INTRODUCTION

Focusing on the prospect of a locally based Southeast Asian Studies in the near future, this chapter necessarily takes a different approach and framework from most of the other chapters. For political and historical reasons, Southeast Asian Studies, as we know it today, has for the past several decades had its major centres of excellence half a globe away from Southeast Asia, no matter how one might define the region. With the exception of Singapore, formal training and research in Southeast Asian Studies in the region are fairly new and small in size and impact in comparison both to academic activities in other fields of enquiry, as well as in comparison to area studies in several countries outside the region. Understandably, most historical analysis of area studies has referred largely to key texts, ideas, persons and institutions from other regions. While such an exercise is highly valuable, it raises a number of intellectual, political and ethical issues as I have explored them elsewhere (Heryanto 2002). Building on that article, I wish to consider below the prospects for a home-grown Southeast Asian Studies in the twenty-first century, and speculate what such studies might look like. I must admit from the start, I do not have any ready answers to these important yet difficult questions. However, I hope this modest attempt is a worthy step. More specifically, this is a preliminary attempt to consider the initial and potential contribution of intra-Asian popular cultural flows to the future of a locally based area studies of the region, its people and its historical trajectory, as one possible form of successor to the old Southeast Asian Studies from the Cold War era.

Unlike most analyses of prominent Southeast Asian Studies in other regions, we are faced with a rather limited range of locally published and accessible ideas when examining the case within the otherwise rich intellectual traditions of the region itself. Instead of following the usual practice of looking back to milestones, key texts, authors, and debates of area studies in the past, local conditions have led me to focus on the present potentials and possible future. Instead of confining the selection of materials for analysis to published academic works on locally produced Southeast Asian Studies, I take the liberty to consider various non-academic materials, especially popular cultural products that bear witness to the fervour of contemporary cross-regional networks, offering one potential basis for a future region-based area studies. Needless to say, such an approach is far from adequate. It is my hope, nonetheless, that the discussion below shows persuasively that post-Cold War area studies has no or little choice but to go beyond its "regnant paradigm" (McVey 1995, p. 6) of the past, especially if it is to survive this century and particularly in the region itself. It is neither possible nor desirable for a home-grown Southeast Asian Studies to produce a replica of the exemplary models from the colonial and Cold War eras. Southeast Asian Studies in the present and future cannot afford to overlook the vibrant development of new media and popular cultures. Substantial sections in the middle of this chapter will be devoted to a close examination of samples of what such cross-regional cultural flows look like and how they may be helpful in the formation of a locally-based area studies.

I will look at some of the dominant streams in the recent intra-regional popular cultural products, of which the so-called "Korean Wave" is a salient part. To complement that discussion, I will examine selected alternative samples of intra-regional popular cultural circulation that are politically sensitive to majority groups in the region. I refer to ethnicity and religion in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. Both the dominant and the alternative intra-regional popular cultural flows in this new millennium signal new desires and anxieties among millions of people in this politically and economically dynamic region as they attempt to redefine their self-identities, and also a common commitment to embrace a modernity that better fits their specific, if diverse and fluid, historical circumstances and aspirations for their future. All these new developments require reconsideration not only of the selected contents or external contexts of Southeast Asian Studies...
that the forces of the market and the new media were not necessarily made by the political elite of the region. However, one must quickly add the capacity to help integrate the region much better than any conscious efforts

consequences to the enterprise (Reid 1999; Heryanto 2002). Two of the most recent related forces that have transformed the region are new media technology and industrial capitalist expansion. These new forces have the capacity to help integrate the region much better than any conscious efforts made by the political elite of the region. However, one must quickly add that the forces of the market and the new media were not necessarily a
go good thing for everyone in the region, as they are never meant to be. It is also worth noting that the new media might not have been so effective in integrating the region until they were accompanied by the recent boom in the production, circulation and consumption of popular culture across the national borders of North, East and Southeast Asia. Ironically, this took place not long after the infamous 1997 economic crisis and in the early 2000s.

As Southeast Asian Studies waned in many parts of the world following the end of the Cold War, there have been some enthusiastic attempts to build locally based area studies in Southeast Asia. Most prominent among these attempts are the networks run by academics, with generous sponsorship from external philanthropic foundations from the USA and Japan. One such network is the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP), based in Manila, with sponsorship from the Japan and Toyota Foundations in the initial years in the late 1990s. Soon after that the Bangkok-based Asian Studies in Asia Fellowship Program (AsiaFP) was founded, then transformed into the Asian Scholarship Foundation (ASF) from 2002. ASF and its predecessor enjoyed generous support from the Ford Foundation. The third important network in the region is the Kuala Lumpur-based Asian Public Intellectuals (API) Fellowships with sponsorship from the Nippon Foundation. The Rockefeller Foundation sponsored the establishment of another Bangkok-based network called the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN). Several more projects along these lines have been evolving, including the ASEAN University Network.

It is hard to see the simultaneity of these new and comparable initiatives as purely accidental. There seems to be a common sense of urgency to salvage area studies, which had been deemed to be in irremediable crisis in many parts of the world outside the region. It was also clear there was a common commitment to innovation in building a locally based area studies, as well as attachments to the Cold War era studies. Cognizant of the structural limitations that seriously impede academic rigour in the region (see McVey 1995; Heryanto 2002), many of these networks have been keen to collaborate with mid-career non-academic professionals who have the potential to make a significant contribution to building a strong home-grown area studies. Reminiscent of the studies of the Orient in colonial times, such persons may include those loosely labelled as "public intellectuals", as well as artists, civil servants, and journalists. It is also a common policy among members of these networks to give priority support to those who are both citizens and residents in the participating countries. These networks commonly encourage participants to study the less familiar
among the participating countries, instead of their own country or their closest neighboring countries.

Unfortunately, even the best intents and efforts do not readily equate to successes. One decade after these visions and commitments were first put into practice, their interim achievements deserve noting, and problems acknowledged. The number of young academics in selected universities studying other parts of the region may have grown. Some of them may have published work that will be recognized as important contributions to area studies. There has been a growing interest in scholarly study of this area among local intellectuals. Notwithstanding these, the scale and intensity of economic dynamics, urban growth, and cultural vibrancy of the region in the past three decades dwarfed the achievements of these new projects. More fundamentally, heavily reliant on external funding and the persistent legacies of the old "regnant paradigms" of area studies from the Cold War period have made it difficult for these projects to self-sustain over a long period and achieve their intended goals any time soon. Despite the aspiration of the founding members of the network to encourage innovation and collaboration with non-academics, conservative and narrow-minded academicism characterized many of the sponsored activities, leading to a general tendency to reproduce some of the less innovative practices of area studies from the Cold War era.

Largely overlooked, or misunderstood, or underestimated by students of Southeast Asia past and present is the growth of new strength in non-academic and non-state-sponsored knowledge production with potential impact on scholarly activities in Southeast Asian Studies. If the trends continue well into the next several decades, one can postulate a scenario where different locally-based producers, retailers, advertisers, journalists, artists, activists, cultural critics, and consumers of popular cultures have a lot to instruct each other about their neighboring countries and the globalized region as a whole, but not in classrooms and not directly towards attaining academic degree.

