Title
Pedagogies of resonance: Teaching African American and Asian American literature and culture in Asia

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As a teacher and scholar, I have long been engaged with interracial dynamics in the United States. Since I began lecturing in Asia, particularly while teaching as a Fulbright Professor at the University of Hong Kong from 2000 to 2002, my chief concerns have been to explore the relevance of ethnic American studies in Asia and to present issues about race compellingly to Pacific Rim audiences. 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.

I have found several themes and strategies to be quite effective in teaching or lecturing in Asia on literature by African Americans and Asian Americans. Five literary themes in particular have provoked critical self-reflections in East Asian audiences. The first is the legacy of a buried history. Scholars and activists in the United States have divulged lamentable historical chapters such as the genocide of Native Americans, slavery, and the Japanese American internment, but in some Asian countries many untold chapters of national history remain closed, to this day. The second is hate crimes. Many Asian as well as American students tend to think that racism is simply
a matter of personal preference or distaste. By learning, through literature, film, or current events, about physical injuries inflicted on people of color, these students can better understand the grave import of racial prejudice, both in the United States and in their own countries. No less pernicious than hate crimes is self-hatred, the third theme; much contemporary literature reveals the psychological effect of racial subordination. The fourth theme I emphasize is that of the Asian American model minority. Although Asian Americans have been denouncing this stereotype as a myth in the United States, many students in East Asia still preserve the characteristics associated with the model minority. The fifth theme is the stereotyping of Asian men and women in American popular culture, which often sparks heated discussions among Asian audiences. I hope to go beyond mere debunking of the stereotypes by discouraging Asian audiences from conforming to or exploiting these images in face of transnational mail-order bride and sex tourism industries.

I have also consistently deployed five pedagogical strategies. The first is contextual enlargement. By showing how African American and Asian American writers draw from Western as well as Asian and African heritage, I counteract the tendency to 'ghettoize' ethnic literature and emphasize the importance of the trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific historical and cultural contexts in understanding the work of these writers. The second strategy is juxtaposition. Pairing African American with Asian American texts can prove especially helpful in introducing African American literature to Asian audiences and in illustrating the differences among racial minorities. The third strategy is reflection, or the use of multicultural American texts as a mirror that illuminates the ethnic hierarchies in Asian countries. The fourth strategy — often a corollary of the third — is transference, whereby an audience may become aware of their own upholding of an invidious status quo. The fifth strategy is inversion. There are times when official ideology needs to be subverted, albeit gingerly, indirectly, through a transposition of significance — as I did by using coded language in Burma, where my own assumptions were also unsettled.

The following sections describe actual examples of the foregoing pedagogies, as well as the responses of those who have attended my lectures given around the Pacific Rim. To avoid homogenizing Asia, I have chosen an episodical format, moving the discussion from country to country and registering the reactions of students and scholars local to each venue.

**Taiwan: Buried History and Contextual Enlargement**

In 1992, I gave a talk on Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* at the first biennial conference on Chinese American literature in Taipei. I showed how Kingston defies the received notion of history as being definitive by calling attention to her own fictive rendition of Chinese American experiences. Instead of stressing (or fuming over) the way Kingston rewrites Chinese myths, as many Chinese and Chinese American critics have done, I focused on the way she recasts Western classics. I emphasized that Kingston, who has often been attacked for distorting Chinese myths, also plays fast and loose with the Western canon, and that challenging traditional authority — be it Chinese or American — is in fact her trademark.

One example occurs in the chapter 'The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains', in which she retells a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a Chinese American historical anecdote. In this chapter, Bak Goong, the Great Grandfather, works in the sugarcane plantations of Hawaii, where Chinese laborers were forbidden to talk. To relieve himself and his countrymen of the pain of silence, Bak Goong tells about a king who longs for a son, only to beget one with cat's ears. Although the king orders everyone to keep his son's abnormal ears a secret, he feels compelled to shout the truth into a hole in the ground, and the grass that later grows over the spot whispers the secret in the wind. Inspired by Bak Goong's story, his fellow Chinese workers dig out a hole into which they loudly convey their yearnings and frustrations. When this 'shout party' is over, the hole is filled: 'they buried their words, planted them' (118).

