

When Asian Americans Return to Asia: Return Narratives, Transpacific Imagining, and the Post/Cold War

Chih-ming Wang

Academia Sinica, Taiwan

Abstract

By focusing on Asian American return narratives as a symbolic indicator of a shift in transpacific relations, this article attempts to address two questions: first, how will a focus on return experiences engage and reframe transpacific imperial geopolitics that created and sustained Asian American literature, and second, how will a focus on the “post/Cold War” rather than on globalization as a temporal frame challenge the *transpacific* imagination in American studies as a cultural and economic narrative of immigration, integration, and salvation that purports to transcend Cold War divisions. The article analyses Maxine Hong Kingston’s *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011) and Chang-rae Lee’s *My Year Abroad* (2021) to consider how post-1990s Asian American return narratives rearticulate contemporary geopolitics. It will conclude with a reflection on the Orientalism of Asian American literature in the treacherous imaginary of transpacific futures.

Keywords: transpacific, Maxine Hong Kingston, Chang-rae Lee, Asian American literature, Cold War

Almost three decades ago, the late Arif Dirlik set up his critique of global capitalism by responding to Ella Shohat’s question — “When exactly [...] does the ‘post-colonial begin’?” — with a partially facetious answer: “When Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe” (1994: 329). Dirlik’s rhetorical provocation aims to foreground a vision of global, albeit asymmetrical, circulation through which the term “postcolonial” became popular. His answer attends not so much to the global travel of such a discourse from Western centres to non-Western peripheries as the unintended yet inevitable consequences of Third World intellectual migration to the First World. Such migrations signify the conditions of “global modernity,” which Dirlik defines as a “period concept” (from the 1980s onwards), in contrast to Euro-American domination and hegemony. He contends that the “[q]uestioning of Eurocentric teleology in either the capitalist or the socialist guise has revealed modernity in its full historicity, and ‘geohistorical’ diversity” (2003: 276). Modernity is global precisely in that it is no longer a Western monopoly but a relational structure in which alternative discourses such as Islamic and Asian modernities are not “reactionary responses” but rather “the very conditions of global modernity” (2003: 284). Dirlik’s point is not that diversity is just a fiction, but rather that diversity is produced by a desire for modernity that is now made “global” by colonial-imperial economic and technological forces that enabled and expedited mobility across geographical boundaries, especially that of Third World intellectuals.

Though Dirlik did not refer directly to Asian American writers in his 1994 article, they were implicated in the category of “Third World intellectuals” that marks the start of the postcolonial. The truth is: in the last forty years or so, Asian American writers and scholars have not only “arrived” in First World academe, but moreover “returned” to Third World locations as root seekers, temporary sojourners, and American relatives, whereas the Third World, especially Asia, has risen from the torments of poverty and war alternately as either a victim or a threat, as either a space of adventure or horror. Such *return* migrations, real and imagined, are enabled by globalization, and have since the 1990s produced complex narratives about displacement and belonging which are often couched in traumatic memories of war—hot and cold—to signify both precarious attachments to the homeland and problematic identifications with the sites of diasporic dwelling within and against the grooves of empire. The ambivalence and prominence of the return motif in Asian American writing since the 1990s thus begs a twist to Dirlik’s question: “what exactly begins” when Asian Americans return to Asia?

Focusing on Asian American return narratives as a symbolic indicator of a shift in transpacific relations, this article attempts to address two questions: first, how will a focus on return experiences engage and reframe the transpacific imperial geopolitics which created and sustained Asian American literature, and second, how will an emphasis on the “post/Cold War” rather than globalization as a temporal frame challenge the *transpacific* imagination in American studies as a cultural and economic narrative of immigration, integration, and salvation that purports to transcend Cold War divisions. Whereas the transpacific is increasingly defined by such official discourses as the deflated TPP (Transpacific Partnership Pact) or the newly coined Indo-Pacific strategy at work, Erin Suzuki argues, it also “extends and exceeds the earlier categories of the ‘Asia-Pacific’ and ‘Pacific Rim’” that are weighted against these economic and geopolitical imaginations, opening up an imagination of “multiple transpacifics that conflict, intersect, and overlap” (2007: 352-353). In a recent article, Erin Suzuki and Aimee Bahng (2020) furthermore contend that the transpacific, for it to shed off its settler colonial logic of possession, must also account for the diverse epistemologies and movements within the Pacific; after all, the transpacific is not just a fly over, but deeply grooved in, Pacific histories. Indeed, the transpacific highlights Asian and Pacific histories and experiences in the remaking of American culture, especially throughout the twentieth century, and signals a cultural alienation that refuses one-way domestication and assimilation. The transpacific is meant to be a “critical cartographic term” (Suzuki 2007: 356) to attend to and explore obscured histories and silenced voices that cannot be squarely located in the American minority frame, but they must be rescued by and recuperated in the crucible of (Asian) America. As Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen point out in their introduction to *Transpacific Studies*, “The challenge of transpacific histories and flows means that existing models of studying these topics need to be reconsidered and reconfigured” (2014: 16) because the legacies of Orientalism and the Cold War have

weighed heavily on the studies of the transpacific itself, codifying it as the Other within the area studies model or as a denied origin that may jeopardize the project of claiming America in the Asian American frame. Sunny Xiang indicates that the Oriental inscrutability—implying shifting and conflicting identification of Asians as both friends and enemies in US history—that still haunts us today shows that the Cold War, when viewed through the transpacific lens, presents itself as a “historiographic problem” and “perceptual crux” (2019: 2, 7) and is unending. The emergence of transpacific studies and its decolonial, de-cold war tendencies are a long-awaited attempt to break the deadlock of Cold War binaries by critiquing and recognizing itself as a part of institutional, academic power, and knowledge production (Hoskins and Nguyen 2014: 23).¹ For its embeddedness in the structure of knowledge production is coeval with the transpacific entanglements of American imperialism, which as Y en L  Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama argue, “rationalizes US military and capitalist interventions in Asia and the Pacific Islands as necessary for the ‘national security’ of the United States and for the humanitarian ‘rescue’ of Asian peoples” (2018: 176).

