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Young Asian Dutch constructing Asianness

Understanding the role of Asian popular culture

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CHAPTER 5

Summary and Conclusions

This research project set out to shed more light on Asian minorities in the Netherlands. As noted before, Asian Dutch are virtually absent in Dutch political, public and academic discourses about cultural diversity, migration and multicultural society (see also Chow, 2011; Chow, Zwier, & Van Zoonen, 2008). By investigating and reporting on Asian Dutch specifically, this project attempts to intervene in these debates and to adjust the discourses so as to make them more inclusive and a better reflection of multicultural reality in the Netherlands. Not just by increasing the representation and visibility of Asian Dutch as such, but more importantly by inserting their very own voices and an understanding of particular aspects of their everyday lives in the Netherlands. Ultimately, this will enhance our comprehension of Dutch multicultural society at large – both academically and sociopolitically.

In retrospect, the seed of the present project had already been planted in the early 1990s. It was then when my personal experiences with, and observations of, an emerging sense of panethnic Asianness that resonated with a growing number of young Asian Dutch, started to build up. This new phenomenon of young people of Chinese, Indonesian, Indo-Dutch, Vietnamese and other Asian origin calling themselves ‘Asian’ – and proudly at that –, coming together and connecting at Asian parties, keenly watching film and television from Asian countries other than their homeland; this I wanted to understand, and subsequently explain to others, passionately. What is this sense of Asianness they, and, indeed, I myself share? Why? How? These and other questions coupled with my extensive observations eventually got embedded into the existing extensive body of scholarship on ethnic minorities, cultural identities and identifications, panethnicity, multiculturalism, media consumption, popular culture, cultural globalization and so forth. This resulted in the formulation of the main objective of this research project, namely to explore and gain an understanding of the role of local Asian Dutch and transnational Asian popular culture in young Asian Dutch’ panethnic Asian cultural identifications and their construction of panethnic Asian cultural identities.

Through conducting the studies reported in the preceding chapters, I have tried to find and formulate answers to the main research question and a number of sub questions flowing from it. What follows below is a summary of the separate studies and their main findings and a reflection and synthesis thereof, leading up to answers to the research questions and a discussion of the wider academic and sociopolitical implications of the findings and conclusions.

The very first objective of the present research project was to explore and map young Asian Dutch’ Dutch, homeland and Asian cultural identifications and combinations thereof. Given that this is the first research project to investigate panethnic Asian identifications in the Netherlands, it was essential to start by exploring to what degree young Asian Dutch identify as Asian and how this is related to other cultural identifications. To this end, an online survey was conducted for this project’s first study. The study established empirically that among certain segments of the Asian Dutch population there is a sense of panethnic Asianness. Young Asian Dutch engender Asian identifications in addition to, or next to, their Dutch and homeland (e.g., Chinese or Indonesian) identifications. Three

distinctive cultural identification types – or groupings of respondents who share similar distinct configurations of particular levels of Dutch, homeland and Asian identifications – were identified in the study: 1) ‘Cosmopolitans’, who show strong Dutch, homeland and Asian cultural identifications, 2) ‘Asians’, who combine strong homeland and Asian cultural identifications with weak Dutch cultural identification, and 3) ‘Hostlanders’, who combine moderate homeland and Asian cultural identifications with stronger Dutch cultural identification.

Furthermore, no clear-cut negative relationship between non-Dutch identification on the one hand and Dutch identification and ‘integration’ in the Netherlands on the other hand, was found. In fact, ‘Cosmopolitans’ show the highest level of ‘integration’ and Dutch identification, as well as strong homeland and Asian identification. Also, even ‘Asians’, who show the highest levels of homeland and Asian identification, show a positive identification with the Netherlands and are relatively well integrated in socioeconomic terms. The findings undermine popular belief that (strong) hostland and non-hostland identifications cannot be combined, and that engendering non-hostland identification hinders integration into the hostland. ‘Well integrated’ Asian Dutch, who hold significant amounts of mainstream cultural capital, also show strong homeland and Asian identifications. This may in part be explained by the notion that especially for ‘well integrated’, middle class ethnic minorities such as certain Asian Dutch, (pan) ethnic identifications have become an asset and a worthwhile way to distinguish oneself from the mainstream (e.g., Halter, 2000). It has become a new type of capital, and in the context of this research project one could speak of Asian cultural capital.

