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### Questioning proximity: East Asian TV Dramas in Indonesia

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# Questioning Proximity

## East Asian TV Dramas in Indonesia

The study of transnational cultural flows has been of continuing interest among media and communication researchers, with recent studies focusing on cultural flows within geographically and culturally adjacent nations. It is often suggested that the level of “cultural proximity” that exists determines the success of cultural exchange between countries regarded to possess similar cultural traits. This notion, that local audiences will have preference for cultural commodities from countries with which they share cultural ties in recognition of their own culture, has enjoyed much intellectual currency in recent times, especially in relation to analyses of regional media markets. The danger of using the cultural proximity thesis lies in the fact that, if cultural ‘resemblance’ is regarded to be the sole determinant of a foreign cultural commodity’s local acceptance without taking into consideration specific social and historical circumstances, what results may be an essentialist and shallow analysis. Based on a six-month interview-based study of East Asian TV drama fans in Indonesia, this paper critically examines the use of the cultural proximity model in determining the reasons behind successful local acceptance of imported cultural commodities. The paper proposes that in-depth audience research will need to be conducted in order to understand the sorts of resonances local audiences experience when consuming transnational cultural commodities.

CHARLOTTE SETIJADI

### **Meteor shower? Indonesia’s new pop idols**

Recently, there was a rather unexpected popular culture phenomenon in Indonesia. On 10 January 2003, a big music concert was staged in Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital city, for the Taiwanese boy band group, F4. Inside the arena, 60,000 screaming fans—predominantly young female—crowded inside the arena where the concert was being held. Outside, thousands of eager fans who could not get hold of tickets stood on trees, on top of buses, climbed on gates and even risked their own safety by climbing on construction cranes just to catch a glimpse of their idols.

On stage, the four young members of F4 appeared absolutely stunned to see such euphoric display of fan devotion, something they do not even receive in their home country. Even before F4’s arrival in Indonesia, fans had camped outside the hotel which F4 would be staying in for days. When F4 arrived in Jakarta’s international airport, it was so packed with hysterical fans that extra security

had to be called in and paramedics had to attend to fans who had passed out in hysteria. According to reports by the Indonesian entertainment magazine *Nova*, such is the extent of some fans’ devotion that after F4’s members finished swimming in the hotel’s swimming pool, fans ignored security warnings in the hotel and raced each other to jump into the pool in order to be the first to feel the water in which F4 had been swimming.

The boy band F4 was actually a spin-off from the hit Taiwanese TV drama *Meteor Garden*, produced by Chinese Television System (CTS), in which the four members of F4 played the lead characters. Although the story of *Meteor Garden* and F4’s popularity in Indonesia may sound similar to other popular culture success stories that have become common these days, their success in Indonesia is anything but typical. The successes of F4 and *Meteor Garden* are just two of the many East Asian popular culture imports that became extremely popular in Indonesia’s mainstream market. The success of East Asian popular culture is phenomenal because, in the past, almost all foreign popular culture commodities in Indonesia came from the US. American TV shows, music, consumer goods and merchandise dominated in Indonesia, practically without competition from other countries. Although, in the past, there were several TV programmes and films from East Asian countries that were relatively popular in Indonesia,

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such as *Oshin* from Japan and the mytho-historical *Legend of Condor Heroes* from Hong Kong, their popularities were not as significant as the level of popularity that newer imports, such as *Meteor Garden*, enjoyed.

The success of programmes such as *Meteor Garden* started a new trend in Indonesian commercial TV programming where TV stations raced each other to purchase the broadcast rights to more Taiwanese TV dramas as well as TV dramas from other East Asian countries such as South Korea. Indonesia's *Kompas* newspaper noted that, if in the 1990s, American TV programmes comprised up to 50 per cent of both the public and commercial TV programming in Indonesia with hit shows, such as *Baywatch*, *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place*, it seems television dramas imported from East Asian countries have taken over the most popular and profitable daily prime-time (5 p.m. to 10 p.m.) commercial TV spots since 2001. *Meteor Garden*'s success has also paved the way for the popularity of all things East Asian in Indonesia, including TV dramas and pop songs from South Korea, movies from Hong Kong and even the establishment of several teen magazines, such as *Fresh Asia!* and *Go Asia*, that specializes in monitoring the newest trends in East Asian pop culture.

