

Book Review

Nick Deocampo (Ed.): *Early Cinema in Asia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2017. 342pp. ISBN 9780253025364 (Hardback) 9780253025548 (Paperback)

The academic endeavour in cinema remains challenged to provide a self-reflective approach to the study of Asian culture and identity. The majority of Asian film studies have been conducted mostly within the constructed framework of national cinema, with studies focusing on histories, specific directors or genres, and the canons of particular countries (e.g., Japan, China, or India). Even endeavours that examine films from a trans-cultural perspective ultimately remain trapped within the borders of national cinema. Further still, edited volumes frequently collect only case studies that focus on individual countries or on specific cases (e.g., examinations of historical influences or film remakes). Film production and reception from the earliest years of cinema and the relationship between early cinema and national and/or regional identity has, until now, been examined in only a very limited number of publications.

Early Cinema in Asia, edited by Nick Deocampo from the University of the Philippines, attempts to fill the gaps in Asian film scholarship by asking a number of questions. By actively engaging with research areas that scholars of national cinema have avoided, the volume's entries reflect on the possibility of identifying an "Early Asian Cinema," rather than merely the unrefined category of "Early Cinema in Asia." In his brilliant and precise introduction, Deocampo illustrates this chronic neglect by recounting one of his experiences in researching early cinema. He writes about how representatives from national film archives rejected even the possibility of taking colonial-period films into account, recommending that Deocampo conduct his research in the colonial powers' film archives rather than in the national film archives.

The book is broadly the result of two conferences and subsequent interactions between the participating scholars. It successfully brings together an impressive variety of approaches and topics from well-established scholars in the field, such as Wimal Dissanayake and Charles Musser. Their theoretically-dense entries engage critically with ideas of colonial, national, and regional identity and will become seminal works in the field. Tilman Baumgartel, in particular, examines the colonial beginnings of film in Indochina. Other entries by established scholars tend to emphasize specific aspects of early cinema in the national context. For example, Aaron Gerow, in an extended and updated version of an essay that he published eighteen years ago, applies Benjamin's concept of mechanical reproduction to Japanese silent cinema.

The entries by scholars who are early in their careers tend to differ in density, detail, and length. The longer entries span nearly 40 pages, while the shorter entries, sometimes written by film critics or doctoral students, stay under ten pages. Some of these shorter entries tend to focus on presenting facts and do not engage deeply with the volume's theoretical questions. For example, Wai-ming Law's account of "Hong Kong's Cinematic Beginnings" and Ritsu Yamamoto's treatment of early film reception in China are interesting and well-informed accounts of historical developments, but they fail to engage with how these specific cases could be discussed in relation to a conception of national, post-colonial Chinese cinema.

The inconsistent length and academic depth of the articles leave the book with a somewhat problematic structure. However, this editorial decision allows for the inclusion of an impressive variety of case studies, which include Japan, China (with additional essays on the specific cases of Taiwan and Hong Kong), India, Malaysia, Iran, the Philippines, Thailand, and the countries of the Pacific Islands. Fascinating details from untold stories appear in these essays, such as film distribution by the Danish company Nordisk Film (Nadi Tofighian), and the role of royalty in Thailand's cinema (Anchalee Chaiworaporn).

The book is a successful contribution to, and convincing encouragement of, engagements in theoretically self-critical studies of the origins of cinema in Asia and, in a wider sense, to any academic engagement with questions of national and regional identity. Though a few of the entries were short and superficial, the book's theoretical framework offers an invitation for further study. Overall the book is edited excellently, and is complimented with an informative appendix that provides a useful chronology and a bibliography of selected works. Finally, the publisher's decision to release the book both as a hardback edition and a more affordable paperback edition simultaneously will be beneficial for scholars and film aficionados in different stages of their careers all around the world.

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