accounts for a share of music markets throughout the region. Live concerts by Japanese musicians draw thousands of fans across East Asia, fueling interest in Japanese contemporary culture. Karaoke bars commonly offer a wide
repertory of Japanese songs. Japanese music artists such as Hamasaki Ayumi or Nakashima Mika, and Japanese bands such as SMAP, Wind, AKB48, or L’arc-en-ciel are but a few of the names that are widely known to East Asian youngsters but which remain relatively unknown in Europe, South America, and the Middle East.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Japanese popular culture occupied a sizable position in the popular culture markets of East Asia. According to a survey conducted in 2006 by Yomiuri Shinbun (one of Japan’s leading daily newspapers), 25 percent of South Koreans aged eighteen or older prefer anime and comics from Japan over American or locally made animation, compared to 30 percent of adults in Indonesia and Malaysia, 18 percent in Thailand, and 12 percent in Vietnam. For movies, the figures were 10 percent in South Korea, 21 percent in Indonesia, 18 percent in Malaysia, 19 percent in Thailand, and 12 percent in Vietnam.2 Japanese pop music was estimated to occupy between 15 and 20 percent of the music market in Hong Kong during its peak period from 1996 to 1999, and between 8 and 12 percent in 2003. In Singapore, the share of Japanese music was estimated at 8 to 10 percent of the music market between 1996 and 1998, and about 5 percent in 2003. In Bangkok, estimates for the years 2002 and 2003 were 4 to 6 percent. In Seoul, Japanese music was estimated to have captured between 10 and 12 percent of the music market in the first six months after the market was opened to Japanese cultural products in 2002, and approximately 7 to 9 percent in 2004.3 Japanese television dramas were also popular in South Korea, before the mounting success of Korean and Chinese dramas in recent years. According to figures released in 2007 by Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, approximately 60 percent of TV programs exported from Japan in 2005 were broadcast within Asia. According to a 2002 survey conducted by Hakuhodō, Japan’s second largest advertising company, 10 percent of Bangkok residents polled expressed a preference for Japanese television dramas over other types of TV dramas; this was the same percentage that indicated a preference for American television dramas. The popularity of Japanese TV dramas outstripped that of American dramas in Hong Kong, Singapore, and three Chinese cities: Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Japanese television dramas ranked second in popularity among youngsters in Hong Kong, with 65 percent watching Chinese dramas, 22 percent watching Japanese dramas, and 8 percent watching American television dramas.4
This book poses two central questions about the variety of Japanese popular culture products found in markets throughout Asia: (1) Why has Japan’s popular culture proliferated in urban East Asia? (2) Given this proliferation, how is popular culture likely to affect the dynamics of regional formation in East Asia? My answer to the first question is simple: In order to understand the pervasive presence of Japanese popular culture in East Asia, we need to look at the organizational aspects of cultural production rather than limiting ourselves to identifying distinctive sociocultural features or narratives that are presumed to be embedded in Japanese cultural commodities and resonant with Asian consumers. We can better understand the spread of Japanese popular culture throughout East Asia by looking at the mechanisms assembled by the culture industries in order to commercialize, manufacture, and commodify popular culture.

My answer to the second question is more far-reaching. In this book, I argue that the proliferation of Japanese cultural industries in East Asia provides new insights into the relationship between cultural commodification and the notion of regionalization. By regionalization, I refer to an indirect, bottom-up process that increases proximity between markets, institutions, and communities within geographical and conceptual domains broader than two states. The experience of Japanese cultural industries in East Asia over the past three decades shows that the expansion of cultural industries into new markets, motivated by a desire for more consumers for those industries’ products or services, plays an important role in fostering market-driven, consumer-oriented mechanisms that have broad political and social implications for the region. Those mechanisms promote the evolution of regional cultural markets and propagate a regionwide transformation of structural arrangements and policies to commodify and market culture, hence supporting regionalization. The resulting circulation of popular culture contributes to region making not only from an institutional standpoint, that is, the creation of transnational markets and the establishment of collaborative ties between all relevant parties (companies, agents, promoters, distributors, retailers, etc.), but also in terms of the dissemination of lifestyle communalities and concepts that occurs when different people in different places consume the same cultural products.

Popular culture plays a constructive role in pulling people closer together by providing them with shared experiences. The commodifica-
tion, production, marketing, pirating, and consumption of popular culture leads to the construction of new frameworks for delivering images, ideas, and emotional expressions that can stimulate feelings of proximity and belonging. The spread of popular culture may help people across Asia develop a common language made up of the same sounds, images, and texts available on CDs and DVDs, on TVs and movie screens, in comic publications, on commercial billboards, or via the Internet. These commodities and images need not be uniquely Asian as long as they are shared by wide segments of the Asian population.

