



Routledge Research in Digital Media and Culture in Asia

TRANSNATIONAL CONVERGENCE OF EAST ASIAN POP CULTURE

Edited by
Seok-Kyeong Hong and Dal Yong Jin



Transnational Convergence of East Asian Pop Culture

This book observes and analyzes transnational interactions of East Asian pop culture and current cultural practices, comparing them to the production and consumption of Western popular culture and providing a theoretical discussion regarding the specific paradigm of East Asian pop culture.

Drawing on innovative theoretical perspectives and grounded empirical research, an international team of authors consider the history of transnational flows within pop culture and then systematically address pop culture, digital technologies, and the media industry. Chapters cover the Hallyu—or Korean Wave—phenomenon, as well as Japanese and Chinese cultural industries. Throughout the book, the authors address the convergence of the once-separated practical, industrial, and business aspects of popular culture under the influence of digital culture. They further coherently synthesize a vast collection of research to examine the specific realities and practices of consumers that exist beyond regional boundaries, shared cultural identities, and historical constructs.

This book will be of interest to academic researchers, undergraduates, and graduate students of Asian media, media studies, communication studies, cultural studies, transcultural communication, or sociology.

Seok-Kyeong Hong is a professor in the Department of Communication at Seoul National University, Korea. She finished her PhD at University of Grenoble and was an associate professor at the University of Bordeaux, France, between 2000 and 2013.

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First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hong, Seok-Kyeong, editor. | Jin, Dal Yong, 1964– editor.

Title: Transnational convergence of East Asian pop culture / edited by Seok-Kyeong Hong and Dal Yong Jin.

Description: Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY :

Routledge, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020042297 (print) | LCCN 2020042298 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367648985 (hardback) | ISBN 9781003126850 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Popular culture—East Asia. | Popular culture—Western countries.

Classification: LCC HM621 .T7429 2022 (print) | LCC HM621 (ebook) | DDC 306.0973—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020042297>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020042298>

ISBN: 978-0-367-64898-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-12685-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Acknowledgments

This book was generated out of a program supported by the Research Grants for Asian Studies funded by Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC). Between 2016, the year of the beginning, and 2021, the year of the publication, several seminars and meetings have deepened the initial research questions. We thank the participant researchers for their perseverance and enthusiasm as well as the participants of seminars who enriched the collective making of thoughts. I (Seok-Kyeong Hong) am specially indebted to my graduate students. They showed an immense interest on this book and stimulated me through their encouragements and participation in reflections on the cultural dynamics in the East Asia. Special gratitude should go to Professor Dal Yong Jin. Without his endeavors I'm not sure if this book would have come into being or be of high quality. I started this book project; he finished it. I (Dal Yong Jin) want to express my thanks to Professor Seok-Kyeong Hong who led the project. Without her academic leadership and vision, this book could not have been published.

We also acknowledge that early versions of two chapters of this book appeared in two different journals. One is Chapter 9, which was originally published with the title of "Platform imperialism in the networked Korean society: a critical analysis of corporate sphere," in *Asiascape: Digital Asia* (2017) 4: 209–232. The other is Chapter 12, which was originally published with the title of "A tail that wags the dog? Cultural industry and cultural policy in Japan and South Korea," in the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* (2011) 13:3: 307–325.

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1 Introduction

The making of East Asian cultural space

Seok-Kyeong Hong and Dal Yong Jin

The transnational flow of popular culture in East Asia has continued over the past several decades. In the early 21st century, East Asia has become a major hub for cultural flow due to Japan, Korea, and China having rapidly developed their cultures, both popular and digital, as well as their cultural markets. Various forms of integrated production and consumption are rapidly developing in East Asia. Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s, Japanese animations and J-pop of the 1990s, and the success of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) starting in the late 1990s are some distinctive examples of transnational cultural convergence. In the 2000s, the development of cultural industries and subsequent transnational exchange in Japan and South Korea (hereafter Korea) were emulated by China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, which led to great interest in the transnational flow based on the development of pop culture in East Asia.

