

Keith Howard on the Social Phenomenon of Asian pop

By Koen de Ceuster

Talking to Keith Howard, on a sunny early autumn afternoon in his office in the SOAS (school of Oriental and African Studies) building, I was struck by the almost inevitable pull in his research towards popular music. Although he indicated that, music-wise, Asian pop was sometimes little more than a boring replica of Western styles of pop music, he stressed that as a social phenomenon it decidedly deserved scholarly attention. For too long, musicology in the West has been concentrating almost exclusively on 'classical' music, despite dwindling interest from the public. Although he willingly admits that such research has undeniable scholarly merits, he personally is more interested in the social uses of music.

He was already 'cheesed out' when, during and after his MA training as a Western musicologist/composer, he could get a commission to write new academic-style music, but that the composition would be performed once to an audience of perhaps forty people, never to be played again. He stresses: "that doesn't seem to me the way that music should be". A similar frustration gripped him when he began teaching music. Forced by the school curriculum to teach major and minor scales, he saw pupils donning their Walkmans outside the classroom, but hating their music classes, 'a situation still all too common throughout schools in Britain today.'

After his MA, he wanted to look at how people used music and trained in anthropology, and embarked on a PhD at Queens University, Belfast. Korea became his preferred terrain for research. The country proved an excellent example of a modernising society where remnants of

pre-industrial life coexisted with a modern, contemporary, global society. 'You could still find people who sang folksongs that they had sung until the 1950s in the fields, and you could go into Seoul and watch people buying pop music.' With regard to folk music, he was most interested in the connections between the past and the present. Rather than concentrating on what it had been like, he was fascinated by the present, and looked at preservation movements, change and standardisation; at political and popular uses, and at how folk music was being taught.

'The standard way of conducting ethno-musicological fieldwork is to look at the soundscape. You do not just look at the small area you want to study, but at everything that is out there.' So, although he concentrated on folk music during a nearly eighteen-month stay in the countryside, he also collected samples of virtually everything - TV shows, pop, court, folk, and Western music. Commissioned in 1992 to produce the in-flight Korean pop music programs for Lufthansa and Singapore Airlines, he began taking a closer look at the pop scene in Asia. Unlike the late 1980s, when Asian pop was dominated by a 'star-system' of singers excelling in formulaic 'Eurovision'-type ballads, 'the nineties were when a lot more variety came in. You can call it globalisation, but you could also see fragmentation in the market, and fragmentation allowed people to hear what they wanted. It allowed underground music to become more mainstream. It allowed dedicated markets to emerge for musical subcultures.

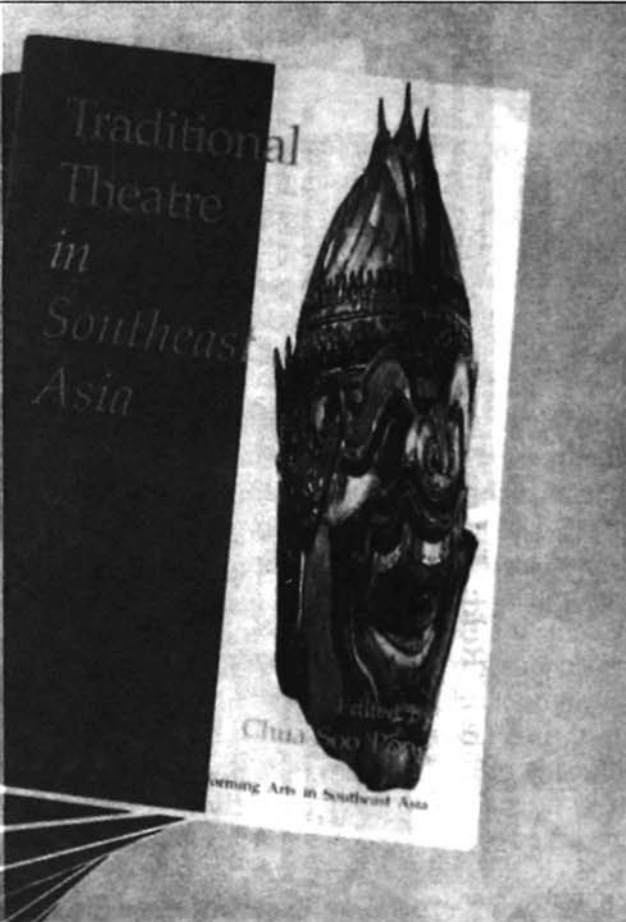
These rapid changes were in part a consequence of the globalised pop video culture brought to the region by satellite TV. 'Videos moved the

market to a vision of pop based on visuals, based on action and dance. Ideas move very quickly from country to country, because everyone follows the visual information, and styles change very quickly. Satellite TV allows local cultures to appropriate music styles very quickly. So you see each country taking elements of rap, garage, jungle, and hip hop and combining these with more local styles. You get appropriation, but in mixes you would never hear in the West, that are no longer just rap, no longer street music, no longer Jamaican reggae, but fusions that are very Asian'.

Although Keith's future research will remain focused on folk music and issues of preservation

(notably in projects in Buryatia and Thailand), he will remain a keen observer of pop music, if only because: 'Popular culture and popular music show us how the world is changing. We are moving from a world where you could look at single music cultures isolated from the rest of the world with very clear and neat power structures, government down, authority down, landowners down. We're moving to a more global market where influences in music come and go all the time, and where the powerful forces tend to be companies, or the media, or ideas.'

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Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia introduces many traditional forms of theatre that are not widely known outside their countries of origin. Edited by Dr Chua Soo Pong, Currently the Director of the Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore, the book discusses how traditional forms of theatre should be revitalised in the rapidly changing socio-economic environments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia (US\$ 10 excluding postage cost) can be obtained from:

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