The first study also explored young Asian Dutch’ consumption of popular culture and media and how this is tied to their Asian identification. With regards to media consumption patterns, the study showed that respondents in general consume more popular media (i.e., film, television and pop music) than news media. Furthermore, the study established that in addition to popular media from the US, the Netherlands and their homelands, Asian Dutch also consume popular media from Asian countries other than their homelands. Chinese Dutch for instance, may pick and mix from films, television series and pop music from the US, the Netherlands, China as well as South Korea. As such, this study is one of the first to explore and establish these patterns of cross-Asian popular media consumption among Asian diasporas in the West. Also, the study found that levels of non-homeland Asian popular media consumption are highest among ‘Asians’ and lowest among ‘Hostlanders’ while ‘Cosmopolitans’ fall in between. A similar pattern emerged for the levels of Asian identification obtained through the consumption of non-homeland Asian popular media. Finally, nightlife consumption was also investigated. It was found that ‘Asians’ visit so called Asian parties – or panethnic Asian Dutch nightlife – relatively more often than ‘Cosmopolitans’, while ‘Cosmopolitans’ do so compared to ‘Hostlanders’. ‘Asians’ and ‘Cosmopolitans’ show high and comparable levels of Asian identification obtained from visiting Asian parties, while ‘Hostlanders’ show considerably lower levels thereof.

The findings suggested a relationship between Asian Dutch' sense of Asianness and the consumption of non-homeland Asian popular media. More specifically, it seemed that the consumption of non-homeland Asian popular culture is an articulation of Asian Dutch' Asian identifications. Furthermore, a similar relationship between Asian identification and the consumption of Asian parties is revealed as well. Essentially, what the first study illuminated, is that non-homeland Asian popular media and Asian Dutch nightlife are part of young Asian Dutch' everyday lives, and that the consumption thereof is related to their sense of Asianness. This underlined the importance of Asian and Asian Dutch popular culture for young Asian Dutch' Asian identification and warranted more in depth investigation into their relationship.

This research project's second study directed attention to the phenomenon of Asian parties. Asian parties constitute a crucial research site with regards to panethnic Asianness in the Netherlands as they were the first (and continue to be some of the most prolific) explicitly panethnic Asian spaces in the Netherlands. As such they have played an indispensable role in the emergence and maintenance of a sense of Asianness among young Asian Dutch. More specifically, the study focused on the producers of Asian parties, which, given that they have been or still are consumers of Asian parties themselves, provided an opportunity to examine both the production and consumption of Asian parties. Furthermore, the study investigated Asian party producers' considerations and motivations with regards to the production of Asian parties. This provided a unique and additional perspective on young Asian Dutch' Asian identities and identifications as well as the construction of Asianness in the Netherlands in general. To this end, participatory observations at Asian parties and in depth interviews with DJs, promoters and others involved in the production of Asian parties were conducted.

First and foremost, Asian party producers' vivid accounts of their own first encounters and subsequent experiences with Asian parties as 'regular' consumers unmistakably showed how young Asian Dutch are socialized in these panethnic Asian cultural spaces. They also showed how Asian parties facilitate and direct both young Asian Dutch' imagination of Asian identities and Asian identification, as well as the materialization thereof into real life cross-Asian interactions and relationships. Asian parties facilitate a shared sense of Asian togetherness, cultural proximity and belonging among young Asian Dutch visitors. Also, Asian parties structure young Asian Dutch' Asian identities and identifications through foregrounding a particular delineation of a panethnic Asian in-group (i.e., people of Southeast and East Asian origin) and by emphasizing the notion of community-in-difference (i.e., commonalities are foregrounded rather than differences between single ethnic-national origins, groups or cultures).

