

Fandom and Cinephilia in Southeast Asia

This special issue started with the initiative of Patrick Campos, who proposed an idea of putting together an issue on fan culture in Southeast Asia. At the time I had just finished presenting a paper at the Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas conference on cinephile pilgrimage to Angkor Wat following Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, an extended venture from my PhD thesis. Being fairly new to fan studies but would really like to learn more about the field, I contacted Bertha Chin, the cofounder of the Fan Studies Network who is currently based in Southeast Asia, if she would be interested in gathering works that highlight the development of fan studies in the region and so we put together a CFP.

It has been an interesting and at times challenging process after we realized that there are many people interested in the topic, but not many are currently working on case studies in the region or have already conducted works that could be written for submission. We subsequently expanded the scope to the context of East Asia more broadly and have also invited writers who work on related areas.

We are really grateful for all contributors for their hard work and their patience during our long process of gathering all the papers together. Articles included in this issue captured different developments of the studies of audiences and fans from scholars in diverse fields and approaches.

Engaging with geopolitics and the questions of national and transnational which has been the dominant approach of looking at fandom in East and

Southeast Asia, Veluree Metaveevinij explores coproduction films between Thailand and Myanmar: *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (2014) and *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (2016). These films reveal the duality of modernity and nostalgia in the stories and interesting interplay of the concepts within the star-fan relations. Also engaging with the subject of border crossing, my own paper draws attention to the growing practice known as fan tourism in East and Southeast Asia and invites a closer attention to layers of affective relations of film fans / cinephiles to a particular cinematic moment, iconic site, and the actual film location. Using the case of Angkor Wat and Wong Kar-wai as the case in point, I particularly highlight different modes of fan encounters by fans that make the text and the place meaningful, this kind of self-reflective film engagement explores the intimate and ethical dimension of film fan tourism, which were underexplored in literature on fan tourism as a globalized commercial phenomenon.

A set of papers in this issue also offers interesting local specific aspects of fan culture. Richard Bolisay's paper discusses the idea of a "love team" of the stars duo "JaDine" in the age of Twitter and in the context of Filipino fan culture. Natthanai Prasannam explores the industry-fan relations of *yaoi* culture in Thailand, in which the beautiful boy couple are "shipped" by fans as later poached for marketing purposes by the industry.

With writers from different fields, this special issue also highlights diverse approaches employed by scholars to explore different dimensions of fan culture in Southeast Asia. Taking audience and communications study approach, Roehl Niño Bautista explores the motivations for practicing kendo in relation to individual's identification of being a fan of Japanese manga series *Rurouni Kenshin* in the Philippines. Chuck Pascual (published in Filipino) explores the aspect of subjectivity in star-fan relations by appropriating Madonna's persona in his fan activities and art-making practice. Sasawat Boonsri's article (originally written in Thai and translated into English) traces the development of alternative cinema going and cinephile collectives in Bangkok since the 1980s to today through extensive interviews. Following Plaridel's tradition, the issue also includes a film review. Nef Luczon discusses a review and reflection on the success of *Your Name* (2016) in the Philippines.

While fan studies as an established academic discipline grew out from Anglo-European contexts of media and audience studies, a collection of papers in this issue reveals how the subject of fan, fandom, cinephilia, and star-fan relations are approached from different research traditions in Southeast Asia. In the context of Thailand and the Philippines, there seems to be a limited crossover between works in fan studies in the West and works discussing regional and national contexts. In Thailand specifically,

this may be due to language limitations and access to literature as well as the structure of academia in which film and media scholars are from diverse backgrounds. In 2012, an edited collection was published in the Thai language highlighting developments in cartoon studies, studies of local television and fan studies. The chapter by an established communication arts scholar, Kanchana Kaewthep, offers a discussion in Thai language of the development of fan studies established by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*. Since the 1990s, there have been extensive developments in the debates on fan studies in the West, including works that engage with East Asian case studies and transcultural dimensions such as the works by Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto. A special issue of this kind aims to contribute to the field by bringing together both more established and new writers working in the related areas who wish to engage in a broader conversation on fan studies in the region and reaching out to wider readership.

The coeditor of this issue Bertha Chin specifically provides a further reflection on the way in which the Fan Studies Network, first started in the UK, is now expanding its network in the US and more recently in Australia through conferences.

Thank you again to all involved with this issue including our peer-reviewed readers and the editorial team at *Plaridel*. We hope that different conversations discussed in this issue can expand works on fan studies, and that fan studies can also contribute to individual's areas of research, teaching, and fannish endeavors.