In other words, the transpacific analytic critiques US imperialism and exposes the limitation of the minority frame that on the one hand overlooks the Americanness of Asian American writing and casts the immigrant in the mode of the liberation narrative on the other, where the US is regarded as the liberator and becoming a US citizen the telos of migration. This is most evident in the transpacific imagination between the 1970s and 1980s where the transpacific passage is by default a westward passage, and returning with an American citizenship the proof of success. As Josephine Park indicates, “The Cold War subjects who are products of, witnesses to, and critics of this imperial violence, however, are also active participants in the logics of the Cold War” (2016: 16). At the same time, this West-bound “immigrant narration” (Wang 2019) is complemented by a belief in globalization as the end of Cold War ideology (as in Francis Fukuyama’s once triumphant “End of History” thesis) when a great part of Asia remained locked in still tense Cold War geopolitics and mentalities. Now, this “end of history” narrative is strangely coupled with the “end of the world” thesis that considers the rise of Third World economies, particularly China, as a threat to the world’s political and ecological systems; as both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj  i ek have famously remarked, “it’s easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism” (qtd. in Dirlik 2017: 127), to which Dirlik adds that the rise of China has renewed its significance with the threat of “neo-traditional authoritarianism” and “reckless maldevelopment” (2017: 129, 130). Hence, the answer to “what exactly begins when Asian Americans return to Asia” must be found in China’s challenge of Pax Americana in the post/Cold War moment where the Asian American becomes the contradictory figure of both resistance and complicity in the tired tropes of US Orientalism and imperialism.

Concerned with what return enables in the Asian American literary imagination, particularly how it exposes the myth of immigration to the desire for return, where triumphant globalization may be re-scripted

as the prolongation of Cold War trauma that Yoneyama and Xiang identify as transwar and trans-imperial, and where Asian Americans in Asia confront their own Americanness through twisted “minor feelings” (Cathy Hong 2020), this article will unfold the arguments above in three sections: a brief survey of the return motif in Asian American literature and scholarship since the 1990s to highlight the post/Cold War conundrum it is embedded in, most potently represented by the rise of China as both an opportunity for and challenge of US hegemony, to be followed by an analysis of two examples—Maxine Hong Kingston’s *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011) and Chang-rae Lee’s *My Year Abroad* (2021) that feature China-bound journeys. Both texts treat China as a geo-cultural other that is intimate and menacing, exciting and perplexing, rendering Asian American return narratives as a rearticulation of contemporary geopolitics. It will conclude with a reflection on the Orientalism of Asian American literature in the treacherous imaginaries of transpacific futures.

Return Narratives: A Post/Cold War Problematic

In sociology, while return migration only emerged as a topic of critical interest in the 1990s to suggest that contemporary migration associated with globalization is “turbulent and fluid with [a] multidirectional and reversible trajectory” (Joly 2004: 1), return has been a central and recurring theme in Asian American writing (Chu 2019). In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, and David Mura’s *Turning Japanese*, respectively, published in the 1980s and 1990s, the desire for return looms large in Asian American subjectivity: it is irrepressible, tantalizing, yet restrained. It is irrepressible and tantalizing because Asia is claimed as a culture of origin, a place to know and in which to belong, but it is restrained because Asia is also a sign of stigma and fear; it is where many Asian Americans—born and raised in the US—*have never been*. The conundrum of longing is deepened by the geopolitical reality during the Cold War when a good part of Asia was shut behind the “bamboo curtains,” and the “Red Scare” in the heyday of McCarthyism that made one’s identification with Asia suspicious and disloyal. During those years, return was fervently imagined but difficult to realize.

But the 1980s dramatically changed that. Globalization destroyed the Berlin Wall and for the most part crushed the bamboo curtains, enabling Asian Americans to reconnect with their roots and rediscover themselves. If the “barbarian reed pipe” and the “adventures of Lo Bo Sun” in Kingston’s novels published in 1976 and 1980, respectively, were poignant allegories of return, Jingmei’s return to China through Hong Kong at the end of *The Joy Luck Club*, published in 1989, is a vivid description of the thrill of “going home.” Colleen Lye contends that Jingmei’s return not only “humanize[s] the mother’s alien perspective and apparently antic behaviors;” it also literalizes “the triumph of liberal capitalism over any socialist alternative,” wishing for “the restoration of the China that had been lost to the United States in 1949” to the capitalist globalization of 1989

