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What Asian American studies can learn from Asia?: towards a project of comparative minority studies

Rika NAKAMURA

ABSTRACT This article examines the significance of engaging in Asian American studies in Asia, with examples drawn primarily from Japan. It asks: what happens when this US-based racial minority studies is relocated to the place where Asians do not constitute racial minorities? The paper argues that, on the one hand, the intellectual encounter between Asia and Asian America encourages the US-based minority studies to examine their implications in American imperialism in their perceptions towards Asia. On the other hand, Asian American studies as the racial minority discourse forces ethno-racial majority Asians, with all our ethnic, national, and other differences, to reflect upon the racial, ethnic, and (neo)colonial relations in our own lands while critiquing the inequalities that are taking place in and across Asia. The paper looks at the forms of minority struggles in Japan, zainichi Koreans and Okinawans, in order to propel the US Asian American scholars to decentralize their work and perspectives. It is my hope that this new perspective generated from Asia-based Asian American studies will help construct a place of mutual learning, where we can engage in conversation to ask new questions, to challenge and transform Asian American studies as we know it.

KEYWORDS: comparativism, Asian American studies, race, (post)colonialism, imperialism, the Asia-Pacific Wars, zainichi Koreans, Okinawans

Relocating Asian American studies in Asia

In their respective articles, King-kok Cheung and Sau-ling Wong, two prominent US-based Asian American scholars, delineate their pedagogical journeys to Asia and explore the differing significances of engaging in Asian American studies there. To borrow and modify Wong’s question, this act of relocation may be summed up in, as it invites, a following question: ‘What happens when Asian American literature leaves “home”’ (Wong 2004) and when it encounters with Asia? In what follows, I will examine the significance of relocating Asian American studies in Asia, with examples drawn primarily from Japan. In so doing, I will also ask following questions: how does Asian American studies in the US translate into the Asian context? What can the US-based scholars learn from Asian American studies produced in Asia? How does the relocation transform and enrich the field of Asian American studies as a US minority discourse—for scholars located in Asia as well as in North America? What can we gain and learn from this new perspective, from the intellectual encounters, and from engaging in Asian American studies in ‘Asia’—with all its heterogeneities and colonial and neocolonial relations?

In his book Asia as Method, Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010: xv) puts forward Asia as method as ‘a critical proposition,’ to ‘creat[e] new possibilities for intellectual work’ and to ‘transform the existing knowledge structure’ to better advance the projects of decolonization, deimperialization, and de-Cold War. Likewise, I would like to investigate the possibility of how this new location, Asia as a reference point for Asian American studies, can provide a new perspective and method for ‘posing a different set of questions’ (Chen 2010: xv) and for
facilitating Asian American studies as a transnational discourse. What new possibilities does the relocation create for the intellectual work we engage in? How does it transform the existing, i.e. US-based, knowledge structure in which Asian American studies is currently based? How does it help advance the project of deimperialization, decolonization, and de-Cold War?

It is my contention that Asia not only denaturalizes, as it transnationalizes, the discipline. Furthermore, as a non-Western part of the world, it also highlights the history of American Orientalism and imperialism, of which Asia in varying degrees has been a target. On the one hand, looking at Asian American studies from Asia can help explore the contradictory meanings of the category of Asian Americans as both an imperial subject and a racial minority. On the other hand, Asian American studies as a racial minority discourse de-essentializes the meaning of race when the discipline is relocated to a place where Asians constitute a racial, if not ethnic, majority. To this extent, the act of relocation also highlights the elements that the inter-Asian perspective makes visible. It underscores the continuities and discontinuities not only between Asia and Asian America but within Asia, and also between race and imperialism; it draws attention to the histories of intra-Asian colonialism (most evidently that carried out by Japan) and intra-racial imperialism (between Asia and Asian America). As such, Asian American studies in Asia can allow ethno-racial majority Asians to have new self-perceptions at home and Asian Americans abroad. What I attempt to explore then is a possibility of the work Asian American studies in Asia can do to help expand the domestic horizon on both sides of the Pacific, while constructing dialogue across the Pacific and Asia. It is my hope that this article will participate in the current endeavors to reconceive Asian American studies as a more collaborative trans-Pacific and inter-Asian project.

I begin with the aforementioned efforts of relocating Asian American literary studies in Asia witnessed in Cheung and Wong’s articles; both are collected in the anthology, Crossing the Oceans: Reconfiguring American Literary Studies in the Pacific Rim published in 2004 by Hong Kong University Press. I will also make an occasional reference to Wong’s other piece, ‘Maxine Hong Kingston in a global frame: reception, institutional mediation, and “world literature”’ (Wong 2005), which appeared in the Japan-based AALA Journal. I pick these texts because they embody full article-length treatments of the issue by two representative scholars of the field, where they literally transport Asian American studies to various Asian locations to examine the significance of engaging in Asian American studies in Asia. Their articles offer an important insight about the differences that lie between Asians and Asian Americans in terms of racialized subjectivities and experiences, in a place where Asians do not constitute a racial (only ethnic) minority. They also illustrate how works of Asian American literature can generate different readings from an Asian audience when they travel across the Pacific.

While Cheung and Wong’s articles make an important critical intervention, their texts also betray the kind of US-centrism that is embedded in their projects. In particular, I interrogate the way their trips take on the mode of an (unacknowledged) imperial mission, whereby the renowned US minority scholars travel to Asia to correct the misperceptions of Asian readers and to enlighten them. In this respect, I find it crucial to read the two critics’ pedagogical journeys to Asia along and in juxtaposition with the discursive journeys undertaken by another set of Asian American scholars. In particular, I will look at three critics who contributed to the 2003 special issue of Journal of Asian American Studies, ‘On Korean “Comfort Women”’ (Chuh 2003a). While I question the way Cheung and Wong’s trips to Asia fail to prompt a re-examination of their own positions as US-based minority scholars, this is precisely what the three critics, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, Kandice Chuh, and Lisa Yoneyama, invite in their writings, an exploration in the form of self-critique. By reading these two groups of Asian American scholars in their engagements with Asia, which supplement each other, I will show how Asian American studies’ encounter with Asia, with its internal (neo)colonial dominations, can provide a place of mutual learning: a place where we not
only can explore the continuities and discontinuities between, and within, Asia and Asian America but also reflect upon and deconstruct our own discursive positions, and the violence we inflict upon others.