Furthermore, the study shed light on the strategic deployment of Asian identities and identifications by Asian party producers. They successfully employ the Asian cultural and social capital they gained through their sense of Asianness and through visiting Asian parties to produce Asian parties themselves. Asian party producers thus transform their

Asian cultural and social capital into economic and symbolic capital. This concurs with the notion that ethnic identities and identifications constitute valuable assets or capital nowadays (e.g., Halter, 2000). Asian party producers could be regarded as 'plain and simple' nightlife entrepreneurs as their involvement in the production of Asian parties is guided by economic motives and market logic. However, the study demonstrated that many Asian party producers are also driven by moral motives associated with their sense of Asianness and their sense of connection to, and responsibility towards, the 'Asian community' in the Netherlands. They are committed to the idea of providing young Asian Dutch a safe space where they and their peers of diverse Asian origin can come together, mingle, feel at home, and imagine shared Asian identities and identifications. Asian party producers' moral or Asian goals are thus materialized in the production of Asian parties.

Both Asian party producers' economic and moral motives affect the production of Asian parties and their (symbolic) content and features, and consequently lead to particular configurations of these Asian cultural spaces. Indeed, the observations at Asian parties as well as the interviews with the producers showed that in general, Asian parties contain few symbolic or material markers of Asianness. Asianness is located in the people present at Asian parties: the crowd as well as the DJs, MCs, artists and other performers are mainly of Asian origin. To a large extent the Asian parties produced by the Asian party producers interviewed for this study are thus a perpetuation of the Asian parties the producers consumed themselves. The producers are, ultimately, involved in the reproduction of panethnic Asianness as they have known it from the start: an Asianness that foregrounds the notion of community-in-difference and shared Asian identities and identifications.

The final study of this project investigated in depth the relationship between young Asian Dutch' sense of Asianness and the consumption of non-homeland Asian popular media reported in the project's first study. It did so through conducting focus group interviews with young Asian Dutch about their consumption of Japanese and South Korean popular film and television. The study established that young Asian Dutch find Japanese and South Korean films and television series appealing and enjoy them, in part because they evoke a sense of cultural proximity in them; young Asian Dutch identify with the narratives and characters through their sense of shared Asianness. In turn, Japanese and South Korean films and television series contribute to young Asian Dutch' imagination and articulation of Asian identities and identifications. Young Asian Dutch' notions of cultural proximity and Asian identification are evoked by the characters' perceived 'Asian' physical appearances and by the representations of 'Asian' values, culture and lived experience. These, then, facilitate a sense of belonging as well as the imagination of Asian identities and identifications of a particular Southeast and East Asian nature.

Through watching Japanese and South Korean films and television series and talking about them with Asian Dutch peers, young Asian Dutch reflect on their own 'Asian'

upbringing and other aspects of their 'Asian' lived experience. In that sense, the films and television series serve as a mirror for young Asian Dutch. In addition, they also serve as a window on 'Asian' everyday life and as such they provide young Asian Dutch with additional Asian cultural repertoires and knowledge needed to live a moral 'Asian' life. Furthermore, as young Asian Dutch enjoy watching characters 'like themselves' who they can identify with as Asians, Japanese and South Korean film and television, to an extent, replace Dutch and US popular media content lacking Asian representations. Moreover, Japanese and South Korean film and television provide young Asian Dutch with additional cultural capital with which they can distinguish themselves from non-Asian Dutch peers, and resist and question dominant White Dutch (popular) culture. Most significantly perhaps, the findings illuminate how Japanese and South Korean film and television contribute to an Asian Dutch cultural space in and through which young Asian Dutch are able to negotiate their Dutch, homeland and Asian identities and identifications.

The findings of the three studies taken together clearly demonstrate that young Asian Dutch do indeed identify *as* Asian in the first place and identify *with* people of Asian origin in the second, and that they construct shared Asian identities. Furthermore, this sense of Asianness has been shown to be tightly connected to the consumption of transnational non-homeland Asian popular culture and the consumption and production of local Asian Dutch popular culture.