No doubt, one dominant feature of such knowledge is the industrial interests of the sponsors, including those with questionable ethical and ideological overtones. While such knowledge will never replace what is commonly expected of a respectable scholarly work, students of Southeast Asian Studies must not rush to dismiss these non-academic knowledges, because the latter are part of the strongest forces that shape Southeast Asia today. This is not necessarily a one-way relationship. Academics in the region have been active in the production, circulation, regulation, and consumption of popular culture. What is new, for better or worse, is a major shift of power relations in the production of knowledge around intra-regional networks, between academics and those in the media and entertainment industry. Not only will academics have to be more attentive to sources of information and resources available from the media and entertainment industries, but an increasing number of graduates from academic institutions have sought and found employment in this fast developing industry. Following the "corporatization" of academic institutions in the region (Heryanto 2003) in the 1980s and 1990s, what we have seen since the late 1990s (and more so in the 2000s) is a series of new initiatives by major local industries to take part in investment in the establishment of tertiary institutions. It has become increasingly impossible or unacceptable, for students of contemporary Southeast Asia to overlook the work of the new media and widespread consumption of popular culture.

NEW MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

Both the terms "new media" and "popular culture" have been casually used by many people from a wide range of backgrounds, including journalists and academics. However, among specialists each of these phrases is highly contested. It is unnecessary to go into detail about the ongoing debates about the concepts. For our immediate purpose, suffice it to note what senses of the terms will be adopted in this discussion, and to acknowledge that this preference is neither taken for granted nor free from objection.

Scholars (for instance Chun and Keenan 2006; Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant and Kelly 2003; McQuail 1994) have discussed at length the benefits of the commonly used term "new media" as well as the reasons for its popularity and some of the thorny issues surrounding its use. It is important to heed their advice that the adjective "new" here should not be taken to imply "better" for all beings, or to imply total separation from or incompatibility with the "old(er)" media. Even if "new" is taken to imply "better", it can never mean the same for different people. The term "new media" does not refer to a fully developed state of technology, but also to the potentials for the future that they still have. In the discussion below, the term "new media" (plural for "new medium") refers loosely and collectively to the different information technologies of communication — particularly but not exclusively the electronic and digital — with the following marked characteristics or features that distinguish them from the old media: interactivity, high capacity, decentralization, and flexibility of form, content, and use.
Beyond the specialist media studies circles who do not always agree with each other, discussions on new media technologies often revolve around what they do for us in important areas, such as governance, education, industry, personal relations and conflicts. These studies are definitely valuable. What is frequently missing in these discussions, however, is a consideration of what the new media have done to us, as opposed to for us. There is an assumption that the new technology changes many things around us, but not our inner selves which are autonomous and as if free from history. Such arguments presume the universalist idea that human beings are essentially the same and that across the globe they are trying to achieve the same ideals. Thanks to the new media, so the common wisdom goes, we can do things better, easier, at a higher speed, and at lower cost. The notion that “new” will necessarily bring something “superior” or “better” is an index of a particular modernist bias from the previous century about progress and the evolution of history. The media themselves have generally been perceived — by political and economic elites as much as by lay people — first and foremost as a set of tools. They are perceived to be neither good nor bad in themselves. Their value is considered to depend on who owns them, or who has access to their use, and how they are used.

A humanist perspective of this kind was dominant for most of the last two centuries in the social sciences and humanities, and it has shaped the dominant paradigm in Southeast Asian Studies. Surprisingly, this dominant view survived the two World Wars that shattered the illusion of human reason and the capacity of human beings to bring about a better life with the use of science and technology. In any case, this past history helps explain why, until very recently, scholars in Southeast Asian Studies were never trained to recognize, let alone seriously examine, media technology as a social force with a significant degree of autonomy in the process of social change. In fact, instead of simply facilitating better human agency in communicating the same old types of messages with greater speed or size or detail, the new technology has challenged and subverted (if not uniformly) all of the old familiar institutions, practices and agencies. It has also helped give birth to new kinds of messages and new kinds of agency, and has reinvented a new kind of social relations. Accordingly, if area studies will survive well in the new social environment, it can be expected to undergo some substantial transformation from its predecessors.

As elaborated elsewhere (Heryanto 20086), I use the term “popular culture” to refer to a variety of genres of communicative practices widely and prominently circulated for a large number of the people, or by such people, or a combination of both. The first category (for the people) refers to mass-produced commodified messages (including music, films, and television) and related signifying practices. The second category (by the people) includes non-industrialized, relatively independent, communicative practices that circulate through various means (public events, parades, festivals), often, but not always, in opposition or as alternatives to the mass-produced commodities of entertainment and lifestyles. To bring the concept into sharper relief, let me contrast it to what popular culture is not. Most past studies of Asian culture devoted attention to the so-called “traditional” or “ethnic” cultures (often exoticized as authentic cultures of specific peoples by the tourist industry, museums and the art world) which can be easily distinguished from the modern, urban-based popular culture which lacks a specific association to or embeddedness within any particularly ethnic group and its traditions. Popular culture is also distinguished from the state-sanctioned “official” version of national cultures (as often propagated in schools and ceremonies) or the “avant-garde” or “high” cultures of the nation’s intelligentsia (as found in the academy, theatres and prestigious galleries). This is not to say that there is no borrowing or mutation of particular elements between one category and another. The contrary is true; borrowing of elements from one category to another has been common throughout history.

If media technology has been relegated to the status of a mere tool, and is thus considered secondary to something of greater importance (such as the “content”, or the people who own and manipulate it), popular culture was obviously regarded as even less important.3 Actually, there were more reasons than has usually been admitted for the lack of interest in popular cultures among scholars in Southeast Asian Studies during its peak in the Cold War period. One of these reasons is gender bias. Led by American social sciences, Southeast Asian Studies during the Cold War was preoccupied with issues of the region’s march towards modernization, state-nation building or those hurdles that impede such projects (as poverty, Communism, local traditions, corruption, or violence). They all appear as primarily activities about and for men from a predominantly male authorial perspective. In contrast, entertainment and popular culture as disseminated via the mass media (radio and television) was seen as occupying the secondary “private” or “domestic” domain, mainly belonging to the second-class gender.

Additionally, a significant reinvigoration of popular culture is a fairly recent reality in many parts of Southeast Asia.4 Although the early emergence of popular culture in Southeast Asia dates back around a century ago, it underwent difficulties during the political turmoil of decolonization and the Cold War. Although many today’s Southeast Asian consumers of popular
cultures have fond memories of products in the middle of the twentieth century, only the last two or three decades of the twentieth century began to witness a major expansion of the mass production and consumption of popular cultures in this region. The new development was made possible by the sustained industrialization from the 1980s, the rapid growth of the media and entertainment industries (especially television network), and the increased capacity, affordability, and higher level of user-friendliness of the digital media technology.

From the 1950s, if not earlier, popular culture from India had already spread across the region, if unevenly. In the 1970s and 1980s martial arts and historical films from Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and telenovelas from Latin America found a huge and avid audience in the region. Japanese comics, toys, animated films, popular music and television dramas were a big hit in the 1980s and early 1990s (for details see Iwabuchi 2002a; Otmgazin 2007, 2008). From the early 2000s Korean music, soap operas and video games have made a major presence in the region (for details see Merdikaningrys 2006; Setijadi 2005; Shim 2006; Shim, Heryanto, and Siriyuvasalc 2010; Siriyuvasalc and Shin 2007). Despite all these developments, these phenomena still remain a sorely understudied area. The majority of writings and discussions available are from journalistic reports and blogs among fans. Although such publications have some merit, they often lack the analytical depth and rigour that can be expected of serious academic research work.