In the latter part of the article, I will extend this thesis to discuss the possibility, and need, of reconceptualizing Asian American studies in Asia as a comparative minority studies project. This comparatively oriented trans-Pacific and inter-Asian perspective can unsettle the centrality of US Asian American studies, to the extent that it invites US-based Asian American critics to learn from the minority struggles in Asia while facilitating conversation between ethnic studies and area studies. On this side of the Pacific, such studies can also encourage ethno-racial majority Asians to look at North American minority experience as a way to reflect upon the ethno-racial relations and critique the inequalities in our own countries as well as within and across ‘Asia.’

Sites of deconstruction and dialogic engagement

In the article ‘Pedagogies of resonance: teaching African American and Asian American literature and culture in Asia,’ King-kok Cheung (2004) relates her experience of having taught US ethnic literatures in various Asian nations and locations: Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Burma/Myanmar. One of the claims she makes is how US minority literary texts help various Asian subjects in Asia self-reflect upon their own cultural and racial practices, including race-related violence. Cheung points out that these US minority literatures help ethno-racial majority Asians reflect upon minority experiences in their own homelands, which often remain invisible to those Asians who comprise the dominant majority in their respective nation.

Citing Lata Mani’s self-critique of herself as a postcolonial elite from ‘the third world,’ Dorinne Kondo, like Cheung, points out the danger of how non-white residents in the US, who are not brought up as a racial minority in their respective nation, sometimes fail to take ‘race’ seriously and can ‘dismiss politics based on race as merely epiphenomenal’ (Kondo 2001: 37). Studying Asian American literature from this standpoint encourages an Asian subject, who has grown up as a member of their society’s ethno-racial majority, to look at and reflect upon their familiar reality while recapturing such reality through the eyes of their racial/ethnic other(s). To cite one such scholarly endeavor within the Japanese context, Fujikura Naoko (2009) draws a comparison between Japanese immigrant laborers in the Americas in the early twentieth century and the current Japanese Brazilian and Southeast Asian migrant workers in Japan. Fujikura explores their commonalities in terms of ethno-racialized experiences of displacement and labor exploitations in their similar and disparate economic and historical situations. Studying racial minority literature ‘elsewhere’ helps generate such a perspective and foster its domestic applications in the present while formulating a conceptual linkage between spatially and temporarily disparate experiences.

Cheung (2004: 13) writes of her pedagogical experience in Asia:

Asian audiences easily understand or sympathize with the plight of racial minorities in the United States, but what is most intellectually satisfying is noting these audiences begin to identify social inequalities in their own countries and shift from empathizing with oppressed minorities elsewhere to seeing themselves as the dominant majority within their own homelands.

Indeed, I believe this shift in perspective is a crucial part of the study of minority experience ‘elsewhere’ (Cheung 2004: 13). After all, it is so much easier and safer to work on the ‘violence in another country.’ As Sau-ling Wong draws on the work of Mita Banerjee, who engages in Asian American studies in Germany, she also makes this point and critiques the
displacement, which Banerjee calls ‘voyeurism of race’: how the US race issues are perceived in Germany “as a spectacle far from home,” while occluding the race and ethnic differences ‘already existing in its midst’ (Wong 2005: 31). The act of focusing solely on foreign race issues without making a domestic linkage can also risk the appropriation by the dominant nationalist discourse, which can displace its domestic oppressions onto the other. As Cheung (2004: 27) expresses her anxiety, the US ethnic literary scholar’s critique of ‘the dominant white culture […] can play into chauvinistic or anti-American and anti-democratic sentiments in some Asian countries, leading to complacency rather than self-scrutiny.’ Recalling what Lisa Yoneyama (2001) in a different context has aptly called ‘transnational warping’, this is the point I myself would like to emphasize.

What I find missing in Cheung and Wong’s critiques, however, is the awareness that the phenomena they describe, the problems of displacement and occlusion, are practices for which US Asian Americans also need to be held responsible. Or put differently, what I question about Cheung’s (and to a lesser extent Wong’s) article is the absence of the reverse gaze upon her own normalized Asian American perceptions. While Cheung encourages Asians to reflect upon their dominant positionalities within their societies, one wonders if she herself shifts her perspective to seeing herself as ‘the dominant majority’ in the global order: namely, an American, albeit minority, scholar in Asia. Being a Westerner of color in Asia, particularly of an Asian origin, constitutes a complex position. However, Cheung does not convey in her essay whether she questions her American side of positionality (with or without such complexities) or considers the possibility that her pedagogical journey may constitute a new imperial mission.

In one account depicting her visit to Taiwan, for instance, Cheung imparts an episode that delineates the impact which the US minority literature, here Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel, has made in Taiwan. Citing ‘a Taiwanese scholar’ who commented that the Taiwanese ‘should learn from Kingston’s example and challenge the official history of the Republic of China, which has muffled the voices of its minorities’ (Cheung 2004: 16), Cheung concludes: ‘In Taipei, I was thus made aware for the first time that American literature can hold a mirror to ethnic relations in Asia and can prompt an Asian audience to uncover repressed history concealed in its own soil’ (Cheung 2004: 16). Agreeing on this mirroring effect, which Asian American literature produces in Asia, I nonetheless find it surprising that Cheung never questions that such efforts of resistance had (presumably) existed in Taiwan long before her introduction of Kingston and the importation of the Asian American model. Significantly, however, Cheung expresses no interest in learning about, let alone from those local Taiwanese endeavors than simply transmitting the Asian American ‘example’ to them. The same attitude characterizes her visits to Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong respectively. This lack of interest is also seen in Wong’s articles, which do not pay attention to the histories of racial resistance outside North America, either on the side of the minority or the majority.

Here, I would like to emphasize that my critique of these scholars is not intended to negate the importance of their intervention or for Asians in Asia to learn from the Asian American struggles. However, to the extent that the Asian American critics and their texts remain the unmoving center that alone perform the pedagogical work, their cross-cultural journeys end up in one-way teaching rather than constituting a place and process of mutual learning. As I shall elaborate later, this is what Kang, Chuh, and Yoneyama challenge, as they perceive their discursive encounters with Asia as what disrupts their normative US perceptions while making them reflect upon their Asian American subject positions. To this extent, it is noteworthy that Kang’s article makes an extensive reference to the resistant scholarly works produced in South Korea and Japan on the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery rather than substitute the ‘absence’ with Asian American endeavors.