What is most interesting about the popularity of East Asian popular culture imports in Indonesia is the fact that many audiences claim that the reason they prefer to watch East Asian TV dramas over American TV shows is because, as one Indonesian fan states in a website bulletin board:

The story of TV dramas like *Meteor Garden* is more relevant to us Asians than [American] TV shows, such as *Beverly Hills* or *Sex and the City*. Of course those American programmes are interesting but they are too unrealistic and we Asians can't relate to them" (*Meteor Garden*'s Indonesian fan club website, author's translation).

It is noteworthy that American TV programmes are now considered "too unrealistic" for "we Asians" when, only a few years before, American TV programmes were extremely popular in most of Asia. This remark is an example of a very common perception that assumes how people will generally prefer to consume media texts that contain materials regarded to be culturally relevant. The perception that Asians will automatically relate more to cultural materials that come from Asia is based on the same simplistic assumption that, naturally, people would prefer to consume cultural products that contain traces of their own culture. This means that, for example in Indonesia's case, it can be easily assumed that the reason why the popularity of American TV programmes has drastically declined since the arrival of East Asian TV dramas is because Indonesian audiences can relate more to cultural products from Asian countries and thus prefer them.

This assumption seems to make perfect sense and, in media and communication studies, it has often been argued that the success of a foreign media text in another country is largely due to a level of "cultural proximity" that exists between the media text and the local culture. One of the most cited authors in regards to the notion of cultural proximity is Joseph Straubhaar whose renowned study of the Brazilian

TV industry, *Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity* (1991), drew attention to the use of the cultural proximity thesis as a theoretical framework. According to Straubhaar:

Audiences make an active choice to view international, regional or national television programmes, a choice that favours the latter two when they are available, based on a search for cultural relevance or proximity (1991: 38).

Moreover, Straubhaar adds that:

They [local audiences] seem to prefer nationally or locally produced material that is closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based in regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious and other elements (ibid.: 50).

Looking at Straubhaar's conception of cultural proximity, it would be hard to deny the empirical validity of a theory that provides a hypothesis on how audiences will have preference for cultural products from countries with which they share cultural ties. For example, in Straubhaar's study, it was found that the success of Brazilian *telenovelas* in countries like Venezuela and Argentina could be attributed to the similar Latin American cultural roots that the countries share. Likewise, the existence of geo-linguistic and geo-cultural TV markets has been established (see Appadurai, 1996), and other studies such as the one conducted by Elizabeth Jacka and Stuart Cunningham (1996) have also shown that local and intra-regional TV programmes tend to be the most popular TV programmes in any country or region. However, precisely because of its apparent empirical validity, the notion of cultural proximity resists further theorization.

The notion of cultural proximity tends to connote the seemingly natural recognition of primordial cultural similarities. Yet, it is the seeming naturalness of this idea that must be interrogated. Although, thus far, cultural proximity has provided a useful basic framework for analysing the preconditions behind the success of intra-regional cultural exports like television programmes, analysts such as Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) have argued that the notion of cultural proximity alone is a much too simplistic and totalizing concept for explaining such complex issues as the local acceptance and appropriations of foreign cultural products. Moreover, there are many questions regarding audiences' media preferences that cannot be answered simply by resorting to the cultural proximity thesis. For one, if audiences are said to prefer media texts from countries with which they share cultural similarities, why do audiences in many instances choose media texts from countries with which they share minimal cultural similarity, even when culturally proximate media texts are available? The inadequacy of the cultural proximity thesis becomes evident when more complex questions are presented.

In this article, my aim is not to argue against the use of the cultural proximity thesis. Rather, I intend to critique the popular use of the cultural proximity thesis that often demonstrate scant regard towards the specific social, historical, economic and political factors that contribute

to the reason why local audiences perceive cultural proximity towards cultural commodities from certain countries and not others. I aim to argue that although the cultural proximity thesis is a useful basic analytical tool, the seeming naturalness of the thesis often results in its shallow use to provide an easy answer to questions of why some transnational cultural commodities become popular in some countries and not others. I propose that by examining the notion of cultural proximity in a wider context and as a dynamic process, we can further understand the sorts of satisfaction, if any, audiences experience when identifying cultural similarities in specific transnational programmes.

