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Cultural Imperialism or Economic Necessity?:

The Hollywood Factor in the Reshaping of the Asian Film Industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that film industries in several Asian countries are in the process of reinventing themselves as traditional approaches to filmmaking are increasingly found not to be economically viable for the industry. Economic challenges to traditional filmmaking are attributed to economic and cultural globalization with the expansion of democracy around the world, which brings Western cultural influences and entertainment styles to increasingly economically well-off and educated people in Asian countries. The paper explains the appeal and adoption of these styles in Asian film industries within the framework of the theories of cultural dependency and media evolution. The paper says that, for now, there is a growing Hollywoodization of Asian films – marked by sexual depictions, scantily clad women, and violence-oriented scripts within the framework of a pleasure-seeking culture. The author contends, however, that evidence indicates the beginnings of a reverse influence on Hollywood for the same reason -- the profitability of commercial feature films -- that is influencing Asia by Hollywood. Hollywood is

getting Asianized to some degree, with influences of the Indian, Hong Kong and Korean movie industries. The two-way cultural symbiosis is likely to grow to serve the entertainment and cultural needs of a cosmopolitan audience who is open to consuming and appreciating foreign cultural influences without entirely rejecting their own.

INTRODUCTION

The demise of totalitarianism in the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites states in the early 1990s provided added attractions for liberal democratic systems and market economies in politically closed and command economy-style societies. Along with these moves have come media liberalization and media globalization, whose social implications the developing world is just beginning to see. Marshall McLuhan's projected global village (McLuhan, 1967) is increasingly a reality made possible by the communication revolution -- satellite and cable television, multinational media conglomerates such as those of Rupert Murdoch and TIME-Warner communications, and, increasingly, the Internet.

Trade liberalization and economic growth have given more people the means to become consumers of media entertainment than ever before. The rising literacy levels in Asian countries and access to Western (mostly American) entertainment offerings are turning media consumers to be more demanding from their traditional cultural and entertainment industries. In his travels to a number of Asian countries, this writer has observed the pervasiveness of American culture being imported through a variety of media, especially movies and television programming, and increasingly the Internet. The Washington Post reported that international sales of American entertainment and software products totaled $60.2 billion in 1996, more than any other U.S. industry (The Washington Post, Oct. 25, 1998, p. A01).

Important questions emerge from this phenomenon: What are the implications of Western media globalization for indigenous cultures in developing Asian countries? What kind of influence, if any, is Western media globalization having on indigenous media industries? In this age of media globalization,

are there any indications that cultural influences may be taking place both ways – between the East and the West – rather than only from the West to the East? This paper addresses these questions by focusing on the film industries of some Asian countries and Hollywood.

Cultural Dependency, Media Growth: Theoretical Considerations

Expansion of democracy and economic liberalization since the 1990s have unleashed unparalleled Western cultural influences around the world also. This has raised concerns among social critics and policymakers in many countries. Biggins (2004) says that globalization, which has been strongly advocated through international media, has brought in a "landslide transformation of existing local culture and identity into a new form of culture with no frontier." Jerry Mander, co-founder of the International Forum on Globalization, has voiced the same concern. Writing in The Nation, Mander (1996) said that global media corporations of Rupert Murdoch, Ted Turner and very few others "transmit their Western images and commercial values directly into the brains of 75 percent of the world's population. The globalization of media imagery is surely the most effective means ever for cloning cultures to make them compatible with the Western corporate vision."

Biggins cites the cultural dependency theory of Mohammadi (1995) as a factor in the influence of the Western culture in the developing world. He quotes Mohammadi as follows:

> "The continuance of Western dominance over Third World nations was based partly on advanced technologies, including communication technologies. But it was also based on an ideology, accepted in many parts of the Third World, that there was only one path to economic development, which was to imitate the process of development of Western industrial capitalist societies. Cultural imperialism or cultural dependency occurs with the Western countries' influence on the language, values and attitudes (including religion), ways of organizing public life, styles of politics, forms of education, and professional training, clothing styles, and many other cultural habits. It creates a new kind of model of domination called neocolonialism which has sparked new kinds of struggles to eradicate this enduring cultural influence in the Third World" (Biggins, 2004).