But before moving into this discussion, let me look at Sau-ling Wong’s trip to Asia. The shifting perspective and the mutuality of learning processes discussed in the above are what I
find missing in Wong’s view of Asian American literature in Asia. In her 2004 article ‘When Asian American literature leaves “home”: on internationalizing Asian American literary studies,’ Wong criticizes the way Asians in Asia are unaware of the discrepancies that lie between Asia and Asian America and thus fail to ‘properly’ understand Asian American literary texts. Wong (2004: 32) diagnoses the problem as one of ‘decontextualization,’ whereby Asian readers suffer from ‘a knowledge deficit’ in Asian American culture and experience, which they mistakenly identify with their own native Asian cultural experience. In other words, while Asian readers are ‘being too remote’ (Wong 2004: 32) from the original cultural context to fully understand Asian American literary works, their ‘superficial familiarity obsurses the social, cultural and political matrix out of which the [Asian American] author operates and which profoundly alters their meaning’ (Wong 2004: 33). Undoubtedly, this is a valid and important critique of the misconception that applies to the Japanese audience, some of whom assume an unproblematic continuity between Japanese and Japanese Americans in terms of cultural and ethnic experience and subjectivities.

By disprivileging Asians as ‘foreign’ readers, however, Wong seems to assume the ‘native’ reader to be the ultimate, if not the sole, subject who performs the correct reading of Asian American texts. In this regard, non-native readers are reduced to, as they are perceived only in terms of their deficiencies, those whose cultural incompetency needs to be amended if they wish to perform a ‘proper’ reading. Put in other words, while critiquing the Asian readers’ failure to ‘properly’ understand Asian American literature—by ‘properly,’ she means the US Asian American way—Wong does not explore the possibility that a cultural outsider may perceive what can be a blind spot to a native reader, and Wong dismisses and corrects their ‘misreading’ rather than explore its implications.

Perhaps, this critique is especially pertinent to Asian American representations of Asia, where Asian readers also become the object of representations. Hyungji Park (2010: 1) invites an exploration as to ‘what Asia is to make of its own image as represented in the work of’ Asian American literature. This, to me, is an important question that is absent in Wong’s article. Put in other words, rather than dismiss or correct the Asian readers’ ‘misperception’ regarding the Asian American representations of Asia, Asian American scholars can address, and take seriously, the implications of Asian readers’ ‘misreading’: the possibility, for instance, that such misreading, often accompanied with their puzzlement or resentment, may have stemmed from their sense of violation, their objection to what they may have felt with some Asian American writers’ liberal, if not Orientalist, use of Asian culture and literature. In critiquing (what they term) the ‘false’ representations of Asia, Asian readers may be responding to what they perceive to be Asian American Orientalism. In the article that is characterized by its peculiar absence of the concept of Orientalism (and imperialism except toward Canada), Wong critiques the Asian readers’ ‘misperception’ without exploring the possibility that Asian American writers, too, may be responsible for their ‘misrepresentations.’ Again I would like to emphasize that this is not to deny the importance of her critique that Asian readers need to reflect upon and examine some of their interpretive practices. Yet, I believe the process of learning needs to be mutual.

The same can be said about Wong’s challenge to the erasure of racial issues, which she charges against Chinese scholarly readings of The Woman Warrior. In ‘Maxine Hong Kingston in a global frame’ (2005), Wong points out that despite the fact that China is a multi-racial/ethnic nation, the racial minority discourse in the original Kingston’s text becomes eclipsed as it is translated into de-racialized and heavily culturalized, thus less threatening, ‘East-West’ relations and differences in the Chinese scholars’ readings of the novel (Wong 2005: 28). Indeed, in many ways, her critique is true of situations in Japan. Just to pick a few random examples, from the staging of M. Butterfly by a Japanese theatrical company Gekidan Shiki (1989) where both Song and Gallimard are performed by Japanese actors, to popular magazine reviews of a filmic adaptation of Marguerite Duras’s novel L’Amant which is interpreted as a
deracialized ‘love story,’ and the more recent, Clint Eastwood’s film *Flags of Our Fathers*, which is viewed again as a deracialized humanistic anti-war movie, such erasure of race is a common practice with Japanese popular media. The differing perceptions regarding the murder of Yoshi Hattori, an exchange student who got shot in Louisiana in 1992, may provide another useful point in illustrating this discrepancy. In Japan, many viewed the shooting not so much as an instance of anti-Asian racism—in the way many Asian American scholars may interpret the incident—as that which proved, to the superior and nationalistic Japanese eye, the dysfunctionality of gun-happy US society.

To return to Wong’s critique, however, if Chinese scholars such as Wei Jingyi are guilty in their omission of race in their reading of Kingston’s works as overseas Chinese literature rather than US minority literature (Wong 2005), so is Wong for her erasure of Orientalism and imperialism in her reading of Chinese receptions of Kingston. As she equates Chinese and Asian American populations, referring to each group as the ‘majority citizens of a large, powerful and ancient country [i.e. China]’ and the ‘minoritized citizens of a large, powerful and young country [i.e. US]’ (Wong 2005: 28), the issue of Orientalism disappears altogether. In the article where the domestic racial minority issue constitutes the only power asymmetry that is worth the critic’s attention, it may not be surprising that Wong acknowledges Asian American dominance vis-à-vis Asian Canadians but not toward Asians in Asia (Wong 2004), who constitute an ethno-racial majority. In this sense, Wong’s article is almost like a reversal of some Asian scholars’ works that point fingers to Western imperialism but not toward domestic racism, where each stands as the dominant.