## Cultural proximity thesis revisited

The cultural proximity thesis is founded on the view that local audiences actively seek foreign cultural products that are relevant to their local customs/values. The notion of cultural proximity, loosely defined as “the theory which provides a hypothesis on how the audience will have preference for cultural products from countries with which they share cultural ties in recognition of their own culture” (Jacka and Cunningham, 1996: 14), tends to connote the seemingly natural assumption that audiences will prefer media texts which are closest or most proximate to their own culture. In regards to this assumption of audience preference for culturally “proximate” texts, Straubhaar argues that local audiences will have

A preference first for national material and when that cannot be filled in certain genres, there is a tendency to look next to regional cultural productions which are relatively more culturally proximate than those of “less-proximate” cultures such as the US (1991: 56).

Here, although lingual similarities are regarded to be the most important factor in determining cultural proximity, there are other cultural elements involved, such as religion, ethnicity, and recognition of similar racial features and non-verbal codes. The cultural proximity theory was largely developed within the same disposition as the concept of “cultural discount” developed by Hoskins and Mirus (1988: 503), which describe “the cross-border reduction in the value of foreign programmes”. They suggest that a programme rooted in one culture would have a “diminished appeal” elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the values, beliefs and behavioural patterns of the material. A “cultural discount”, therefore, applies to foreign programmes bearing nuances or accents that diminish their value in a secondary market. Although slightly different in focus, both the concepts of cultural proximity and cultural discount are based on an essentialist understanding of culture as a predetermined attribute of a media text.

The usefulness of the cultural proximity thesis as an analytical framework both in academia and communication industries is rarely debated, especially because it would be hard for any observer to deny its empirical validity and seeming obviousness as a logical explanation for the

“natural” acceptance of exported cultural commodities in countries with similar cultural, geographical and historical backgrounds. The cultural proximity thesis has also recently been associated with studies of intra-regional, geo-linguistic and geo-cultural television programming markets (Liu and Chen, 2004), as well as various other studies that examine the causes and effects of international cultural exchanges (Fabian, 1983). For example, an analysis by Yu-Li Liu and Yi-Hsiang Chen of why Japanese TV programmes are popular in Taiwan concludes that “Japanese programmes are more diverse and more oriental, so are easily understood by Taiwanese audiences because of the ‘cultural proximity’ factor” (2004: 58).

The same conclusion could have easily been drawn from our case study, where an easy answer to the question of why East Asian TV dramas became so popular in Indonesia is because they are “more oriental”, in the words of Liu and Chen, and thus deemed more relevant for Indonesian audiences. But, there are many further questions that must be asked. For one, what does “more oriental” mean? Are there other reasons outside of the “cultural proximity factor” that explain why particular TV programmes from one country/region are popular while others are not? Attempting to conduct an analysis of audience reception of intra-regional media texts without asking more fundamental questions, such as why audiences feel culturally proximate to a TV programme or what the recognizable characteristics that make a TV programme culturally proximate are, can only produce an ahistorical, totalizing and shallow analysis.

Moreover, some recent critiques of the cultural proximity thesis, including one by Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham (1996: 19), argues that one of the problems for the study of the regional flow of TV programmes is the relative absence of further audience research due to an over-reliance on the cultural proximity thesis that do not give further explanation for why audiences prefer certain programmes and not others. Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham’s criticism highlights the importance of not conceiving the cultural proximity thesis in a deterministic way. What need to be analysed further is how the perceptions of cultural similarities are constructed in specific cases and what factors contribute to the construction of such perceptions. Indeed, it is imperative that there is further examination of the audience’s experience in consuming specific media texts and how the audience’s subjectivity influences the acceptance and popularity of a media text in particular contexts. Only then will we have a thorough understanding of what causes audiences’ perception of cultural proximity in different circumstances.

## Why watch East Asian TV dramas? Some audience perspectives

In order to discover more about the reasons why Indonesian audiences like East Asian TV dramas, I conducted a string of interviews<sup>1</sup> and observations on East Asian TV drama fans. In a six-month study in 2006, I interviewed a sample of 30 Indonesian East Asian TV drama fans from the cities of Jakarta (and its surrounding areas), Medan and Bandung.

Research participants represent both genders—although like the actual fan base of these TV dramas, my respondents were predominantly females—from a wide range of age groups, as well various socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews covered questions ranging from audiences' general television consumption habits, favourite TV show, favourite East Asian television drama, characters in the TV dramas they most identify with to questions regarding why they prefer (if they do) to watch East Asian TV dramas compared to Western ones. It is important to establish that I do not claim that the audience data I have gathered represent all East Asian TV drama audience in Indonesia. Rather, the insights that my respondents revealed helped me gain a deeper understanding of the many reasons why the Indonesian audiences I interviewed watch East Asian TV dramas. Also, although there were thirty interview transcripts in total, I will only include excerpts from a few selected interview findings in this article due to space limitations.