American author Herbert Schiller had cautioned back in 1969 that the implications of the cultural influences brought about by American programming were far-reaching, especially for developing peoples of the world. "Everywhere local culture is facing submersion from the mass-produced outpourings of commercial broadcasting in the United States," he said, adding, "To foster consumerism in the poor world [through American entertainment programming] sets the stage for frustration on a massive scale" (Schiller, 1969, p. 111).

Apart from the cultural dependency theory, at least two other factors must also be considered in explaining the influence of Western, especially American, media on indigenous media industries in developing countries. First, the lowest common denominator production principle of American entertainment industries, which gears content for mass audiences, has been found to be the most successful for maximizing sales, circulation and advertising revenues (Lowenstein and Merrill, 1990, p. 33). This principle is aimed at pandering to the basic and pleasure-seeking instincts in human beings through the themes of sex, violence and alcohol in media content, a formula long used by Hollywood and mainstay of the established studio productions. The rise of the independent film industry in the United States is attributed to a rejection of the Hollywood production formula. In recent years, a more degenerated form of the lowest common denominator production formula has been seen in the tabloidization of television shows, like “The Jerry Springer Show.”

Secondly, economic globalization and increasing industrialization in developing Asian countries have facilitated a rise in income levels for people in these countries, resulting in an expanding consumer base for both printed and electronic media. The history of media development in the West shows that media transform from offering a high-level content to the relatively small consumer base in pre-industrial societies to a relatively low-level, popular-appeal type of content to serve the needs and interests of an expanding, but not a well-educated, consumer base in industrializing societies, as evidenced by the rise of the sensational Penny Press in early 1800s in the United States. This evolutionary model of media growth

in all societies is offered as the Elite-Popular-Specialized Theory of Media Progression (Lowenstein and Merrill, 1990, pp. 31-33). These theoretical considerations and the cultural dependency theory will serve as the backdrop in explaining the reshaping of film industries in some Asian countries.

Hollywoodization of Movie Industries in Asia

Perhaps the most compelling example of the incorporation of the Hollywood production formula in recent years in its productions is India's film industry, based primarily in the western city of Bombay and nicknamed "Bollywood." India's movie industry, which turns out more than 800 feature films a year in a variety of languages (Pendakur, 2003, p. 2) compared with about 250 produced by Hollywood annually (Plate, 2002), is the largest in the world. In recent years, movie theater attendance has fallen substantially because the industry's traditional song-and-dance storylines and hackneyed treatment of love scenes have not produced big hits. As a result, the film industry has started to deal openly with sex or offer generous doses of skin in an attempt to draw audiences. As the British news agency Reuters reported on October 21, 2004: "Daring young actors and actresses have thrown caution, and their clothes, to the wind to play amorous characters such as prostitutes, adulterers, playboys and husband swappers that Bollywood rarely touched in the past" (Bollywood finds . . ., Oct. 21, 2004). This new approach to filmmaking appears to be having positive economic results.

For example, Agence-France Presse reported that the biggest grossing film in 2003 was Jism (Body), which tells the story of a woman who is unapologetic about using her sexuality to persuade her lover to kill her rich husband. The small budget film turned out to be a surprise hit and its star, Bipasha Basu, is now one of the most sought after actresses in Bollywood. "The success of Jism showed that Indians are no longer ashamed of watching a steamy scene in a full house," said leading filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt, who wrote the film's screenplay. Bhatt said the film reflected a change in the mindset of the Indian viewer. "Earlier, a steamy film would be shown in small towns and would be seen by men who came for

titillation, but now urban women throng upscale halls to watch such films" (Bollywood turns on the steam, 2003).

Julie, a Hindi film released in summer 2004, dealt with the subject of prostitution, played by a top beauty queen, Neha Dhupia. Her character ends up as a prostitute after her boyfriends leave her after sleeping with her. The movie was a box office hit for repeatedly showing lovemaking scenes, turning the actress into a new sensation among moviegoers. Girlfriend, also released in 2004, dealt with lesbianism and contained a brief erotic scene between two women. There were violent protests in sections of the country, as the generally conservative Indian society, and critics, decried the film. But the movie was still playing and another lesbian-themed film was said to be in the works.