Obviously, cultural industries are not the single determinant of regionalization, nor is popular culture the only conceptual key that explains regionalization’s inner dynamics. The claims I make here, however, are that the politics and economics of regionalization necessitate an examination of cultural industries, and that the transformation generated by the regionalization process cannot be properly understood until regional developments in the organization of commodified culture are better grasped and fully contextualized.

In other words, popular culture is an important aspect of regionalization. Looking at the circulation of popular culture in East Asia advances our empirical and theoretical understanding of how regionalization actually works and, more basically, what constitutes a “region.” First, it sheds light on the impact of nonstate forces that have no political center and—in a market economy—are not controlled by governments. Second, focusing on popular culture overturns conventional wisdom about the driving forces and actors behind regionalization. It directs one’s attention away from highly institutionalized arrangements, such as security alliances and free trade agreements (FTAs) and looks instead at agencies involved in the creation and marketing of cultural commodities.

To support this argument, I develop a three-part explanation. First, I show that the Japanese domestic market is home to a highly developed machinery for producing and commercializing popular culture, one with specific features that differentiate it from the “Hollywood model” of making popular culture. These features have made Japan a major producer and exporter of popular culture to East Asia and an object of regional emulation. Second, I explain how the Japanese cultural industries have become integrated into markets for popular culture throughout urban East Asia. Not only does the emergence of these markets allow different people in different places to share the same set of cultural commodities
and thus offer the ability to share lifestyles and ideas about how to live, but it also encourages cooperation among all those involved in commodifying and commercializing culture, including producers, promoters, entrepreneurs, agents, distributors, etc. Lastly, I demonstrate that Japanese cultural industries have been exporting standardized popular culture organizational methods and production formats, which have been gradually adopted by local industries. For many local producers outside Japan, Japanese industries represent a forerunner and a model of how to construct a developed popular culture industry that can offer an alternative to American cultural products. The development of organizational arrangements used for commodifying and commercializing culture in East Asia is thus heavily influenced by the methods and experiences introduced by the Japanese cultural industries. In many fields the Japanese model for organizing popular culture has become the regional standard.

In the following chapters, I show that by creating new markets for Japanese popular culture and by implanting the “Japanese model” of popular culture production, the cultural industries have propagated a transformation of the structural arrangements used for commodifying and commercializing popular culture. Understanding the adaptation of Japanese organizational methods for cultural production in East Asia is important not only because of the images Japanese popular culture reflects or the cultural practices it engenders (such as cosplay, whereby fans gather to show off costumes that imitate their favorite anime heroes), but also because such acceptance and adaptation underpin a deeper transformation of cognitive frames, cultural views, and structural arrangements related to “culture.”

I would like to make my argument clear: I am not suggesting that the operations of Japanese cultural industries ultimately lead to the formation of a Japanese-dominated regional identity in East Asia, to the homogenization of cultural practices, or to the imposition of Japanese norms and values on local societies. The flow of popular culture in East Asia is multidirectional. A variety of other popular culture confluences, both global (American) and regional (Chinese, Korean), have rapidly intensified in recent years and Japan itself has become an avid importer of popular culture from other parts of East Asia, although there is a conspicuous asymmetry in the import-export ratio, with Japan generally exporting much more popular culture within East Asia than it imports from the region.
In addition, although cultural industries create platforms upon which different people in different places in East Asia are exposed to a variety of Japanese popular culture products, and possibly to a new range of images and messages, these cannot be read in any monolithic way. The consumption of popular culture is a highly generic process wherein the images and “meanings” extracted from products tend to diversify and are subject to individual interpretations. Consumers, after all, are active subjects who try to make sense of what they see and hear, rather than passive subjects entirely manipulated by the producers or marketers of cultural commodities.

The intriguing question about the choice of the Japanese case remains: To what extent can Japan be considered a useful case study for exploring the relevance of popular culture production in other parts of East Asia? I believe we can extrapolate from findings in the Japanese context to understand similar developments in East Asia and possibly beyond. The Japanese case exemplifies how popular culture can effect regional formation, both in general by creating shared markets for popular culture, and specifically in terms of how Japan’s cultural industries influence the development of local industries, which have conspicuously adopted the Japanese production and marketing model. At the same time, it is important to note that the regional circulation of Japanese popular culture and the expansion of Japan’s cultural industries within the region are not Tokyo-sponsored operations aimed at constructing a new regional identity, nor do they manifest any Japanese cultural hegemony in the sense of domination or control. Rather, Japan’s cultural “power” shows up as the ability to influence the organizational basis for popular culture in East Asia.