Three principal themes emerged from these interviews: (a) there was an overwhelming perception among my respondents that East Asian TV dramas raise issues that are more relevant to their lives than Western TV shows; (b) there is a sense of aspiration towards the lifestyles of characters in East Asian TV dramas that my respondents felt to be different to the kind of aspiration they feel towards characters in Western TV shows; and (c) preference towards East Asian TV dramas are not perceived to be due to similarities in language and cultural values alone but also because of perceived similarities in lifestyles and material conditions. These three themes will form the basis of my argument that the use of the cultural proximity model alone is not sufficient to be relied upon as the theoretical explanation of why local audiences prefer to TV shows from particular regions. Rather, audience research into this area needs to take into consideration social, economic and macro-historical factors that may have affected audience's perception of cultural similarities in transnational media texts.

From the very beginning of the interviews, I found that most of my respondents spoke very freely about how they felt and what they imagined when they watch East Asian TV dramas. For example, when asked about what it is about East Asian TV dramas that she likes so much, one of my respondents, Dini<sup>2</sup>, a high school girl living in central Jakarta, excitedly revealed that she likes East Asian TV dramas because

The plots are so interesting and the stories are often very romantic. I love these “happily ever after” kinds of stories. Also, the character Dao Ming Shi (from the Taiwanese TV drama *Meteor Garden*) is rich, handsome, kind and devoted. Sometimes, I imagine that someone like that would come and rescue me too, like in the TV show.

Dini also added that she identified with Shan Cai, the main female character in *Meteor Garden*. She found that

Shan Cai is just an ordinary girl, a poor girl who's strong-willed, smart and hard-working. Good things

happen to girls like her. I feel like I'm like her, just an ordinary girl, not rich or good-looking. Maybe like her, I'll have a rich boy like Dao Ming Shi fall in love with me too (laughs).

Another respondent, Marisa, a university student from Bandung told me that

I like East Asian TV dramas, especially the ones from Korea because the stories are so real. Sometimes, in Western TV dramas, you can tell that the acting is fake and the stories are unrealistic. In East Asian TV dramas, they talk about everyday issues like love, family issues and friendship. I really like that. Besides, Korean actors are so good-looking! I like the Korean actor Bae Yong Joon because he has a kind face. I hope I can marry a Korean man someday, one that looks like Bae Yong Joon.

Similar remarks were found among respondents who revealed that they liked East Asian TV dramas predominantly for their storylines and characters. Such insights have allowed me to see beyond the common theoretical explanations regarding audience preferences—such as the “cultural discount” model, for example—and hear valuable first-hand audience accounts.

Some respondents also revealed that one of the things they enjoyed from these East Asian TV dramas is the glamorous and materialistic lifestyle of the characters. For example, Suci, a 34-year-old housewife with two preschool-aged children from Bekasi, a suburb outside of Jakarta, told me that

The lives of characters in TV dramas such *Winter Sonata* (a Korean TV drama) and *Hotelier* (also a Korean TV drama) are so glamorous. They live in big mansions and everyone is so pretty. It fascinates me to see other people's lives. I'd like to think that maybe one day I can have a glamorous life like that too (laughs).

Suci's comments were similar to Bambang's, a 30-year-old trader from Medan who interestingly told me that

At first I really didn't like TV dramas, I think the stories are too outrageous and very “girly”. All they do on the show is cry, cry, always cry [sic]. But my wife really liked *Meteor Garden* and *All About Eve* (a Korean TV drama) so, at night, there was nothing else to watch on TV but these dramas. So I watched them and I started liking them after a while. I mean, I still think the stories are unrealistic but I quite enjoy looking at the nice houses, clothes, cars and motorbikes, like in the show *Mars* (a Taiwanese TV drama about a street-race biker). At least, they're something different to other TV shows.

When I asked Bambang whether he thinks the portrayals of wealth in East Asian TV dramas are unreasonable, he said:

Of course, like other TV shows, the portrayals of wealth in these (East Asian) TV dramas can be over the top. But, I think there are people here in Indonesia

who actually live like that. So I guess the portrayals of wealth are quite realistic to many people who are at that level. But, I think not all of the characters are portrayed that way. Many characters are just ordinary people like me.