By definition, popular culture is a product of an industrialized society, where cultural practices and artefacts are produced, displayed, or consumed in a great number with the assistance of technologies of mass duplication, making them highly accessible to a large number of consumers across different locations and social backgrounds. Many of these technologies were not designed in Southeast Asia and their circulation is not within the control of Southeast Asians, although Southeast Asian labour often went into the process of production. Even in those countries of the region where industrialization began slightly earlier or progressed more robustly, popular culture is a fairly new phenomenon, and the study of this phenomenon has only recently developed. In this sense, the absence or dearth of work on popular culture in Southeast Asian Studies can be understood as something other than the result of an oversight or gender bias alone.

Increasingly, the pace of producing scholarly work appears too slow to catch up with the progressively faster moving world pushed by the new media. Many scholars across the major disciplines, including (though not especially) those active in Southeast Asian Studies, were simply unprepared to take on the task of analysing something so new and something that until recently scholars had regarded so unworthy of close scrutiny and analysis. In addition to intellectual inhibitions, there are also serious practical issues. There are increasingly abundant quantitative data on the subject matter to be collected for analysis, and these data quickly become obsolete soon after — or even before — they are collected. For these reasons, this study does not aim to add or emphasize any particular empirical details of a phenomenon per se which is still very much alive, changing, and in-progress. Instead, this study aims to highlight a few long-standing issues. These issues were selected specifically on the basis of their significance to the discussion of the future of locally-based area studies in Southeast Asia. A brief account of Asian popular culture flows in the region will be presented as no more than a cursory introduction to the general phenomenon. A few empirical details and references will follow mainly for illustrative purposes.

The dawn of this millennium witnessed, for the first time, how the West ceased to be the one and only centre of orientation for the consumption of popular culture in Asia. Although American popular music and Hollywood films continue to hold an important influence, they no longer have the sole and dominant power that they enjoyed for almost the entirety of the previous century. At precisely the time when more and more Asians, particularly the young, were switching their fascination to media representations of fellow Asians, “East versus West” as a discursive frame of thought or convenient trope was also declining dramatically in public discussion. This is a profound transformation if one considers how the “East versus West” dichotomy was a central point of reference for nearly all discussion of nation-building during much of the history of the decolonization of the region. It was revived most strongly in the last decades of the twentieth century when “Asian Values” propaganda was in vogue. The fall of the “Asian Values” discourse was not only or directly the result of the 1997 economic crisis as many have suggested. Rather, it was superseded by an intra-Asian focus and fascination among millions of people in the region, particularly in terms of consumerism, entertainment, and popular culture.

The shift of power from formal state elite discourses to mass consumption of popular culture is probably part of a larger set of changes in the region. This, in turn, requires major shifts and adjustments in the study of the region if such studies are to have relevance.

Two qualifications are now called for. First, the declining concern with the “East versus West” dichotomy should not be taken as a sign of an absolute decline of Western power or cultural influence. Rather, it indicates a strong trend in Asia, where selected iconic elements of
Western popular culture have now been creatively blended with those conventionally understood as “Asian” within a new aesthetics, sensibility and identity among Asian youths. Rather than being entirely wiped out, rejected or avoided, these elements of Western popular culture are modified, localized and incorporated. From the late 1980s a trend was already noticeable whereby in micro-level practices, the new rich in Asia “objectify[ed] the West in the form of commodities at their disposal ... Instead of ... regard[ing] the West as a major threat, or ... an object of obsessive idolisation, more and more Asians regard ... Western things as pliable resources” like any other exoticized objects of consumption from “Asia” (Heryanto 1999, p. 169). While markers of distinction pertaining to “Asian” and “non-Asian” continue to be reproduced, repackaged and marketed and occasionally mixed, the two are no longer portrayed as opposites that shall never meet.

Second, I mentioned earlier that the trend towards better regional integration in Southeast Asia has been galvanized not so much by efforts of the region’s top political elites as by forces of the new media and the market in the new environment of expanded industrial capitalism and the creative work of popular culture. Having said this, I must acknowledge that governments in the exporting countries of these popular cultural products have played an important role. Governments in Japan and South Korea made substantial investments in the creative industries from the late 1990s for economic and political reasons rather than reasons of cultural advancement or enlightenment. However, these efforts should not be equated with the outcome. In neither case, do these governments have the capacity to turn, direct or convert the successful expansion of popular cultural production, distribution and consumption in the region into greater political clout or, as some have called it, “soft power” and “diplomatic influence”. Shim Doobo (2006) shows the concerted and long-term efforts of the South Korean government in investing in and engineering what is now commonly referred to as the “Korean Wave”. Otmazgin (2008) provides details of Japanese state investment in cultural production and distribution, and its limited capacity to reap political gains. His analysis also shows how other governments (in Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines and Malaysia) attempted unsuccessfully to restrict the inflow of Japanese popular culture into their respective territories as they had previously done with American popular culture. Even when it was evident that their earlier attempts had been to no avail, many governments in the region continued to ride the latest popular cultural wave and to seek short-term political and diplomatic gains in the name of the nation they represented.

The results have been varied but limited (for the case of Japan see Iwabuchi 2002b).

THE DOMINANT WITHIN INTRA-REGIONAL CULTURAL FLOWS

In the opening section I mentioned the need to look at what exists in the public space across Southeast Asia as a potential resource for a locally based area studies, given the limited size and range of scholarly debates that have been conducted thus far under the rubric of Southeast Asian Studies in the region. This section and the next will be devoted to examining selected samples of contemporary popular cultural products that have caught the imagination of millions of youths in the region.

Most observers now emphatically agree that audience reception matters. Ultimately the success story of the Northeast Asian popular cultures cannot be adequately assessed without due recognition of the role of the audience in making it happen. But “audience” is an extremely complex and elusive concept; it is certainly more problematic than can be addressed in this brief study. I mention this only as a reminder that analysing state policies or obtaining the record-breaking sales figures can be useful but never adequate for understanding the Asianization of Southeast Asian popular culture. Although such information is important it does not tell us why millions of Southeast Asians in the early 2000s spent hours each week passionately consuming recent popular culture from other Asian countries. What was it about these cultural products that the audience found compelling and appealing, and which they could not find in other cultural products?

Many analysts have explored possible answers (Otmazgin 2007; Shim, Heryanto, and Siriyuvasak 2010; also for Thailand see Siriyuvasak and Shin 2007; for Indonesia see Ida 2008; Merdikaningtyas 2006; Pravitta 2004; and Setijadi 2005; for Singapore Chua 2004). Understandably, none has claimed to know the answers with any certainty. With the notion of “audience” still highly contested, it hardly needs to be said that we should not assume uniformity of audience reception even in the most abstract and general sense. Although various popular cultural products were consumed more or less in the same period across the region, these products acquired different values and significance as they travelled in different locations and social groups. Here I do not refer primarily to individual consumers’ subjective preferences or backgrounds, although these are an important factor that deserves study in their own right. Instead, my concern is with the different social histories that have produced different collective
memories and “imagined audiences” across the societies of Southeast Asia, each with different (dis)abilities, expectations, and sensitivities in their acts of consumption. The next section will elaborate this point.

Below is a brief observation about some common thematic features that prevail in many of the popular Asian drama series. By no means does this provide a direct, let alone an adequate, answer to the question of why these series appeal to such a wide audience. However, it is an important step towards answering the question. Given the wide range of forms and genres of Asian popular cultures that have swept across the region (comics, music, films, television drama series, toys, video games, clothing and hairstyles, and so on), and the size of each form and genre, the case presented below is a fragment of the total picture with no claims to representativeness. The selection of genres and materials is based on what appeared to be the most prominent and accessible samples. I have chosen to comment on drama series in this section, and films in the next, because of their prominence in the region as well as for methodological reasons. Televised drama series (as discussed below) have the capacity to reach a large and broad audience, perhaps no less than what comic books, music, or films do. Televised drama series as a medium can be more powerful than comic books and music, not only because of their moving images and sound. By presenting a realist portrayal of life situations which the majority of its target audience aspire to or feel familiar with, televised drama series promise to convey meaningful messages to their audience in a most direct and consumer friendly way.