(2014: 216). The reintegration of China into the capitalist world system since the 1980s moreover sanctifies Asian Americans as pioneers of global linkage on the one hand and authorizes US supremacy on the other, making Asia a site for both adventure and nostalgia. The geopolitical changes in the 1990s also unleashed the creative energy of younger Asian American writers, whose works, published after the 1990s, are often touted as “memoirs,” indicating the prominence of return narratives in Asian American writing. Patricia Chu contends that return narratives are “a form of literary memorial” to engage with migration, melancholia, and memory (2019: 40); they “expand Asian American subjectivities and histories beyond the borders of the United States” and “reclaim or remember the Asian histories that an earlier wave of Asian American scholarship neglected and [...] engage with the collective work of Asian American countermemory” (2019: 11-12). Indeed, fictional works on return—Lawrence Chua’s *Gold by the Inch* (1998), Don Lee’s *Country of Origin* (2000), Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003), Aimee Phan’s *We Should Never Meet* (2005), Marie Myung-Ok Lee’s *Somebody’s Daughter* (2006), Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), and Krys Lee’s *How I Became a North Korean* (2016), to name a few—have significantly expanded the themes and territories of Asian American writing beyond the American shores by addressing little known memories and histories—of transnational adoptees, mixed-race refugees, orphans of war, exiles, and political dissidents—pushing Asian American literature towards a post-identity, transnational phase which Eleanor Ty (2000) has described as “unfastened.”²

Return narratives hence have the double function of combatting the pressure of assimilation from the American public and the invisibility of Asian culture in its discourses, and instituting and legitimizing Asia as another site for Asian American subjectivity formation. Maria Antonia Oliver-Rotger argues that the “autoethnographic knowledge” produced by return narratives can generate “oppositional consciousness” to “open an internal dialogue with the groups or collectives to which the autobiographical subject belongs” (2015: 5-9). In doing so, return narratives both extend Asian American literature *spatially* to Asia and reconstitute it in the entanglements of history and memory with which “every return,” as Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller suggest, “exercises, or attempts to exercise, a right to acknowledgement” (2011: 18). Return is as much a sign of connection as it is of division where belonging is more often questioned rather than settled, and where an internal conversation has to be externally located.

Eric Pido’s *Migrant Returns* (2017), while more of a work of cultural geography on how return migrants remade Manila via real estate development, is a powerful study of those difficult conversations of belonging and memory. While the balikbayan box, by which overseas Filipinos send goodies home, is usually understood to be an object of linkage, Pido shows the transfiguration of the balikbayan as a complex negotiation of transpacific asymmetry produced by dictatorship and neoliberalism. The balikbayan economy, by which Pido describes the transnational circulation of diasporic labour and capital between the US and the Philippines,

emerged out of a political history from the 1960s to the present in which the US has played a crucial role in shaping both the Filipino American community and the political regimes in the Philippines; the remittances from Filipinos abroad especially helped to shelter the Philippine economy from collapse in 1997 (2017: 12-19). The Philippine government's endeavours to rebuild the economy in the ruins of economic crisis moreover created an opportunity for global capitalism to venture into urban development that attracted overseas Filipinos, mainly from the US, to return for retirement and investment, thus creating the balikbayan landscape in Metro Manila and other regions in the Philippines. In this way, return lays bare and reinforces the socio-economic and cultural gaps between Filipino Americans and the Philippines, making the balikbayan, much like the Viet Qieu in the Vietnamese context, a difficult terrain to navigate, let alone to reclaim an identity and a sense of belonging. Pido observes:

Deep feelings of regret, embarrassment, and anger tend to be shrouded by seemingly trivial concerns over traffic and dirtiness, clichés of bureaucratic corruption or threats of crime, and, of course, complaints about the oppressive tropical humidity. Never does the difference between the United States and the Philippines become more distinct than when balikbayans return home. (2019: 179)

In shrinking the distance of longing, return unveils an unbridgeable gap of differences codified in the imperial past and neoliberal present. It creates a space for storytelling and critique against both ends of the Pacific.

In other words, what prompts Asian American return narratives since the 1990s, as attested to by the literary and critical works discussed above, is a confrontation with the difficult histories and relations produced and shaped by both Cold War politics and neoliberal economies. While often deemed a triumph of the liberal democratic West, the neoliberal present does not guarantee the end of the Cold War. In fact, as we witness at this very moment, neoliberal capitalism has engendered a rising China whose competition with the US threatens to draw the world into another World War. As China continues to transform and as the distance between the US and China shrinks, the meaning of return also changes. Neoliberal capitalism entangles Asian America with Asia to expose the difficulty of belonging in the vertigo of globalization where war and economy continue to drive people around, to unmake and remake identities across borders. How to reconceptualize our current post/Cold War moment through Asian American return narratives and work through the racial melancholia in the transpacific entanglements of Asian America is the calling of this article.

My deliberate coinage of the term "post/Cold War" is specifically meant to counter the periodizing and Western-centric tendencies in the international relations literature on the Cold War. It maintains that first of all the Cold War, as far as Asia is concerned, is not over yet (in fact, it has entered a new phase under the

Trump administration); and secondly, Cold War geopolitics manifests itself as a spectre of violence that takes form in the displacement of Asian immigrants and the disarray of Asian nations. Return narratives return us to this site of individual displacement and national disruption, and invite us to rethink the transpacific journey which promised safety, dignity, and prosperity. Lisa Yoneyama's *Cold War Ruins* (2016) speaks volumes about these tense entanglements. Emphasizing the question of justice in the redress movement, she shows how the Cold War is a transpacific, transwar, and trans-imperial formation that both liberated and harnessed the subjects under siege—comfort women, Okinawans, and Japanese women—all victims of imperial violence and figures of perilous memories. This perspective underscores both the amnesia of violence committed by the US and Japan, and the Americanization (through “security” treaties of various kinds) of postwar peace in Asia, which laid the foundation for our neoliberal present. Christine Hong's *A Violent Peace* (2020) moreover presses on this transpacific irony where Asian “democracies” were oddly coupled with US counterintelligence, where wartime concentration camps for Japanese Americans transpired into the American occupation of Japan, and where peace was built on the nuclear arsenals for war. Y en L  Espiritu's *Body Count* (2014) furthermore connects the dots between refugees, immigrants, and the militarization of the Asia/Pacific that lasted beyond 1989, miraculously turning the destruction of home into a “gift of freedom” (Nguyen 2012), sustaining a liberal humanist narrative where Asians are conditionally included, if at all.³