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The State of Fan Studies in South East Asia

When Wikanda Promkhuntong first approached me to coedit this special issue for *Plaridel*, it was in 2016. To say this special issue has been slowly taking shape—or to borrow a term from fandom, a “slow burn”—would be an understatement. Fan studies, for many in Southeast Asia, is still tentatively an alien concept: certainly, an outlier among more so-called serious academic disciplines that are perceived to impact lives and communities. Often, this makes it difficult, particularly for early career researchers, to participate in emerging fields of study.

In our discussions while putting the issue together, Wikanda proposed that I contribute a reflective piece on the development of fan studies in the region, given my involvement with the UK-based Fan Studies Network from its inception in 2012, to the establishment of an Australasian chapter of the network¹ that aims to provide a space for scholars working on, or interested in, the topic of fan cultures to connect and collaborate. Having an Australasian chapter would indeed enable scholars in the region to reach out and connect, to decentralize the field from the usual UK/US perspective. At the very least, it would mean that fan studies scholars, and those who are curious about the field, do not have to travel to the UK (and lately the US) for the annual conferences. It would enable opportunities for the field to diversify, widen up research and observation to non-English fandoms, and encourage more participation from those not normally based in the UK, Europe, and US.

Admittedly, it's been very difficult to write this, because a reflective piece can be very personal and experiential. More so when recent debates and concerns within fan studies on structural whiteness made me realize I probably shouldn't be trying to claim to speak for a group, much less a region. Representation is a politically loaded term. Whose voices am I silencing by offering a perspective of the field within the region? But how else are we going to be able to talk about things, if we don't, at some point, point to some form of generalization?

For that matter, what is Southeast Asia? The region tends to be conflated as part of Asia in general, but in truth, there is no singular culture within the region²; its eleven countries, each with its own unique history and development, some with more complicated relationships to postcolonial powers than others. Therefore, its perception of fandom and fan studies (or the study of media and pop culture more generally) also vary, depending on the institution and their openness to these developing fields of research.

I can only speak from my own experience and observation, being a fan studies scholar, who, due to institutional constraints, often have to "disguise" the fan studies element, passing off as something more palatable for an Asian audience. This is often "repackaged" as engagement, a business-friendly term that doesn't posit fan studies as too weird and/or too affective. In doing so, however, it depoliticizes the field and the fan studies scholar to be to be inherently "safe" from topics deemed too controversial for Malaysian institutions.³

This isn't to say that Asian media and pop culture aren't important—the papers on this special issue highlight the variety of ways scholars and fans have engaged with media texts in countries like Thailand and the Philippines. They are becoming increasingly influential too, as the global reach of K-pop can attest. There are certainly several trends to be observed from the ways pop culture is consumed in at least: the proliferation of K-pop and some of its fandoms' more militaristic practices to promote their favorite bands and idols cannot escape notice (for example, BTS's fandom identifying themselves as the Army, and their large-scale promotional campaigns on social media targeted at raising awareness on the band's music and message). There is also a growth of localized creative industries: social media influencers are celebrated by a youthful, media-savvy, and loyal fan audience while the Indonesian film industry, for instance, is gaining international acclaim with some of its leading actors going on to star in global franchises like *Star Wars*. In Hong Kong, the civil unrest that has gripped the city the last four months has also extended to pop culture and fandom as celebrities like Denise Ho and Jackie Chan become activists on

opposing sides of the political spectrum, drawing their fans into the debate on social media too.

The popularity of Hollywood pop culture remains constant in South East Asia, with mainstream successes such as *Game of Thrones*, the Marvel superhero, and *Star Wars* franchises generating not only a lot of talk among fans and the media, but also economic profits through fans' consumption of official toys and collectibles. These various trends should account for reasons why pop culture and fan studies be taken more seriously from a scholarly perspective. However, institutional and funding pressures may hinder the field's growth in major ways. But perhaps the way to approach this with a less cynical perspective is to acknowledge that while "traditional" fan studies may not be explicitly performed, fan studies scholars are actually also equipped with theoretical understandings in other disciplinary areas such as literary studies, English, film, media, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, areas which can and have enabled us to study pop culture under the guise of something considered of more value in Asia. This is something both Wikanda Promkhuntong and myself are hoping has been achieved somewhat with this special issue, that it would go on to generate more scholarly interests and scholarship.



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Notes

¹ The inaugural conference was held at the University of Wollongong, Australia in 2017, with a second conference scheduled to be held in December 2019 at Swinburne University of Technology, Australia.

² Or, for that matter, the whole of Asia.

³ In Malaysia particularly, public universities, while more receptive of arts and humanities, tend to be more conservative while private universities are more focused on business and science/engineering degrees.