With effective use of realist images, sound and narratives, dubbed or subtitled Japanese or Korean drama series and films can also strike a chord with various audiences in Southeast Asia who do not speak the original language used in them. Under the specific circumstances that prevail in the region today, drama series can also outdo films in their ability to reach and compel a loyal audience. Of late, films have attracted a narrower audience than television in the region, because the former are more demanding: a particular hour, a ticket fee, and solitary consumption in a dark room.12 Televised drama series as a medium can be more powerful than comic books and music, not only because of their moving images and sound. By presenting a realist portrayal of life situations which the majority of its target audience aspire to or feel familiar with, televised drama series promise to convey meaningful messages to their audience in a most direct and consumer friendly way.

Another theme of many of these Oriental dramas is the importance of hard work and persistence, demonstrated particularly by the young female protagonist. Not surprisingly, most studies by others (as those already cited throughout this chapter) suggest that females outnumber males as viewers. The same gender imbalance can be seen among the fans of the predominantly male popular music singers from Japan and Korea. Paradoxically, the merits of industriousness, patience and humility in these Korean and Japanese drama series are invariably counter-posed with exuberant displays of comfort, elegance, and luxury in the lifestyles of some of the wealthy characters. Such lifestyles are often more extensively shown and foregrounded in these drama series than in Hollywood films. In the stories presented, there is no one-to-one direct and causal link between industriousness and a luxurious lifestyle. Not all the industrious characters end up living in abundance. Not all who work hard do so with the intention to become wealthy. Not all who are wealthy appear to work harder than the less advantaged ones. We will return to this matter in a moment.

Although the love story sets the overall storyline of these Northeast Asian drama series, what gets foregrounded throughout the episodes is not the protagonist’s preoccupation with her affectionate feelings towards someone she loves. Rather, the series presents a dramatic display of the protagonist’s uphill struggle and gradual ability to overcome various challenges of living as part of a second-class gender in a rapidly industrializing Asian society with a strong patriarchal culture. This is so much so that the romantic relationship between the protagonists is occasionally pushed to
when they are self-restrained. At least at the level of appearance, decorum is prioritized over individual expression. This resonates with off-screen speech subjects" these might entail. The contrast in the immediate rewards (if any), and the protagonist will happily submit to hard work and self-restraint, regardless of some degree of respect and moral authority (of course, as with all models, there are some exceptions). 17

Such cross-regional similarities have led some observers to make an argument for the "cultural proximity" of Northeast Asian popular cultures over those from North America. While not wanting to discount this argument outright, I find it inadequate. Audience preferences and pleasure can develop from contacts with the familiar and with sameness as much as from contacts with the unfamiliar and foreign. 18 On the other hand, I do not agree with some of the strong criticism of the "cultural proximity" thesis either. Of the critics of the "cultural proximity" thesis, more have objected to the modifier "cultural" than to the noun "proximity". The concept "cultural proximity" has some validity when one takes "culture" to refer to a contested field and a set of signifying practices in the world marked by unequal relations of power in both material and non-material terms. Even if it is inadequate to explain the popularity of Northeast Asian popular culture, the "cultural proximity" thesis has some value when the term "culture" is not understood as something static and unchanging or inertly or naturally belonging to a clearly bounded social group.

Let us move from abstract generalization to some specific examples. The storyline in Meteor Garden revolves around the love between Shan Cai and Dao Ming Tze, with several complications and sub-plots of additional love stories involving other characters. 19 Shan Cai is a girl from an economically modest family background. Dao is the spoiled son of an extremely rich family. He takes the lead in a group of four boys called F4, who are both feared and idolized for their wealth, good looks, and bullying. Despite their extreme contrast in material terms, Shan Cai and Dao are equally stubborn. Shan Cai's name, as she tells the audience in one scene, means "weed not to be trampled on". In the early episodes of the drama series, Shan Cai finds herself the object of repeated bullying by her schoolmates acting as a proxy for F4. She would not have been targeted by F4 and their supporters in the first place had she not confronted Dao in defence of her girlfriend who had previously made some minor mistake vis-à-vis Dao, which provoked a scolding from him. Far from accepting her fate and submitting herself to assaults and humiliation by F4, Shan Cai revolts and single-handedly strikes back. In one of the earlier scenes, she punches Dao to the ground!

Later on we learn that Dao has a crush on Shan Cai. To his surprise, however, Shan Cai rejects his affections outright. This rejection further deepens Dao's desire to conquer and possess Shan Cai by any means, including a willingness to publicly abase himself and compromise his
reputation as the toughest guy in the school. Slowly but surely, Dao wins Shan Cai’s heart. But with few exceptions, in the lengthy series of *Meteor Garden* the love story between Shan Cai and Dao is fraught with endless disagreements between them. Their squabbles are entry points for some of the comic situations that entertain the audience. In any case, for the period of time when Shan Cai and Dao feel mutual interest, each stubbornly represses her or his affectionate feelings for the other and maintains their own pride.

As a person with only modest economic resources, Shan Cai appears throughout the story as a hard-working person with a strong determination to maintain honour and self-esteem, and to delay self-gratification. Although she accepts that Dao will obviously shower her with material benefits, for a long time she is hesitant to accept his love. A substantial portion of the story also portrays how Shan Cai confronts threats from other people, including humiliation from Dao’s mother who objects to Dao’s relationship with her. So, while there is some element of a Cinderella complex in this series (as in nearly all the top titles in the region), Shan Cai exemplifies a female protagonist with a strong, uncompromising and confrontational nature and integrity, thus defying any simple parallel to Cinderella. In another important contrast to the many Cinderella-style stories, whether from Hollywood or locally made, *Meteor Garden* and most of the top Korean drama series show very little sexually-motivated body contact between the protagonists who are in love. Usually, there is no more than one kissing scene for the entire story, with multiple episodes. This last mentioned feature has drawn repeated commendation from viewers, predominantly female, of different national and religious affiliations and social classes.

In contrast to *Meteor Garden*, gentle expressions of tender love dominate the tetralogy *Endless Love*. The prevalent mood in the series is a combination of mellowness and melancholy that distinguishes it from the more youthful *Meteor Garden*. What *Meteor Garden* and *Endless Love* share, however, is the self-restraint of the protagonists, along with presentations of luxurious lifestyles. The *Endless Love* tetralogy has been noted by avid viewers and analysts alike for its beautiful natural and urban scenery, good looking actors, and the trendy lifestyles that appear in the mise-en-scène. The other big hit, *Full House*, is closer to *Meteor Garden* in that squabbles dominate the romantic relationship between the two equally stubborn protagonists: Han Ji-Eun (an economically modest female novelist) and Lee Young Jae (a rich and famous male actor). Despite their differences, the two protagonists are strongly committed to hard work and self-restraint, denying their true feelings towards each other.

Apart from the propagation of the values of hard work, persistence and self-restraint (plus the highly fashionable clothing depicted in these television series), there are limited historical facts that viewers can learn about Korea or Japan from their popular culture. This is not surprising. These cultural products were designed specifically for a wide range of international audiences with various backgrounds and no prior knowledge of the exporting country. What unifies the diverse audiences is a presumed aspiration towards some sort of cosmopolitanism and a strong appetite for upper middle-class consumerism. This seems to contradict my earlier suggestion that the recent spread of intra-regional cultural flows promise to enhance the growth of locally based area studies. What we have not discussed is the fact that the success of these soap operas has actually propelled a long series of learning experiences and a hunger for more knowledge about the countries of origin of those televised dramas. That these are not the countries of Southeast Asia must be appreciated as part of a larger learning process to be outlined below.