In this sense, Asian American return narratives enable us to revisit this painful history of “violent peace” by confronting the contradictions of not belonging, forced intimacies, forged identities, lingering grief, and reluctant separations, which now appear in the stories of transnational adoptees and (mixed-race) refugees who harbour a dream to return for an understanding of the present. Specifically, in a time when Asians and Asian Americans alike are still feeling the sting of Cold War division and struggling with the unfolding of a new Cold War that hinges on the old ideologies of the “yellow peril,” it is important to recognize that racial vulnerability is historically formed, geopolitically imposed, and intensified by the toxic feelings of being a minority. Cathy Park Hong defines these “minor” feelings as “the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed” (2020: 55). The feelings of being viewed with suspicion, looked down, and wronged, are “ordinary” precisely because they are repeated projections of Cold War fear. That sting of division and those “minor” feelings of being Asian are where return narratives started and why our approach to them is necessarily entangled, triangulated, and transpacific.⁴

China-Bound: Minor Feelings and Imaginary Returns to Reality

“I will not forget you. I will always send money home.”

—Maxine Hong Kingston (2011: 59)

“It is often difficult to live just one life.”

—Chang-rae Lee (2021: 154)

Of the return narratives I discuss, Kingston’s *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* and Chang-rae Lee’s *My Year Abroad* are odd choices for comparison, not merely because they are of different genres and published a decade apart, but also because they differ drastically from other return narratives that tend to feature vulnerable and traumatized subjects as adoptees and refugees. Rather than attempting to connect the present to the past by restoring repressed memories and silent histories, Kingston and Lee focus on the present for traces of the future, especially China. In a series of free verse poems that constitute *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, Kingston recounts the stories of China’s changes and reflects on what they mean to her, the US, and the world. In contrast, Lee’s *My Year Abroad* features a middle-class mixed-race Korean American, Tiller Bardmon, who is brought to Southern China and gets involved in a scam against a Chinese gang to witness the changeover of capitalism with Chinese characteristics. Expanding the range of the “idealized critical subject” in Asian American studies (Lee 2012: 22) to include mixed-race Americans, immigrant entrepreneurs, and the Chinese underworld, Kingston and Lee deliver fantastic returns to engage with the rough realities of China’s rise and America’s decline, as well as the racial vulnerabilities of Asian Americans. They also enable a meta-critical reflection on the return narrative itself.

In *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, the return narrative is embedded in a poetic meditation on aging, in which, counting towards her 65th birthday, the author relates the losses and regrets in life—the lives of civilians and soldiers lost to the Iraqi war, and her insufficient response to her father’s poetry. She considers her father a fellow poet who, though writing in a different language and tradition, has left her a literary legacy waiting to be regurgitated, responded to, and translated. While her father is mentioned only sporadically in the book, his writerly legacy is the reason why living matters to ageing Kingston and why return—actual and metaphorical—is imperative, because it is an attempt to extend memory as life and to reflect on the shifting realities that register with the imaginaries of the end of history and of the world.

To experience growing old and imagine dying in the apocalypse of endless wars, Kingston once again conjures up her hero Wittman Ah Sing to embark on an imaginary return to China to “see for myself my own true China” (2011: 31). This literary device allows Kingston to also recount her own return experiences and

contrast her literary political project of establishing Asian American literature with her forgetting of China, of her relatives and villages in the Guangdong province as well as the origins of legends that she had transplanted in the US. Real and fantastical moments interweave China and the US to signify the return trip as a double quest for legal immigration and a sense of belonging, as well as a form of activism that depends on the transpacific relaying of stories—to combat minor feelings within and reassert antiwar ethos for life. Whereas Wittman is all-American and has no relatives anywhere but in the US, Kingston herself has been to China “12 times, counting Hong Kong and Taiwan as China” (49-50). While in China for his first time, Wittman soon realizes that “China’s changing. China’s changed. China gone. Old China nevermore. It is too late.... Voyage far, and end up at another globalized city just like the one you left” (2011: 63). Kingston also recalls how each of her visits to China differs from the previous one: “My last Chinese journey, a year and a half ago, the new superhighway from Guangzhou to my villages — 4 hours. No more stopping for farmers threshing again and sun-drying fruit and vegetables on the fine strips of new road” (2011: 155-156); and how on “This visit, I didn’t see a chicken, duck, goat, or cat, or pig in the house or lanes and alleys. A TV sat to the side of the altar; the symmetrical array of emblems, calligraphy, and family photos that took up the center of the wall faced the front door” (2011: 159). China’s changes implicate the changes of the world, as well as the changes of Asian Americans’ relationship to China.