Suci's and Bambang's remarks are typical of many of my respondents who admitted to liking East Asian TV dramas because of the images of prosperity and modernity portrayed in the shows. Interestingly, many respondents revealed that although, like Bambang, they felt that some representations of wealth are too over the top, they still found such portrayals to be quite relevant to Indonesia's economic situation today where many people are rich. Many, like Suci, hope to attain that level of wealth one day.

When specifically asked why my respondents prefer to watch East Asian TV dramas compared to Western ones, a variety of interesting responses were made, representing many different viewpoints regarding the matter. Cecil, a 22-year-old secretary from inner city Jakarta told me that

I don't really think about where the TV dramas came from. They (the TV dramas) are normally on at times when I get home from work and just want to relax. The stories are very easy to follow and I don't have to think hard. It just so happens that the TV dramas came from East Asia.

While Cecil appears to not have any particular reason why she watches TV dramas from Asia, the story was different for Yeni, a 32-year-old small business owner from Bogor, where she revealed to me that she likes the fact that East Asian TV dramas are different from Western TV dramas that she grew up watching.

In the 90s, all we had on TV was American TV shows like *Baywatch* and *Beverly Hills*. I really liked them then but I felt that I couldn't relate to their lives on the show. I really like some of the new East Asian TV dramas that are available now. They talk about issues that are relevant to us and they also have similar values, like family values and what a good husband should be like. Maybe because these TV dramas came from Asia and of course the lifestyles portrayed will be very different to those coming from America. I feel that the lives portrayed in the (East Asian) TV dramas are much more attainable for me.

I have found that similar to Yeni, many of my respondents felt that they could relate to the storylines and characters found in East Asian TV dramas because these TV dramas portray lifestyles and values that are more relevant to their own lives. Moreover, some of my respondents also told me that they found it easier to feel affection towards characters in East Asian TV dramas. For example, according to Jimmy, a university student from west Jakarta:

Although I think Western women in American TV dramas are beautiful, I don't feel attracted towards them because I don't think I'll ever be attracted to Western women in real life. Maybe because I just think they're so different to me. In American TV

shows, the women are almost always portrayed to be so forward. I think I'm quite traditional. The women in East Asian TV dramas are more realistic to me. Kelly Chen (a Hong Kong movie star) for example, is beautiful and I like the characters she plays. Demure, yet independent and modern but not forgetting family values.

To Jimmy and also Yeni, East Asian TV dramas becomes a refreshing alternative to Western TV programmes that have dominated the Indonesian market since the 1990s. For different reasons, both Yeni and Jimmy felt that they could relate to East Asian TV dramas much better than to Western TV dramas, a feeling commonly found among my respondents. As will be discussed in the following section, recognition of similarities audiences found in East Asian TV dramas are stimulated by various reasons that should not be simplistically explained by applying the cultural proximity model alone.

Although responses varied among respondents, I have found that most respondents felt that the main factor that attracted them to East Asian TV dramas is the characters' lifestyles on the show. Almost all of my respondents claimed that they enjoyed watching the modern lifestyles of characters in series such as *Meteor Garden* and *Winter Sonata*. In the interviews, many of my respondents told me that the portrayal of urban life in downtown Taipei or Seoul were found to be both fantastic but also reachable at the same time. Audiences I interviewed felt that there are many similarities between the lives of characters in the show and their own lives. They also felt that there are many similarities between Indonesian cities and landscapes with the settings found in East Asian TV dramas. These similarities made them feel that East Asian TV dramas are more "grounded" to their own lived realities. Interestingly, audiences, like Jimmy and Marisa, felt a similar sense of recognition but towards the characters found on the shows. It seems that my respondents felt a sense of reachability in East Asian TV drama characters and that it is not impossible to encounter someone just like one of the characters they see in the TV dramas. My respondents told me that they do not feel this sense of attainability in Western shows.

From my observations throughout the study, I found that generally, my respondents did not find the characters' physical features to be the determining factor that made them prefer East Asian TV dramas to Western ones. Many of them told me that it did not matter that Korean and Taiwanese movie stars have physical features, such as skin colour and eye shape, that are more similar to their own features. Quite a few of them even revealed that they still frequently watch Western TV programs and like celebrities from America and other Western countries, like the United Kingdom and Australia. However, many of my respondents felt that they could never achieve the type of lifestyle portrayed in Western TV shows. For example, Diah, a 27-year-old executive from inner city Jakarta told me that although *Sex and the City* is one of her favourite TV shows, she felt that she could never have the kind of lifestyle portrayed on the show. In her words:

I like *Sex and the City*, I think the show's funny,

witty and a little naughty. I do watch East Asian TV dramas too but, sometimes, I actually prefer *Sex and the City* if they happen to be on at the same time. However, realistically, I know that I would never have the kind of life that the characters on the show have. Jakarta is not like New York City and that kind of hedonistic lifestyle is very hard to justify here in Jakarta. East Asian TV dramas, I think, are more grounded to what we have here in Jakarta. The characters on the shows face the same kinds of issues we face and their lifestyles remind me of my own.