Outline of the Book

The title “Regionalizing Culture: The Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia” reflects my effort to grasp the dynamics of popular culture production and dissemination in East Asia by using a big-picture, political-economic approach rather than engaging in detailed content analysis of certain products, images, or genres. The title also hints at the indirect consequences of these processes on region making in East Asia and on the very notion of a “region.” On the one hand, many Japanese popular culture products have been regionalized in the sense
that they are present in East Asia in a variety and concentration unseen in any other part of the world. On the other hand, these popular culture operations themselves have an impact on the regionalization of East Asia by connecting culture and economy and by creating links between various industries and communities across the region.

In this introduction, I have outlined the phenomenon this research is concerned with, that is, the salient presence of Japanese culture in East Asia. I have introduced the central argument of my study: that cultural industries underpin regionalization in East Asia by creating markets and propagating a regionwide transformation of the structural framework for commodifying and appropriating culture.

In chapter 1, I develop an analytical model that combines a traditional political-economic approach with an approach that considers characteristics specific to the popular culture market. I briefly review theoretical supports offered in the field and underline their advantages and limitations. I then examine the relations between “popular culture,” “high culture,” and “cultural industries.” These terms have a complex history, and their meanings demand clarification. I identify and map associated products, fields, and activities, and I examine the distinctive ways in which cultural industries operate.

In chapter 2, I offer an orientation to understanding East Asian regionalization. I look at the main characteristics of this “region” and show that popular culture is intrinsically significant to the regionalization process in East Asia. The chapter highlights some conspicuous characteristics of East Asian regionalization: namely that it is essentially market-driven and overwhelmingly focuses on urban centers with large populations of middle-class residents and not on nation-states as a whole. After clarifying major concepts related to “regionalism” and “regionalization” in East Asia, the chapter establishes a regional paradigm for analyzing Japanese cultural industries, showing that a dynamic East Asian popular cultural market has already been in the making for the past two decades and has greatly contributed to the regionalization process.

Chapter 3 examines the Japanese cultural industries in their domestic market by looking at (a) how culture is commodified, (b) the size of the domestic market, and (c) Japan’s cultural exports portfolio. Here I posit that the structure and size of the domestic market and the experience of Japan’s cultural industries at home have fostered the competitiveness of Japanese cultural products abroad. The chapter shows that the Japanese
domestic marketplace is home to a highly developed machinery for producing and commercializing popular culture. This chapter also analyzes the Japanese government’s growing involvement in the country’s cultural exports over the past two decades and the importance attributed to this topic in Japanese public discourse. The chapter shows how the development of cultural industries has modified government policy regarding popular culture, and it notes that the development of cultural industries has now become an item on the Japanese government’s economic and diplomatic agendas.

Chapter 4 describes the creation of a regional market for Japanese popular culture. It examines the expansion of Japanese music and television companies into East Asia since the end of the 1980s and provides a quantitative analysis of the market share of Japanese music and television programs in the region. The chapter shows how Japanese music and television companies have become actively involved in local cultural scenes and demonstrates that Japanese music and television have carved out a sizable position in East Asia’s markets. Chapter 4 also examines the role of piracy in enhancing the dissemination of Japanese cultural commodities in East Asia, underlining its role as an efficient distributor of popular culture.

Chapter 5 investigates the impact of Japanese cultural industries on local cultural industries in East Asia. It discusses their influence on local cultural production and appreciation for Japanese products. It argues that the importance of Japanese cultural industries lies not only in the carving out of transnational market share, but also in regionwide dissemination of cultural production formats and the resulting organizational transformations. The chapter starts by examining the transfer of Japanese cultural formats to the culture markets of East Asia and their adaptation by local cultural industries, especially in Korea. The chapter ends with a summary of in-depth interviews with sixty-eight cultural industry insiders in East Asia and examines why there is a high appreciation for Japanese cultural products and production formats. It shows that high product quality and the power of Japanese branding are the main reasons for the success of Japanese popular culture products in the East Asian market.

Chapter 6 summarizes the book’s main findings and explores its implications. It then discusses the impact of the expansion of Japanese cultural industries on the regionalization process in East Asia and offers
wider analytical and theoretical insights into the relations between popular culture and regional formation.