Other recent films like Oops and Boom have also caused a lot of controversy in India. Oops explores the murky world of male strippers, which, says movie critic Prathamesh Menon, is a concept so vague and unfamiliar to the Indian audience that there was rioting in some cinema theaters in an attempt to ban the film. Boom shows the three main female leads strut through most of the two-hour film in little more than bikinis and are frequently the target of crude sexual remarks. One male lead asks a woman to perform oral sex under his desk as he works (Menon, 2003). Menon says that elsewhere in the world that might be considered relatively tame stuff, but not in India where even smooching in public can still cause outrage.

For many years, Bollywood films shied away from showing even a kiss, with scenes cutting away chastely to shots of birds, bees or flowers. However, a 2003 release, Khwaish (Desire), showed not less than 17 kissing scenes and portraying a young couple who are anything but shy about discussing their sex life. Murder and Andaaz, other recently released films, have generated a lot of buzz over the actresses' skimpy clothing or kissing scenes rather than their acting abilities.

Taran Adarsh, a Bollywood critic, explained this new phenomenon in movie making. "Sex sells. And it works well if it comes with a good story. Cable TV has brought in a lot of Western influences to Indian homes. People are more accepting and more open now," he said (Bollywood finds . . ., Oct. 21, 2004). A

Bollywood producer and upcoming director, Rashika Singh, offered another explanation. She said filmmakers in India are increasingly targeting the urban youth audience. “The younger viewers want their idols to dance like Michael Jackson, swagger like Tom Cruise, fight like Jackie Chan - and still croon to their beloved in Swiss meadows, and deliver rhetorical dialogue with panache! It is like having your Indian cake and licking the forbidden Western icing too” (Menon 2003). One of India’s leading sociologists, Shiv Vishwanathan, said the new face of Bollywood is a bit of art imitating life. “It’s thanks to globalization,” he said, referring to Western market-style economic path India switched to in 1991, opening up to multinational firms, satellite TV and easier international travel” (Bollywood finds . . ., Oct. 21, 2004).

Social critics, however, worry about the likely implications of the new trend in Bollywood filmmaking for the Indian society. Generally, the Indian film industry has not had a background in realism. It has consisted of escapist musicals with common storylines of good vs. evil and boy meets girl. Typically, the films have been family orientated and the plot is kept simple so that even the rural villager can easily relate to it. The new Hollywood-inspired shift in film style is seen to be a threat to the values and culture of the Indian people.

Menon (2003), for example, says that the current Bollywood formula has some cause for concern because the transplantation of Western ideas has led to extreme vulgarity with high sexual innuendo and unnecessary violence in films today. The Film Federation of India, a regulatory body that presides over film content, complains that the films made in the New Bollywood are too Westernized and that they are degrading and diminishing India's true cultural identity.

Another cause for concern is the often duplication of popular Hollywood films in recent years. “If you point to any new Bollywood release,” says Menon, “you can bet that there existed a Hollywood original somewhere down the line. The film Koi Mil Gaya is a befuddled remake of ET and other recent films like

Bhoot (Ghost) saw the emergence of an Indian Exorcist and Raaz (Secret) was taken from What Lies Beneath. This highlights the worrying dependency of the industry on its Hollywood counterpart."

The other large Asian film industry, Hong Kong, is seeing Hollywood influence also. Borrowing from Mission: Impossible movies, Hong Kong production Downtown Torpedoes, released several years ago, is the story of a team called ATM (Advanced Tactical Mercenaries), who perform high-risk industrial theft "jobs". Jordan Chan, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Theresa Lee, Ken Wong and Charlie Yueng are in leading roles in this movie in which the emphasis is on spy hi-jinks, not mushy love stories as with many Hong Kong productions.

