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Beyond Discipline: Globalization and Sino-U.S. Relations .................................................. WANG Jian-ping (1)

Globalization and Sino-U.S. Relations: Political, Diplomatic and Military

The Bush Administration’s China Policy ................................................................. TAO Wen-zhao (3)
Globalization and the Turn-of-the-Century Imagination .................................. JOSLIN Katherine (6)
Sino-U S Relations in 1949: John Leighton Stuart’s Last Mission ..................... SHI Guo-qiang (9)
Tibet in Sino-U.S. Relations ................................................................................. LI Ling-yan (12)

The Evolution of America’s NMD and TMD and Their Influence upon the World
................................................................................................................................. ZHAO Yu-qin, HUANG Ying (16)

American Public Opinion on China at the Turn of the 21st Century and Its Implications for Sino-U.S
Relations .................................................................................................................. LI Qi-keng (19)

American Exceptionalism and America’s China Policy in the Wake of WWII .......... ZHANG Tao (21)

Kissinger’s Strategic Approach to American Foreign Policy: A Critique ............... KONG Hao (23)

National Interest, Global Strategy and U.S. Policy Towards China .................... ZHANG Li-gang (26)

Cultural Factors in Sino-U.S. Relations

Expanding Horizons: American Religious History in Global Context .......... PEARSON Samuel C. (29)
Avoid Misunderstanding, Strive For Better Understanding .............................. MEI Ren-yi (32)
The Cultural Conflict between China and U.S. in the Global Context .......... SHENG Ning (34)
How Americans View Themselves ...................................................................... PASKMAN Sheila (37)

American Churches and Its Influence upon China Policy ................................ XIONG Zhi-yong (38)

Political Symbols in the U.S. Media China Coverage and Post-Cold War U.S.-China Relations
................................................................................................................................. PAN Zhi-gao (40)

Dialogue between a Positive Confucius and a Realistic Emerson: Common Features of Emersonian
Individualism and Confucius’ Thought on Human Relations ......................... ZHANG Chun-bo (43)

China and the United States in Each Other’s Major Press ................................ ZHAI Zheng (45)

Addressing Unemployment; the American Experience in the 20th Century ........ LIANG Hong (47)

Cultural Factors Influencing American and Chinese Personalities ................... GAO Li-xin, SUN Yang (49)

American Literature in Global Culture

Teetering on the Hyphen: Asian American Ambivalence toward the “Homeland” ................................. CHEUNG King-kok (51)

The Importance of History in Mutual Understanding; The Case of the Chinese Exclusion Act
................................................................................................................................. CHU Jonathan M. (54)

“Ashes in the Mouth”; Globalization, Immigration and Turn-of-the-Century American Literature ......................................................... WANG Jian-ping (57)

Korean Shamanism and Korean American Literature ......................................... LEE Kun Jong (59)

A Brief Analysis of the Cultural Meaning of “Asian American”-Reading the Works by Frank Chin and Maxine H. Kingston ................................................................. HUANG Ji-ying (62)

Manufacturing Native Speakers: Immigration, English, and Discourses of Authenticity in Pae
Mynne Ng’s Bone and Chang-rae Lee’s “Native Speaker” ................................ NARKUNAS J. Paul (64)

A Mirror to Post-WW II American History over Four Decades - John Updike’s Rabbit Novels
................................................................................................................................. XU Ying (67)

Beloved or Unloved: Representation of Slavery in Toni Morrison’s Beloved
................................................................................................................................. ZHANG Yan-qing, XIN Shi-zhong (70)
Teetering on the Hyphen: Asian American Ambivalence toward the "Homeland"

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Abstract: Asian Americans wish at times to sever ties with their countries of ancestral origin and at other times to reclaim their cultural heritage. Because of the dominant perception of what constitutes "American"—white, mainstream, Western—the desire of many minority members to reclaim a distinctive ethnic tradition seems forever at odds with their desire to be recognized as fully "American." With the current emphasis on multiculturalism in the United States, however, more and more hyphenated Americans have been encouraged to reclaim their ancestral cultures. But this process too can be hazardous, if it takes place under the white gaze. In this essay I examine Asian Americans' ambivalence toward their roots in Asia by looking at Asian American literary history.

Keywords: Asian Americans, diversity, Americanness

Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia.

Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior

Asian Americans wish at times to sever ties with their countries of ancestral origin and at other times to reclaim their cultural heritage. Because of the dominant perception of what constitutes "American"—white, mainstream, Western—the desire of many minority members to reclaim a distinctive ethnic tradition seems forever at odds with their desire to be recognized as fully "American." People of Asian descent have historically been excluded from American citizenship; to this day some still feel the need to prove their Americaness by renouncing their ethnic legacies. With the current emphasis on multiculturalism in the United States, however, more and more hyphenated Americans have been encouraged to reclaim their ancestral cultures. But this process too can be hazardous, if it takes place under the white gaze. In this essay I examine Asian Americans' ambiguity toward their roots in Asia by looking at Asian American literary history. Sixteen years separate the publication of AIIEEEEE! (1974) and The Big AIIEEEEE! (1990), two of the most influential anthologies of Asian American literature, edited by Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Shawn Wong, and Lawson Inada. In AIIEEEEE! the editors distinguish sharply between being Asian and being Asian American. They differentiate foreign-born writers such as Lin Yutang and C. Y. Lee-whom they regard as "Americanized Chinese"—from American-born writers of Chinese descent. According to these editors, American nativity is very much the sine qua non of "Asian American sensibility," which they believe must inform Asian American literature.

The Big AIIEEEEE!, by contrast, sets out to reclaim an Asian heroic tradition as the fountainhead of authentic Asian American literature. Arguing now that the "American-born, exclusively English-speaking Asian Americans were dominated by the Christian vision of China" (xi) and that their works are "the products of white racist imagination" (xii), the editors promise to "offer a literary history of Chinese American and Japanese American writing concerning the real and the fake" (xv). Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Amy Tan have all been blacklisted as "fake." The "real," the editors assert, must be traced back to "its sources in the Asian fairy tale and the Confucian heroic tradition" (xv). Thus one finds in AIIEEEEE! a strong impulse to distance with Asia while in The Big AIIEEEEE!, a strong impulse to connect. Following are what I believe to be some of the reasons behind these conflicting attitudes. Let me begin with those considerations that discourage connection.

Diversity among Asian Americans. People classified as Asian Americans include groups as heterogeneous as Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, East Indians, Pakistanis, Vietnamese, Burmese, Thai, Laotians, and Pacific Islanders. The appellation "Asian American" did not gain currency till the late 1960s, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. To this day it still hasn't taken hold outside academic and activist communities. Because of the historical hostility among various Asian nations (e.g. between Korean and Japan, between India and Pakistan), many Asians-particularly immigrants-still look at Asians from other national groups with suspicion. Given such fragile coalition among Asian Americans, stressing connections with Asia may keep alive past differences and detract from the present commonality of being a racial minority in the United States.

Dominant Perception of Asian as Alien. Perhaps the strongest reason for distancing themselves from Asia is that Asian Americans, unlike other racial minorities, are persistently regarded as foreigners. Many Asian American national groups had suffered a history of legislative exclusion from immigration or naturalization. Those born in this country are still often regarded as aliens. Ronald Takaki points out that the Chinese, as the first immigrants from Asia, "were associated with blacks in the racial imagination of white society. Shortly after the Civil War, the New York Times issued a warning that depicted the newly freed blacks and the newly arrived Chinese as threats to the American political system.... Like blacks, the Chinese were viewed as antagonistic to republican and free-labor society.... Like blacks, the Chinese were viewed as threats to white racial purity" (Takaki 1989: 100–01). The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited all but a handful of Chinese merchants from entering the country.

But the most glaring example of the dominant culture's refusal to recognize people of Asian descent as Americans occurred during World War II, when Japanese Americans (many of whom were U.S. citizens) along the West Coast were incarcerated in various relocation camps. Americans of German and Italian descent, on the other hand, were left at large. Faced with such prejudice, some Japanese Americans were compelled to prove their Americanness with a vengeance—by repudiating their Japanese

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If Asians are sometimes seen as dangerous by the dominant culture, at other times they are viewed as exotic. Edward Said has depicted the Orientalist tendencies among traditional scholars who polarize the Occident and the Orient, with the East being the mysterious, feminine, and silent Other (1979: 138). Asian Americans understandingly reacted against such stereotypes. But their anxiety about orientalism may also have curbed the desire to assimilate to Asia. To avoid being cast as alien and exotic, many Asian Americans have taken undue pains to stress their differences from, rather: commonalities with, the people from their ancestral homeland.