More specifically, since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been an active development of the exchange and convergence of East Asian pop culture—referring to the new collective condition represented by the reciprocal merging and penetrating within the once-separated practical, industrial, and business aspects of popular culture under the influence of digital culture—as well as the subsequent possibility of an East Asian pop culture community. The introduction of Japanese pop culture in East Asia in the late 1980s catalyzed the subsequent emergence of Korean pop culture in the same region since the late 1990s. Ever since, the transnational exchange of East Asian pop culture has kicked into high gear. In other words, there is no doubt that the transnational convergence of East Asian pop culture started with the introduction of Japanese culture in East Asia (Iwabuchi, 2006, 2013). Japanese manga and anime have especially become some of the most significant cultural content representing Japan around the globe (Steinberg, 2017; Suzuki, 2019). However, Iwabuchi (2006) claimed that the spread of Japanese manga, anime, and music (J-pop) in Taiwan, Indonesia, and other East Asian countries ignited intra-Asian cultural flows is limited because Japan-centered pop culture mostly failed to flow into China or Korea, although there were some programs that unofficially flowed from Japan to these countries. Considering China and Korea, who both have a history of

war and colonization with Japan, only opened the gates to Japanese culture in the late 1990s, Iwabuchi's claim toward cultural community in East Asia centered on Japan is inevitably limited. It is certain that ever since Korea and China openly accepted the flow of Japanese culture in the late 1990s, the cultural convergence of East Asia through transnational exchange grasped the attention of the global academic world (Otmazgin, 2013); however, this transnational exchange is still restricted to only a few countries.

The theory of a China-centered flow of popular culture within East Asian countries also has its limitations. As Chua Beng-Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi (2008) emphasized, cultural exchange called 'Pop Culture China' has long existed in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and China. However, because only a few TV programs and films have been exported beyond the Greater China region to countries like Japan and Korea, the claim for a pan-Chinese East Asian convergence of popular culture did not receive much spotlight, besides exceptions from a few relevant countries. Japan and China have developed their own cultural influences in East Asia; however, their attempts are limited as they mainly penetrate only a limited number of East Asian countries.

In this regard, cultural community in the East Asian region has been fully actualized since Korean pop culture began to spread to other East Asian countries, and later beyond regional boundaries (Hong, 2013; Jin, 2016). As Jin (2002) emphasized, Hallyu or the expansion of Korean pop culture into Asia and the global markets began in the late 1990s. Based on the increasing Korean Wave trend in Japan, China, Taiwan, and Singapore, the simple exchange of cultural products such as television programs and films led to the actual formation of an East Asian cultural community that included the exchange and sharing of capital, labor, and scripts (Jin & Lee, 2012). Korea has significantly shifted its regional integration as Japan and China have pursued similar policies to develop their own popular culture after the global popularity of Hallyu. In fact, Cool Japan policy has similarly pursued the formation of cultural communities through the spread of Japanese culture in East Asia in the 2010s. Likewise, China, seeing the success of Hallyu, aims to form a regional commonality in East Asia that transcends the boundary of Greater China, and it is developing its soft power policy.

Under this circumstance, the need for research on popular culture that is shared and circulated in East Asia, which accounts for more than one third of the world's population, is ever more escalated. The main context of this book regards the historically constructed conditions of the formation of a common popular culture, including digital culture in East Asia, and its direction.

Major goals of the book

With the rapid growth of East Asian cultural flows, several scholars have undertaken substantial research on pan-East Asian cultural flow and

collaboration, and case studies are accumulating. However, writing this book, from preparation to completion, is unique and has been a thoroughly collaborative process between its co-researchers. This is what sets this book apart from other directed books, which are usually composed of chapters collected from a call for papers discussing mutual themes at hand. Initiated by Seok-Kyeong Hong, with a long-term collaboration with Dal Yong Jin, this book received institutional aid from SNUAC (Seoul National University Asia Center) for a year of preparation and two years of collective academic activities. Over the course of eight months in 2016, eight seminars were held by six researchers from six different universities located in three different countries (three from Korea, two from America, and one from Canada). During this first year of preparation, the core problematic of the book was discussed and shared, and an outline of the chapters and content was shaped. In addition to the chapters to be written by the six co-researchers determined at this stage, more researchers were selected through five international conferences held during the two following years (2017–2018).