Like Mission: Impossible movies, there is a fair amount of double-crosses, hidden agents and other plot twists. A review by a Hong Kong critic noted that Downtown Torpedoes is "a stylish movie that shows that HK film-makers can take some inspiration from the US without totally diluting their product. It's not a classic, but compared to crud like Tokyo Raiders or this movie's pseudo-sequel Skyline Cruisers, it's a refreshing change" (Downtown Torpedoes, Film Review).

Hollywood's influence on Asian filmmakers, however, may not strictly be one way. An interesting example is that of Hong Kong action film director John Woo. Feaster (2002) writing about Woo's work notes that this filmmaker adopted American director Sam Peckinpah's machismo, but also combined it with his traditional Chinese sensibilities that showed a deep appreciation for honor and loyalty and the willingness to die for a friend. That cinematic style was hailed in Woo's films like Hard Boiled, The Killer and Bullet in the Head exported to the West. Woo followed the same style in the Hollywood production of his war film Windtalkers starring Nicholas Cage and Christian Slater. Feaster says that through this cinematic style "Woo brought something fresh and exciting to American audiences while also recharging a genre that often slid into cancerous nihilism in the hands of brutal action heroes like Charles Bronson, Clint Eastwood and Arnold Schwarzenegger" (Feaster, 2002).

The resurgence of the Korean film industry in the late 1990s is also attributed to integrating the Hollywood action-thriller approach to the indigenous cinematic style. Throughout Korea's film history, the melodrama has dominated popular film. In any given year, 50-70% of the films produced in Korea are classified, rather broadly, as melodramas. Popular movie stars are often best remembered for their roles in heart wrenching tragedies. In recent years, however, Korean cinema has reinvented itself, reclaiming its own domestic market from Hollywood productions. Paquet (2000) says there are several ways in which the films of today have tried to distance themselves from their predecessors. Newer films tend to have a glossier feel to them, and as the technical capabilities of the industry have expanded, directors have started to employ sophisticated digital imagery and special effects.

“Shiri, for example, shrewdly combines the Hollywood action blockbuster with the Korean melodrama to result in a film which appeals to a wide spectrum of viewers,” Paquet says. It was a film about a North Korean spy preparing a coup in Seoul. The film was the first in Korean history to sell more than 2 million tickets in Seoul alone. It smashed the domestic box-office record previously held by Titanic to become the most successful Korean film ever.

Citing another example, Paquet says that director Lee Myung-se’s previous works have centered on issues of love and marriage (e.g. My Love, My Bride, released in 1990, and First Love, released in 1993). However, in his 1999 release Nowhere to Hide, he takes a seeming change of course by choosing the action genre. Action films, a hallmark of Hollywood, typically feature a continuous level of high energy, stunts, chase scenes, fights, escapes, rescues, non-stop motion, an unbroken storyline, and a resourceful hero struggling against incredible odds to defeat an evil villain. Paquet notes that many aspects of Nowhere to Hide fit this description: it centers on a group of detectives who struggle to catch a wanted assassin; the film features chase scenes (one in which the detective is barefoot), fights (often notable for their striking visuals and humor), disguises, killings, and narrow escapes.

This success of Korean films has attracted the attention of Hollywood. Films such as Shiri are now distributed in the USA, and in 2001 Miramax even bought the rights to an Americanized remake of the successful Korean film My Wife is a Gangster. The 2003 suspense thriller Janghwa, Hongnyeon (Tale of Two Sisters) was successful as well, leading DreamWorks to pay $2 million for the rights to a remake, topping the $1 million paid for the Japanese movie The Ring (Korean films, 2004).

An interesting explanation of the influence of Hollywood on Filipino movie industry was offered at the 2003 Sangandan Film Festival in the Philippines. In a forum on Hollywood's influence on Filipino films, a film expert said that "since local viewers get to see mostly American productions, they are bearers of the USA's cultural imprint, and have been 'subliminally' programmed to prefer big blockbusters to the more intimate and personal dramas that European filmmakers prefer to produce" (Philippine Daily Inquirer, July 21, 2003). It was further noted at the forum that after the American occupation of the Philippines in the early part of the 20th century, most of the imported films came from the United States.

