
Media Culture: Children's TV Programs and Appearance of "Childhood" in Asia[†]

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Introduction:

Attempts have been made in recent years to grasp the globalizing world which is characterized by transnational flows of information, commodities and people. The global process of production, circulation and consumption has emerged, along with which a multitude of local groups are struggling to define their new identities in relation to such global forces.

In this context, how do new forms of global and local politics of culture affect children? And how do children themselves experience, understand, and resist or reshape the complex, frequently contradictory cultural politics that inform their daily lives? This paper explores various aspects of the current global politics of culture in relation to changing discourses on childhood and to changing conditions and experiences of children, mainly in contemporary Asian countries. Specifically, I am going to ask how children experience their relation to "global media cultures." The aim of this paper is to find new understandings and new questions.

Let's begin with discussions of "childhood" as a social and historical construction which is challenged and reconfigured in fundamental ways in this age of globalization. Philippe Aries argued that by the eighteenth century, special conventions in artistic and literary representation marked children as a distinct group and childhood as a separate domain, set apart from the everyday life of adult society. The immaturity of children is a biological fact of life, but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture.¹

Assaults on the space of childhood as an ideally safe, innocent, and carefree domain have been discussed in recent years. Such studies represent diverse perspectives on "vanishing" childhoods, "disappearing" children, and "negotiated" identities. Postman, for example, argues in The Disappearance of Childhood that the decline of American childhood as a protected space within the family began in 1950 as the uncontrolled, market-driven, and globally circulating media images invaded the family homes. With this invasion came a loss of childhood innocence.²

Although, I am not fully convinced that such childhood innocence had ever generally existed, it has thus been argued that the global media has made it disappear. There is no adequate theory at hand, however, to understand and

[†] The original idea of the paper developed from the panel "Media Literacy and community formation" organized for the 15th Biennial Conference of Asian Studies Association of Australia held in Canberra, Australia, in June 2004. The current paper was read at the 2nd Worldwide Forum for Comparative Education and revised for this edition.

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¹ Alan Prout and Allison James, eds., Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood, Falmer Press, 1990, p.6.

² Neil Postman, The Disappearance of Childhood, Vintage, 1994.

explain the nature of the current crisis in the study of childhood, or the experience of children. Nevertheless, I am to argue that we are currently witnessing the remarkable re-conceptualization of the “child,” and “childhood,” within the context of global media culture.

Background:

Since the late 20th century into the first decade of the 21st century, societies in Asia have experienced IT revolution and subsequent globalization of media culture. It is now requested of us to have a keener sense of how the existing generation of youth are being produced within a society in which new media plays a decisive role in constructing multiple and diverse social identities. This paper deals with the role played by the children’s TV programs in constructing new “childhood”, with the focus on Japan’s children’s TV animation programs, along with their TV advertising, which have spread into many countries in Asia.

The findings which I am going to present in the paper will be: (1) TV has changed the life-style of the families in Asian countries by introducing the kind of culture in the center of which sits advertising; (2) there is tight linkage of social and cultural identity construction with the purchase and consumption of cultural products which are thus advertised through TV, that is, what one buys and consumes loom large in most people’s understandings of themselves and their world; and (3) it is the new concept of childhood and the new identity of being a child which have most remarkably been produced by advertising-based culture.

Theoretical framework:

Richard Ohmann, in his book titled Selling Culture³, wrote that television is “the universal medium of advertising-based culture.” By “advertising-based culture,” he meant to say

(1) advertising sits in the center of the cultural production (2) there is tight linkage of social identity with the purchase and use of commodities, including cultural products (3) it is the new professional managerial class who has led this cultural revolution.

His was the study of American society at the time of emerging mass culture in the early 20th century. And somewhat similar situations have been present in the societies in Asia in recent years. I would like to examine the case with the examples of children’s TV programs, specifically, the Japanese children’s animation programs in Asia, with special attention to their advertisements.

Let me outline the definitions of some of the key concepts:⁴ “mass culture” marks off the category of entertainment, which is voluntary experience; produced by a relatively small number of specialists for the mass consumers to share; with dependable frequency that shapes habitual audiences around common needs or interests; and it is made for profit.

In contrast with “popular culture,” which credits popularity as authentic and implies the active role for audiences in choosing and interpreting entertainments, “mass culture” signals the homogenization of culture that has accompanied the expansion of media, and implies the power of the culture industries to shape audiences and groups of consumers. The popular culture approach seems to be more familiar to us anthropologists than the mass culture approach. Yet, we need to have both perspectives in order to understand the subject of contemporary mass/popular culture. In this paper, therefore, I am going to see the contemporary phenomena of TV culture through the mass culture viewpoint.

³ Richard Ohmann, Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the turn of the century, Verso, 1996, p.363.

⁴ The definitions of “mass culture” and “popular culture” are based on Ohmann’s work.