These new and emerging Asian identities and identifications are appealing to certain segments of the Asian Dutch population as they offer them a way out of a constraining hostland-homeland dichotomy. While the findings of the first study did indeed show that the majority of young Asian Dutch engender strong Dutch and/or homeland cultural identifications, the qualitative follow-up studies provided in depth understandings of these identifications and highlighted their problematic nature. On the one hand, young Asian Dutch do not completely feel at home in the mainstream Dutch cultural sphere. They acknowledge the symbolical exclusion of Asian Dutch from mainstream Dutch culture and society, and at times they feel that they are not fully accepted for who they are by their White peers and Dutch society at large. As young Asian Dutch are being othered and not perceived as 'real' Dutch subjects, it is difficult for them to feel Dutch and unreflectively engage with the Dutch cultural sphere. On the other hand, young Asian Dutch are also critical about their homeland cultures as they find them traditional and quite restrictive – in particular when compared to Dutch or Western culture. Consequently, young Asian Dutch do not unconditionally and at all times identify with their homeland cultures, nor have they formed 'stable' and 'unified' Chinese, Vietnamese or other homeland based cultural identities.

While older generations of Asian Dutch have generally only had the option and the desire to engage with Dutch and/or homeland cultural spheres, today young Asian Dutch can also engage with panethnic Asian spheres. Given the problematic nature of Dutch and

homeland cultural spheres and identifications, it is not difficult to see how Asianness effectively constitutes a new and attractive option for young Asian Dutch. Rather than being forced to identify and engage with hostland and homeland cultural spheres only – and thus being subjugated by these – young Asian Dutch have embraced Asian cultural spheres, identities and identifications as a ‘solution’ to this constraining dichotomy. Compared to Dutchness and Indonesianness, Chineseness and so forth, Asianness offers young Asian Dutch more space for imagining cultural identities and identifications and is more open and inclusive as it does not preclude hostland or homeland identifications. In this sense, the panethnic Asian ‘community’ in the Netherlands is an example of what Baumann (1996) called community-in-difference. Young Asian Dutch are acutely aware of differences among themselves flowing from their diverse ethnic, national, cultural, and migration backgrounds. At the same time however, they actively construct shared Asian identities based on shared lived experience and perceived cultural commonalities, most saliently the importance and centrality of ‘family’, ‘harmony’, ‘respect’ and ‘filial piety’ in ‘Asian culture’ as well as in their own everyday lives. In panethnic Asian cultural spheres, young Asian Dutch downplay cultural differences, emphasize their commonalities, and foreground shared identities and identifications. This, then, facilitates the development of larger social networks crosscutting cultural boundaries.

Also, panethnic Asianness is young Asian Dutch’ own creation, and it is given meaning by themselves rather than by traditional institutions like the family, school or government. To a certain degree it is a source of pride and distinction vis-à-vis non-Asian Dutch peers and mainstream Dutchness, and it empowers them. In the face of stigmatization, exclusion and marginalization, young Asian Dutch are critical about how they are perceived, represented and treated by mainstream Dutch society. In addition, they are critical about the perceived conservatism in, and pressures from, the homeland spheres they encounter in their everyday lives. But rather than positioning themselves as dupes or victims of sociocultural structures they have no control over, young Asian Dutch appear remarkably strong and resilient. This, I argue, can in part be credited to the presence and availability of Asianness, to which young Asian Dutch can belong, and which they can employ as a rich sociocultural resource with which they can enlarge their social, cultural and symbolic capital.

As mentioned, the studies’ findings also show that the emergence and maintenance of panethnic Asian cultural spheres, identities and identifications in the Netherlands are inextricably connected to the consumption and production of local Asian Dutch popular culture and the consumption of transnational non-homeland Asian popular culture by young Asian Dutch. These forms of popular culture are the essential sociocultural resources, the raw materials so to say, that young Asian Dutch have employed and continue to employ to construct Asianness in the Netherlands.