Bak Goong's tale of the king with cat's ears is presented as a well-known Chinese legend. In fact, this story is adapted from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Book IX, in which Apollo punishes King Midas by turning his ears into ass's ears. The king's shame is known only to his personal barber who, unable to keep quiet, utters the secret into a hole. But 'a thick growth of whispering reeds began to spring up there, and these, when stirred by the gentle breeze ... repeated his buried words and exposed the story of his master's ears' (133). This story is retold by Chaucer's Wife of Bath in *Canterbury Tales* (11.952–82), except in that version it is King Midas's wife who betrays the secret.

Kingston transforms the story of King Midas into a Chinese folktale. Her chapter brings to bear multiple contexts: the Western literary canon, Chinese tradition and, most important of all, Chinese American history. The king's longing for a son in the folktale parallels the yearning of the China
Men, who are separated from their loved ones in China and prevented by American exclusion and anti-miscegenation laws from creating new families. Bak Goong’s association of silence with sexual deprivation (‘If I knew I had to take a vow of silence ... I would have ... become a monk’) suggests that the hole into which these men pour their words and longings may be read metaphorically as a vagina. Kingston’s retelling also carries a feminist edge. According to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, it is the king’s wife rather than his barber who leaks the secret; Chaucer thus intimates that women are inveterate gossips who must not be trusted with secrets. Kingston, by contrast, makes us see that silence — considered a feminine virtue in many Asian cultures — is in fact no easier for men than for women to maintain.

Most significantly, the hole is an aural receptacle: ‘They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets’ (117). Recalling that King Midas gets his ass’s ears as a punishment for dull hearing, we may see Kingston’s retelling as an indictment of historians who are silent about the contributions of Chinese laborers. The ears of these historians are plugged the way the ‘ear into the world’ is eventually filled with soil. No matter how loudly China Men speak through their labor, their exploits remain uncredited, consigned to oblivion. The narrator is determined to ‘make up’ for these glaring omissions. By a twist of history, Kingston is currently one of the most widely taught living authors in US colleges. It is as though the words planted by the China Men have finally taken root in America, and secrets hushed long ago are now heard everywhere on American campuses (see also Cheung, ‘Talk-Story’).

After my talk, a Taiwanese scholar commented that one should learn from Kingston’s example and challenge the official history of the Republic of China, which has also muffled the voices of its minorities, such as the Miao people and the Native Taiwanese. 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.

Japan: Juxtaposition, Hate Crimes, Self-Hatred, and Reflection

In 1999, in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Asian American Literature Association (AALA) in Japan, I lectured at Kobe on African American and Asian American literature. My intent was to highlight both the parallel concerns and the divergent approaches of African American and Asian American authors, as discerned in three pairs of texts: a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks on Emmett Till and a poem by Miriam Ching Louie on Yoshihiro Hattori; one episode from Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and another from Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior; parallel passages from Chester Himes’s If He Hollers Let Him Go and John Okada’s No-No Boy (see Cheung, ‘Interracial Dynamics’).

Prejudice against people of African descent is probably no less prevalent in Asia than in the United States. The pairing of the texts underlines parallel predicaments faced by the Asian American and African American characters and prompts the audience to transfer its empathy from the Asian American figures to their African American counterparts. The poems by Brooks and Louie concern actual hate crimes. Yoshihiro Hattori was a 16-year-old Japanese exchange student in the United States who happened to press the wrong doorbell on his way to a Halloween party and was shot to death by a white man in Louisiana in 1992. Members of my audience were all familiar with the incident — one that had stirred up enormous anger in Japan. The majority were understandably ignorant about Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American boy who had been brutally murdered in 1955 by two white men after ‘talking fresh’ to a white woman in Mississippi. The film clip I showed about the murder brought many of them to tears. Juxtaposing the two poems enabled me to use a specific incident that had been of much concern to members of this audience, to instill a broader awareness of the effect of racial prejudice.

The pairing of texts also has enabled me to illustrate a recurrent difference between African American and Asian American writers when dealing with themes of discrimination and assimilation. Works by Asian American authors tend to convey much greater hope and optimism than works by their African American counterparts, who are much more critical of American society and much less restrained in expressing anger and despair. The contrast is readily apparent in The Bluest Eye and The Woman Warrior.