**Empirical Research**

Although there is much anecdotal evidence about the popularity of Japanese culture in East Asia, there is no comprehensive source of empirical information. Providers of official statistics in Japan and in the rest of East Asia have not mapped out the cultural industries sector, so relevant information is either unavailable or is listed in a series of overlapping categories, such as art, entertainment, leisure, culture, media, sport, etc. Most existing studies on Japanese popular culture abroad focus on specific examples and emphasize textual representations and the reaction of audiences to cultural exposure (for example, Craig and King 2002; Allen and Sakamoto 2006; Allison 2006; Inoue 2010; Ishii 2001; Iwabuchi 2004; Martinez 1998; Moeran 2000; Mōri 2004; Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998; and Treat 1996). Moreover, while there are many works dealing with Western-based cultural industries (Beck 2003; Hartley 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2002; Holt and Perren 2009), there are very few in English or Japanese that comprehensively analyze the mechanisms and capabilities of Japanese cultural industries.

In recent years a growing number of scholars have turned their attention to the production side of culture and media (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell 2009; Caldwell 2008; and Ross 2004) and to related labor conditions (Caves 2002; Christopherson and van Jaarsveld 2005; Baker and Hesmondhalgh 2010), but their work has focused on the Euro-American experience. Notable exceptions are Hamano (2003) and Nakamura (2003, 2004), who examine the structure of Japanese cultural industries in the domestic market, and Berry, Liscutin, and Mackintosh (2009), who look at how popular and media culture shape Northeast Asia from a cultural studies approach that focuses on “creative industries” and their growing importance in an era of globalization.

Given the lack of hard data on this topic, the empirical side of this study has two central aims. The first is to evaluate the degree of popularity and the variety of Japanese popular culture products in local markets, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. The second is to examine the impact of Japan’s cultural industries on the local cultural industries of East Asia. The latter task makes it possible to demonstrate that in
addition to content export and the carving out of market share, the exter-

nalization of cultural production formats is also a factor in the overall
impact of Japanese cultural industries in East Asia.

The research focuses on East Asia’s nine biggest markets for
Japanese cultural exports: Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore,
Indonesia, Malaysia, mainland China, Thailand, and the Philippines. It is
based on data taken from export records, market surveys, and case stud-
ies of Japanese music and television companies’ activities in these mar-
kets. It also includes approximately eleven months of fieldwork in Hong
Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Bangkok, and Seoul between April 2004 and

In the course of my research I employed a variety of methods, includ-
ing in-depth interviews, fieldwork, data analysis, and reading of empiri-
cal material in English, Japanese, and other languages. First, I conducted
in-depth interviews with sources in the cultural industries, in Japan and
other locations in East Asia. The interviewees were all directly or indi-
rectly engaged in producing, promoting, marketing, regulating, or study-
ing popular culture in East Asia, especially Japanese popular culture. They
included sixty-eight individuals from major music and television compa-
nies in Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Bangkok, and Seoul, as well as
government officials, officials from affiliated organizations, academics,
media specialists, promoters, and workers from media-related organiza-
tions. I asked them questions regarding (1) local cultural markets, especially
regarding music, television, and piracy; (2) the popularity, appreciation for,
and demand for Japanese popular culture products in comparison to other
popular culture products in the market—both domestically produced and
imported; (3) cooperation with Japanese culture companies’ personnel,
agents, and promoters; and (4) their opinions on various aspects of con-
temporary culture, society, and politics in East Asia.

Next, I conducted a survey of 172 shops selling mostly music, mov-
ies, television programs, and animation series in Hong Kong, Singapore,
Shanghai, Bangkok, and Seoul, from April 2004 to May 2005. The sur-
vey examined the number of titles of Japanese cultural products offered
at each store relative to American and locally manufactured products.
During the survey, the shops’ managers and workers were also asked
about the popularity of Japanese music, television programs, animation,
and movies, and about the general preferences of consumers who visited
the shops.
Third, I conducted a survey of primary sources in Japanese, English, and other languages about the export, presence, and consumption of Japanese popular culture in East Asia. These materials included white papers, think tank reports, advertising companies’ estimates, cultural preference surveys of consumers, government statistics and data, and other related publications.

A fourth tool of investigation was consultation and exchange of information with researchers, journalists, and other specialists in Japan, East Asia, and elsewhere, as well as a review of literature related to cultural commodification, industrialization, and regionalization. This background literature will be introduced throughout the book, but I would like to mention here a few studies that were particularly helpful: the works of Hesmondhalgh (2002), Hartley (2005), Castells (1996, 2000a), and Cottle (2003) regarding how cultural and information industries operate; the works of Iwabuchi (2002) and Allison (2006) on Japanese popular culture outside of Japan; the works of Borrus, Ernst, and Haggard (2000), Ernst (2006), and Hatch and Yamamura (1996) on the Japanese automobile and electronics industries in East Asia; and the studies of Katzenstein (2005), Katzenstein and Shiraishi (1997, 2006), and Pempel (2005) on the regionalization process in East Asia.