The number of Southeast Asian tourists visiting Japan and Korea (and particularly the sites selected for the scenes in the popular series) jumped dramatically. On one occasion, groups of rich youths from Jakarta travelled to Bangkok to attend a concert by singer Jihoon Jung aka Rain (who starred in the drama series *Full House*) when his manager included Bangkok, but not Jakarta, in a concert tour. On occasions the movement has been in the other direction, or to other major metropolitan sites in Southeast Asia. Cross-regional travels and interactions both online and offline take place among Southeast Asians and beyond via the consumption of Northeast Asian popular culture, with Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong or Taipei being the centres of reference. New waves of interest in the formal study of Japanese and Korean in the region have reportedly been directly related to the new obsession with Northeast Asian soap operas. This has been accompanied by the establishment not only of fan groups, but also of more serious social organizations that collaborate with the Japanese or Korean diplomatic offices in the region to hold training courses, exhibitions and festivals promoting products and services from those countries. Information about opportunities for formal study in those countries, and about the limited number of scholarships that are available, is regularly disseminated by these local organizations. The full range and scope of such activities cannot be listed here, as they were continuing to expand when this essay was being prepared.

One can recognize these Northeast Asian popular cultures as an alternative expression of modernity in popular cultures to those produced
in the major centres of the entertainment industry in North America. However, from the perspective of many communities in Southeast Asia, something is missing in those cultural products from Northeast Asia and North America alike. As noted earlier, one outstanding difference between these Northeast Asian products and their North American counterparts is the emphasis on pious but resilient feminine beauty in the former, and the prowess of a hypersexualized masculinity in the latter. What sets both of these dominant products apart from both life and its fictional representation in Southeast Asia is the absence of any intense engagement with the ethnic and religious tensions so prevalent in Southeast Asian societies. These issues will be further discussed in the next section.

**ALTERNATIVE ASIANIZATION OF POPULAR CULTURE**

In contrast to the dominant intra-regional popular culture outlined above, the few alternative samples to be discussed below are products of illiberal Southeast Asian societies with a long history of artistic and cultural didacticism. The imported modern notion of a separation between fact and fiction remains thin and fragile. Normally the contents of these local works are richly endowed with information about and allusions to local or national historical and political events, making it potentially difficult to appeal to international audiences without prior knowledge of the region.

To those unfamiliar with them, some of the narratives from this region might appear rather inward-looking and parochial. But as should be self-evident, for the purpose of intra-regional area study, this is not necessarily a bad thing.

As Chua (2004) admits, Singapore is much closer culturally and economically to Northeast Asia than to its neighbours in Southeast Asia. Given Singapore's combination of strong Confucianism, patriarchy, secularism and economic power, it should not be a surprise that some aspects of the formula found in the Northeast Asian drama series identified above resonate with a recently produced Singapore drama series entitled *The Little Nyonya* (2008). The series narrates the lives of four generations of three Peranakan Chinese families in Malacca and Singapore in the last three quarters of the twentieth century. In this series, Peranakan Chinese are (as described by one of the characters) descendants of Chinese male migrants to the Malay archipelago who married local women and developed a distinct culture, mixing Chinese, Malay and European elements.

In an echo of the thematic features of the Northeast Asian drama series, the female protagonist Yue Niang is unfairly treated as a servant in the home of a rich family. She shows unreserved filial piety to her grandmother, her only living relative. Despite her strong desire to rebel against the injustices around her, more often than not she chooses to conceal her feelings. She also decides not to express or pursue her love for Chen Xi, a rich and liberal-minded gentleman who is already deeply in love with her. Despite Chen Xi's insistence on proposing marriage to her, Yue Niang renounces her true feelings because Chen Xi is already arranged to marry someone with whom his grandmother has chosen for him. *The Little Nyonya* has not been as widely shown in the region as have the Korean and Taiwanese titles. However, it was a big hit domestically and has the potential to attract television viewers across Southeast Asia.

More importantly, rather than simply presenting an engaging storyline of industriousness, piety and beauty, *The Little Nyonya* claims to be semi-historical, with a somewhat anthropological tinge. In more than a few scenes, the film displays lengthy and detailed shots of the presumably nearly extinct cultural heritage of the Peranakan Chinese on both sides of the Malayan Peninsula. At several points, scenes in the series seem to forget the main storyline and transform into a documentary film for visitors to a museum, an exhibition, or seminar room. Highly exoticized images of Peranakan art work in porcelain, architecture, clothing, embroidery, certain rituals, and songs. Then an elder character is heard reminding a younger one (and the viewer) what a shame it would be if the younger generation were to disavow this wealth of tradition. Despite this intellectual pretention, some local viewers critically questioned the portrayals of the Peranakan characters speaking in Mandarin, instead of Malay.

This series is one vivid example of a locally based medium that attempts to produce and disseminate purportedly important information about a social group in the region. One can strongly question the accuracy of the historical information presented in this series, but to do so is to miss the point. What concerns us here is the fact that requires further analysis: the circulation of the series has caught the imagination of a huge audience across the region. Marginally added to the main storyline is a sub-plot, superimposed on the main story, about a young couple who meet the protagonist Yue Niang in her old age and eagerly ask her to recollect her life story. The main story then unfolds as a flashback to seventy years before. One of the young couple is Angela, the step granddaughter of the protagonist. Like the other female protagonists discussed above, Angela has a markedly stubborn character, especially in her interactions with the males of her own age. The other party
The ethnic segregation in many parts of the region undoubtedly has serious bearings upon the extent to which The Little Nyonya can be distributed and also the manner in which the series can be appreciated in countries where “ethnic Chinese” does not only signify a minority with substantial economic power but is also stigmatized as second class citizens. For these reasons, one cannot take for granted the great success of Meteor Garden in Indonesia or Malaysia (as distinct from the situation in Singapore, Hong Kong, or to some degree Thailand and the Philippines). Based on her fieldwork on audience reception in Indonesia, Pravitta reports that several of her respondents admitted that it took them by surprise that they could so adore the series protagonist Dao Ming Tze (played by Jerry Yan). They confessed, “one does not usually find a good-looking man in a Mandarin film” (Pravitta 2004, p. 7). This changed rapidly, at least among the small circle of respondents studied by Pravitta:

one does not usually see “indigenous” Indonesians dating an ethnic Chinese. ... You don't usually hear an “indigenous” girl referring to a Chinese guy in endearing terms. This has all changed. Female students started to look at men of Chinese ethnicity, and coined all sorts of terms such as cina (cina cantoh) [good-looking Chinese], cibuy (cina suhay) [cool Chinese].

(Pravitta 2004, pp. 18-19)

Obviously, for various reasons, this finding above is not valid for the whole of Indonesia. In almost the same period Rachma Ida found no positive correlations between the new fandom for oriental-looking, Mandarin-speaking protagonists on television and markedly improved inter-ethnic relations in the city of Surabaya where she conducted similar research (Ida 2008, pp. 106-7).