However, while Kingston sees material progress in country life and traditional culture reemerging from the calamities of revolution in China, the China that Wittman encounters is entrenched in depravity and sorrow, fastened to familiar stories of migration. He meets a woman carrying home her husband’s ashes and bones — her husband having died as a refugee in Hong Kong, and she, a Vietnamese, having survived. Moreover, he meets a peasant girl who implores him to marry her and take her to the US, and yet another who plots to steal his money and take his life. While the proposal for marriage reaffirms the transpacific economic gap that the average (Asian) American man can sometimes profiteer from, the plot of stealing and killing risks rehashing the deep-seated Western stereotype of Chinese as inscrutable and conniving, as scheming and menacing. In this imagination, China is awkwardly arrested in the Cold War mentality past and present: at once a socialist utopia that was never meant to be and a purgatory of humanity that is doomed to underdevelopment, regardless of the fact that Chinese megacities today are arguably the most developed regions in the world. Therefore, while writing about her involvement in the peaceful protest against the war on Iraq in the US, Kingston cannot help but also condemn China’s crackdown on Falun Gong as a violation of human rights and religious freedom, and proclaim that “A pure citizen of the world would boycott China—for tyrannizing Tibet and Xinjiang, for shooting nuclear missiles off Taiwan’s beam, for making weapons and selling them to all sides” (2011: 45). Indeed, the China of the imagination (poor and backward) is a hard match for the China (a regional hegemon and an effective authoritarian state) in reality, so the fight for freedom must

be waged on both ends of the Pacific. But this liberal humanist ethos is so embedded in the Cold War unconscious that China remains an Other — to be rescued and remade American, or to be reckoned as a threat, contained and resisted. The dual returns of Wittman and Kingston are thus literary attempts at confronting China in both Cold War imagination and post-Cold War reality, as well as the ambivalent role of the Asian American within as diasporic, subaltern, and ethnic, all laced up in the imperial baggage that Christina Klein calls “Cold War Orientalism.”

For Kingston, this imperial baggage is also gendered and aged. She asks: “Why is it that old women are China’s refuse, and men, war veterans, America’s” (2011: 204). It seems that whether in China or the US, the refuse are always associated with a history of violence. If the physical return to China is a reminder of the Asian American distance from it, as its transformation over the years has rendered new meanings of China to Kingston, this hard and disruptive reality is again to be resolved by a humanist imagination: “To imagine hard and make real the people who appear in letters, stories, dreams” (2011: 180), that is, people who are relatives and siblings in life. She must render the stories of Fah Mulan and the no-name aunt anew—not as “women warriors,” but as veterans and refugees—to continue the fight of making sanctuaries out of hostility, in the US as well as in China, to make the world a better place. In the retelling of Fah Mulan as a soldier with PTSD and of the no-name aunt as a refugee, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* comes full circle as a cosmopolitan liberal humanist critique of the suicidal (and homicidal) culture produced by imperial wars and sexual violence. For Kingston, return is a literary device for the retelling and reflection of China and her transpacific aspiration.

Equally invested in a fantasy of China, though of a different breed, *My Year Abroad*, a decade later, is instead concerned with the suicidal culture of capitalism represented by privileged middle-class life in the US and the ever-prosperous city of the future, Shenzhen, China, where things happen in dramatic fashion. Making Shenzhen the locus of action, in contrast to the inactivity of Dunbar and Stagno (complacent and stagnant), two fictional towns that represent the state of US life, testifies not only to the rise of China as the new engine for global capitalism but also unveils an imagining of what Rob Wilson names “killer capitalism” (2007; 2019), which through the novel’s display of constant feasting, flaunting of luxury, and exquisite exploitation of labour and body makeover, is now wedded to China where the extraction of labour, minerals, and chemicals is mysteriously transformed into a health drink named “Elixirent” that is soon to overtake the global market. The trip to China is thus a journey into the heart of global capitalism—and the “heart of darkness”—where the innocent (Asian) American falls prey to, yet also benefits from, the sorceries of Chinese scams. As Wilson argues, “as expenditures on dietetics, health care, cosmetic surgery and embellishment soar” in the West, the killer capitalism of the Pacific Rim “put the inhuman face back on this commodity pampering of body” and through immigration, legal or otherwise, created a “more riddled ethnoscape of transnational becoming” (2007: 124, 132). What Wilson hints here is not merely a comparison between the West and Asia where

emphasis on consumption differs but rather that transpacific flows of migration and commodity suggest a body makeover that hides the inhumane labouring in making inexpensive fashionable commodities and keeping the engine of capitalism going into the end of the world. As his analysis of the Korean blockbuster *Snowpiecer* suggests, killer capitalism is “a world of social antagonism” where “predatory and vampire-like habits of antagonism generate an endless cycle of male resentment, a will to class and gender vengeance, and mutual violence” (2007: 123-124). As *My Year Abroad* demonstrates, this suicidal, self-destructive energy of capitalism is what makes China both fascinating and terrifying, and why China is not simply out there, but deeply inside the US too.

The narrator, Tiller, grew up in Dunbar and is pained by his mother’s absence and father’s distance. Though a “low yella” that is one-eighth Asian (Lee 2021: 39), looking almost white and comfortable in his middle-class privileges, Tiller feels the pressure of racial injustice in Dunbar, which is “a purgatorial shithole” for the quorum of minorities there (Lee 2021: 29). Despite feeling unsettled, Tiller is like an average well-pampered teenage Dunbarite expecting to spend a year abroad that “might offer opportunities for cultural and professional experiences that were life-changing but hopefully not too much” (Lee 2021: 16). But his chance encounter with Pong Lou, the Chinese immigrant entrepreneur, defies that expectation and implicates him in a fiasco in Shenzhen that later gives him a new perspective on the mundanity of American life. Though the reasons for Tiller’s mother’s and his girlfriend Val’s suicidal impulses are not explained, they loom large as a dark force disrupting the unity of family that either quietly chokes at racial differences (as in Tiller’s family) or actively challenges the protagonists to rebuild its meaning (as in the trying union of Tiller and Val). Told in flashbacks, Tiller’s adventures in Shenzhen intend partly to explain Tiller’s mixed-race background and his settling in Stagno, and partly to unravel the double scam of the “Elixirent,” an Indonesian jamu to be sold to the health-conscious consumers on the surface and the secretive production of an elixir for immortality based on Taoist alchemy. It is a self-destructive pursuit, which like capitalism and immigration, is essentially a form of extraction, an unmooring of belonging.

