



## Popular Culture of East and Southeast Asia, 1900-present

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Asian financial crisis of 1997. Ramos's successor was the movie actor Joseph Estrada, who turned out to be something of a joke and was impeached in 2001. The outcome of the impeachment trial was inconclusive, and when the Supreme Court declared the presidency vacant, the vice president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the daughter of Diosdado Macapagal, became president, serving a rather undistinguished term until Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III, the son of former president Aquino and the martyred father, was elected president in May 2010.

President Aquino had himself served nine undistinguished years in Congress and three as an even more undistinguished senator. The huge outpouring of grief at his mother's death convinced politicians to run him for president. Despite this inauspicious beginning, President Aquino seems to be an honest person and his presidency shows some promise—going after, for example, big-time tax evaders. Filipinos, however, have, over the years, become rather disaffected with their government and its corruption.

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**See Also:** Japan; Women; World War II.

### Further Readings

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the region. Commercial popular culture has developed fastest during peacetime, supported by media proliferation and the growth of market economies. It can be distinguished from elite and folk cultures by its relatively frivolous, consumerist, and ephemeral nature, the large size of its audiences, and its circulation through the mass media. Western popular culture, although widespread, competes for attention with local pop industries, whose artists and products cross national boundaries and contribute to a sense of regional identity. Popular culture has been criticized in some countries for distracting citizens from concerns such as education and religion, and governments have both censored and mobilized popular culture to further their ideological goals. Popular culture produced in east and southeast Asia often reaches a global audience, and impacts the popular cultures of many parts of the world.

### Historical Overview

In the first few decades of the 20th century, during which time most east and southeast Asian countries were either colonies of the West or Japan, or were involved in domestic and international conflicts, commercial popular culture was limited to large urban centers and treaty ports. Cities such as Shanghai and Tokyo provided access to newspapers, popular music, dance halls, and movie theaters. Elsewhere, particularly in rural areas, there was a continuation of folk traditions such as local operas, shadow puppet plays, song, and dance. By the 1950s and 1960s, many east and southeast Asian nations had begun to develop their own popular culture industries. Countries with authoritarian governments (Vietnam, North Korea, China, Cambodia) or in a state of political transition (Indonesia, Burma) were exceptions, where repression and strict media control limited the development of popular cultures.

The modern history of east and southeast Asian popular culture begins with the end of political and military upheavals such as the Vietnam War and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and a gradual thawing of diplomatic relations from the late 1970s to the 1990s. Widespread cultural liberalization, improvements in living standards, and a rise in incomes meant that there was a wider range of popular culture on offer, and people could afford to spend more on leisure and entertainment. Popular culture phenomena were able

## Popular Culture

Popular culture is an integral part of daily life throughout east and southeast Asia, and reflects the ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic diversity of

to move more freely across national borders: Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng performed in multiple languages and was adored throughout Asia; Singaporean singers Zhang Xiaoying and Lena Lim were big hits in Malaysia; and Japanese anime, television dramas, computer games, and karaoke became lucrative cultural exports.

Since the 1990s, the region has experienced a burgeoning of media channels, continued urbanization and economic growth, and close interaction with other parts of the world. Popular culture has flourished accordingly, and now circulates widely, and often globally, through all media.

### Cultural Flows

The pervasiveness of Western popular culture is common to most east and southeast Asian nations. Korea was Asia's biggest importer of Hollywood movies in

the 1920s and 1930s; Thailand was an avid consumer of American film musicals in the 1950s; hits by the Beatles and Frank Sinatra have long resounded in karaoke clubs from Mongolia to Vietnam; and each Harry Potter novel was eagerly anticipated in the 2000s. Some Western pop culture has been more successful in this region than at home. Danish band Michael Learns to Rock has won millions of Asian fans with its easy-listening rock songs and American saxophonist Kenny G's song "Going Home" can be heard across China on trains and in shopping centers at closing time or the end of long journeys.