The narrators in both texts are acutely aware of their debasement for being girls of color as they grow up in the United States; both Claudia in The Bluest Eye and the narrator in The Woman Warrior suffer from an inferiority complex vis-à-vis white girls. The ways in which they respond to their situations differ dramatically, however, as is evident in two parallel scenes: Claudia’s treatment of white dolls and Maxine’s treatment of a silent Chinese girl, denounced as a ‘China Doll’. Claudia reacts against society’s unequal treatment of white and black girls by mangling ‘white baby dolls’ (22). She says of her compulsion:
the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, “Awwwww,” but not for me? (22)

Knowing that she can never measure up to the white norms of female beauty, Claudia — unlike her friend Pecola — resents the toys and humans that epitomize that beauty. She acts out her anger on white dolls and blonde girls.

The narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, by contrast, turns her anger inward — with concomitant outward manifestation of it against her own kind. She tries to force a mute Chinese girl in her class to speak by torturing her. The narrator’s valorization of speech indicates her unquestioning acceptance of the American norm; speech in this context has a valence similar to ‘the bluest eye’ in Morrison’s novel. Her savagery toward the ‘mute’ girl, which pointedly takes place in an ‘American’ school, is reminiscent of the psychological violence suffered by dark-skinned Pecola. What Kingston’s narrator so vehemently detests in her classmate is not just her refusal to speak but ‘her China doll haircut’ (173), her ‘straight hair turning with her head, not swinging side to side like the pretty girls’ (176); in other words, the scene evinces the narrator’s virulent self-contempt for being Chinese.

Alarming as Claudia’s acts of mutilation are, they are less debilitating of her than the Chinese narrator’s self-flagellation. While self-hatred also infects Morrison’s black characters (particularly Pecola), Claudia’s defiant attitude prompts the reader to see such self-hatred as a result of racial prejudice and social injustice. The narrator in *The Woman Warrior* actively turns the blame on her own ethnicity and culture for her putative ‘abnormality’.

A parallel contrast occurs between Chester Himes’s *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and John Okada’s *No-No Boy*. Himes’s novel is set during WWII; Okada’s, right after the war. The protagonists in the two novels both feel discriminated against as men of color. In Bob Jones, Himes’s protagonist, racial inequality engenders in him — as in Claudia — a deep animosity toward whites: “I’ll tell you ... about the way I feel toward white people, why I resent them so goddamned much — resent the things they can do when all they got is colour” (96). In Okada’s protagonist, Ichiro — as in Kingston’s narrator — racism results in self-hatred. Ichiro, who feels gnawing guilt for having resisted the draft during the Second World War, seems to hate anything and everyone Japanese — including his own parents (see also Sato).

Both protagonists have girlfriends — Alice for Bob and Emi for Ichiro — who urge them to assimilate by accepting their subordinate positions in the US. Alice tells Bob:

> You need some definite aim, a goal that you can attain within the segregated pattern in which we live ... We are Negroes and we can’t change that. But as Negroes, we can accomplish many things ... It is simply a form of self-preservation. (168)

Ichiro wants to know the root of his ‘sickness’. He learns from Emi:

> It’s because we’re American and because we’re Japanese and sometimes the two don’t mix ... As things turned out, it wasn’t all right to be Japanese and American. You had to be one or the other ... Admit your mistake ... Maybe what you’ve done doesn’t make you one of the better ones but you’re not among the worst either. (91–5)

Alice urges Bob to accept a segregated society; Emi urges Ichiro to embrace America and acknowledge his guilt. Both women ask the protagonists to accommodate themselves to the existing racist hierarchy, but in Himes’s novel Alice is depicted as a problematic character that represents a compromising position. Bob Jones must resist, whereas Emi in Okada’s novel is presented as a positive figure that extricates Ichiro from despair. Her position is nevertheless equally dubious (see also Ling 44–8). It is hard to imagine those whose rights as American citizens were arbitrarily suspended feeling uplifted at the thought of the national anthem, as Emi expects from Ichiro:

> Make believe you’re singing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ and see the color guard march out on the stage and say the pledge of allegiance with all the other boys and girls. You’ll get that feeling flooding into your chest and making you want to shout with glory. (96)

Bob’s reaction to watching Japanese Americans sing patriotic songs is wholly different:

> Little Rikki Oyama singing ‘God Bless America’ and going to Santa Anita with his parents next day. It was taking a man up by the roots and locking
him up without a chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me, Robert Jones, Mrs. Jones's dark son, that started me to getting scared. (3-4)

The patriotism of Japanese Americans, Bob wryly notes, does not prevent their incarceration. Emi, in her unquestioning allegiance to the United States, seems not to see the irony of her solution.