With this metaphorical arch to link the US and China, mixed-race Asian American with Chinese immigrant entrepreneur and transnational labour in Shenzhen, Lee draws a complex web of relations which Dirlik calls “complicities,” making the US and China entangled, even mutually conditioned, despite the seeming opposition and difference on the surface. This complicitous entanglement is the foundational narrative and it is expressed in the mentorship between Tiller and Pong, who in Tiller’s view, is “a sort of jamu himself, a human tonic to dissolve our habits of inattention and complacency” (Lee 2021: 219). Pong is an a/typical Asian immigrant, who is well-assimilated and not quite. Unlike Henry Park in *Native Speaker* who is an emotional alien constantly trying to belong, Pong, while sharing the attributes of the “latecomer Asian immigrant, focused and industrious and leaving nothing to chance,” is also a “multitargeting

entrepreneur with ventures as varied in scale and kind as a fro-yo shop and car washes and an Indian wedding hall, and personal interests like yoga and surfing” as well as “diverse skills and discerning aptitudes and effortless generosity” (2021: 241). Pong is an unusual Asian immigrant, because he at once conforms to and breaks away from the model minority cast and appears to be greatly resourceful and charming — attributes that are hardly associated with Asians. As Tiller observes, “Pong was different. Maybe it was because English was his third or fourth language, maybe it was the style of his mind, but he had a way of unsettling you with how accurate he was, so that he often seemed to be engaging in profound understatement, which made you reexamine the world and see it as not so ordinary a place” (2021: 47). Pong is not just an immigrant seeking refuge and a better future in the US (though a part of his biography certainly fits this profile), but rather a smart and daring entrepreneur with global capitalism on his back and access to the Chinese market and mode of production to unsettle the world.

Contrary to the typical immigrant plotline, Tiller, the innocent and unconfident American, is intrigued by Pong from the start and thrilled at becoming his apprentice and protégé. This reversed attraction not only metaphorizes the allure of the Chinese market for US capitalism but also hints at a racialized yearning for belonging which Tiller never gets to fulfill at home, even “in the rare instances when our still-intact nuclear family got together with uncles and aunts and cousins, the adults drinking lots of wine and talking loudly past one another, except for my mother, who’d wander in and plunk down with us kids mute and stomach-tubed on the Cartoon Network” (2021: 240). The distance Tiller feels from his father thus can only be explained in terms of a kind of silent racism—innate to such white suburbs as Dunbar—that drives his mother to suicide and Tiller to an identification with Pong and his pan-Asian collaborators, each bearing a sliver of difference in their identities, whether it is the Thai Chinese chef Chilies, the Indian Filipino prostitute Nendita, or the sick Sri Lankan-Chinese mogul Drum Kappagoda. The pan-Chinese network assembled here suggests both the transnational character of Chinese capitalism and the exploitation of co-ethnic identity that Asian Americans may succumb to. The intolerance of racial differences in Dunbar is thus potently contrasted to the acceptance of racial differences in Shenzhen where the promise of a cousinship to make a business deal matters more than one’s identity. The novel’s acknowledgement of racial difference and yet the overlooking of it for corporate partnership contains a double critique: of US white supremacy on the one hand and of pan-Chinese capitalism as purely economic and amoral on the other, though sarcastically Tiller finds it “Better to belong in a darkness than not anywhere at all” (2021: 317).

While US racism stings and stymies Asian immigrants, pleasure and profit making in China too has its moral costs, because it is a cruel form of extractive capitalism that replaces the site of production with the spectacle of consumption, fittingly embodied by the colourful health drink that promises to nurture health-oriented Americans. Lee deftly exposes the site of Elixirent production—in fact a mixing of raw materials to

react with sodium hydroxide and aluminum to create a distilled essence—to be the site of labour extraction where the farangs, including Tiller and an ESL teacher named Pruitt, rather than Chinese coolies, are put to work. It is yet another double scam: where the health drink is but a coverup for Drum’s alchemy to pursue immortality that is yet to be invented, the mud-like curry of Chilies’ family recipe is what is actually produced, a real business Chilies has pursued for years. The elixir for health and longevity that one consumes in the US thus may have come from the same sweat and blood of labourers in China that make curry, but the labourers are no longer just Chinese. Reversing the farangs’ roles from teachers and visitors to labourers in China amplifies the Chinese workshop (à la Marx’s “Asiatic mode of production”) as the gruesome and wicked site of primitive accumulation where the essence of humanity, regardless of skin colour, is extracted and remade as capital. As Tiller complains:

I caught a ghostly reflection of myself in the pane of the sliding porch door and saw how shockingly thin I’d become, how pointed of elbow and shoulder [...] my cheekbones now more pronounced, the set of my eyes seemingly angled higher with how drawn I was [...] Was this part of Chilies’ custom reeducation program, his aim to stoke my own private cultural revolution by breaking me down into rudimentary units? (Lee 2021: 423)

Moreover, all this grinding, churning, and running around the “devil’s workshop” (Lee 2021: 399) is not just for making the health drink, but also for producing a secret potion for unending life (mercury), based on Taoist alchemy. Here Lee deliberately recycles the myth of the Chinese emperor’s quest for longevity to depict a China both old and new, at once ghastly, feeble, and sick as the cancer-inflicted Drum is, and ruthlessly authoritarian and inhumane as Chilies, as Mao’s China has been imagined. With the West’s concerns with the rise of China’s techno-capitalist hegemony, the secret potion for unending life seems a fitting allegory of China’s internal problems and global menace — as a challenge to US hegemony and as an insidious corruption of American health, all in the name of “Elixirent.”