**Enabling ‘self-critical reflection’**

In contrast, the need for Asian Americans to reflect upon their dominant positionality is what Laura Kang, Kandice Chuh, and Lisa Yoneyama emphasize in their articles, as they perceive their discursive encounters with Asia as what disrupts and challenges the assumed position of Asian Americans as solely minoritized subjects. In discussing Asian American women’s engagements with the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, for instance, Kang argues how this violent act of sexual subjugation targeting (here) Korean women needs to be viewed as constituting a site of ‘dis-identification’ (Kang 2003: 46). Referring specifically to ‘Korean/American’ women artists and scholars’ representational endeavors, Kang (2003: 27) insists how such efforts instantiate ‘not their sameness, but their distance and difference from the Korean “comfort women”’. Put in other words, while Kang, like Cheung and Wong, perceives the encounter between Asian and Asian American as the site of differentiation rather than homogenization, Kang problematizes the process by which the attribution of their homogenized ‘ethnic and/or gender identity as the secure origin or compelling cause of their representational impulse’ (Kang 2003: 27) may eclipse the *American* part of their subject position vis-à-vis Asia. Instead, her article prompts these women to investigate their position ‘as distinctly American subjects of representation and knowledge production’ (Kang 2003: 27). This is an important critique that also applies to some Japanese women’s unproblematized, gender-based identification with the victim-survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery, while such identification can occlude the imperialist dimensions of this sexual violence. Not only had the majority of women drafted for the military sexual slavery been non-Japanese Asian women from the colonized and occupied territories of Japan. Moreover, as I have discussed elsewhere, the primary means through which Japanese women obtained their imperial citizenships was by assuming the position of ‘imperial mothers,’ thereby giving birth to soldiers who could act as potential rapists to those women (Nakamura 2005).

In many ways, Kang’s argument also confirms and supplements Cheung and Wong’s insistence that ethno-racial majority Asians, with all their differences, need to reflect upon their positionalities when they engage with Asian American literature which, after all,
deals with racial minority experience. All three critics underscore the danger of appropriating the stories of others as one’s own; only they comment on populations residing on different sides of the Pacific. While Cheung and Wong invite Asians in Asia to recognize their majority position through their encounter with the minoritized Asian American population, Kang similarly prompts Asian Americans to identify their dominant Western perceptions vis-à-vis Asia.

As Kang further elucidates the complex, multiple, and contradictory positionalities which ‘Korean/Americans’ specifically inhabit, she also complicates Cheung and Wong’s argument by insisting ‘the intervening slash between the “Korean” and the “American” is explicated as marking the differences and slippages amongst a “Korean” postcoloniality, an “American” nationality, and an “Asian American” racial formation’ (Kang 2003: 28). The passage calls attention to the layered configurations and tangled dynamics of those affiliations rather than sustaining a simple binarization of (each homogenized) Asia and Asian America; it also articulates a need for differentiating among ‘Asians.’ The “‘Korean’ postcoloniality here is obviously distinguished from one experienced by other Asians. In this way, Kang’s argument also resonates with Lisa Yoneyama’s, which she extends in her article (Yoneyama 2005). Reading the voices of Japanese male fundamentalists as an instance of ‘male hysteria,’ Yoneyama elucidates their multiple and contradictory positionalities: the gendered racialization they experience due to the effects of Western imperialism, the ethno-racial majority stance they occupy in the domestic Japanese context, and the colonial masculinist position they assume vis-à-vis the rest of Asia.

As Kang insists on the need for Korean/American women to work through their multiple and contradictory affiliations, she also explores the contradiction involved in their representational endeavors and desires. On the one hand, Kang draws on a Korean feminist scholar Cho Hae-joang’s essay to suggest that Japanese military sexual slavery can provoke a stronger interest among Korean/American women precisely because it embodies the combination of racial (colonial) and sexual violence, which Korean/American women experience as double minorities in the US context. On the other hand, Kang calls for a need for such identification to be critically examined so that their investments ‘as distinctly American subjects of representation and knowledge production’ (Kang 2003: 27), and the degree to which their identification may turn into appropriation, can be investigated. Kang questions, for instance, how some of these women unwittingly utilize the dominant trope of ‘giving voice’ to the victims, to effectively erase the actual, pre-existing voices of Korean survivors, even though it was those survivor-women who brought the issue into public discourse by articulating the violence. By innocently assuming the American interventional role as judge and rescuer, they also erroneously establish the United States as the place of justice while assuming their superior position to help advance the cause. In effect, they may obscure the fact that it was the activists and scholars in Asia, particularly South Korea, who began the pursuits of justice against Japanese military sexual slavery long before their Asian American counterparts took up the task.

In the concluding chapter of her book Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women, Kang (2002) looks at two documentary films, created by Korean/American women, that deal with US military prostitution in South Korea. As Kang sees the films as the place of an encounter between Korean and Korean/American women, her book problematizes the hierarchical division of labor which one of the two films, Camp Arirang, assumes vis-à-vis those two groups of women: while the latter is assigned to a position of power and authority in providing social commentaries, the former is deployed to offer personal experiences. What Kang interrogates here then is how in the film the Korean sex workers never emerge as subjects/others who disrupt and intervene in the Korean/American filmmakers’ normative US perceptions and expectations about South Korea and about the Korean sex workers. Rather, those Korean women are cited in the film to offer testimonies that simply
support the broad observations and analyses articulated by the Gls and the Korean American women scholars’ (Kang 2002: 265). Reminiscent of the Asians in Cheung’s article, then, the Korean sex workers here, Kang critiques, are employed only to affirm and authorize, rather than challenge and intervene in, the notions already held by the Asian American filmmakers in their travel to Asia, and in their assumed position of authority.

While Kang warns against how these Korean/American filmmakers unwittingly inhabit and inherit the discursive terrain constructed by Western imperialism—as they participate and reproduce the narrative forms informed of it—her article invites the reader to examine how Korean/American women engaging with the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery may also reproduce, as they rely on, the distinctly American(ized) forms of representations: ‘a particularly American grammar and regime of representation and knowledge production’ (Kang 2003: 32, emphasis in original). Accordingly, Kang insists that what Yoneyama called the ‘Americanization of redress and historical justice’ (Yoneyama 2003: 57) needs to be investigated while turning the encounter between Asians and Asian Americans into an ‘opportunity for self-critical reflection’ (Kang 2002: 270). As Kang maintains: ‘Instead of a refusal to represent, the challenge is to bring these issues to a transnational public discourse […] without effacing our own specific positionalities as “American” investigating subjects’ (Kang 2002: 269). I would like to recall once again the importance of reading Kang and Cheung-Wong’s pieces together in supplement with each other, so that Kang’s self-critique also speaks to us ethno-racial majority Asians. In this way, the encounter between Asia and Asian America can become a productive site of mutual learning and knowledge production, which is based on ‘self-critical reflection.’

