Re-territorializing East Asia: International Coproduction and Region-Making in the Korean Animation Industry

Joonkoo Lee
School of Business, Hanyang University, Seoul, South Korea

This paper examines the interaction of globalization and localization in “region-making” in the context of cultural industries. It argues that a regional cultural market emerges through the encounter of two critical forces: local producers with ambitions to make their content available beyond national markets, and global media firms with needs to tap into local markets and talents. As the two forces compete and cooperate, a region is “re-territorialized” as a crucial space for both to draw economic, cultural and human resources from. This region-making process is facilitated by elaborate commercial arrangements to link local producers to global firms which, in turn, generate new forms of intra-and trans-regional linkages. This argument is illustrated with the case of Korea’s engagement in the Asian market through international coproduction in the animation industry. For more than four decades, Korean animators worked as offshore suppliers for Western and Japanese studios. It began to change in the late 1990s as they attempted to create and export their own animation. This upgrading effort was critically facilitated by international coproduction. Initially devised for global media firms to enter regional/local markets, this commercial partnership allowed Korean studios not only to access key resources for their global presence. But also, by splitting the world market into multiple “territories” where each partner has exclusive rights, it prompts them to claim Asia and its sub-regions as their business territories and build a cross-national network of production and distribution as well as finance and talents. Consequently, Korean firms participating in international coproduction have redefined the Asian market as a vital economic, cultural and human space for their global strategies and re-constructed the relationship between regional and domestic markets. This paper concludes with discussion of the co-evolution of global, regional and local cultural industries and its implications to the global cultural economy.