In particular Asian parties have played a pivotal role in the creation and emergence of a sense of panethnic Asianness among young Asian Dutch, as they constitute the first

explicitly panethnic Asian cultural spaces in the Netherlands and revolve around face-to-face interaction, unlike mediated forms of popular culture. Young Asian Dutch have been able to meet peers of different Asian origin at Asian parties. Furthermore, at Asian parties they have been able to imagine and articulate panethnic Asian identities and identifications which they incorporate in their everyday lives and diffuse among, and share with, their Asian Dutch peers. The case of Asian parties clearly underscores the socio-spatial dialectic or the notion that space shapes the social just as much as the social shapes space (Soja, 1980). It also foregrounds the importance of real life interactions between young Asian Dutch for the construction of Asianness in the Netherlands. Asian identities are not 'simply' synthetic and virtual identities imagined through mediated popular culture, they are constructed, shared, lived and connected in and through the social worlds of young Asian Dutch. Whether through friendships with young Asian Dutch peers forged at for instance high school, or through visiting Asian parties that are explicitly produced to facilitate interaction between young Asian Dutch. Thus, despite the observation that only a minority of the young Asian Dutch participants in this research project visit Asian parties, the significance of Asian parties for the creation and diffusion of panethnic Asianness in the Netherlands cannot be underestimated. Indeed, notions of panethnic Asianness in the Netherlands as observed in this research project, may not have come to fruition had it not been for Asian parties. In the end, this underlines the suggestion that the production of culture and identity in general is shaped by real life interactions.

The above is not to say that mediated popular culture is of little importance to the construction and maintenance of Asianness in the Netherlands. On the contrary, what the studies taken together illuminate is in fact the importance of, and the interplay between, the different forms of popular culture consumed by young Asian Dutch. Asian parties' main contribution to panethnic Asianness in the Netherlands is located in their unique capacity to facilitate real life social interactions between young Asian Dutch and to represent and diffuse a sense of panethnic Asianness in Dutch public space. Japanese and South-Korean film and television on the other hand, function as rich and accessible resources of Asian cultural knowledge with which young Asian Dutch can imagine more intricate and particular shared Asian identities and identifications. As such, Japanese and South Korean film and television can be viewed as infusing the panethnic Asian bonds and group identities forged at Asian parties with indispensable cultural content or meaning. If Asian parties afford young Asian Dutch a space to forge a sense of Asian groupness, then Japanese and South Korean films and television series provide them with a mirror and a window on Asianness. Also, Japanese and South Korean film and television compensate for a painful lack of representation in mainstream Dutch media and popular culture. Ultimately, what the findings illustrate is how 'ordinary' people employ various forms of popular culture to construct new and creative cultural identities and cultural spheres that are not foregrounded or sanctioned by the state, the family or other traditional institutions.

To a degree the panethnic Asian identities and identification imagined by young Asian Dutch differ from those imagined in other localities. While acknowledging that one should speak of multiple Asiannesses in the Netherlands rather than of a singular and 'stable' Asianness, it is possible to paint a generalized picture of Asianness in the Netherlands. This becomes all the more clear when it is compared to for instance panethnic Asianness in the United States.

In much of the literature on Asian panethnicity in the United States, not the least Espiritu's seminal book *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (1992), the instrumental nature, meanings and articulations of panethnic Asianness are foregrounded. Although cultural aspects and considerations as well as the notion of primordial bonds are also observed and discussed, it is emphasized that panethnic Asianness in the US emerged out of Asian Americans' desire and need to combine their forces and unite in order to reach particular (socio)political objectives, mainly counteracting exclusion from all major spheres of life. Fighting overt and virulent racism targeted at Asian Americans and securing government funding of race-based community interest groups were two main objectives. Hence, Asian American panethnicity is often described as a movement, alliance or collectivity, while the very term 'Asian American' was coined by student activists of Asian origin. Furthermore, the delineation of 'Asian America', of who belongs to this panethnic 'group', has to great extent been influenced by the (from time to time varying) definition of 'Asian American' used by US government for census purposes, equal opportunity programs, and the like. Asian Americans have internalized this assigned identity and its delineation, and, on the other hand, appropriated it for their own objectives. Thus, in the US the delineation of 'Asian American' has changed over time according to the needs of US government as well as Asian Americans themselves and at present includes Americans of East, Southeast and South Asian origin (see Espiritu (1992) for an extensive and insightful account of the emergence of panethnic Asianness in the US).