These scholars have paid special attention to the transnational cultural exchange processes of East Asia. Although the dramatic development of Hallyu triggered a great amount of research on the transnational production/consumption of culture in East Asia, there still remains a lack of literature that attempts to systematically integrate this phenomenon into the universal theories of cultural industry (see Hong et al., 2017; Yoon & Kang, 2017). On the one hand, in cultural industry studies led by American, British, and European scholars, Asia is either boxed away or is studied by only a small group of experts, resulting in an alignment of theories that do not address each other. On the other hand, while Hallyu studies, Japanese pop culture studies, Chinese media studies, and Asian fandom studies have garnered a great quantity of literature, most of the literature consists of case studies that cannot actually be connected to general culture industry theories. However, today's cultural industry of East Asia, in which Japan-Korea-China are connected and rapidly joined by other East Asian countries, shows a scale and dynamism that exceeds the North American-European market in terms of its size and creativity. Such dynamism is closely related to the digital culture of this region, making theories on East Asian convergence culture possible.

This book agrees with the reality that transnational relations of mutual influence in the formation of pop culture have been established, and it hypothesizes that the amalgamation of pop culture mediated by digital culture is forming a “convergence culture.” Convergence culture, again, refers to the new collective condition represented by the reciprocal merging and penetrating within the once-separated practical, industrial, and business aspects of popular culture under the influence of digital culture. North American and European research shows that such condition is not fragmented into individual practices, but is rather embodied in a dominant

logic made visible by the digital culture (Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2013). Korean popular culture—driven by the growth of Hallyu in the midst of the dynamism of digital culture and empowered by its geopolitical position acting as a mediator between East Asian superpowers such as China and Japan—is now considered a powerful driving force of cultural convergence in East Asia. Korean pop culture, which was modeled after the Japanese pop culture industry and shaped by the active embrace of Western pop culture, is actively developing the Hallyu industry with the help of the Japanese and Chinese markets. As the countless remakes and format sales between Korea-China and Korea-Japan testify, Korea is acting as a mediator of pop cultural influence between the two superpowers, China and Japan. The pop culture space of East Asia—mediated by Hallyu and built by Korea, China, Japan, and the joint forces of other East Asian countries—is being shaped in large part by production systems (e.g., crossmedia, idol systems, etc.), consumption phenomena (East Asian fandom culture), and the powerful influence of the consumers on processes of production.

This book aims to observe and analyze transnational interactions of East Asian pop culture and current cultural practices, comparing them to the production and consumption of Western popular culture and providing a theoretical discussion regarding the specific paradigm of East Asian pop culture. In other words, this book is to identify and explain the huge cultural space constructed by Korea-China-Japan, becoming visible through the mediating efforts of Hallyu in midst of the transition, settlement, success, and failure of technologies of East Asian pop culture.

This book originally attempted to serve as not just an accumulation of case studies but as an active discussion of pop culture and cultural industry theories on East Asia. At the same time, it aimed to observe, analyze, and reflect theoretically upon the formation of an East Asian pop culture block and the ‘convergence’ and ‘de-convergence’ that occur inside. It would provide a theoretical paradigm and field of observation for a transnational understanding of the pop culture practices of East Asia in the future. However, later, we decided to extend the scope and twisted the original ideas a bit to include transnationality in East Asian pop culture and added a few more chapters, while eliminating some chapters so that this book collectively discusses not only the notions of convergence and de-convergence, but also transnational popular culture in the East Asian context.

Currently, research on East Asian pop culture industries as well as Hallyu studies is scattered among various field, genre, and regional studies. We expect this book to assemble and synthesize these scattered fields of research into a single coherent flow and shed light on the uniqueness and originality of the convergence culture of East Asia. In other words, this book seeks to examine the specific realities and practices of consumers that exist not only within East Asia but also beyond those regional boundaries, the cultural identities they share, and their historical constructs.