These four texts reveal a striking contrast. The two Asian American narrators attribute their difficulties in assimilation to their ethnic or cultural difference; the two African American characters — Claudia and Bob — denounce the structural inequality of American society. Although Kingston and Okada also reflect social inequality through irony, their strategies of resistance are often so subdued and indirect in comparison with Morrison and Himes that readers may entirely overlook their undercurrents of protest against racism. The difference between these authors and between how their works are received may have roots in existing stereotypes such as the Asian model minority versus black rebels and hoodlums, as well as in white publishers' expectations and the uneven social and material positions of Asian Americans and African Americans. Even Asian American writers themselves may have so internalized the myth of the model minority that they blame their ethnicity rather than American society for their marginal status. Hence David Palumbo-Liu wryly describes popular Asian American literature as ‘model minority discourse’ (395). Mainstream publishers, in turn, may be more open to works by Asian American writers that do not challenge white racism, for the myth of the model minority is so pervasive that the reading public seems to feel that Asian Americans have no right to protest; outspoken writers such as Frank Chin do not go down well with general readers. Finally, it is also undeniable that Asian Americans, not hobbled by a history of slavery and enforced illiteracy, have been able to make much greater socio-economic advances than have African Americans who, even today, must overcome formidable obstacles.

These texts also bring out the differences and commonalities between Asians and Asian Americans. Although Asians in Asia — as members of a majority — do not suffer from the kind of acute self-hatred that plagues the protagonists of Kingston and Okada, many still feel a lingering sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the West as a result of the legacies of Western colonization or occupation. Furthermore, many East Asians, especially those brought up in Japan and Hong Kong, are even more reluctant than Asian Americans to challenge existing social and political systems.

The theme of self-hatred elicited several comments from my Japanese audience. One scholar pointed out that the Western standard of beauty also prevails in Japan, where many a woman would not balk at surgery to get larger eyes or bigger breasts. A more subtle form of self-contempt surfaced when I asked why most of the AALA members are female. I was told that most male professors in Japan prefer to study ‘real’ — white and male — American writers; Japanese women, themselves marginalized in Japan, are therefore more likely to study or be consigned to teach ‘minority’ writers. I have since come across similar misgivings concerning the study of Asian American writers among scholars from China, Thailand, and India.

There was a moment of tension when a professor remarked that my talk about interracial dynamics had rekindled in her the anger about her own people, whom my lecture prompted her to view as a silent model majority. She said that the audience was rightly appalled by the murder of Emmett Till, the killing of Yoshihiro Hattori, and the Japanese American internment, but probably most did not know or did not admit that similar crimes had occurred in their own backyard, that the Japanese had committed greater offences against the Chinese and the Koreans, both before and during the Second World War. When she had visited Korea earlier that year, she was shocked when a group of Korean students accosted her and other Japanese tourists, shouting: ‘Japanese go home’. She regretted the fact that she herself had not been taught earlier about Japanese war crimes such as the Nanjing massacre and the abuse of Korean comfort women. The professor reprimanded herself and her peers for not confronting their own government about whitewashing their national history. Once again, I was hearing in Asia unexpected echoes of interracial issues in the United States.

Korea and Hong Kong: The Model Minority and Transference

The theme of the model minority was an aspect I continued to explore a year later when presenting a paper at Pusan National University, Korea, entitled ‘Performing the Model Minority in Chang-rae Lee’s Native Speaker’ (see Cheung, ‘Three Korean American Dreams’). My choice of the text was governed in part by the ethnicity of the Korean American author and in part by his complex rendering of race relations. In the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, many Koreans, especially those with relatives and friends in the US, still felt considerable rancor against African Americans. Native Speaker allowed me to talk about the conflict as well as the possibility of
reconciliation between African Americans and Korean Americans. I began by telling the audience that the stereotype of the Asian model minority emerged at the height of the civil rights movements in the 1970s, when African Americans were pressing for definitive structural changes. Conservatives argued that if Asian Americans could do well despite the fact that they, too, had been victims of racism, African Americans should likewise be able to take care of themselves. The government need not intervene to help racial minorities (see for example Petersen; Bell; ‘Success Story’). The myth of the model minority was thus intended to pit Asian Americans against other people of color, especially African Americans.