"This was colonizers' way of holding up US-related ideals before our grandfathers' eyes, so that, in due time, Filipino filmmakers aped American film products in their own productions," said a film expert (Philippine Daily Inquirer, July 21, 2003). "Thus, the preference for fair-skinned, aquiline-nosed stars, clear-cut conflicts between true-blue heroes and dastardly villains, forthright storytelling, 'moral lessons,' 'message' films, and filmmaking conventions that still characterize some of our movies today," the film expert added. This preference was said to make it difficult for small local movies to be released or distributed in the country. This also ups the ante when it comes to movie budgets, and this is another factor that prevents independent companies or self-financed filmmakers from making much headway in the local movie scene.

Hollywood's influence is also apparent on the fledgling Thai film industry that is beginning to take off. Action is a critical element to the success of the 2003 release Beautiful Boxer. However, like Hong Kong Director John Woo, Director Ekachai Uekrongtham of Beautiful Boxer adopts the action-drama approach

to making the film. Based on the true story of Thailand's famed transgender kick boxer, Nong Thoom, Beautiful Boxer is an incredible tale of one effeminate boy who fights like a man so he can become a woman. Believing he is a girl trapped in a boy's body since childhood, Parinya Charoenphol, who plays Nong Thoom, sets out to master the most masculine and lethal sport of Muaythai (Thai boxing) to earn a living and to achieve his ultimate goal of total femininity.

Critics have described the film as touching, funny and packed with breathtaking Thai kick boxing sequences. Following its screening at the Bangkok Film Festival on Jan. 20-Feb. 2, which drew the likes of Oliver Stone and Colin Farrell from Hollywood, the film was widely expected to get international distribution. A number of other recent Thai films were also said to have been sold to U.S. distributors (Siam Chronicle, May 1, 2004).

Asian Values vs. Hollywood Values Dialectic

Most academic debates since the New World Information Order movement of the 1970s on the implications of the dominance of Western media for non-Western countries have warned of imminent dangers to indigenous cultures. The foregoing analysis of the reshaping of some of the Asian film industries seems to lend some support to that view. Although the success of the sex and nudity-oriented Bollywood films confirms that there is a Westernized audience in India with an appetite for such films, India is still largely a rural country and farmers and villagers provide vital contribution to the economy of the film industry. They cannot possibly understand and appreciate the values and issues expressed by the New Bollywood. For now, enough films are being produced in India to serve the traditionalists, but whether that continues will depend on the box office success of such films.

Social critics in India are also worried that by entering the mainstream adult movie market, the uniqueness of Bollywood of providing elaborate family-oriented musical-dramas will be lost. They also

caution that apart from threatening traditional Indian values, the industry will be more vulnerable to outside competition, which in turn may damage Bollywood beyond repair.

The dilemma faced by Bollywood in maintaining the economic viability of the industry on the one hand and protecting and serving traditional Indian values on the other is resulting in serious soul searching regarding the direction the industry should take. One view comes from a highly successful new Bollywood director, Ram Gopal Varma. The Asian edition of TIME magazine in its cover story on Bollywood in October 2003 quoted Varma as saying that "anyone who does not follow the West is gone" (Perry, Oct. 20, 2003). Varma also noted that he did not care whether his movies served the needs of the rural, traditional Indian population. Indian superstar Aamir Khan responded to that view by warning that a wholesale rejection of song and dance might kill the "color, fire and innocence" that defines Indian cinema (Perry, Oct. 20, 2003).