Transnational convergence of popular culture and digital technologies in East Asia

As was briefly discussed, since the 1980s, popular cultural products and digital technologies have crossed the national borders of East Asian countries, enabling a discursive construction of an “East Asian popular culture and digital technologies” as objects of academic analysis (Chua, 2006). East Asian countries, including Japan, Korea, and China, one after another, have greatly advanced their cultural content and digital technologies, and therefore, East Asia has become one of the major hubs that global cultural industry firms, policy makers, and consumers have to pay attention to. These countries have developed cultural flows within this region, and later beyond the regional boundary, which is unprecedented.

With the increasing regional penetration of local culture and digital technologies, several theoreticians developed different discourses, such as intra-cultural flow (Fung, 2007), cultural regionalization (Jin & Lee, 2012; Otmazgin, 2013), inter-Asian referencing Iwabuchi (2013), and inter-Asian frameworks (Cho & Zhu, 2019). However, only a few works (e.g., Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008) focused on the Korean Wave-driven pan-East Asian flows and collaborations. As Hong (2017, p. 67) aptly argues, “it has been more than a decade since Hallyu became one of the important topics in East Asian cultural studies,” and the emergence of Asian media and popular culture developed in the early 21st century has been much bigger than imagined. It has been remarkable as Korean popular music (K-pop), television programs, and webtoon-based transmedia storytelling such as *Kingdom* (2019) and *Itaewon Class* (2020) on Netflix have penetrated Western countries. As the recent popularity of BTS—a seven-member boy idol group in K-pop—and *Parasite*’s wins at the 2020 Oscars also prove, Korean popular culture has become globally popular in recent years. This means that we have to emphasize the increasing role of Hallyu as the source of the pan-East Asian cultural sphere in order to determine the possibility of regional integration and collaboration in both popular culture and digital technologies. Although we don’t attempt to emphasize Hallyu as the only available source for the pan-East Asian cultural collaboration, we believe that it is critical to understand the significant role of the Korean Wave in the creation of regional cultural identity. Therefore, what these scholars focused on has been the Hallyu phenomenon, which gained widespread popularity simultaneously in various East Asian countries from the late 1990s to the early 2000s.

The co-researchers in this edited volume assumed that the various phenomena of the cultural industry, consumption, and the development of the cultural market in East Asia in regard to the digital cultural environment are both converging and diverging. Borrowing the concept of ‘convergence culture’ that was first developed in North America, this approach positions the logical transformation of pop culture brought forth by the digital media environment as a prerequisite while simultaneously identifying the distinct

East Asian characteristics in an effort to further develop the existing theory. Again, there has been active development of research on the exchange and convergence of East Asian pop culture.

In particular, we are certain that the Korean Wave is an ongoing process of transnationalization. This book analyzes the transnationalism of popular culture not only through the exportation of domestic popular culture to other countries but also through its increasing appropriation and digital mediation. Through our articulation of Hallyu as a unique global cultural phenomenon, we plan to shed light on the ways in which transnational cultural flows are configured and reconfigured in relation to digital media environments in East Asia. The milieu surrounding media and cultural studies will be continuously shifting, and this new media ecology offers great opportunities for us to develop unique canons. With the emphasis of the perspectives of rich Asian history and culture, we can develop new paradigms running through an East Asian sphere (Jin, 2020).

As Wendy Su (2021) in this book emphasizes, the construction of an East Asian cultural identity or the convergence of East Asia culture is impossible and implausible without a sufficient understanding of the historically intertwined, deeply complicated East Asian relationship and cultural exchanges. What is important in this light is that we must avoid limited perspectives emphasizing only intra-Asian dialogues. Instead, we must posit East Asian perspectives in the globalization context, which means that our approach, focusing on transnational convergence of East Asian culture and digital technologies, should be rather innovative, comprehensive, and comparative so that the readers of this book will be able to grasp not only the pan-East Asian sphere, but also the transnational globalization approach.