When I asked Diah what it was that made her feel that the portrayal of life in East Asian TV dramas are more relevant to the lives of Indonesian audiences, she told me that

Countries like Korea, Taiwan are some of the new economic powerhouses, not only in Asia but also in the world. They are getting increasingly wealthy and I think people there live much better than us in Indonesia. But, I don't think Indonesia's far-off either. I think in a short while Indonesia can be like those countries too. So, in the TV dramas, although the lifestyles of people in East Asian countries seem to be more prosperous but they are still reachable to us. It encourages me to think that Indonesia can be like Korea or Taiwan one day. I think this is one of the reasons why I like East Asian TV dramas, they are closer to my reality.

The depth of Diah's answer—most of my respondents' answers were not as articulate as Diah's—really surprised me as I realized that to many Indonesian audiences I interviewed, East Asian TV dramas become a source of aspiration. I argue that East Asian TV dramas provide Indonesian audiences with images that fulfil their desires to achieve the kind lifestyles portrayed in the shows.

### Viewing cultural proximity in a different light

Indeed, we should not underestimate media texts' potential in stimulating feelings of desire and aspiration among audiences. As has been repeatedly argued, most notably by post-modern scholars such as Kellner and Carey, the power of media texts lie in their capacity to provide symbolic images and meanings that “appeal to the senses, emotions and thoughts of the self and others” (Lull, 1995: 71). In this perspective that echoes Guy Debord's (1970) aphoristic proclamations, it must be remembered that in today's society, where the common currencies are images and signs, people increasingly become reliant on images as tools to understand and relate to the real world. This means that the role played by media texts—such as East Asian TV dramas in our case study—in the process of identity formation must also be taken into serious consideration. In regards to the significance of transnational cultural commodities in this process, John Fiske even goes as far as arguing that “in a consumer society, all commodities have functional as well as cultural values and to model this, we need to extend the idea of an economy to include a cultural

economy where the circulation is not one of money but of meanings” (1989: 27). Meanings, which include attitudes, lifestyles and values are transferable through commodities, and thus the exchange and consumption of transnational cultural commodities play an important part in providing local audiences with symbolic images with which they construct their identities.

Often, the mundane character of consumption practices disguises the key contribution they make to a broader integrated pattern of behaviour that not only fulfils the practical ends of everyday life but also gives material to the particular narratives of self-identity. Some studies (for example, Gomes, 1994; Kahn, 2001) have found that, especially among economically marginalized nations, local identities are often constructed through the consumption of cultural commodities originating from more economically prosperous nations as a symbolic act of association. For example, in her study of modernity, identity and the construction of Malay womanhood, Lucy Healey (1994) argues that one of the ways in which identity is locally constructed is through the consumption of Western artefacts that are by consensus considered “modern”. Healey observes that

“Upwardly mobile” women were keen to demonstrate their modernity by the consumption of [Western] material paraphernalia ... For a woman, part of this was the desire and ability to be a consumer thus releasing herself from the constraints of poverty. It commonly meant that she became increasingly interested in such pastimes as home decoration, fashionable clothing ... and so on (1994: 104).

The consumption of cultural commodities as means to express certain aspirations is evident in cases where the consumption of foreign cultural commodities symbolizes the desire to associate oneself with a certain ideal or state of being.

In Indonesia, as well as in much of Asia, it is undeniable that the West has been a fascinating model for lifestyle and an object of consumer desire for many years. This phenomenon can be seen in many instances where the consumption of all things Western, from Western clothing to food, music and movies, for example, is regarded as a sign of wealth, affluence and elevated social status. Consumer culture and the pursuit of this kind of luxury involves what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “the aristocratisation of the bourgeoisie” (1991: 139) where, for example, especially throughout the 1990s, consumer culture in Indonesia implies a public statement where the consumption of Western commodities is considered “cool”. In reference to our case study, an example of this phenomenon can be seen with the long-running popularity of American TV programmes such as *Baywatch* and *Beverly Hills 90210* in Indonesia throughout the 1990s, which was accompanied by the popularity of American popular culture and goods. Through the images of Western wealth, affluence and prosperity found in American TV programmes, Western-style modernity became the object of aspiration. In devouring all things Western, contemporary Asians feed this aspiration.