Except for the spillover of broadcasts from one country captured on the peripheries of neighbouring countries by satellite disks, and a few exceptions within mainstream broadcasting, technical, administrative and commercial structures mean that it is easier to distribute local popular music than it is for local films and television series across national boundaries, and ethnic and religious divisions. This has clearly been the case with recordings by some of the top popular singers travelling from Indonesia to Malaysia, Singapore and East Timor (Heryanto 2008b, pp. 1-3; Khalik 2007; Sorman 2009). Similarly, the Filipino crooner Christian Bautista has found a huge number of fans in Indonesia and Thailand. These intra-regional cultural flows in Southeast Asia may expand further in size or kind, and it is not
impossible that their future development may have long lasting impact. But for now, two alternative popular cultures deserve more attention than they have currently received. The first are works with a strongly Islamic content. The other is the range of popular cultural forms (music, films, drama series, and dance) which are heavily indebted to Indian popular cultures, especially to so-called Bollywood. It is unfortunate that owing to some political circumstances, these two streams of culture have been pitted against each other.29

A decade before the spread of East Asian popular culture, Indonesia and Malaysia witnessed the dawn of a new cultural politics of Islam involving the "gentrification" and commodification of Islamic lifestyles (Heryanto 1999). However, unlike the popular cultures from Northeast Asia that rose rapidly to prominence, the growth of Islamic popular cultures has been taking place in a slower and more timid manner. Their popularity is more restricted to Muslim-majority countries. Conservative Muslim leaders have been divided about the merits of popular culture as a mode of mass communication to convey religious messages, or as a source of entertainment for the religion’s followers. Things changed for the better when the pious Jakarta-based Muslim Rhoma Irama transformed dangdut music in the late 1970s, and made himself the first important popular star with an explicitly Islamic identity (Frederick 1982, Lockhard 1998, pp. 94–105). Since then he has enjoyed the title of "King of Dangdut". One of the more recent eventful moments in the history of Islamic popular culture in the region took place in 2008 with record-breaking ticket sales for the Indonesian film Ayat-ayat Cinta (Verses of Love), surpassing the box office figures for any title of any genre in the country, including Hollywood blockbusters.30 This was one of the very first Indonesian films to feature a female protagonist who is nearly fully veiled.

What is surprising about Ayat-ayat Cinta is not so much its enormous commercial success as why it took so long for the world’s largest Muslim nation to produce a film like this at all. Prior to the release of Ayat-ayat Cinta, veiled women were nearly totally absent from the cinema screen in Indonesia, and were rarely seen on film posters in Malaysia. In any case, the release of Ayat-ayat Cinta and multiple copycat films took place in the wider context of “Islamicization” in state politics and middle-class lifestyles from the 1980s. Like the new rich elsewhere, many newly wealthy Muslims in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia discovered a new preoccupation with the aesthetics of their newly established power, the display of wealth, and exuberant consumerist practices. Another conspicuous expression of the persona of the new trendy Muslim is noticeable in the rapidly growing fashion industry for Muslim women.

In the first few weeks after its release Ayat-ayat Cinta is being widely referred to as one of the most Islamic films ever made in Indonesia. The story is set in Egypt and revolves around Indonesian Muslim postgraduate students studying Islam. It focuses on a love story framed within moral propagation of what is and is not proper according to Islam. As the years pass, the film remains in the popular memory as a milestone in the history of Islamic popular culture. However, not all Muslims agree with this evaluation. In some circles, Muslim intellectuals have denounced the film as too liberal and un-Islamic in its portrayal of the romantic relations between the young protagonists. The behaviour of the leading actors off-screen was also criticized (Yumyanti 2008). The editors of one Islamist journal accused Ayat-ayat Cinta as propagating pluralism, something they condemned, and alleged that the novelist and film-makers were "agents of Zionism" (Risalah Mujahidin 2008).

In my own assessment, Ayat-ayat Cinta’s popularity is attributable to its being both more and less than Islamic. It is hybrid, and perhaps cosmopolitan, in substance and in style. Despite its generous display of Islamic markers, in significant sections the film is redolent of Hollywood and Bollywood movies, as well as Indonesian television dramas (sinetron). In contrast to the female characters in veils, the male protagonist Fahri wears Western-style casual clothes and a trendy haircut. He does not grow a beard. At his wedding ceremony Fahri wears a Western suit and tie. The scenes of the wedding itself are highly reminiscent of those in Bollywood movies. This kind of hybridity is characteristic also of the film’s Northeast Asian-style counterparts and also runs through the popular songs, films and drama series already discussed.

I have made several references here to Bollywood films and to the immensely popular musical genre of dangdut which owes its sounds and beat to Bollywood music. Despite the long history and widespread of the consumption of popular culture from South Asia, this subject has received very little attention from the small but growing number of scholars studying culture in the region, popular or otherwise (for more see David 2008). Dangdut is a generic term referring to a uniquely Malay/Indonesian music style that mixes elements from Arabic, Indian and Malay traditions. Mainly sung and enjoyed among the urban poor, dangdut was strongly associated with "bad taste" and the preferences of the lower classes until the 1970s when Rhoma Irama turned it into a respectable music genre. Even after Rhoma successfully elevated the status of dangdut (thanks in part to the
Western musical instruments he used and the rock music he blended into his compositions), dangdut and Bollywood popular cultures more generally have not enjoyed the same level of public prestige as their counterparts from North America and Northeast Asia.\(^{31}\)

The reasons for this unequal status are complex. However, for our present purposes, suffice it to note one small but important factor: Dangdut has spawned multiple sub-genres among diverse groups of people, ranging from the Islamic proselytizing type of sentimental popular to genitally-focused (Pioquinto 1995) dance music performances. In many parts of Java, indigenous mysticism is happily married to Hinduism blended with Islam that came from India (and not the Middle East). On this most industrialized island in Indonesia, the more erotic type of dangdut performance has prevailed, especially among the lower classes. In 2003 the then little-known Inul Daratista stirred up a nationwide controversy with her dangdut sensual singing and dancing. Professing to be a Muslim herself, Inul represents a new cultural icon, a non-aristocratic Javanese practice that celebrates bodily pleasure and sexuality with a nominal Islamic slant. To her critics, Inul epitomizes the moral corruption and decadence of the global Western-styled modernity that Indonesia has wrongly adopted. In an ironic twist, however, no less a figure than Rhma Irma, the King of Dangdut himself, made a public attack on Inul and her rise to fame with a call for a boycott and a moralistic condemnation of what she represented. With edicts from local Muslim leaders and local government endorsement, Inul was banned from performing in several provinces in Indonesia, as well as in Malaysia.

The saga of dangdut may at first seem unrelated to the discussion in the previous sections. What is common to all the cultural forms discussed here is the prevailing consolidation of the new middle classes as a national bourgeoisie. The emergence and popular reception of contemporary popular cultures from Northeast Asia signals a strengthening of the moral position or legitimacy of the tastes and aspirations of the new middle classes across the region. The nostalgic quest for re-examination of past history and injustices, along with the implicit appeal for new legitimacy for an ethnic minority with significant capital as illustrated by The Little Nyonya, is an expression of the same ideology.

Although it is the world's largest Muslim nation, Indonesia for too long assigned to Muslims a status akin to that of a minority, and the majority of Muslims appeared to have adopted this “minority mentality” (Wertheim, cited in Vatikiotis 1998, p. 120). Until the 1980s Islam was widely associated with poverty, backwardness, and the countryside (Mahasin 1990). The commercial success of Ayat-ayat Cinta is one of a number of more recent affirmations for a series of events that have reversed that long history of condescension, signified by the newly acquired political status, new wealth, and preoccupation with the aesthetics of everyday life in ways not very different from those that appear in the drama series from Northeast Asia. There is a region-wide desire to consume the best from both East and West, without being either an Asian or a Westerner as stereotyped on and off screen. Like dangdut, Bollywood movies and music, were not taken seriously or accorded any respect by the middle classes in Malaysia, Singapore or Indonesia until the late 1990s when Bollywood movies began to be “gentrified” and to focus on romantic dramas (instead of masculine action and suspense as in the previous decades) with beautiful scenery, songs, and good-looking actors and actresses (David 2008, p. 180). Although there seems to be a common pursuit of upward class mobility as outlined above, it is clear that not all are equal among these different strands of cultural flows and styles. How these new social, cultural, and technological changes offer prospects and pose challenges to a locally based area studies in the region will be the focus of the concluding section below.