Organization of the book

The organization of the book is as follows. To encourage the reading of the chapters alongside other cognate areas, we have organized the contents across three broad thematic points. Part I documents history and context of the transnational flows of East Asian popular culture. Part I consists of three chapters. Chapter 2 analyzes East Asian popular culture in the early 20th century, focusing on Jin Yan (金焰), the emperor of film in Shanghai, China. It emphasizes Shanghai since the city was considered the most cosmopolitan society in Asia in the period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While the traditional research that focuses on popular culture has centered on media, text, fandom and recently celebrities, the media hub's importance should be stressed; therefore, the research questions in this chapter include 1) On what grounds did Shanghai become an early pop cultural hub in Asia? and 2) Under what circumstances did a Korean actor become a star in the Chinese film industry?

In Chapter 3, Dong-Hoo Lee analyzes a media ecology approach to transnational media flow in East Asia. She attempts to look at the role of media

as a crucial agent in the formation and expansion of the Korean Wave as a transnational media flow. Rather than taking a functionalist approach to media or treating media as a taken-for-granted and fixed determinant for transnational media flows, she considers the media environment as the “foreground” (in McLuhan’s term) of the Korean Wave and seeks to understand it from a media-ecology perspective. This chapter focuses on the media environment as a context that has mediated transnational media distribution and consumption in East Asia in the 20 years since the late 1990s. Rather than examining the functional role of a specific medium, she focuses on the changing media environments in terms of inter-media relations between old and new media and people’s everyday media systems and how they have shaped “the speed, scale, and pattern” of transnational media experiences.

Chapter 4 discusses the converging East Asian cultural market. It analyzes the cultural collaboration process of the East Asian regional market transforming into one integrated market for the popular cultural industry. It explores the possibilities of forming one distinct cultural sphere in East Asia. It also examines the influences of regional political economy in terms of shifting cultural politics that have expedited both cultural convergence and cultural de-convergence in the regional cultural market. Instead of emphasizing only one side, it converges the two main aspects, both state-led top-down and private cultural producers-led bottom-up, in order to fully understand the growth of regional integration. In doing so, it discusses the major characteristics of pan-Asian cultural products and integration.

Part II identifies transnational convergence of culture in East Asia with four chapters. In Chapter 5, Gyu Tag Lee discusses new generation dance music, focusing on the beginning of K-pop’s and J-pop’s influences on it. “New Generation Dance Music” was the most popular musical genre of the Korean music industry in the early and mid-1990s. It was the first time in the history of the Korean music industry that dance music became the most popular genre. New Generation Dance Music was also highly influenced by Japanese music, which has played an important role in developing Korean popular music. A number of plagiarism scandals that seriously undermined the popularity of new generation dance music are good examples of how not only Western popular music but also J-pop influenced the early K-pop as well. In this chapter, Lee investigates the unofficial enjoyment of J-pop by local Korean audiences and their reaction toward those scandals to show how cultural exchange took place between Korea and Japan even though it was officially banned by governments.

In Chapter 6, Jungmin Kwon discusses the past, present, and future of Boys Love (BL) cultures in East Asia. She raises a question of how this particular subculture (i.e., BL fandom in East Asia) could obtain strong fan bases across national boundaries and beyond political, cultural, and historical conflicts. She firstly historicizes BL culture and its development in each East Asian country, with a focus on reciprocal actions. Then she explores

the root of shared fantasies about the male body that are described in BL content among BL participants and offers culturally specific backgrounds regarding BL's origin, such as Confucianism and the oppressive education system. Next, she moves on to examining recent, noticeable BL phenomena that are commonly discovered in East Asian popular cultures.

Chapter 7 analyzes sharing gender imagination in East Asia. This chapter explains that the fandom for East Asian popular culture is mostly comprised of female fans over males, and thus the representation of 'masculinity' in the contents is directly subject to the female audience's feedback. The fandom for East Asian cultural products has been increasing on a global scale through gaining more audiences in support of their cultural resources, such as Japan's animation (manga) and the Korean Wave's celebrity-oriented music, drama, and movies. Thus, the scale of East Asian pop culture is not only limited to the region, but on a global scale through the Internet-related digital platforms. This chapter aims to find characteristics of imagined gender identities portrayed in East Asian pop culture, and ultimately to map out the possibilities for East Asian pop culture to reshape the existing fabric of cultural identity on gender and race.