Minority struggles outside of North America

In fact, one way of accomplishing such mutual learning may be by gaining knowledge of ethnic minority experiences in Asia. In this latter part of the article, I will focus my attention on minority studies in Asia. Learning about the forms of resistance, which racial minority groups outside the United States engage in, can provide a useful frame of reference from which Asian American scholars can learn to de-universalize their US models. Let me here turn to the examples of Japan since I have more concrete knowledge about this than other Asian locations, even though my intention here is not to use Japanese cases to substitute for the Taiwanese and other Asian minority struggles, which need to be viewed in their heterogeneities and historical specificities.

In particular, I would like to look at zainichi Koreans and Okinawans, two highly visible and active ethnic minority groups in Japan. Both minoritized groups are outcomes of Japanese colonial rule of Korea and Ryukyu respectively. In the following, I will look at the forms in which the minority subject’s pursuit of civil rights and acts of narrating war memories, here the Asia-Pacific Wars, take place; I pay particular attention to the ways both instances challenge the dominant nationalist model, which relies on the rhetoric of citizenship for the minority subject’s procurement of civil and human rights. I suggest that their disavowal to comply with Japanese nationalism, demonstrated in these cases, may prove to be useful in questioning the traditional US model of liberal inclusionism, which sustains citizenship as the basis of one’s claim of civil rights and military service as the route to national inclusion.

I begin with Choi Sun-Ae’s ‘Jibun no kuni’ wo Toitsuzukete (Continuing to Question ‘One’s Own Country’) published in 2000 as a series of popular Iwanami Booklets. In this booklet, Choi, a third generation zainichi Korean woman, gives an autobiographical account of her activism, including her court battles, as she defied in 1981 the then Japanese law that forced ethnic Koreans and other foreign residents in Japan to register their fingerprints. Choi’s book questions the notion that connects citizenship and civil rights, as she maintains
that zainichi Koreans can claim their civil rights as ‘residents of Japanese society’ but not as Japanese national subjects. In so doing, Choi also deconstructs the usual, assumed binary of ‘citizen’ versus ‘foreigner,’ or the concept of a nation that supposedly equals one’s ‘home.’ Denying the possibility of her naturalization to Japan, Choi, nonetheless, conceives it as a place of more complicated and multiple belongings: the place where she was born and raised, where her family, friends, and teachers reside, where parts of her cultural sensibilities have been formed, and where she, nevertheless, refuses her citizenship to take place in the form of naturalization. In this way, Choi disrupts the easy continuities among her nation, her civil rights, and her sense of identity and belonging, in terms of her ethnicity, citizenship, and cultural upbringing and belonging.

In this respect, Choi’s narrative explores the possibility where she can conceive zainichi as an identity/position that can deconstruct the idea of a ‘true and essential’ national subject, on which one’s claim of civil rights is usually predicated. Rather than combating Japanese society’s racist and nationalist exclusion of zainichi with a claim to her ‘true nationality’—either Korean or Japanese—the book deconstructs the notion of nationality itself and as the basis of upholding one’s human rights. At a closing moment of her book, Choi recounts her conversation with her seven-year-old daughter, who worries that with a Korean mother, she may not be (considered) ‘perfect Japanese’ (Choi 2000: 63), to which Choi responds with a remark, ‘But I’m not a perfect Korean’ (Choi 2000: 63). Choi does not consider herself ‘perfect Korean’ presumably because of her lack of linguistic fluency in Korean, experience of residency in South Korea, or of her cultural competency. At the same time, she also disavows the label of Japanese national, due to her ethnicity, citizenship, and the history of colonialism that is inscribed on her.

What Choi plays with here is the idea of a (‘perfect’) national subject, as she disconnects nationality with ethnicity on the one hand, and with citizenship on the other. In turn, she makes visible the fictionality of such a position. Put in other words, precisely because zainichi Koreans have been forced to inhabit the shifting boundaries of the Japanese nation and empire, where their ‘nationalities’ were coerced upon, constructed, displaced, and disrupted for them by the colonial Japanese government, they can challenge the idea of a fixed national subject and imagine a more fluid subject position, and Choi (2000: 3) herself explores such a ‘third position’ rather than the fixed binary of a citizen or a foreigner. In her book Imagine Otherwise, Kandice Chuh (2003b) warns against the temptation and danger, in the US Asian American context, of countering racial exclusion with reverse nationalism, a claim upon one’s true nationality, which may be articulated either through the dominant US American or ‘resistant’ Asian position. Choi’s story, which disrupts the usual claim of human rights via citizenship, resonates with this call, as she deconstructs the idea of a national subject while questioning the notion that makes citizenship a prerequisite for obtaining one’s civil rights.

Notably, Choi’s insistence here correlates with the efforts of her predecessor zainichi Korean activists, including Seikyusha of Kawasaki during the 1970s. According to Kazuyo Tsuchiya, this Kawasaki-based zainichi group worked toward the abolishment of nationality clause (kokuseki joko), which had served to justify the exclusion of non-citizens from various welfare policies in post-war Japan such as child allowances, public housings, and scholarships. As Tsuchiya (2008: 271) writes, zainichi activists in Kawasaki ‘crafted a tradition of activism that challenged the narrow definition of citizenship,’ as they ‘problematized the demarcation between “citizens” and “non-citizens” in the field of welfare and education’ (Tsuchiya 2008: 275). The above examples thus demonstrate the minority subject’s struggle to obtain civil rights without making an appeal to the dominant nationalist discourse, where nationality is considered the basis of those claims. In this regard, Choi and Seikyusha’s activism helps us interrogate the hegemonic US model, which is heavily dependent on such inclusionist nationalism: from the civil
rights movement to Japanese American redress and, more recently, the fight against anti-Muslim hate crimes after 9/11.