As Lee suggests in Native Speaker, however, many Asian Americans have themselves internalized the stereotype as a cultural insignia. The father of the protagonist, a successful greengrocer, likes to think of himself as the exemplar of the American Dream:

In his personal lore he would have said that he started with $200 in his pocket ... and just a few words of English. Knowing what every native loves to hear, he would have offered the classic immigrant story, casting himself as the heroic newcomer, self-sufficient, resourceful. (49–50)

Every native loves to hear this classic story of the self-made man, the hardworking immigrant in the tradition of Horatio Alger, because it implies that the United States is indeed the legendary land of opportunity, where everyone who works hard can attain wealth and prosperity. Yet the narrator is quick to point out the Korean cultural resource that lies behind his father's success: 'The truth, though, is that my father got his first infusion of capital from a gyeon, a Korean "money club" in which members contributed to a pool that was given out on a rotating basis' (50). It is through the mutual aid of his Korean compatriots — rather than mere individual effort — that the father obtains the necessary capital to start his business.

The narrator also observes that people like his father who insistently play the role of the model minority have subconsciously accepted the American racial hierarchy: 'We believed in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground' (53). Being a model minority thus involves not only pleasing the white majority (by being impeccable, hardworking, and uncomplaining), but also sharing the dominant culture's prejudice against other minorities; plus suffering mutely.

Unlike Henry's father, who pursues individual economical success, John Kwang, another major character, puts himself where Asian Americans have traditionally feared to tread, by becoming a high-profile politician who works toward interethnic solidarity. Instead of pitting racial minorities against one another, Kwang tells Korean Americans that the brutal legacy of enslavement and disenfranchisement, and the social structure at large (which permits banks to refuse loans to nonwhites and allows restrictive housing covenants to prevent people of color from buying homes) are responsible for the poverty and despondency of African Americans. (See also Davis, Harris, and Lipsitz for analyses of urban social structure.) Kwang thus effectively dismantles the myth of the model minority, which would have people believe that African Americans succeed by virtue of their industry and that African Americans fail because of their indolence. He points out, as the narrator does earlier, that it is the tradition of communal aid that immigrants have brought with them from Korea — more than American opportunity — that allows Korean immigrants to establish a foothold in the new land.

Kwang then attempts to connect Korean Americans and African Americans by invoking a shared history of the colonized:

We Koreans know something of this [African American] tragedy. Recall the days over fifty years ago, when Koreans were made servants and slaves in their own country by the imperial Japanese Army. How our mothers and sisters were made the concubines of the very soldiers who enslaved us. (153)

In pointing to the parallel history of blacks and Koreans, Kwang's speech is a far cry from those who believe in 'shooting black people' as part of their Americanization. Kwang encourages racial minorities who are physically different from each other to feel a sense of kinship by virtue of their common history as subordinated groups. I hope that my talk on Native Speaker did likewise prod the Korean audience to acknowledge any harboring of their own prejudice against African Americans, to question the implication of adhering to the myth of the model minority, and to discern the common history of violation and resistance.

When I taught at the University of Hong Kong (2000–02), I found that making my students there see the insidious aspects of the concept of the Asian American model minority was especially challenging. Many people of East Asia, including my students in Hong Kong, still subscribe to values attributed to the model minority: obeying authority, being dedicated to
personal success and to family, and staying out of politics. Students involved in protests or demonstrations are often considered troublemakers, even by their peers.

In studying the various literary texts mentioned above, the students in Hong Kong were all too ready to condemn white racism and empathize with the Asian American or African American characters; they seldom saw themselves as a culpable majority. When asked whether they found the interracial dynamics represented in ethnic American literature relevant to their lives in Hong Kong, they responded that they did not feel the sting of racism because just about everyone in Hong Kong is Chinese. Yet I have not passed a single day in the city without running into Filipinas, Indonesians, Asian Indians, Vietnamese ... not to mention Caucasians and Africans. The extent to which these racial minorities were invisible to my students is troubling. When I pressed them further on whether they have, for example, any Indian friends and would therefore consider marrying one, more disturbing sentiments surfaced about how ‘these people’ spoke an alien language and stuck together. I told them that these were exactly the kinds of comment made by European Americans concerning Asians and considered by the latter to be discriminatory. Thus I found myself spending a good portion of the course turning the table by making my students see themselves as an elitist and oppressive majority. By the end of the course, some students had begun to take a much more critical look at their own society. After we had read Andrea Lee’s ‘Servant Problems’ (a story about a black girl in a mostly white school who has been hoping to get the leading role in a school play but is cast as a mute black servant), a student observed that the problem of invisibility is worse for Filipinas and Indonesians in Hong Kong: Just about every middle-class household in Hong Kong has a Filipina or Indonesian helper, yet people of Filipino or Indonesian descent never appear in any movies or television series set in contemporary Hong Kong. And white or black people in Hong Kong movies are always cast in stereotypical roles. Her comment encapsulates the hierarchy of race — and class — in this putatively cosmopolitan city.

