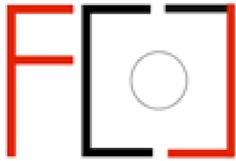


# Review: Olivia Khoo, *Asian Cinema: A Regional View*

Paulina Zurawska

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**Asian Cinema: A Regional View**

**Olivia Khoo**

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**Reviewed by Paulina Zurawska, University of St Andrews**

Until recently there has been a trend in western scholarship of approaching Asian cinema largely from the perspective of national contexts. It is an approach that does not take into account the porous boundaries between nations and inter-Asian nature of a lot of the cinemas from the region. Olivia Khoo's *Asian Cinema: A Regional View* eschews this method, and instead presents a regional approach to films of Asia. The author suggests that Asia should not so much be seen as a fixed territory composed of a set group of countries, but as an amorphous and changing landscape of different regions that emerge, and engage with one another. Khoo utilises this definition of Asia as a grounding for a comparative methodological analysis; rather than employing specific methods of comparison, a regional approach encourages the very act of comparison in the first place, without ascribing a set of limits to the comparisons that may take place. Hence, Asia is both object and method: a unique idea, wrought with potential for innovative analysis.

Khoo specialises in Asian and Australian cinema, and their intersection. An interesting mix when considering her approach in this book, where Asian cinema itself becomes a transnational venture. Indeed, chapters of the book focus on pan-Asian productions and Asian remakes of other Asian films. It is a direct challenge to the hegemony of colonial cinemas that imbricates European settlers into the entire ecosystem of film production, and the decolonisation of these institutions. This method could not work with Asian cinema, since Asian cinema was never able to arise in and of itself, rather the fluctuating and negotiated category of "Asian" has led to myriad considerations of what the term could encompass. The book does not focus on comprehending Asian cinema from a Western perspective, limited in its lived

understanding of Asia in general, and each region specifically, but instead considers several perspectives unique to Asia's own historical, cultural, and economic contexts.

Khoo primarily focusses on the past thirty years of different Asian film industries such as the enmeshed regions of Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, as well as Sinophone cinema, and emerging concepts that redraw the borders defining film industries. The introductory chapter explores developments that catalysed a more collaborative and integrated relationship between these historically disparate industries, setting the stage for the regional approach she then takes in her analysis. From here, Khoo explores in detail some of the changing production practices in Asian cinema that have arisen in response to declining audience numbers and distribution practices, chief among these being a direct move to an online milieu. These chapters are intentionally centring Asia and side-lining the West. It does not deny the influence that Western cinemas have had on Asian industries, but rather focuses on this influence in the context of inter-Asian consequences: how these changes have caused Asian industries to affect one another. For example, Khoo's chapter on Asian cinema-remakes elucidates on Asian companies remaking successful films in different Asian countries. These remakes are normally handled by the same production company, but also involve collaborations with local film production talent, to help alter remakes to suit new audiences. For example, the Chinese remake of *Miss Granny* was longer, more dramatic, and more serious, while the Korean original contained more comedic elements and outward emotionality.

The intra-Asian specificity of these methods of (re)distribution is analysed once more in Khoo's chapter on film distribution and exhibition. Again, Asian cultures are centred and there is an extremely effective case study of the Singapore-based streaming platform Viddsee, which collects short film content and creates dedicated channels for various Southeast Asian nations. Additionally, there is conspicuous overlap of these "National" channels within the platform's "Regional" and "Subregional" categories, an overt and telling link to the

regionalisation of Asian cinemas that the book itself attempts to build. There are, of course, several other platforms that do this: the video streaming platform Gagaoolala is also a highly Asian-focused video streaming platform which hosts short and feature films. In her fifth chapter on queer Asian cinemas and short films, Khoo misses an opportunity to discuss the example of Gagaoolala. Every film on the platform is about queer culture in some way, and there would be much ground that could be covered in analysis about these two topics, especially as a bridge between the this chapter and the next.

Khoo's subsequent chapter on queer Asian focusses on trends of queer and female authorship with the moving image, including short films as queer production practice. The chapter is essential to the argument that Asian cinemas should be seen as regional and less defined by borders and limitations of geography and cultural stereotypes, given the fluidity and historically transgressive aspects of both female authorship and queer filmmaking. Its case study approach allows a depth of analysis that situates the chapter as one which beckons further research: the limited number of examples gives space for further and alternative works in this area, while the depth of analysis presents strong arguments from which to base this further work. The chapter is an important contribution to the scholarship devoted to queer Asian cinemas, and can be productively approached through diffractive reading with the work of Zoran Pecic's *New Queer Sinophone Cinema*.<sup>1</sup> In Khoo's book, however, we are not limited to the geographical and linguistic barrier that "Sinophone" culture exemplifies. Linguistic barriers, as Khoo demonstrated in the chapter on remakes, matter not when regional modes of production allow intra-Asian collaboration. In a similar way, the chapter Khoo devoted to queer Asian cinemas (particularly her analysis of Sun Koh's *Dirty Bitch*) emphasises the need for regional connections. These regional connections allow productions to move quickly and easily across national borders, which Khoo argues is essential in the context of "minor cinema": films that recognise and maintain their marginal nature. Where these films would not normally be

commercially viable, the creation and usage of regional connections allow films like *Dirty Bitch* to be produced and distributed in ways that only Asian distribution models permit.

Where the book is truly ground-breaking, in the final chapter on 3D cinema and technical innovations. The brief obsession with 3D films in the West followed its rather fringe use in the 80s and 90s. With the release of *Avatar* in 2009, Western cinemas spent sums of money translating existing films into 3D and making new 3D features to tap into the enormous financial success of *Avatar*. While this technological innovation fell out of fashion in Hollywood, 3D technology has become a defining feature of Asian cinemas, featuring in everything from mainstream blockbusters to arthouse cinemas. Khoo's book illuminates this development and expands on the scale of the infrastructure for 3D production that has been constructed in Asia. Production companies in Asia are now able to diversify and spread this technology across the continent, and the need for Western involvement (either from investors, technology companies, or post-production companies) has disappeared. The rendering obsolete of Western film-technology firms has been key, Khoo suggests, to allowing Asian production companies to situate themselves as regional hubs from which 3D film production can occur. The commitment and effectiveness of Khoo's argument that Asian regional hubs are such essential parts of their film productions sets the book apart as one which does not require Euro-centric and Hollywood-focused examples, but rather views Asian cinemas as a holistic and fully formed set of industries that exist in/as incessant encounters with each other, free from the shackles of post-colonial influences.

The case study structure of Khoo's book lends itself to the specificities of Asian regions; that which makes these regions so unique and rich in their collaboration. In the context of the pandemic, this book comes at a time when cultures across the world have shifted to online realms. This virtual realm often transcends geographical borders, allowing for an increasing decolonisation of both cinema and film theory. Khoo's model of Asia as a method

and object of study is one that reflects this but also requires it. To view Asian cinemas regionally requires deep analysis of digital production and distribution methods, which can transcend borders fluidly and quickly. Simultaneously, these digital productions and distributional modes require a regional approach to Asian culture that is responsible for the success of these frameworks. In essence, the book is an essential addition to transnational film scholarship that is rich in potential both for future work on the topic, and for inspiring similar methods that can be used in other film cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Zoran Pecic, *New Queer Sinophone Cinema: Local Histories, Transnational Connections*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).