Western popular culture's reach into east and southeast Asia has met with varying responses. Some have condemned its corrosive influence upon local traditions, considering as a hindrance to the development of national culture. People in the Philippines, for example, bemoan the "hamburgerization" of Filipino culture and daily life. American fast-food joints are popular across east and southeast Asia, enticing patrons with their Western-style decor, free Internet access, collectable gifts, and sociable atmosphere. The infiltration of Western popular culture has resulted in many hybrid cultural forms and practices. Burmese rock ("stereo") features Western pop melodies set to Burmese lyrics; Taiwanese pop star Jay Chou mixes hip-hop beats and aesthetics with references to traditional Chinese and Taiwanese culture; and British television formats such as *Pop Idol* have been adopted in many countries, including Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore.

Regionally produced popular culture is often funded by transnational capital and targets multiple audiences. Japanese popular culture was the most widely consumed during the 1980s and 1990s, although its popularization was hindered in some countries by anti-Japanese sentiment stemming from the country's colonial past. More recently, South Korean pop songs and television dramas, known as the Korean Wave, have become hugely popular throughout Asia. Both South Korea and Japan are known for their productive popular culture industries, which churn out commercial pop acts like Korean boy bands Super Junior and Mandarin-speaking Super Junior M, and all-female Japanese supergroup Morning Musume. Countries with smaller populations, less affluent pop industries, or which are seen as less fashionable, tend to be bigger importers than exporters of popular culture.



*Asian popular culture has spread worldwide, as evidenced by this Hello Kitty float in a 2010 parade in Santiago, Chile.*

East and southeast Asian popular culture has a considerable impact on global popular culture. Prominent examples include Japanese cartoons (Pokemon, Hello Kitty), computer games (Super Mario Bros., Dance Dance Revolution), horror movies (*Ringu*, remade in the United States as *The Ring*), and Chinese martial arts films (*Hero*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) and stars (Jet Li, Jackie Chan).

### Politics and Everyday Life

Popular culture has taken on political implications at different times in history. Many governments are sensitive to its effects upon the masses, and censor it for reasons from the length of an artist's hair or amount of sexual content to explicit calls for revolution. Popular music has often been politically inflected: artists and audiences alike use it to express rebellion, including in 1970s Indonesia (Rhoma Irama) and Thailand (Caravan), 1980s China (Cui Jian) and the Philippines (Freddie Aguilar), and 1990s Tibet (Dadon Dawadolma). Some popular figures have become directly involved in politics: Japan has elected former professional comedians to governorships, and action movie star Shin Sung-il took part in the South Korean legislative elections in 1996.

For the most part, popular culture today is governed more by entertainment and fashion than politics. Celebrity gossip fills the pages of lifestyle magazines, newspapers, and entertainment Web sites. Singers, actors, film directors, writers, and sports personalities are idolized, and can find success in multiple genres. Many stars (Hong Kong's Andy Lau and Cecilia Cheung, Korea's Rain, and Taiwan's S.H.E. and F4, for example) are active in the music, acting, and modeling worlds, and appear on multiple television and billboard advertisements; Filipino boxing champion Manny Pacquiao has ventured into music, acting, and even politics, having been elected to Congress in 2010.

Just as elsewhere in the world, consumers in east and southeast Asia are drawn to popular culture based on their collective and individual situations and identities, and on the lifestyles to which they aspire. Popular culture can express shared sentiments, from national or local pride to grief. Alternative tastes form subcultures or neo-tribes, like the hardcore punk scenes in countries like China, Singapore, and Japan. Popular culture has been known to both repress and sometimes champion the rights of minority groups.

One example is the proliferation of Taiwanese movies featuring gay characters, which have found commercial success despite continuing social conservatism and the dismal box office performance of Taiwanese movies since the 1990s.

New media have become essential to the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture. East and southeast Asian countries are creators and voracious consumers of the latest technologies. Cell phones, laptops, and portable media players are used to access the Internet, play games, listen to music, share jokes, read literature, and watch movies and television. Popular culture is increasingly participatory in nature, as fans select idols via short message system (SMS) voting, engage in spoofing and memeformation, and join communities on Web forums and social networking sites. American-produced Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (World of Warcraft) and locally produced titles (Japan's Dynasty Warriors) are extremely popular, and people spend hours immersed in front of screens in Internet cafés, offices, and at home.

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**See Also:** Internet; Literature; Music; Television; Theater and Film; Youth Culture.

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