Already in their most commonly used delineation of who 'belongs', panethnic Asianness in the Netherlands and the US are distinct from one another. As the findings suggest, young Asian Dutch themselves have constructed a panethnic Asian in-group that includes people of East and Southeast Asian origin specifically. This is not based on official definitions used by Dutch government (in fact, there is no one unambiguous official 'Asian Dutch' category in use for government purposes in the Netherlands), nor is it linked to certain explicit and overt political objectives held by Asian Dutch. Moreover, there are no panethnic Asian interest groups of significance organized around a political agenda in the Netherlands; all the significant panethnic Asian interest groups are completely or mainly organized around notions of panethnic Asian (popular) culture and the (re)production thereof. This is all the more emphasized by the fact that one of the very few recent instances of overt panethnic Asian Dutch activism (protests directed at Dutch celebrity Gordon who made racist comments about a Chinese contestant during a talent show on Dutch television) was to a great extent organized through Asian Dutch film festival CinemAsia.

Still, panethnic Asianness as a 'solution' or resistance against a constraining hostland-homeland dichotomy has political connotations – albeit in the realm of the everyday and the private. Also, Asian party producers' objective to create panethnic Asian cultural spaces that facilitate cross-Asian social interaction and the construction and maintenance of panethnic Asian identities, as well as their efforts to support Asian Dutch artists and increase the visibility of Asian Dutch in Dutch society, do carry sociopolitical meaning. However, ultimately, the essential meanings and nature of these objectives and the Asian parties flowing from them, as well as of panethnic Asianness per se, are (popular) cultural rather than political. In the Netherlands, notions of panethnic Asian identities and unity are not commonly and structurally employed to fight racism for instance, or to reach other sociopolitical goals.

Asian Dutch seem to have little interest in organizing Asian Dutch activism. This may be explained by the observation that compared to Asian Americans, Asian Dutch are generally confronted with acts of racism and exclusion that are perceived to be less severe, at least in terms of violence and other material consequences. A similar explanation applies for differences between Asian Dutch and other ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. Moroccan Dutch, Dutch Muslims and black Dutch in particular appear to be confronted with much more virulent forms of racism and exclusion than Asian Dutch. Consequently they have formed very vocal and public anti-racism groups addressing various issues from racial profiling and police brutality to Black Pete, a racialized blackface caricature that is part of Dutch traditional holiday Saint Nicholas Day. The racism and exclusion that Asian Dutch are confronted with in the Netherlands are arguably of a more cultural and symbolic nature, amongst others felt in the lacking and stereotypical representation of Asian Dutch in Dutch mainstream media and popular culture. As the findings show, the Asian Dutch cultural sphere which young Asian Dutch themselves have created and sustained through engaging with local Asian Dutch as well as transnational Asian popular culture, provides them with sufficient cultural resources to deal with the exclusion and racism they face, and to feel a sense of belonging in the Netherlands.

Ultimately, the studies taken together represent an engaged and intimate account of young Asian Dutch' formation and articulation of panethnic Asian identities and identifications – it is their voices that have guided this research project and resonate throughout it. These accounts and the analyses thereof clearly emphasize the highly situational and contingent nature and meanings of panethnic Asianness in the Netherlands. It is distinct from panethnic Asianness in the US, as elaborated above, but also from for instance panethnic Asianness across Asia. Also, young Asian Dutch' vivid accounts of their everyday life experiences demonstrate how Asian identities, identifications, groupness and ethnicity are indeed constructed and not 'real', but they are lived nonetheless and do have significant, and one might say dramatic, bearing and consequences in the material social world of young Asian Dutch; they are imagined but not imaginary, to speak with Jenkins (2002). Panethnic Asian identities, identifications and groupness in the Netherlands are imagined and articulated through Asian and Asian

Dutch popular culture in particular, to a certain extent ‘free’ and ‘independent’ from traditional institutions in both hostland and homeland spheres. Yet in the end, these imaginations and articulations of Asianness are always in relation to, and embedded in, these very same hostland and homeland spheres. This leads to a particular and unique Dutch panethnic Asianness, or panethnic Asian Dutchness. Thus, while the relative thickness and inherent Whiteness of Dutch national identity may render it difficult or unappealing for young Asian Dutch to completely culturally identify as Dutch, as well as to identify with Dutch mainstream society unreservedly, it is precisely panethnic Asian Dutchness that provides them a strong sense of belonging in the Netherlands.