

**REGIONALIZING CULTURE: The Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia.** By *Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. xxv, 230 pp. (Tables, figures.) US\$42.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-8248-3694-8.

In an information age, our globalized world is increasingly impacted not only by the intraregional and interregional flows of financial capital but also by the movements of cultural commodities. While the cultural industry worldwide continues to boom, it is now one of the hottest business trends in Asia. Particularly in East Asia, the sector of popular culture products has experienced rapid growth in recent years, fuelled by a large number of emerging middle-class consumers with higher disposable income. From such a viewpoint, this book gains importance and assumes a responsibility for timeliness.

Structured in six chapters excluding a general introduction, the single-authored volume has become a reality with funding, logistic and advisory supports received from a number of related sources, institutions and people. It endeavours to explore a regionalized system of Japan's popular culture proliferation in urban East Asia, and to examine the illustrative effect of its cultural industries on the dynamics of East Asian regional formation. As its findings reveal, the country's popular culture products have been widely disseminated and consumed in many East Asian cities over the last three decades. The researcher's core argument is that cultural industries underpin regionalization in East Asia by creating regional markets and propagating a regionwide transformation of the structural framework for commodifying and appropriating culture. I would however like to present my following straightforward feedback about this publication.

First, it is clear that the research has been conducted on East and Southeast Asia. But as the author clarifies, "In this study, East Asia refers to both Northeast and Southeast Asia" (185), the term "Asia" used in the book's subtitle is misleading. While "Asia" and "East Asia" have been interchangeably used throughout the volume, other subregions of the greater Asian continent (South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia and North Asia), where the rate of Japanese pop-culture diffusion is relatively low, are clearly left out.

Second, with a concise conceptual analysis about "popular culture" and "high culture," the researcher has used the term "popular culture" to refer to commercial cultural commodities mainly including music, animation and television dramas. It is also good that an integrated "political economy" approach has been utilized in the study. When a link between political economy and popular culture has been made, a difference between regionalization and regionalism has essentially been shown as well. Nonetheless, this transregional research project should have been realized by an international political economy approach. In this connection, it seems excessive that the book covers almost a chapter-long description on the

production mechanisms, local markets and organizational concerns of the Japanese image factories.

Third, to be more skeptical, this volume begins with some inconsistent statements recognizing the potential of soft power for the East Asian governments and publics while at the same time viewing Japan's ever-expanding cultural export industry as a multibillion-dollar business. Since the author himself has rightly asked "If we can think of economy and security as factors that define a region, why shouldn't we be able to think of popular culture in the same way?" (184), it is seriously questioning the relevance of the entire book. Actually, he has paid more attention to the "economic aspects" and placed less emphasis on the "political affairs." In other words, this study basically deals with the mass-commercialization of Japanese cultural exports for money making, and it does not investigate how the politics of Japanese popular culture as ideological values can help shape the contemporary East Asian international relations order.

Fourth, the researcher has of course better justified the rationale for selecting Japan as a useful case study. Besides, the research is basically based on fieldwork at several hybrid cultural cities in the region comprising Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Bangkok and Seoul. Moreover, this practically grounded project includes in-depth interviews with 68 cultural industry insiders in addition to a survey of primary sources in Japanese, English and other languages. But I am not so convinced by the research results. More concretely, when the author has disclosed "The research focuses on East Asia's nine biggest markets for Japanese cultural exports" (xxiv), a full-fledged chapter on any above-mentioned city (except Tokyo) might have made genuine sense. In fact, he regards Japan's pop-culture industries as a forerunner "regional model" of production and circulation, and tells us numerous success stories of its highly profitable manufacturing enterprises. Frankly speaking, he has taken neither a logical approach to fault-finding nor a bold stance throughout the volume. It is a major problem.

Fifth, when the concluding chapter summarizes the book's main findings and it ends with some questions, it would have been valuable for the well-informed readers if this section had sharply answered the following pressing and stimulating questions: (1) Why is Japan, despite its status as a pop-culture powerhouse, failing to mobilize the nation's available soft power resources so that it can exercise more cultural influence globally? (2) How can the country project its goodwill of "Cool Japan" around the whole geography of Asia given that Japan still has image problems in East and Southeast Asia for its imperialist past? (3) How does Tokyo's public diplomacy relate to the strategic interests of Japan as a leader in East Asia and more specifically as a counterweight to Beijing as China's thriving economy makes it more powerful and attractive?

Finally, when it comes to my overall assessment, regardless of a few weak points and some gaps in coverage, the principal purpose of this book has

been realized in a rewarding manner. In the publishing world, there are already many books (written mainly by sociologists) on East Asian popular culture in general. But I have not found any piece that specifically analyzes the regionalization of Japanese cultural industries within a political-economic context. By doing so, it fills an academic gap in globalization studies literature on cross-cultural relations. I understand that this young scholar has shown passion, patience and true commitment to his field of specialization to produce this volume, for which Nissim Otmazgin is congratulated. Because of its distinctiveness, the volume can be suggested for everyone involved and interested in the subject-matter.

*Asia Pacific Institute for Global Studies,  
Dhaka, Bangladesh*

MONIR HOSSAIN MONI

**EXPERIMENTAL BUDDHISM: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan.** *Topics in Contemporary Buddhism.* By John K. Nelson. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. xxiv, 292 pp. (Tables, figures, B&W photos.) US\$32.00, paper. ISBN 978-0-8248-3898-0.

Modern pressures of rapid global development are being keenly felt by religious institutions around the world. Their future will depend to a great extent on how readily religious leaders can adjust to these changes while still maintaining relevance for their members. John K. Nelson's *Experimental Buddhism*, a new study of this phenomenon in contemporary Japan, is a welcome addition to Asian cultural studies, providing an intimate and well-researched examination of a wide range of efforts currently being made by major Buddhist denominations to survive the current competition for hearts and minds in the new globalized Japan.

A cultural anthropologist from the University of San Francisco, Nelson has produced important written works and documentaries surveying the current Japanese landscape of religious meaning and practice. In the present work, through a series of interviews with priests and administrators from 40 different Buddhist temples, the author attempts to uncover the kinds of changes being tested to slow the recent dramatic decrease in parishioners, and to offer new entryways to Buddhism that would attract greater levels of interest among various demographics. Nelson states in his introduction that the book provides a broad survey of these experiments across a number of denominations, without focusing extensively on any one institution. In order to maintain flexibility, he also recognizes that he could not rely on a single methodology, but rather needed to employ several approaches across disciplines in order to respond effectively to the unique challenges of the study.

Beginning his first chapter with a striking example of the kinds of experimentation occurring among long-established temples in Japan, Nelson