At home.⁵

Every Sunday morning, Iwan and Neneng, brother and sister who are primary school students and live in the Jakartan suburb, switch on TV in the living room to watch children's animation programs. Their Sunday morning starts with Dora Emon. Since 1991, when Dora Emon was first broadcast, Sunday morning has quickly become "children's TV hours" in Indonesia. Many TV channels now have "children's programs" during the hours of 7:30~10:00am, and most of them are Japan's children's animation programs. Now, "children" are expected to be found in front of the TV sets in the Sunday mornings, and that is the "normal" scene of the family life. People seem to have already forgotten that, only 10 to 20 years ago, there were no such "suburban residential areas" around Jakarta,⁶ and children were ordinarily found playing outside with neighborhood children even before breakfast. The outlook of family life has changed greatly and the TV set in the living room of the emerging urban middle class family home has played the important role in it.

Dora Emon is the most popular children's TV program and there are always many commercials that accompany Dora Emon. They advertise mostly drinks, snacks and some other items which are now understood as the "children's stuffs." They are Fanta, instant ramen, milk, Nestle, tomato ketchup, cereal, candy, and Pepsodent toothpaste. Iwan and Neneng watch Dora Emon absorbedly but while commercials are on-air they play with their toys or walk around the room paying little attention to the commercials. And yet, they stay in the living room making sure not to miss the next Dora Emon episode. They only half-notice, perhaps, those advertised children's drinks, snacks and other items which they actually drink, eat and consume in their daily life. The TV screen reflects, like the mirror, the daily life of the audience/children and gives reassurance to them.

At the Mall:

After breakfast, the family makes their weekend visit to the shopping mall by family car. There, in the shops in the Mall, Iwan and Neneng eyewitness the commodities which were advertised on TV. They might feel and be assured to have the sense of themselves, their possibilities and their world. They understand who they are through what they see, buy and consume. They know that they are the "children" who consume the "children's" drinks, snacks and other commodities. Through the "children" who appear in the TV commercials, they have already made a kind of contact with other "children/audiences" to whom they might feel social and cultural equals. They have learned their identity as "children" who are to consume the "children's goods" presented as such by TV advertising.

TV commercials offer the images of children and their family life. TV commercials speak to children as prospective consumers and, by doing so, create the new category of audience: "children who are consumers of children's stuff." The "children and childhood" are defined by the commodities which are thus advertised, purchased, and consumed.

Iwan and Neneng do not pay any money to watch Dora Emon, which is offered to them free by the commercial TV channel. Who is paying for it? Who in fact is buying what? It is the commercial sponsors who are paying. TV channel sells the audience's "attention," their "buying power" and their "aspiration" to the commercial sponsors, who pay for the commercials and thus pay for the cost of broadcasting the programs. For the sponsors, the weekly programs function as the agent that attracts the audience and introduces them to the commodities advertised.⁷

TV commercials create and shape "needs" of the audience, and thus the "audience" themselves. They tell the audience what they "need and desire," and thus create and

⁵ The descriptions are based on my fieldworks in 1982, 1991, and 2002.

⁶ Concerning the development of suburban residential area in Indonesia, see Miyamoto, Kensuke, & Konagaya, kazuyuki, eds., *Ajia no Dai-toshi 2 Jakarta*, Nippon Hyoron-sha, 1999.

⁷ For the commercial system that maximizes profits through TV advertising, see Saya Shiraishi, "Globalization of Manga and Anime," Akio Igarashi ed., *Henyosuru Asia*, Seori Shobo, 1997.

shape the group of people who have the identical needs and interests. In the case of the children's programs, commercials create the group of people who are identified as "children" who consume the "children's" programs and commodities. Something has happened because of the advertising-based TV culture. That something is the appearance of "children and childhood as consumers."

Conclusion:

As mass media have come to absorb many socializing functions of the family, they have offered us images of the family which would act as touchstones by which we gauge our own daily experiences. Seductively realistic portrayals of family life in the media, especially on TV screen watched in one's own living room at home, may be the basis for "our most common and pervasive conceptions and beliefs about what is natural and what is right."⁸ Nothing is more politically and culturally influential than the media that is capable of making people accept what is "natural" and what is "right," without ever being noticed of the fact of being influenced.

In the TV advertisements, children are depicted as happy smiling consumers of such "children's stuffs" as snacks, drinks, and other commodities of comfort and indulgence. The family happiness is presented as the way of consumption. Children are the ultimate consumers for whom the family, which is now reconstructed as the unit of commodity consumers, buys the "children's" commodities in order for children and family to become "happy." In the advertisements of the children's TV programs, parents are typically the providers of goods and services of which

children are the final consumers whose happiness is equaled with the happiness of the family. "Happy families" are those who buy goods and services for children. TV has not made childhood disappear,⁹ rather it has reproduced and made the "childhood," on and in front of screen, "appear."

As I have stated at the beginning, television has brought into Asian countries, the kind of culture in the center of which sits advertising; and there is this tight linkage of the identity construction with the purchase and consumption of cultural products which are thus advertised through TV; and it is the "childhood and children as consumers" which have been most remarkably produced through TV advertising-based culture.

⁸ Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N., Media and the family: Images and impact. White House Conference on the Family, National Research Forum on Family Issues (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 198 919). As quoted in Thomas Skill, "Family Images and Family Actions as Presented in the Media: Where We've been and What We've found," Dolf Zilimann, Jennings Bryant & Aletha C. Huston eds., Media Children, and the Family, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1994, p.39.

⁹ Neil Postman, op. cit.; Marie Winn, Children without Childhood, Pantheon Books, 1983.