Visualizing and Invisibilizing the Subempire: Labor, Humanitarianism and Popular Culture Across South Korea, Southeast and South Asia

Jin-Kyung Lee

This paper examines five South Korean TV programs, *The Age of Global Success*, *Love in Asia*, *Asia Hunter*, *KOICA’s Dream*, and *Saving Mrs. Go Bong-Shil*, all of which belong to varied and hybrid genres such as news magazine, serialized documentary, reality show and television drama. Due to its partially elevated status as a middle-brow medium and its ability to combine multiple functions such as entertainment, information, education and social engineering, South Korean television is a more socially influential popular medium than its Western counterpart. I argue that South Korean popular culture, as represented by these television programs, produces, circulates, and promotes the meanings of respective nation-states (e.g., South Korea, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, etc.) and Asia as a bloc in relation to the ongoing regional economic and cultural globalization. The following five aspects of South Korea’s relationship to the less developed parts of Asia emerge in the popular culture of the television medium: first, Southeast Asian and other Asian migrant/immigrant/off-shore labor for South Korea, and the distinct ways in which some are made visible and others, invisible; second, popular cultural imaginings of a pan-Korean regional-global network; third, popular cultural production of a pan-Asian imaginary; fourth, South Korean humanitarianism and its subimperializing dimensions; fifth, dissemination of popular culture within and outside of South Korea, i.e., the emergence of popular culture as a significant instrument of imaging South Korea as a subempire. I conclude the paper by offering a couple of broad speculations on the changing and varied meanings of subempire for contemporary South Korea.

Keywords: migrant labor, subempire, regional globalization, cultural globalization, popular culture