**TOWARDS A POSSIBLE FUTURE**

Recent changes in new media technology that injected new strength into media and cultural studies have, to an unprecedented extent, opened up new space for home-grown agency in the production of knowledge. Potentially, this also opens a new space for intellectual innovation for a locally based area studies. Under the ideal circumstances these developments (the new networks, the new media, and the growing interests in cultural and media studies) could have converged and sparked serious investigations of subject positions: what does it mean to be a “Southeast Asian” in the 2000s, studying “Southeast Asia” and employing analytical tools largely invented and acquired from outside the region? Unfortunately, to date such exploration has not gone very far. Cultural studies, media studies, and the labels of some of the approaches in those studies (post-structuralism, semiotics, post-modernism) have been received with mixed reactions. More than a few in area studies as well as those in the traditional academic disciplines have resisted, dismissed or avoided these new approaches and perspectives, some apparently out of suspicion, prejudice or unfamiliarity.\(^{32}\)

Meanwhile, outside the formal academic confines of area studies, the turn of the new millennium has witnessed the promising networks with more or less the same spirit or similar goals. I do not have the knowledge or the space to offer a complete list. Within the limited areas of media and
cultural studies alone, mention must be made of the extremely successful endeavor of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies project led by Chua Beng Huat (Singapore) and Chen Kuan Hsing (Taiwan). The project brings together scholars, artists, and activists in Asia and the Pacific for a range of activities, of which publishing the well-respected journal under the same name and organizing periodic conferences have been the most notable. More specifically focused on Southeast Asia is the commendable work of a smaller but no less active group under the name of the Association of Southeast Asian Cinemas, initiated by Khoo Saik Cheng and her friends. Related to this is the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA), established in 1996. Yogyakarta has been hosting the Jogja-Netpac Asian Film Festival each year. In late 2009 the Jakarta-based NGO Rumah Film launched the first Islam-themed Film Festival in the region.

Notwithstanding all this, as discussed in earlier sections, even when all these media and cultural innovations are added together, their presence and impact on the growth of a locally-based area studies remains insignificant. The commercially driven waves of Japanese, Korean, Bollywood, and Islamic popular cultures have had far more impact on the development of a stronger sense of regional identity and integration. True, the commercially driven diffusion of popular culture is unlikely to become a site or mechanism for a new, locally based area studies in the region. The entertainment industry has neither the interest nor capacity to sponsor a sustained production of academic knowledge and activities as widely expected by the scholarly communities.

The future of an institutionalized network of locally based area studies remains unclear. If such studies do grow further, one should not expect them to come with the same name, geographical reference, focus, approach and character as the Southeast Asian Studies of the Cold War years. If a viable, locally based area studies is to grow and flourish, I imagine that it will not be able to ignore, resist, or dismiss contemporary developments in the new media as well as the entertainment and popular culture industry and the various non- as well as trans-disciplinary approaches. As the sights and sounds of omnipresent militarism gradually fade from the public space in Southeast Asia, those of intra-regional popular culture move in. Serious study of these new ubiquitous sounds and sights is no longer simply rewarding, but has become mandatory for any viable area study in this millennium.

A series of shifts will likely take place in such studies, in response to the region's changing character and social relations within it. These changes will include a reduction in emphasis on the nation-state as a unit of analysis, and correspondingly more emphasis on transnational, sub-national, cross-regional, social groups based on gender, age, profession, class, religious or ethnic affiliations. An important shift can also be anticipated in focus, from the study of formal political and economic institutions as well as the elite to examining the fast-growing, confusingly fluid, and highly mobile networks of social groups with hybrid, multiple and fragmented identities.

A soft narrative with a more nuanced textual or ethnographic approach will probably gain more currency at the expense of statistics, diagrams, and models. Increased attention will also likely be paid to the dialectics between subject positions and practice, in preference to the old emphasis on values, belief systems, or social structures. More than ever before, a high level of sophistication is at least one of the languages in the region and an understanding of the intricacies of the information technology will be pre-requisites in area studies. Under such circumstances locally based intellectuals, as native speakers, will find themselves in a more advantaged position than ever before in a new area studies that will be strongly interested in listening to the voices of fellow Asians as speaking subjects, instead of regarding them as mere objects for analysis in the manner that characterized area studies in the previous century. If any of the above scenarios makes sense, the increased cross-regional production and consumption of popular cultural products can be expected to constitute a major area of interest that did not exist in the previous periods of area studies.

This chapter has examined the potential contribution of the recent growth of inter-regional popular cultural products to the development of a new generation and to the potential development of locally-based regional studies that will succeed Southeast Asian Studies from the Cold War. By no means does this study suggest that contemporary popular cultural products are necessarily "neutral" or "good" in themselves or for the broader educational projects within the region or outside it. Obviously commercial interests dictate most of the production and dissemination of these cultural products, occasionally at the expense of historical facts, and aesthetic and moral values that are highly respected in academic settings. As hinted in most of the foregoing sections, a great number of the major entertainment products — including those that purport to preach moral or religious values — deserve critical assessment. These products are aimed to entertain the widest possible consumers for the greatest possible profit, and not to educate the public or challenge those in power. To achieve their aims, those behind the production of popular cultures often rely on the already dominant but problematic assumptions and prejudices and values (including various forms of racism, essentialism, sexism), often with the unintended consequence of reproducing and aestheticizing the status quo or promoting a new set
of values of the wealthy urban middle classes. Thus, we have witnessed the dominance of sentimental melodramas that appeal to the bourgeois class across Asia over the "superstitious" horror or "macho" action-oriented narratives much enjoyed by the lower classes. Likewise, we have noted the dominant position of cultural products from the stronger capitalist networks in Northeast Asia and Singapore over those from the economically and politically less stable nations in the region. All these political and ethical issues are very important, and should be taken more seriously outside this present study. Admittedly being somewhat one-sided, this preliminary study focuses on the potential contribution of these popular cultural products to the making of a greater sense of regionalism or Asianness in the global world among millions of Southeast Asians from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. In turn, a stronger sense of regional identity promises to be one necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the possible and resilient growth of a locally-based area studies.

Notes
The author gratefully acknowledges the benefits of various critical comments on an earlier version of this paper from those who do not necessarily agree with many points presented here. They are alphabetically Bart Berendregt, Remmel Curating, Barbara Hatley, Virginia Hooker, Joel Kahn, Hong Lysa, Sumit Mandal, Nissim Otmazgin, Adrian Vickers and Thongchai Winichakul, plus three anonymous reviewers and participants of a seminar at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, where the author was a Visiting Research Fellow. Persistent shortcomings in this chapter remain solely the author’s. The study is part of a larger project with the generous assistance from the Australian Research Council Discovery Project and Australian National University as the hosting institution.1

Interestingly, in what appear to be separate events, in Japan (Otmazgin 2008), Korea (Shim 2006), and certain countries of Southeast Asia (Heryanto 2008b), economic crises immediately preceded a series of events that led to a new vibrancy in popular cultural production.2

I enjoyed the privilege of being involved in some of the first of these networks during their initial years, and I gratefully acknowledge the many insights I gained from participating in their activities.