I would like to note, however, that my intention here is not to binarize *zainichi* Korean and US Asian American forms of resistance or to essentialize and homogenize those ethnicized forms of resistance along the national line. As George Lipsitz (2001) illustrates instances in which black American struggles against racism were more strongly aligned with the international, anti-imperialist move than the domestic civil-right causes, the forms of resistance that *zainichi* Koreans employ are not singular, uniform, or unconflicted, either. In fact, such traditional ethnic Korean organizations in Japan as Mindan and Chongryum believe that *zainichi* Koreans belong to the North and South Korean homeland and consider *zainichi* activism, which pursues too much civil rights in the context of Japanese society, a problematic move towards assimilation. A larger number of *zainichi* Koreans still resist discriminations in Japanese society by using their Japanese names and trying to pass as Japanese in the public domains. Similarly, while many Okinawans engage in the form of resistance that is predicated upon citizenship and national inclusion, there are others more strongly prone to pro-independence, *han-fukki* or *dokuritsu*, positions. My intention here then is to invite the readers to explore what these comparative perspectives may generate for the studies of Asian American experiences in the transnational context, to put both the US and Asian models in perspective.

In her intriguing study of a Taiwanese text on labor and migration, *Our Stories*, Amie Parry draws out some of the historical and political forces that both connect and disconnect Asian American experiences of immigration and Taiwanese domestic migration and displacement. Parry (2010: 6–7) argues: ‘If one of the goals of Asian American Studies has been to look at Asian American history in a broader context and not only as determined within a US national narrative, especially one that leads to citizenship, then *Our Stories* can be an important text for Asian American studies.’ Similarly, I would like to emphasize the importance of looking at minority experiences in Japan in a broader, trans-Pacific and inter-Asian context, so as to place them in conversation with minority experiences in Asia and Asian America and explore what this comparative perspective makes visible.

In this respect, I find it important to refer to the anthology *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)* edited by T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White and Lisa Yoneyama (2001). The book places the experiences of US racial minorities during the Asia-Pacific Wars with those of other non-white, non-Western, colonized and colonizing populations. Earlier, I questioned how Cheung and Wong view and judge the other world from their Asian American position. In contrast, *Perilous Memories* elucidates a form of interaction that decentralizes the US minority norm or ‘truths.’ While the anthology travels into ‘the other worlds’ discursively, the critical analyses of the experiences of Japanese American soldiers—their participation and resistance to US national war efforts (Fujitani 2001)—are juxtaposed with those of Black US soldiers, such as David Fagan who switched sides to fight with the Filipino insurrection army against the US colonial force during the Spanish-American War, the Guam and Solomon Islands soldiers who aligned with the US forces to resist Japanese invasion, and the Korean and Taiwanese imperial soldiers under the Japanese military, with the former ending up fighting for the Indonesian independence movement. The narratives of *Perilous Memories* destabilize the normative US position, as they juxtapose the histories of US racial minorities with the, themselves quite heterogeneous, racial and anti-colonial struggles elsewhere, while mirroring and kaleidoscoping those experiences back to the US perceptions. The book demonstrates an effort of collaboration between ethnic studies and area studies to better illuminate the relationships among race, colonialisms and imperialisms. I believe it can offer one possible model upon which our comparative project can be built. (I shall return to this.)
Destabilizing the national(ized) narratives of war memories

If Choi disrupts the binary model of ‘citizen’ versus ‘non-citizen’ in her quest of *zainichi* Koreans’ civil rights in Japan, an Okinawan scholar Ishihara Masaie similarly challenges the dominant nationalist logic of ‘enemy’ versus ‘ally’ in his accounts of the Battle of Okinawa, which was the last theater of combat in the Asia-Pacific Wars. In his book *Okinawa no Tabi/Abuchiragama to Todoroki no Go: Kokunai ga Senjo ni Nattatoki* (*Journey in Okinawa/the Abuchiragama and Todoroki Caves: When the Homeland Turned into a Battlefield*) published by popular Shueisha Shinsho in 2000, Ishihara reconstitutes the Battle of Okinawa from the oral accounts he had collected from the survivors. Not unlike T. Fujitani’s efforts to dismantle the US nationalist making of Japanese American soldiers as war heroes (Fujitani 2007, 2011), Ishihara problematizes the highly romanticized popular nationalist narrative circulating in Japan, which equates Okinawans to the loyal and self-sacrificial citizen-subjects who devoted their lives to the Japanese empire. Instead, his book deploys the Okinawan experience of the battle to critically interrogate the nationalist logic and perception that the battle was fought between the two clearly distinguishable and opposing parties, the enemy Americans and the Japanese allies, the fictitious binary that the Okinawan perspective disrupts.

Indeed, what deserves attention about his book, I believe, is the depiction of the American military in its duality, both as mass-murderers and rescuers. On the one hand, Ishihara underscores the brutality of the US armed forces, which utilized inhuman military weaponry such as gasoline, napalm, and artillery fire against civilian noncombatants. By bombing and exploding the caves in which Okinawans hid themselves, the US army demonstrated no hesitation, according to the book, in their acts of mass-murdering the civilians. On the other hand, by including stories in which Okinawans were also rescued rather than tortured by US servicemen, Ishihara contradicts the popular Japanese propaganda, which was instilled in Okinawans during the war, that the American soldiers were ‘evil, demonic animals’ who would no doubt kill men and rape women if Okinawans were to surrender or become captured by them. The book includes several survivors’ testimonies, whereby some Okinawans were rescued by American servicemen, who took them to hospitals and provided them with medical treatments. Indeed, the book suggests that those Okinawans who surrendered to or were captured by the allied forces were much better off than those who continued their resistance in the caves, since the former were able to enjoy their freedom and security outside the caves in the allied internment camps.

Equally important in this regard is the book’s depiction of the Japanese army. Ishihara emphasizes the fact that more Okinawans were killed, massacred, and/or forced into committing group murder-suicides (*shudan jiketsu*) by the Japanese army than the US forces. Not only did the Japanese military do ‘nothing to protect the lives of the citizens of its own country’ (Ishihara 2001: 98), on whom they placed no value, Ishihara says; they actually utilized Okinawans as ‘human shields,’ where many were also killed by Japanese soldiers for reasons such as the alleged acts of spying, ‘lack of cooperation’ with the Imperial Army, and what the military perceived as the ‘anti-Japanese treasonous behaviors’ (Ishihara 2001: 92). These descriptions of the Japanese and US armies are combined to show how Ishihara’s accounts of the Battle of Okinawa destabilize the dominant Japanese nationalist narrative that the battle, and by extension the war itself, was fought between the two opposing parties, the enemy Americans and the Japanese allies, and that Okinawans constituted the *Japanese* side of the victims. Ishihara contests the notion that equates the tragedy of Okinawans to that of Japanese.