Another view comes from writer Pankaj Mishra, who suggests incorporating the Hollywood style to filmmaking without straying too far from Bollywood's usual version of the romantic triangle. That echoes the action-drama style adopted by Hong Kong Director John Woo, as discussed earlier, and the Korean and Thai filmmakers. Mishra cites the Kal Ho Na Ho (Tomorrow May Never Come), released in 2003, as an example. The movie, set entirely in New York, brings a new slickness to Bollywood dreams of affluence and style – while singing, the characters combine Hindi lyrics with the rhythms of disco, rap and gospel – but it simultaneously reaffirms family through a gregarious cast of brothers, sisters, parents, grandmothers and grandfathers. To Mishra, such films are "becoming the echo chamber of middle-class India as it tries to bend – without breaking – its old, austere culture of underdevelopment" (Mishra, Feb. 28, 2004)

Emerging Asian Movie Markets and Implications for Hollywood

Research indicates that there are at least two important implications of the new phenomenon gripping Asian film producers. First, Hollywood may itself benefit from the increasing Hollywoodization, albeit within local socio-cultural frameworks, of indigenous film industries in Asia. MIT Professor Christina Klein notes that "Hollywood today is going into the business of producing and distributing 'foreign' movies. This move derives from studio executives' suspicion that Hollywood films may have reached the limits of their overseas appeal. As evidence, they point to the growing popularity of locally-made films around the world" (Klein, 2003).

Klein says that Hollywood is finding ways to turn a profit on the desire of local audiences to see local films; rather than trying to beat the competition, the studios are joining it. In the last few years, Columbia, Warner Brothers, Disney/Buena Vista, Miramax, and Universal have all created special overseas divisions or partnerships to produce and distribute films in languages other than English. Sony-owned Columbia Pictures' Hong Kong-based subsidiary, for example, has produced a number of films in Chinese. Hollywood studios are also becoming important financiers and distributors of Asian films. This trend has contributed to the success of Asian filmmakers, such as Indian director Mira Nair, whose 2001 hit, Monsoon Wedding, was distributed by Universal Studios in the United States.

In addition, the increasing globalization of film industries is making it possible for "foreign" movie stars to make their mark in America. Indian beauty queen and film star Aishwarya Rai, for example, has appeared in her first movie in English, Bride and Prejudice, which is scheduled for distribution by Miramax in the United States later in 2004. Klein says the Hong Kong film industry alone has contributed actors like Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Chow Yun-fat; directors such as Tsui Hark, Kirk Wong, and Ringo Lam; and martial arts choreographers like Yuen Wo Ping, Yuen Cheung-yan, and Corey Yuen.

The second implication of the Hollywoodization of Asian filmmaking is for the future of Hollywood itself. In view of the increasing globalization of filmmaking, and China and India projected to be larger movie markets than Europe, will Hollywood remain immune to Asian influences on its own style of

filmmaking? The answers seems to be in the negative in view of the economic factor. Klein says that from 1950s through the 1970s, Hollywood earned about 30% of its money overseas. “That number is expected to grow over time, with some industry figures predicting the foreign share of box office earnings could rise to 80% within the next twenty years. This means that Hollywood is becoming an export industry, making movies primarily for people who live outside the US” (Klein, 2003). Asia alone is expected to be responsible for as much as 60% of Hollywood’s box-office revenue by then.

This economic reality is expected to result in an increasing crossover of Asian cinematic style into Hollywood. As Klein (2003) says, when scholars talk about global cinema they usually mean the Hollywood blockbusters that perform well in markets around the world -- films like Titanic or Jurassic Park. But the integration of Hollywood and Asian film industries is producing a different kind of global cinema: films which contain material and stylistic elements from industries on both sides of the Pacific. Hero, China's official submission for the 2002 foreign language Academy Award, is one example of this new global cinema. Menon (2003) says that an example of where the globalization of both Eastern and Western film styles can be seen to be a success is when Hollywood takes on the ideas of Bollywood. “When Australian director Baz Lurman was filming Moulin Rouge, he commented that his intention was to apply the 'Bollywood masala' formula. When [Indian] director Shekhar Kapur shot Elizabeth, he insisted that it have all the kinetic color of a Bollywood film. Kapur was also the producer for the recent Bollywood-style romantic comedy, The Guru, complete with dance numbers and dream scenes. New releases like Bollywood Queen and Bride and Prejudice also intend to apply this formula,” says Menon.