Lockhard (1998), one of the earliest published books on popular cultures in Southeast Asia, and reviewers of this book (Leit 2000; Moro 2000) lament the general lack of recognition of the merits of studying popular cultures among scholars with an interest in the region or in any single country therein. When the Hong Kong Institute of Education organized an International Conference on Popular Culture and Education in Asia on 11–13 December 2008, the organizer claimed that the event was the first of its kind.4

During the nationalist movement for independence in the first half of the past century, it was common for “high cultured” men of letters (journalists and literary writers) to take a leading political role, before taking a top official position within the government of their newly independent nations. This trend disappeared when militarism swept across the region during the Cold War. Of late we see film actors and television entertainers entering state politics in the region (see Heryanto 2008b, 2010a, 2010b) in competition with the business people.

In more or less the same period, telenovelas from Latin America were highly popular, especially in the Philippines but also the neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia. As we currently focus on the intra-Asian popular culture flows from the turn of the century, many of the equally popular cultural products from other geographical areas (including Latin America) will not be included in this discussion.5

This is one area that reminds us of the limited and unstable boundary that defines what is or is not “Southeast Asian”, thus the need to use the term with some flexibility and caution.6

Even as late as 1998 the publication of Craig Lockhard’s Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia was promoted in the book blurb as “a singularly original piece of scholarship, unmatched in both breadth and detail”. Barely a year later, it appeared to have become history because it missed the next, and bigger developments of popular culture in Southeast Asia and beyond. The later developments were bigger not only in the sense that each of the countries he studied has produced works with multiple scales of commercial success and popularity. More importantly, as highlighted in this study, there was a remarkable increase in the scope and intensity of exchange as well as collaborative production and consumption of popular culture across the region and beyond.7

As discursive signifiers, “East”, “Asia/ians” and “Western/ers” in this study do not refer to some materially or physically objective entities, locations, persons, or qualities. Rather they have acquired multiple and competing meanings in our collective imaginings and speech through identifiable and analysable social histories.8

In Singapore (where I lived when the 1997 crisis hit) and to a lesser degree in neighbouring Malaysia, more than a few local observers argued that these two countries had survived the crisis precisely because they had been more vigorously faithful to their neighbours “Asian Values”. For more recent comments on the issue, see Chua (2010).

The West’s supremacy in the production and circulation of global popular culture remained intact even after the ascendency of the Northeast Asian counterparts. Iwabuchi (2002b, p. 459) argues that some of the best examples of Japan’s newly acquired global power in popular culture were restricted in Asia and not
in the West. Even in the case of selected Japanese cultural products that appear to be strongly popular in the West, their success was heavily indebted to the assistance of the industrial networks of selected major American companies. Shin (2009) describes in detail the series of ambitious attempts by popular singer Rain and his manager Jinyoung Park to make inroads into the U.S. market, but to no avail. One caution is due with regard to such crude comparison. Television programmes often help popularise films, comics or music, but usually not the other way round.

In countries like Indonesia, access to movie theatres has recently become rather rare and difficult for those living outside major cities. The total number of movie theatres has shrunk dramatically. The few new ones are concentrated as cinemplexes in up market shopping malls in a small number of capital cities. The majority of old movie theatres in many parts of the country have been abandoned by their owners, due to the rising costs of maintaining the business in the face of the expansion of private television networks, political liberalization, and the wide accessibility of DVD players and computers as well as the uncontrollable pirated DVD market.

Korean films have plenty of graphic violence scenes, perhaps even more than Hollywood titles do. This has not been the case with the Korean televised drama series that have been aired in the region and gained high ratings. Hollywood films that have circulated in the region have also exhibited a notable gentrification, with more romantic melodramas and fewer violence-focused action films (for details, see David 2008). In Southeast Asian countries where religion is a part of high-level politics, local horror films and television series have been frowned upon and discouraged by religious authorities as inappropriate. For some middle-class literati, horror stories signify backwardness and an anathesis to modernity. In Indonesia, horror stories find more freedom in the form of film and television programmes called “reality shows” (see van Heeren 2007). Local comedies often rely on crude references to sex and slapstick comedy, neither of which appeals to the middle-class audience that constitute the majority of the movie-goers in shopping malls. Instead of appearing fully as a genre, comedy often finds space as sub-plots or selected scenes in some of the successful romance stories of the melodrama genre.

See Siriyavasak and Shin (2007, p. 124) for their comments on the case of the Korean Wave that created “male idols for young female consumption”. For Indonesia see Ida (2008); Merdikaningtyas (2006); Pravitra (2004); and Setijadi (2005). For Taiwan, see Yang (2008).

The opposite is true in the majority of hyper-sentimental and caricature-style soap operas in several other countries in the region.

Surely, Hollywood movies do not represent American cinema, let alone “Western” narrative traditions. By no means is the following comment intended to recuperate the “East versus West” dichotomy.
scale of popularity achieved by its Korean, Taiwanese or Japanese counterparts. We should note that Anderson (2002, p. 24) identifies similar reasons for the limited circulation of European films in comparison with North American ones.

As I prepared this essay, the series had been aired in Malaysia, Cambodia, The Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand. One local journalist reported that when aired in Singapore at one point it “chalked up a viewership rating of 26.3 per cent … beating the 22.5 per cent rating for the closing ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. … The 34-episode show is the most-watched Chinese drama serial in the past eight years” (Lee 2008).

Such criticism can be found in the “official” Facebook group pages of the drama series [Shu Qi, 21 February 2010, <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/The-Little-Nyonya/22268538302> (accessed 12 October 2010)]. I received a similar remark from another colleague in Singapore via private communication.

A Singaporean friend confessed privately to me that what she dislikes most about the television series is its “Singaporean Airlines” qualities, instead of the Peranakan Singaporeans as she knows them. While fully agreeing with such an apt observation, I am tempted to add that for the purpose of cross-regional cultural flows and interaction, the series serves a function not very different from the famous airlines company.

For discussion on the problematic representations of the Chinese Indonesians on and off the screen, see Sen (2006) and Heryanto (2008a, 2010a)

In 2009 a televised cartoon from Malaysia (Upin & Ipin) was aired on the Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia network and was a big success. The same was true of the animation from Singapore Sing To Dawn (2008), localized in Indonesia as Meriah Minpi (2009) and screened across the Cinema 21 network, the largest distributor in the country.

I have discussed this issue more extensively elsewhere (Heryanto 2008b, 2010a), and limitations of space force me to do injustice to the subject matter by presenting no more than a few brief paragraphs below.

The most commercially successful foreign blockbusters reach around one million ticket sales. Since 2001 three Indonesian films sold more than 2 million tickets: Ada Apa Dengan Cinta? (2.5 million), Get Married (2.2 million), Naga Benar Jadi 2 (2.4 million). In the first month after its release Ayat-Ayat Cinta sold more than three million tickets (Sasono 2008), and in the third month, the figure rose to 3.65 million (Jakarta Post 2008).

Interestingly, those behind the production and global distribution of Bollywood-styled films seem to prefer to direct their promotional work in North America and Western Europe than Southeast Asia. I thank Sumit Mandal for bringing my attention to this point.

For contesting views on this subject, see Reynolds (1995, 1998); McVey (1998); Reid (1999); Clammer (2000); Heryanto (2002), Jackson (2003); Burgess (2004); Curaming (2006).

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