

***Early Cinema in Asia,* edited by Nick Deocampo**

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Early cinema and Asian cinema have each, individually, been flourishing sub-specialties within film studies for decades now—and yet there has been a surprising dearth of published scholarship covering the area of their intersection, that of Asia’s early cinema. This may be the case in part because of the paucity of extant or accessible research materials for some parts of Asia, but the topic itself poses other challenges as well. A new, wide-ranging, fascinating, and at times provocative anthology edited by the veteran Filipino filmmaker-historian Nick Deocampo, with the title *Early Cinema in Asia*, now takes a step to fill that gap in scholarship, while also highlighting some of the distinctive problematics of the subject matter.

Deocampo’s useful introduction outlines difficulties that the topic poses indeed by its very nature. Foremost among these is that the notion of “early cinema” is one that has developed almost entirely by reference to Western film history, technology, economics; that it is a Western concept which does not automatically map onto the field of Asian cinema, nor perhaps should it be so mapped. Among the differences from the West: that the technologies of production and exhibition came from outside of the region; that the first films exhibited came from outside the region with, in many cases, a considerable time lag before the production of films by local makers (foreigners usually making “local” or at least locally-set films first); and that the introduction of cinema in many cases came under a context of colonial rule, and in some cases many years after its introduction in

the West. One therefore also needs to consider whether “early” in Asian contexts rightly refers to the stage of development of film technology or film language (in a largely Western timeline of evolution), or to the amount of time the medium has been present in the particular Asian locality being examined. Such complications additionally require making a distinction between “early cinema in Asia” (that is, all early presence of cinema in the region) and “early Asian cinema” (cinema genuinely of the region).

The “Asia” part of “early cinema in Asia” itself calls for critical interrogation. As cinema developed in part in accordance with nationally specific regulatory, cultural, and historical frameworks, does it make sense to conceive of an Asia composed of such nations (some of which were themselves under Western colonial rule), or of a region-wide development with certain continuities? (Deocampo’s reasonable position is that it makes most sense to keep both frameworks within view, as both are pertinent.) And then there is the question of how wide a net to cast for Asia. Deocampo’s approach is again to be more rather than less inclusive, so that while most chapters cover countries and sub-regions more typically discussed under the rubric of Asian cinema (e.g., China, Southeast Asia), others cover Iran and Central Asia, and one brief entry considers whether the Pacific Islands should be discussed as part of Asia.

The complex and multi-faceted nature of such problematics corresponds in turn with the varied foci of chapter topics. The volume is organized not as a country by country survey, which would have been far less interesting, but rather as a series of examinations of different key issues and conundrums for early cinema in Asia, sometimes more national in scope and sometimes more regional, and employing a range of differing approaches (but tending to put an emphasis on original archival research). The main body of the collection begins with its two lengthiest essays, both of which are concerned with broader, conceptual framing issues, and both contributed by venerable senior figures in their fields, respectively Asian cinema (Wimal Dissayanake) and early cinema (Charles Musser). Dissayanake opens by referencing the aforementioned issue of multiple possible (and co-existing) conceptualizations or levels of “Asian cinema,” as well as the complex and shifting situations of the nation-states linked with this cinema, as a way to highlight the “problematic and contested nature of the concept of Asian cinema” before tackling the issue in more concrete detail. Dissayanake then invokes the notion of the “public sphere” as one possible way into adumbrating a broader pan-Asian cinematic idea—postulating a certain “common Asian public sphere” for exchange of perspectives on contemporary issues of broad public relevance (issues of national identity and culture and of rapid

modernization, for example), in which early cinema would have played a significant role.

Dissayanake moves on to a series of comparative brief case studies (based largely upon existing national cinema histories) to show parallel ways that different Asian national cinemas functioned as part of a public sphere, in contributing in direct ways to national debates over, for example, social controversies and matters of cultural identity. His examples include, among others, engagements with caste issues in Indian cinema, concerns over social class and over Westernization in Sri Lankan cinema, struggles with Hollywood dominance in the early Philippine film industry, the clash between tradition and modernity (and the rise of the urban) in Indonesian film, and still more engagements of issues of salience to national identity in the cinemas of Thailand, Japan, China, and Korea.