This is why the novel is perhaps better grasped as a “meta-return” narrative, an allegory that problematizes both the idea of immigrant return and that of the “heroic” return in the picaresque tradition. After all, Pong, like a good immigrant, not only helps Tiller develop his potential, the magical black card that he leaves Tiller with continues to spit out money from the ATM machine to sustain Tiller’s life in Stagno, just like the commodities that stack in Walmart and the labour that assembles our I-Phones are all from China. Here return is less a narrative device than a metaphor of complicity to deny the separation of the US from China and to question the desire to belong. Though Tiller realizes he has run into a scam that is cold at heart, he cannot help but sing along with it, going deeper into the “ever humming generator” (Lee 2021: 379) of

pan-Chinese capitalism to be embraced by it. While Tiller gleefully sees himself as a “distant cousin returned” to China (Lee 2021: 379), he soon discovers that the extraction of labour roughens out individual differences and generates a masochistic syndrome of identification where the labourers in sweat and blood would, like slaves, “[dole] out punishment, both condign and gratuitous,” at the prompts of the foremen’s harangue, sermon, mockery, and criticism (Lee 2021: 422). In extracting labour, pan-Chinese capitalism also extracts labourers of their identity, turning them into sheer flesh as fuel for the capitalist furnace, fuming in the end of the world as we know it.

In this way, *My Year Abroad* captures the duality of China today as manifested in both the body of the transnational immigrant and the imagination of market and labour. Unlike Kingston who considers bridging the wide margin between China and the US as the responsibility of Asian American writers, Lee in contrast regards the wide margin as already penetrated by global capitalism in which the Chinese immigrant emerges as a problematic figure — to be welcomed in and assimilated, and to be singled out and treated with caution. While Lee humanizes Pong, he cannot help but also cast him as the inscrutable, illegal immigrant. Such a bipolar approach to the Asian immigrant—sadly revealed in the anti-Asian violence and hate speech of late—puts Asian Americans in a double bind where their feelings of loss and longing must be repressed, if not sheltered by some assumed whiteness, as happens with Tiller. Pong’s inscrutable humanity speaks volumes of China’s charm and menace, a post/Cold War friendly turning into a fiend. Tiller’s serendipitous trip to China, with both adventure and suffering there, in this way, is a tortuous journey into the Cold War Orientalist legacies of the US empire.

Conclusion: Tarrying with Orientalism

In his penetrating analysis of Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*, a dystopian novel that accepts China’s rise as the end of history, Christopher Fan proposes a curious perspective on Sino-American entanglements by “tarrying with the negativity of orientalism.” Considering how Lee conceived *On Such a Full Sea* to be a “response to American anxiety about China and about American decline” and an imagining of “America’s future and China’s influence and presence in America” (qtd. in Fan 2017: 679), Fan—through a careful rereading of Alexandre Kojève’s vulgar Orientalism that posits the end of history on an opposition between human and animal—argues that tarrying with the negativity of Orientalism (i.e., casting Chinese as animals or, worse, as viruses) “might lead us to an understanding of our shared status as animacies at the end of history” (Fan 2017: 691). US Orientalism should be interpreted not only as the projection of the American anxiety of communism, but also as the deeper worry that the apocalypse (toxic air, sandstorm, pandemic) that China is

said to represent *is* the American future to come, which must be resisted by resisting China and the Chinese now.

Fan's reading of animacy as positing the end of both history and the world helps to foreground a geopolitical dimension in contemporary Asian American literature in which the negativity of Orientalism critiques not merely US racism and imperialism for which China and the Chinese are scapegoated, but also China and particularly the PRC Chinese as the ultimate and insidious Other among us, as the split-offs from Asian America that must be rejected, objected, and abjected. As China and the Chinese are associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that still plagues the world today, thanks to Donald Trump's racist coinages of "Kungflu" and "China Virus," the negativity of Orientalism has not only been imposed on China and the Chinese, but also manifested in the abjection of Asian Americans—particularly immigrant women in the service industry—as targets of racial violence and hate speech, making their feelings of being a minority more caustic and their sense of belonging more precarious on either side of the Pacific. The Atlanta shooting that killed six Asian women associated with the massage parlour is a case in point. In the white supremacist tarrying with Orientalism, Asian Americans are forced into the straitjacket of denying their transpacific connections in exchange for uncertain (white) American recognition. This is the importance of the post/Cold War frame: in the resignification of the triumphant moment of globalization as an incipient decline of US hegemony, the Asian immigrant is recast in the zero-sum Cold War frame as a seduction, a menace, a traitor, an enemy, an animal, and now a virus. This is the biopolitics and geopolitics that Asian American literature must contend with.