Perhaps a larger benefit from the standpoint of humanity, rather than corporate interests, of moves toward globalization of film industries may be greater understanding and appreciation of world cultures. A new study by UCLA's Ronald W. Burkle Center for International Relations says that growing Asian competition for the Hollywood film industry may not be a bad thing. Tom Plate, a professor at UCLA, noted that the increasing Asianization of the film business could represent globalization at its most

desirable. “Exposing a broader sector of the U.S. audience to divergent cultural and political perspectives could prove of enormous value. Rather than experiencing a fearsome and reductive ‘clash of civilizations,’ we would get a truly cosmopolitan world entertainment media (e.g., more movies might even show serious problems being solved without guns or bombs),” he says. Mass entertainment, concludes the study, "will not in itself be adequate to overcome inclinations toward hatred and violence. But it can help” (Plate, 2002).

CONCLUSION

It is obvious from the foregoing that film industries in several Asian countries are going through a process of reinventing themselves to maintain their economic viability amidst the globalizing media culture of the West, especially the United States. The question is whether it is the cultural dependency theory or the well-established production formula of Hollywood for commercial success that explains the changes happening in Asian film industries. At the Global Fusion 2004 conference in St. Louis, USA, in late October 2004, one media scholar cited the cultural dependency theory, or cultural imperialism of the West, as the explanation for the changing Korean film industry. In his paper, the scholar noted that as some Korean films are becoming huge commercial successes by incorporating Hollywood-style themes and production techniques, their appeal in America was on the rise, which the scholar interpreted as "reverse cultural imperialism."

Indeed, "cultural imperialism" or its academic variant called "cultural dependency theory" are terms often used by scholars in international communication and cross-cultural communication to explain negative influences of the West on the cultures and media industries of developing nations. Some have even suggested that "cultural imperialism" is slowly killing off indigenous cultures in some parts of the world. These are extreme reactions based on misinterpretations of phrases such as "cultural imperialism." There is no doubt, as Keohane and Nye, Jr. (September/October 1999, pp. 86-87) argue, that ideological and material success of a country makes its culture and ideology attractive internationally, especially if the country also happens to be a large one and is dominant militarily and technologically also. If this is how "cultural imperialism" is defined, then it is obvious that by nature "cultural imperialism" works through "appeal" of a culture since the culturally imperialist country is not forcing anyone to adopt its culture. Across the globe, academic books, research journals, information and cultural products from the West have been valued as sources of information and enjoyment even as people in developing countries continue to cherish and enjoy their own cultures. This presents "cultural imperialism" as a benign or

welcome force rather than a harmful one, contrary to how the critics interpret it and weigh its effects globally.

So when a country or its media industries feel compelled to adopt what appear to be the features of Western popular culture, we have to presume that they are doing so for reasons other than "cultural imperialism." As we have said, cultural imperialism, in contemporary world, works by appeal rather than by force. Singapore, for example, carries BBC World Service on one of its FM radio stations 24 hours a day because the country, as an economic powerhouse in Asia, values the importance of the English language in international business and commerce and wants its population to be fluent in English for its continued economic success.

On the other hand, Asian filmmakers have been compelled to adopt Hollywood's "lowest common denominator" production formula – predicated on the themes of sex, violence, alcohol and drug use – to regain commercial success for their films, whose earlier themes of mushy love stories and family dramas have lost their appeal to an audience with access to the titillating offerings of the West through globalized television. The commercial success of Asian films based on the Hollywood formula, such as India's Jism or Korea's Shiri, underscores the point that it is the tried-and-tested production formula that is being imported from the West rather than "cultural imperialism" that is being exported from the West to Asian film industries. This is consistent with and reinforces the Elite-Popular-Specialized media evolution theory, mentioned earlier in this article, which says that media have to be packaged around a "popular" appeal in economically modernizing societies with expanding numbers of media consumers. An equally important point to note here is that there is a greater likelihood of crossover of commercially successful production formulas from East to West (rather than just from West to East) if the economic viability of Hollywood depended on that than the likelihood of a "reverse cultural imperialism." This is because "cultural imperialism" is predicated on the notion of appeal of the dominant to the less dominant, whereas commercially successful media production formulas move freely to fulfill economic needs.

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