Chapter 8 examines pirate cosmopolitanism and the undercurrent of flows with fansubbing television in China. With the rapid development in digital hardware and software, fansubbing culture fashions a new type of media access that traverses across multiple platforms on diverse devices. Situating TV fansubbing within the wider digital culture of transmedial convergence, it examines the cultural logic, as well as the socio-political function, of the pirate, shadow route of multiple flows in China, including televisual flow, information flow, and transnational cultural flow. It interrogates the political meanings of an imagined cosmopolitan community that is created through the self-organized communication sphere of fansubbing, and examines how an alternative framework of identity formation, which it calls "pirate cosmopolitanism," can be generated by the affective "flows" between content and platform, between text and paratext, and between the televisual and the informational.

Part III focuses on digital platforms, cultural industries, and East Asia, which comprises the final four chapters. In Chapter 9, Dal Yong Jin discusses the rise of digital platforms in the networked Korean society. He first identifies the major characteristics that signal the growth of digital platforms as a corporate sphere in which their operation is greatly defined by market forces. Then, he analyzes the nature of the development of local digital platforms in order to determine whether locally made digital platforms have controlled their own market and expanded in global markets. Finally, he investigates the ways in which US-based digital platforms have dominated or influenced the local market, constructing a new form of imperialism. For this reason, Jin not only examines hardware architecture but also pays close attention to the commercial and cultural values embedded in digital platforms.

In Chapter 10, Wendy Su analyzes war memory, globalization, and cultural convergence. She seeks to map out the historical trajectory of film collaboration between the PRC and Japan from the 1980s to the present. She hopes to discover how the PRC-Japan film coproductions have evolved throughout the past two decades, and how the content, themes, and cultural essence of coproductions have developed and changed. She first traces the origin and path of PRC-Japan coproduction, followed by an analysis of film coproductions relating to cosmopolitan Shanghai. Wendy also discusses the latest trend of purchasing and remaking Japanese IP and coproduction. The central argument is that the PRC-Japan collaboration is always characterized by a complicated love-hate relationship. While PRC's official discourse and popular culture foreground the war memory and anti-Japanese nationalism, recent coproductions indicate the tendency of moving away from the haunting shadow of the war and embracing mutual-understanding and cosmopolitanism, which are welcomed by China's younger generations.

Chapter 11 addresses Korea's creative migration to the Chinese television industry, with the presumption that the rise and fall of these two nations' collaborations can unveil recent dynamics in the East Asian media landscape. Sino-Korean media interactions can be discussed as the historical moment when human agents reimagined the boundary of spaces in the Information Age. Therefore, it elucidates interregional collaborations whereby Korean media players are employed as instrumental texts for negotiating cultural infusions and political conflicts in an interregional context. It explores several focal points, including the ways in which Korean media actors deal with conflicts and tensions with their regional partners. Based on in-depth interviews with five Korean media professionals who either collaborated with Chinese media companies or observed the process of Sino-Korean media production, it concludes that the spatial gravity of regionalization manifests Sino-Korean collaborations in reality show production.

Chapter 12 analyzes cultural industries and the state in East Asia. This chapter analyzes the impact of the cultural industries on state policy by looking at the emergence of the Japanese and Korean cultural industries and at the consequential governmental policies that have been initiated. It first reviews the relationship between "culture" and "industry" in order to underline the challenges for policy makers. It then places the issue of commodifying and exporting pop culture in the wider context of Japan's and Korea's developmental legacies and discusses the massive emergence of the Japanese and Korean cultural industries over the last two decades. It later analyzes the way that the policies toward the cultural industries have shifted, the recent governmental initiatives to support the production and export of commodified culture, and provides a few examples of the domestic discourse they initiate. Lastly, it outlines the wider theoretical significance of this study to the process of policy making, and offers some policy recommendations based on the structure and organization of the cultural industries.

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Part I

History and content of the transnational

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