Burma: Political Repression, Gender Stereotyping, and Inversion

In January 2002, at the invitation of the US Embassy’s Office of Public Affairs in Burma/Myanmar, I gave a lecture and two workshops there. The country has been under military dictatorship since 1962, when Ne Win seized power. Though a pro-democracy movement developed following the collapse of his regime (he resigned in July 1988), those who took over the government have been almost equally repressive in stifling dissent voices. In 1989 the ruling military council, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), now the State Peace and Development Committee (SPDC), placed the leaders of the pro-democracy movement in prison and its most famous figure, Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest. She was finally released in May 2002.

I had read Wendy Law-Yone’s Irrawaddy Tango, a roman à clef about Ne Win, the megalomaniac president, and I had seen the film Beyond Rangoon. A doctoral student of mine has also been working on a dissertation on Burma, so I had gained a sense of the totalitarian and whimsical regime that is still in power. Thus I picked a topic that was as apolitical as possible for the lecture on Rangoon/Yangon — the representation of Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood — in order not to get my audience into trouble for attending a ‘subversive’ talk. (Even so, I was denied permission to give this talk at the university in Mandalay.) I had been told to expect some thirty to sixty people in the audience at the US Embassy. In the event, over a hundred people — young and old, female and male — attended. While pleased by the turnout, I also felt a special anxiety, for by then I had already encountered four remarkable Burmese women — next to whom Hollywood stereotypes appear not just offensive but also entirely out of place.

Prior to the presentation, I was able to meet three prominent Burmese writers — Ma Thida, Tin Tin Win (pen-name Ju), and Daw Nu Nu Yi (pen-name Inwaa). All three had spent years in jail; the first two are also physicians. My host explained that the most intelligent students in Burma are required to study medicine, regardless of their own interest or lack thereof. Dr Ma Thida is a surgeon working in a charity hospital; I later learned that she gives all her medical fees to the hospital. She continues to write after spending five and a half years in jail, though hardly anyone would dare to publish her work in Burma now. She was grateful for my offer to try to get her stories published in the US. When I asked whether publication even over there might still get her into trouble, she said, ‘Of course. But I wouldn’t keep writing if I were afraid.’ That night I stayed up reading some of her stories in English translation, and was moved by the disarming vignettes about the daily life of orphans, abandoned children, and harassed citizens in Burma. I was also struck by the coded language.

In Mandalay I was introduced to Daw Ah Mar, also known as Ludu
Daw Ah Mar, a famous 86-year-old journalist. She and her husband U Hla were editors of the newspaper Luda [People] and owners of its publishing house. The couple and their son U Nyo, a fiction writer, had all been imprisoned because of their writing — Daw Ah Mar for a year, U Hla for three years and three months, and U Nyo for eight years. U Hla died soon after his release. Daw Ah Mar gave me a book in Burmese titled To My Beloved — letters to her husband telling him what Myanmar was like since his death. When asked whether she is still writing, she nodded. 'I don’t want my pen to die before I die.'

During my lecture I showed some clips from Slaying the Dragon, a video produced and directed by Deborah Gee about the images of Asian women on the American screen. Part of my reason for showing this documentary in Asia is to discourage Asian women from conforming to the stereotypes, especially those of the coy and subservient China Dolls. But in Burma, I felt it was almost an insult to parade the Hollywood rehashing of Oriental women as lustful vamps, conniving villainesses, or submissive China dolls in front of my audience. Fortunately, I had an opportunity to modify my talk in the subsequent workshops, when I used the topic of media stereotypes as a transition to a discussion of the need to redefine femininity and masculinity. I told the audience about my disagreement with influential male Asian American writers — notably the editors of Aiiieeee and The Big Aiiieeee — who view ‘originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity’ as exclusively ‘masculine qualities’ (Aiiieeee xx). I also discussed my uneasiness with their attempts to assert their masculinity by reclaiming the ‘Asian Heroic Tradition’, thereby reinforcing the association of masculinity with physical violence. I contended that selfless, caring, and courageous actions should be appreciated alike in women and men, so that a man who is attentive and nurturing should not be dismissed as ‘feminine’, and a woman who is outspoken, insubordinate, and fearless should not be denounced as a ‘dragon lady’.