Notable in this sense is that Ishihara’s critique is also extended to the current post-war situation in Okinawa. In his article, ‘Memories of war and Okinawa,’ he criticizes the arrogance of the US military regime in Okinawa for its abuse of SOFA and the production of ‘seemingly endless series of base-related problems’ such as ‘crimes, fatal accidents, water and
noise pollution, [and] live-fire exercises’ (Ishihara 2001: 97). At the same time, he also exposes the hypocrisy and discriminatory measure sustained by the Japanese government, which is ultimately responsible for imposing this unequal situation on Okinawans.

What Ishihara’s critique exposes in the end are the lies of citizenship and national inclusion for the minority population. Instead of making an appeal to inclusionist nationalism and rhetoric of citizenship, Ishihara disturbs the notion that citizenship and nationalities are guarantors of one’s human rights. While his account of the Battle of Okinawa foregrounds the question, ‘whose security was protected by the Japanese military presence in Okinawa;?’ it disconnects the (military) state and its people (‘citizens’), while challenging the nationalist myth that the former protects the latter ‘when the homeland turns into a battlefield.’ In this regard, his critique can also be extended to wars in general, where soldiers are killed not by the enemy force but by the state that sends those soldiers to the battleground and utilizes their lives as human shields and murdering machines. Consequently, Ishihara’s account of the Battle of Okinawa not only exposes the nationalist fiction of the unity between the state and its people; it also casts doubt over the values of minority citizenships, and their ‘willing’ self-sacrifices, as those do not guarantee any protection by the state.

Important in this regard is that Ishihara’s account of the battle also exposes the logic of war, which sustains the fictitious binary between the ally and the enemy. To the extent that war serves as an ideological site that divides people into two opposing parties, the act of narrating war memories can also operate as an ideological site in which such nationalized, and fictitious, division becomes continuously reproduced. The Okinawan experience of the battle can expose the arbitrariness of the boundary between the enemy and the ally, they versus us, and citizens versus non-citizens, while dismantling the mechanism by which such binarized logic is actively reproduced and sustained by the state and the state-sponsored nationalized narratives of the war.

Towards a project of comparative minority studies

In this brief concluding section, I will discuss, as I attempt to envision, how ‘Asian American studies in Asia’ can look like while drawing examples based on the situation in Japan. There is and has been a strong interest in Japanese American experience in Japan, particularly that of the internment both in the academic and popular cultural domains. However, the dominant propensity has been to look at this history of US racial violence primarily from the perspective of the victims. In the Japanese discursive context, it is often the case that the internment is linked with the atomic bombings, thus connecting Japanese and Japanese American experiences of the Asia-Pacific Wars through the ‘same’—i.e. anti-‘Asian’—racism, which presumably has its origin in white supremacy. Against this tendency, I submit the need to situate Japanese American internment (kyosei shuyo) in the context of Japanese state mobilization of ‘Asians’ for forced labor (kyosei renko), military sexual slavery, and other forms of colonial exploitations. My own work ‘Attending the Languages of the other’ (Nakamura 2009) attempts to draw this linkage, as it reads three literary works, Joy Kogawa’s Obasan and Mitsuye Yamada’s Camp Notes and Desert Run, which deal with North American internment experiences, and Nora Okja Keller’s novel Comfort Woman. The comparative perspective generated from such studies serves as an important reminder of the historical violences we ourselves are implicated in during the same historical period while underscoring the need to connect ‘white racism’ to our own racism.

In his comparative study on the experiences of Korean and Japanese American soldiers during the Second World War, T. Fujitani (2007: 34) states that the purpose of ‘drawing comparabilities between the United States and Japan, as opposed to the more conventional gathering together of Japan and Germany’ is to ‘resist the comfort provided by the fascist/ nonfascist binary.’ Fujitani invites his audience to reflect on what ‘American liberalism’
Actually shares with ‘Japanese fascism’ in their management of racial difference. Similarly, my intention is to encourage Japanese audience to ‘resist the comfort provided by’ white racism, where ‘race,’ in its singularized form, becomes the primary, if not the sole, factor that constitutes the Asian American experience. Instead, I emphasize the need to relate white racism to our own Japanese version of it while (dis)connecting race from colonialism and imperialism. As I look at current scholarly works produced on Asian American literature in Japan, such self-reflective criticisms are rare (except on the works of Korean American literature). Studies on Filipino or Vietnamese American literature, for instance, seldom include criticisms that dig deep into the histories of Japanese imperialist interventions in these regions, even though, as Shirai Yoko (2007) points out, the notion of the Viet Nam War as ‘the thirty-year war’ makes the Japanese no innocent bystanders of this ‘American war’ in Asia, where the nation also stood as the US ally. Critical analyses in Asian American literary studies that look closely at Japanese imperialist involvements are urgently needed.

As Fujitani (2011: 30) emphasizes in his book Race for Empire, engaging in comparative studies that pulls out similarities or ‘likenesses’ between the Japanese and US wartime regimes is not to deny their differences or to reduce the ‘deep singularity and situated meaningfulness of histories’ to mere sameness. Rather, the point, I believe, is to explore their continuities and discontinuities. In this respect, and to my own purpose, Chang-rae Lee’s novel A Gesture Life provides a useful example in that it depicts the experience of an ethnic Korean protagonist, (Kuro)Hata’s journey as an (im)migrant both to imperial Japan and post-war United States. As Kandice Chuh’s (2003c) insightful reading indicates, Lee’s novel illuminates the (dis)continuities rather than the fixed binary of what Fujitani calls ‘vulgar and polite racisms’ (Fujitani 2007, 2011). Lee’s protagonist’s practice of changing names invites us to consider the violence of soshi kaimei policy, which was imposed on this colonial subject in imperial Japan in relation to his ‘voluntary’ immigrant adoption of his American name: Franklin Hata. Similarly, the two Korean female figures Khutah and Sunny conjure up the divergent and converging histories of military sexual slavery and the US-base related prostitution. To this extent, Hiromi Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms may provide another useful text, as it juxtaposes two instances of settler colonialism, one experienced by Naoe Obachan in Manchukuo during the war and the other which the protagonist’s Japanese Canadian family participate in, in the contemporary Canadian context.