As Kingston's poetry and Lee's novel testify above, this is also the conundrum in which Asian American literature is arrested: despite ongoing US imperialism abroad, the triumphalist globalization of the 1990s has reasserted the value of democracy and multiculturalism for which Asian American literature is an endorsement; however, the resurgence of a new Cold War has challenged that triumphalism as complacent and stagnant, suggesting that the animacy of China would bring an end to Pax Americana for which Asian Americans are to be blamed. Kingston's and Lee's tarrying with Orientalism thus poses a political and ethical challenge to the transpacific in Asian American writing, for which writers are fighting a war of words on both fronts: to critique and defend the US as a nation and civilization, and to imagine a world beyond the end of history where Asia and Asians may shed America's Orientalist stripes. If the transpacific used to mean taking Asia and the Pacific seriously for an understanding of American modernity, now it also means taking them seriously for an understanding of the world that is unfolding before us, where Asia and the Pacific are again under siege, albeit by a US empire in decline. Indeed, it will be great to imagine a broad margin to enrich one's life across the Pacific as Kingston does; and it will be great to return to the quiet mundanity of US suburban life as Lee suggests, especially after Asian economic miracles burn out. But we can no longer afford

to overlook the costs underlying American material luxuries and spiritual tranquilities, as the health drinks (and other vital materials for subsistence) that nurture Americans are mostly made in Asia — perhaps with American and Chinese capital and know-how in both synergy and competition, and more than a couple of farangs lost in the furnace of capitalism. The shifting global situation has forced Asian American writers to consider their embeddedness in empire and to confront the “political contradictions that are not only indictments of the state, but also potential resources of self-definition” (Park 2016: 16). In the undoing of the political contradictions and self-definition lies the promise of transpacific liberation that Asian American return narratives encourage us to imagine and strive for.

Notes

¹ On politics and practices of de-Cold War criticism, see Chen (2010); Yoneyama (2016); and Xiang (2019).

² For a periodization of Asian American literature, also see Song (2013) and Lye (2014).

³ For a critique of liberal humanism and its connections to the Cold War, see Lowe (2015); Yoneyama (2016); and Chuh (2020).

⁴ For further discussion of affect and Asian American criticism, see Cho (2008); Santa Ana (2015); Kim (2019); and Baik (2020).

Works Cited

Baik, Crystal. 2020. *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Chen, Kuan-hsing. 2010. *Asia as Method*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Cho, Grace M. 2008. *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chu, Patricia P. 2019. *Where I have Never Been: Migration, Melancholia, and Memory in Asian American Narratives of Return*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Chuh, Kandice. 2020. *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities “After Man.”* Durham: Duke University Press.

Dirlik, Arif. 1994. “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism.” *Critical Inquiry* 20.2: 328-356.

----. 2003. “Global Modernity?: Modernity at the Age of Global Capitalism.”

- European Journal of Social Theory* 6.3: 275-292.
- . 2017. *Complicities: The People's Republic of China in Global Capitalism*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm.
- Espiritu, Yên Lê. 2014. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Espiritu, Yên Lê, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama. 2018. "Transpacific Entanglements." In Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, ed., *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*. New York: Fordham University Press. 175-189.
- Fan, Christopher. 2017. "Animacy at the End of History in Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea*." *American Quarterly* 69.3: 675-696.
- Hirsch, Marianne, and Nancy K. Miller, eds. 2011. *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hong, Cathy Park. 2020. *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. New York: One World.
- Hong, Christine. 2020. *A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hoskins, Janet, and Viet Thanh Nguyen. 2014. "Introduction." In Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen, eds., *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 1-38.
- Joly, Daniele. 2004. "Introduction." In Daniele Joly, ed., *International Migration in the New Millennium: Global Movement and Settlement*. Burlington: Ashgate. 1-11.
- Kim, Jinah. 2019. *Postcolonial Grief: The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. 2011. *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*. New York: Vintage.
- Klein, Christina. 2005. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lee, Chang-rae. 2021. *My Year Abroad*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Lee, Christopher. 2012. *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lowe, Lisa. 2015. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lye, Colleen. 2014. "Asian American 1960s." In Rachel C. Lee, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*. New York: Routledge. 213-223.

- Oliver-Rotger, Maria Antonia. 2015. "Introduction: Roots and Routes in American Literature about Return." In Maria Antonia Oliver-Rotger, ed., *Identity, Diaspora and Return in American Literature*. New York: Routledge. 1-21.
- Nguyen, Mimi. 2012. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Park, Josephine Nock-Hee. 2016. *Cold War Friendships: Korea, Vietnam, and Asian American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pido, Eric. 2017. *Migrant Returns: Manila, Development, and Transnational Connectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Santa Ana, Jeffrey. 2015. *Racial Feelings: Asian America in a Capitalist Culture of Emotion*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Song, Min Hyoung. 2013. *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing as an Asian American*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Suzuki, Erin. 2007. "Transpacific." In Rachel Lee, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*. New York: Routledge. 352-364.
- Suzuki, Erin, and Aimee Bahng. 2020. "The Transpacific Subject in Asian American Culture." In Josephine Lee, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.877>, published online: 30 January 2020.
- Yoneyama, Lisa. 2016. *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ty, Eleanor. 2000. *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wang, Chih-ming. 2019. "Transpacific Asymmetries: Masao Miyoshi and Asian American Studies." *boundary 2* 46.3: 89-115.
- Wilson, Rob. 2007. "Killer Capitalism on the Pacific Rim: Theorizing Major and Minor Modes of the Korean Global." *boundary 2* 34.1: 115-133.
- . 2019. "Snowpiercer as Anthropoetics: Killer Capitalism, the Anthropocene, Korean-Global Film." *boundary 2* 46.3: 199-218.