I added that Asian women should reclaim this derogatory term, since a dragon is after all a positive symbol in many Asian cultures. Most of these ideas had already been expressed in my published writings, but they had remained more or less abstract. In Burma I found living examples.

Conclusion

In teaching American literature transnationally, we can also give it a transnational perspective. I have tried to disturb a smug or facile reading, in Asia, of multicultural American texts by using several pedagogies that travel well. The interlocking yarns in China Men demonstrate that an author such as Kingston, in ‘making up for’ the silences of Chinese American history, does not simply reach back to Chinese lore for her inspiration; she draws on — or rather plays on — a much broader literary repertoire. The provocative pairing of Asian American and African American texts is used not only to bring out common themes and to transfer Asian students’ empathy for the Asian American characters to the African American counterparts but also to distinguish different minority experiences and the divergent approaches of African American and Asian American writers.

The strategies of reflection and transference allow me to broach the issues of racial inequality and the hazards of model minority behavior in Asia indirectly. Many of us specializing in American ethnic literature tend to be critical toward the dominant white culture, but such an attitude can play into chauvinistic or anti-American and anti-democratic sentiments in some Asian countries, leading to complacency rather than self-scrutiny. While respecting the specific situations in various regions of the Pacific Rim, I try to direct my Asian audiences to discover in American ethnic literature a looking glass that can cast some reflections on their own societies. The examples in this article suggest that literary texts by people of color can speak to Asian audiences in at least two ways. Such works can prompt Asian students to deplore white supremacy and identify with the Asian American or African American characters. They can also provoke Asian students to piece together their own buried pasts, to consider the unequal power relations in their own countries, to resist the self-contempt and racism that is no less deep-rooted in Asia than in the United States, and to question their own subscription to the tenets of the Asian model minority.

How much Americans, including Asian Americans, can learn from and be inspired by Asian audiences is evident from the detailed example of Burma, where stereotypes of submissive and treacherous Asian females are refuted by specific examples of valiant women writers. I, a literary critic, also met an unwonted challenge there beyond the ferreting out of hidden meanings in literature — speaking in coded language myself. I have trusted that my audience in Rangoon could hear the subtext of my lines. When I was talking about the misguided association of masculinity and violence, I was alluding to their own government. When I expressed my wish to redefine the ‘dragon lady’, I was thinking about the likes of Aung San Suu Kyi, often referred to obliquely as ‘the lady’ by her friends and as ‘the prostitute’ by her government. When I urged my listeners to appreciate caring, spirituality,
and courage in both women and men, I was paying indirect tribute to the
doctors and nurses who lost their lives in their attempts to save others during
protests and demonstrations, to the self-abnegating Buddhists who refused
to be corrupted by money or political power, to the students and teachers
who continue to fight for democracy, to the writers whose pens continue
to flow under the shadow of censorship and imprisonment, and to women
such as Dr Ma Thida and Lulu Daw Ah Mar—‘dragon ladies’ who cannot
be stifled.

3

When Asian American Literature Leaves ‘Home’:
On Internationalizing Asian American Literary Studies

Sau-ling C. Wong

Introduction

Although the naming of Asian American literature is only a little more
than three decades old, dating to the Asian American activism of the late
1960s and early 1970s, the turn of the century has witnessed an explosive
growth in the academic study of Asian American literature on American
soil. Furthermore, even from my extremely limited perspective as someone
who has never taught outside the US, it is evident from many signs that
the study of Asian American literature has been gaining momentum
overseas. In Japan, a study group on Asian American literature has been
active since the 1980s. Two members, Teruyo Ueki and Fukuko Kobayashi,
have edited an anthology of Chinese American women’s writing annotated
in Japanese (Ueki and Kobayashi 1993). In Taiwan, the Institute of European
and American Studies of the Academia Sinica has been holding biennial
conferences on Chinese American literature since 1991 and publishing
selected papers (Shan and Ho 1994; Ho and Shan 1996); before that,
Chinese American literary studies was already part of the Institute’s research
on American thought and literature (Shan 1993). Shan Te-hsing has just
published a collection of critical essays on Chinese American Literature
(2000). As for Europe, Rocío Davis, a scholar teaching in Spain, edited a
special issue on Asian American literature in Europe for Hitting Critical
Crossing Oceans
Reconfiguring American Literary Studies in the Pacific Rim

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