To facilitate such a comparative study scheme as discussed above, what is also called for, I believe, is the conversation between Asian American studies in Japan and Japan-based Asian and Japanese studies. After all, they are the experts in the areas of Japanese colonial and ethno-racial minority studies. While some of those endeavors are witnessed in some recent publications, there is a need to strengthen this move and to engage more actively with their work across disciplinary boundaries. In so doing, Asian American studies in Japan can assemble a comparative framework for looking at issues such as Japan-based ethno-racial minority experiences constructed within the discursive contexts of Japan and Asian America. To refer to Chang-rae Lee’s example again, Lee’s US-based Korean American literary construction of Kurohata, a Korean imperial soldier, can be read alongside Iio Kenshi’s version, as this Japan-based half-Korean writer creates his fictional account of a historical Korean kamikaze pilot, Choi Jeong-geun, in his 1985 novel Kaimondake. It will be of vital importance to have Korean and other Asian perspectives to join and complicate the above versions. Similarly, a comparative analysis of scholarly and fictional works produced on military sexual slavery in Japan, US-based Asian America, and other Asian contexts will be quite fruitful.

In so arguing, I would like to emphasize that this is not to deny intra-national heterogeneities. As Chuh (2003c) has shown in her insightful analysis, two Korean American writers, Lee and Keller, whose novels deal with the Japanese colonization of Korea and military sexual slavery, exhibit differing treatments of the issues, which are in part exhibited in the formations...
of their protagonists’ (post)colonial subjectivities. Nonetheless, the comparative studies will help examine the interested and situated narratives and scholarships, what Kang called the ‘American,’ and I would add the Japanese, ‘grammar and regime of representation and knowledge production’ (Kang 2003: 32), which in part constitute those narratives. From the Japanese perspective, Japan-produced studies of military sexual slavery, or even the Asia-Pacific Wars, although they are numerous, seldom include perspectives of minoritized American populations such as Korean Americans. The inclusion of this new perspective will be a useful contribution and intervention for Japan-based Asian and Japanese studies. In this way, Asian American studies in Japan and Asia can become a productive site of conversation that enables dialogic engagements on issues such as race, colonialism, imperialism, and militarism among different parties.

In her article, Lisa Yoneyama (2003: 57) coins a phrase, the ‘“Americanization” of redress and historical justice’ and invites Asian Americans to examine their possible implications in US imperialism and in the strengthening of domestic racial stratifications, when they (rightly) pursue reparations for the injuries caused by Japanese colonialism and military occupations within the US context. Yoneyama articulates the need for Asian American redress to take place in ways that can expose the US ‘imperialist myth of liberation and rehabilitation’ (Yoneyama 2003: 74), where selective pronouncements of certain injuries are espoused over the others. Her article questions how California’s newly instituted legislative measure §354.6, which has enabled Asian Americans to become legitimate subject-agents of redress and seek compensations from Japan, can help sustain the persisting inequalities among the state’s differentially racialized minorities, when §354.6 is juxtaposed with the anti-affirmative action and anti-immigration legislations exemplified by Propositions 209 and 187. As Yoneyama calls for an interrogation of this scenario, she proclaims the need to ‘recast historical justice,’ to pursue redress for the damages caused by Japanese colonial and military rules, in such a way as to link those violence to the ‘memories of U.S. colonialism and imperialism’ and the ‘currently ongoing racism, corporate injustice, and disenfranchisement’ (Yoneyama 2003: 74) in the US context.

Although figured somewhat differently, I have elsewhere discussed how Clint Eastwood’s film Flags of Our Fathers employs the racialized figure of a Native American soldier, Ira Hayes, to delineate the absent humanities of the (to the dominant white Western eyes) similarly racialized Japanese soldiers, who in the film are deliberately represented in their dehumanized form. Hayes as a racial minority soldier, however, also conjures up the film’s perhaps unintended absent presences of his ‘Japanese equivalents,’ the minoritized Korean, Taiwanese, and Okinawan soldiers who were, like Hayes, used and then cast aside by the Japanese colonial government when the war was over (Nakamura 2010). What this above reading conveys, for me, along with Yoneyama’s astute political critique, is the need to cultivate sensibilities and literacies, which can help us connect our injuries to those endured by others, including the damages that are caused by our own doing. As Ishihara Masaie contends, the painful daily realities of the US military presence in Okinawa make him think of the violence Okinawans have been forced to inflict on others: how they have been made to ‘become accomplices in America’s wars of the past fifty years,’ hence the ‘accomplices in the deaths of people in other countries who are killed by the bombs’ (Ishihara 2001: 96). What Ishihara’s quote imparts is again the need to create channels through which we can link our disparate injuries and damages while turning them into possibilities for resistance. Asian American studies in Asia can create a forum, where we can contemplate and exchange our thoughts on how to accomplish this task.

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workshop participants, to whose invaluable intellectual labor this article is indebted. Please note that my use of the term Asia in this article is heavily inclined to East Asia.

Notes
1. See, for instance, Yamazaki Toyoko (1983), Futatsu no Sokoku (The Two Homelands), which was turned into a year-long TV series on NHK in 1984. More recently, TBS aired a similar Japanese American family saga, 99nen no Ai (Ninety-Nine Years of Love): Japanese Americans in 2010 for the station’s 60th anniversary.
2. Soshi kaimei, which means ‘establishing household surnames and changing names,’ is a Japanese colonial policy instituted in Korea in 1939.
3. See, for instance, Iwanami Koza: The Asia Pacific Wars series published in 2005–2006; Bkyo no Shintai (The Bodies in Strange Lands), a critical anthology on Dictée edited by Ikeuchi Yasuko et al. The latter places the classic Asian American text in various voices and perspectives that constitute differently situated Korean diasporas, including those of zainichi Koreans.

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