An interesting observation made by Ariel Heryanto (1999) in his study of the identity politics of Indonesia's

middle class is that although, towards the end of the 1990s, consumption of all things American was still high in Indonesia, what was new was the way in which Asians aggressively objectified the West in the form of commodities at their disposal. What Heryanto means by this is that although, once in a while, one still hears the old Western imperialism rhetoric, nowadays this rhetoric appeals to fewer and fewer young Asians (1999: 169). Instead of continuing to regard the West as either a major threat or an object of obsessive idolization, more and more Asians regard many Western things as pliable resources and Westerners as equals. Heryanto's analysis opens up a pathway to a new perspective on this case study, where if the 1980s and 1990s saw the boom of all things Western in Indonesia, now, as Asian countries recover from the 1997 financial crisis, Indonesians are more exposed to Asia's—in particular East Asia's—economic growth, which is increasingly becoming on par with Western nations. This is, of course, a general trend for all of Asia where with the new economic growth in most of Asia, Michael Pinches argues that

Traditions in Asia are no longer seen as inferior or historically frozen antecedents of European modernity; rather, they are now cultural traditions that rank alongside the cultural traditions of Europe, coexistent but separate and essentially different (1999: 4).

In this new phenomenon termed by Heryanto the "Asianization of Asia" (1999: 170), what is evident is a "turn" by young Asian urbanites from all things Western to all things Asian. This aphorism can mean Asian ethnic cuisine, holiday travel to visit Asian resorts, Asian decorations, accessories, music and TV programmes, for example. In any case, however, this new interest in Asian cultures among Asians cannot be considered natural or inevitable.

The identity formation of modern Asians through acts of consumption, although apparently apolitical, is, in actual fact, built on patterns of association and representations of collective identity that have clear political significance. As Ken Young argues, the reason why modern Asians are increasingly consuming Asian rather than Western paraphernalia is because, unconsciously,

[They] seek to secure their own legitimacy, to build national consciousness and exercise social control, attempt to direct through their command of an array of major institutions (media, education, and so on). Thus, consumption practices may be overwhelmingly apolitical in intent but still have significant political consequences (1999: 57).

Here, Young observes that the new sites and practices of consumption are rendered even more effective in shaping new lifestyles and identities because the emergence of the new affluence in Asia came so rapidly (*ibid.*). It is indeed true that this new interest towards Asia occurred at the same time as the boom of East Asia's economic success and the subsequent emergence of the new Asian middle class. People who have grown up with the post-

colonial Orientalist discourse that Orientals could never catch up with Western affluence learnt that, with the new Asian economic success, Western-style affluence is within reach after all. The upwardly mobile thus seek models of behaviour "appropriate" to their perceived new, elevated status. Here, representations of the new Asian affluence in media texts play a major role in the process of Asianization, where instead of devouring images of Western affluence like in the past, contemporary Asians can now construct their new-found identity with images of their own success found in media texts.

I argue that it is this portrayal of the new Asian affluence in East Asian TV dramas that can be attributed to their success in Indonesia. As mentioned before, from the interviews I have conducted, one thing that I found to be present in almost all cases is the existence of a sense of attraction and longing towards the portrayal of lifestyles projected in the TV dramas. The portrayal of characters as being wealthy, good looking, modern and upwardly mobile gave my respondents something to aspire to. Nevertheless, the attraction of East Asian TV dramas lie in its reachability, something that almost all my respondents agree they do not find in Western TV shows. However, although most of my respondents felt that East Asian TV dramas are "closer to home", I contend that this identification of cultural proximity is not due to a simple recognition of similarities in cultural values alone. I assert that the reasons for such identification are much more than that and they can be ascribed to the many social, economic and political similarities between Indonesia and East Asian countries.