While Dissayanake's broadly comparative approach provides us with a fruitful way into reconceptualizing the notion of Asian cinema, of regionally shared pan-Asian cinematic functions, it ends up being not so sharply focused on outlining and understanding the "early cinema" part of the equation (and it is all the more significant issue to engage given that Dissayanake's study encompasses a fairly extended historical time span).

Musser's essay, on the other hand, while taking a cue from Dissayanake's work here and elsewhere on the broader contexts of Asian cinema, is very directly focused on the question of the relative meanings of "early cinema," offering us an in-depth look at the local conditions of early cinema production, exhibition and reception in one particular locale and time frame (the Philippines and especially Manila, 1897-1917), based upon original archival research; and he in turn connects this picture with considerations of the development of the film industry and of discourses about the cinema both regionally and globally.

Though partly hindered by the relative paucity of extant materials from the era, Musser manages to resourcefully connect the dots, as it were, and thereby to create a fascinating and compelling account of early cinema in the nation, which includes the substantial revelation that film-going in Manila gained significant popular momentum (with a profusion of film shows of various kinds) as early as 1903, and thus years before the mid-decade Nickelodeon boom of the United States. Musser also makes the case that although the cinema industry in the Philippines was to a large extent dominated by foreigners in the first decades of the 20th century, it also involved very significant local input and in various ways articulated locally popular (pro-independence and anti-colonial) perspectives; indeed he goes so far as to venture the argument that the industry could be compared to Hollywood of a certain era as an enterprise that gained creative vibrancy

from its mix of local and foreign personnel. (Stephen Bottomore, towards the close of the volume, offers a brief, thoughtful consideration of the purchase and significance of foreigners for early Asian cinema—and of the national-historiographic complications they pose.)

The several chapters that follow these two opening essays comprise historical case studies of somewhat more delimited focus, all of which make for very engaging reading, and quite a few offering up additional eye-opening revelations, based in many cases on new archival research. A number of brief entries mine the available printed records to attempt to ascertain the dates of the earliest films screenings (and the trajectory of the first film-related activities) in mainland China (Ritsu Yamamoto), Hong Kong (Wai-ming Law), and Taiwan (Daw-Ming Lee) respectively; while Aaron Gerow seeks explanations (be they economic, industrial, or cultural) for the idiosyncratic practice in the first decades of Japanese feature film production of only producing one or two prints of most films. Other discussions include accounts of early cinema in India (P.K. Nair), Iran (Shahin Parhami), and, more briefly, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tibet (Stephen Bottomore).

The anthology's focus on Southeast Asia is particularly strong, and includes, for example, Nadi Tofighian's pain-stakingly researched case study of exhibition practices in the region; Tilman Baumgartel's fascinating account of the development of cinema in Indochina (more specifically, French-colonized Vietnam and Cambodia) and the ways it intersected with the colonial project, deftly synthesized from a wide range of far flung sources; and Deocampo's further narrative of the complex colonial (Spanish and American) dynamic of early cinema in the Philippines. Contributions on Malaysia (by Hassan Abdul Muthalib) and Thailand (by Anchalee Chaiworaporn) round out the Southeast Asian selection.

Early Cinema in Asia does have its share of quirks, some of which Deocampo in fact alludes to in his introduction. The anthology (which had its beginnings in a conference Deocampo organized in 2005) took some years to bring to fruition, and partly as a result of this (but also because of the scholars' varied approaches) not all the contributions appear equally as current, nor equally in depth (some indeed being quite brief), nor are all of them as thorough in referencing the current secondary literature in their respective areas—though some do, and the book also includes a modest-sized selected bibliography with its back matter. And while the volume is designed as an examination of selected key issues in Asia's early cinema rather than a systematic regional overview, there are nevertheless some nations with surprisingly little coverage here (for example Indonesia [the Dutch East Indies] and Korea). Because the issue of region is so important

to the conceptual framework of the anthology, the problematics of that too might have benefited from more sustained interrogation. For example, how are regions formed and designated and which designations are privileged and why?

But these are relatively minor concerns. The volume as a whole is well edited, the contributions without exception are clearly written and well-focused, and the issues and perspectives that are raised are consistently stimulating. And, quite significantly, Deocampo's anthology points to and opens up a range of little explored topics within film studies that call for further excavations. The book is therefore highly recommended for anyone with interests in early cinema and/or early 20th century Asian cultural history.

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