For one, the state of the economy in a large part of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, can nowadays be considered to be affluent enough for the portrayals of immense wealth in East Asian TV dramas to be realistic, reachable and, hence, proximate for Indonesian audiences. Here, the "comfortable distance" that audiences perceive between Indonesia and East Asia seems to be based upon a perception that audiences in these two regions live under similar conditions and stage of modernity. The case of Indonesia presents a unique scenario where positive identification by Indonesians toward East Asian TV dramas can be attributed to the narrowing gap in terms of material conditions between East Asian nations and Indonesia. The urban consumerism of an expanding middle class, the changing role of women in society, the development of communication technologies and media industries, the reworking of local cultural values all contribute to the decrease in perceived distance between East Asia and Indonesia. These external factors must be taken into consideration in order to understand that the identification of cultural proximity in this case is, in fact, based on the facilitation of an imagined sense of synchronicity as well as an expression of desire towards certain lifestyles/stage of development. Seen in this way, I would argue that in accordance with Iwabuchi (2002), the experience of cultural proximity should not be understood in terms of a static attribute of "being" but as a dynamic process of "becoming".

From here, it is important to acknowledge that in any study of local audience reception of transnational cultural



imports, scholars and communication professionals must not resort to the essentialist assumption that local audiences would simply choose “culturally relevant” media texts. As supported by findings from this study, although the Indonesian audiences that I interviewed do prefer East Asian TV dramas compared to Western ones, recognition of similar cultural values of language is not the only reason for this inclination. Rather the influence of the audience’s social and economic aspirations in determining media choices should not be disregarded. As such, it is also important for researchers to also take into consideration the larger and constantly changing social, economic and political circumstances relevant to the lives of local audiences as these macro-factors have a significant impact on audience’s perceptions and aspirations as found in the study.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided a critical analysis of the cultural proximity thesis and its use as a theoretical framework in the analysis of transnational, especially intra-regional cultural flows. Based on a six-month interview-based study of East Asian TV dramas fans in several Indonesian cities, I have explored a number of questions regarding the validity of the cultural proximity thesis that have largely been overlooked. My primary concern in this dissertation has been to interrogate the notion of cultural proximity, where its “apparent” significance as an influence on audiences’ media text preferences appears too obvious to merit investigation. At the beginning of this paper, I proposed that the essentialist view of the cultural proximity thesis must be challenged because, despite its seeming naturalness, the use of cultural proximity to explain audiences’ preference for media texts that contain cultural similarities does not explain how or why audiences identify cultural similarities in media texts from certain regions/countries and not others.

In accordance with Iwabuchi (2002), I contend that observing cultural proximity in such a simplistic manner risks viewing culture as a static and unchanging property when culture is, in fact, continually evolving and discursively constructed in lived experiences. I argued that, because cultural proximity is founded on the idea that there are established “primordial” distinctions between different cultural groups, analysis of cultural proximity must be preceded by investigation into how audiences in a particular locality perceive other cultures and how this perception is formulated through specific social and historical circumstances. Only then can we fully understand the reason—as reflected in their media consumption preferences—why different audiences choose to associate themselves with some cultures and not others and thus perceiving some cultures as “proximate” and others as not.

From the interviews, it was apparent that feelings of cultural proximity felt by Indonesian audiences toward East Asian TV dramas are largely ignited by a sense of coeval caused by the desire among Indonesian audiences to attain a level of modernity already achieved by some East Asian countries, such as Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. I argued that it is this aspiration for Asian modernity that

has prompted Indonesian audiences to express their desire through the act of consumption: be it the consumption of material goods or the consumption of images of Asian modernity found in Taiwanese media texts. Drawing on these points, the experience of cultural proximity then should not be conceived of as a static experience of “being”, where factors that determine cultural proximity have been primordially determined but as a dynamic process of “becoming”, where cultural proximity is a feeling that results from the imaginary cultural associations audiences establish as an expression of their social and economic aspirations.

I have established in this paper that cultural proximity is, in fact, not determined by recognition of primordial cultural similarities but by the audiences’ desire for contemporaneity and synchronicity. Cultural proximity is articulated when audiences subjectively identify it in specific texts and contexts, thus it should never be regarded as a predetermined attribute of a text. To conclude, I propose that there is a great need for further audience research to examine how and why certain foreign media texts have become popular while others have not and what sort of contentment, if any, audiences experience when identifying cultural similarities in specific programmes. This sort of critical analysis can be done by taking into consideration specific social and historical circumstances, as well as various economic and political factors, that shape the way audiences view other cultures and their cultural commodities. This way, the cultural proximity thesis will not be used as an ahistorical, simplistic and deterministic way of analysing audience reception of transnational cultural commodities.

## Notes

1. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. For the purposes of this article, the author did all transcript translations into English.
2. To maintain the anonymity of research participants as requested, aliases will be used throughout this article.

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