Desire to be Recognized as American. The impulse to disconnect from Asia is closely tied to the determination to "claim America," as evident from the political decision to omit the hyphen from the term "Asian-American." In Maxine Hong Kingston's words, "We ought to leave out the hyphen in 'Chinese-American,' because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. . . . Without the hyphen, 'Chinese' is an adjective and 'American' a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American" (Kingston 1982: 60). The obsessive desire to claim America has contributed to an ambivalence about anything associated with the country of ancestral origin. This ambivalence explains in part the lack of overlap between Asian Studies and Asian American Studies in the past. Instead, "Asian American Studies has been located within the context of American Studies and stripped of its international links," Sucheta Mazumdar observes. "Tired of being thought of as foreigners, second- and third-generation Americans of Asian ancestry have been particularly reluctant to identify with Asian Studies and its pronouncements on the distinctiveness of Asian cultures in countertop to Euro-American culture" (29–30) [3].

Image as the "Model Minority". Despite the fact that Asians were seen as foreign and exotic, they are often represented in the American media as a model of successful assimilation and educational attainment. In the words of Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, Asian Americans have been subject to "racist love," unlike the "racist hate" directed at other racial minorities (1972: 107). Whereas more blatant racism against African Americans and Mexican Americans has provoked these racial minorities to assert cultural nationalism, the relative acceptance of Asian Americans may have ironically worked against the urge to maintain cultural continuity. In fact, repressing one's ethnicity seems to be a prerequisite to becoming American. The narrator in Kingston's China Men puzzles over her father's reluctance to disclose his past: "You say with the few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China. . . . Do you mean to give us a chance at being real Americans by forgetting the Chinese past?" (14). Her concluding question-somber reflection on a Chinaman's chance of being acknowledged as American-explodes the myth of a presumably pluralist country. The father has paid a high price for his children to become "real Americans."

Lack of Educational Resources. Asian Americans who do wish to know more about their ancestral cultures would find little by way of the American school system that satisfies that curiosity. The traditional curriculum did not reflect either Asian or Asian American experiences. In the past, parents who wanted their children to learn an Asian language must enroll them in separate language schools. Jade Snow Wong, American-born writer of Fifth Chinese Daughter (1950) and recipient of a Pioneer Award in Asian American Studies, said in her 1992 acceptance speech: "In my years of public school... no mention was made of Chinese history nor of Asian geography" (4). In the light of these formidable political and social obstacles, why do some Asian Americans still wish to connect with Asia?

Cultural and Psychological Well Being. Connection is conducive to ethnic pride and cultural visibility. The editors of Aiiiiiiii!!! lament that unlike African Americans, whose presence has made a striking difference in American culture, Asian Americans remain culturally invisible. The inability or reluctance of Asian Americans to tap their Asian resources may have contributed to their cultural invisibility. African Americans, frequently barred from participation in mainstream life, have nevertheless been able draw from their ancestral culture to create art forms that eventually inform and transform mainstream America. By contrast, Asian Americans, often touted as the model minority as a group that can assimilate quickly and that can "outwhite the whites"—have yet to make a stamp on the larger society.

According to the manifesto put out by the Asian American Political Alliance, a group that advocated for the establishment of a formal Asian American Studies program at Berkeley in 1969: "The plight of the Asian-American is one of forced rejection of his own culture in favor of the dominant one in order to survive. This process of accommodation, which often appears under the guise of acculturation, has produced considerable psychological damage" (Tuch 1971: 265). If the repression of Asian Americans is linked to the desire to be recognized as American, the alternative to eclipsing ethnic legacies in order to achieve such recognition is to change the terms of what constitutes "American." Thanks to the growing emphasis on multiculturalism today—however superficial its implementation may be—Asian Americans are taking a greater interest in their ancestral cultures. It is no coincidence that an ever-expanding body of Asian American literature and cinema has emerged in the wake of this growing interest[4].

New Demographics. Bridging Asia and Asian America is especially crucial in the light of current demography. Because of the new immigration policy established in 1965 enabling a large number of Asians to come to the United States, the majority of Asians residing in this country are now foreign-born. Many of the new immigrants are embedded in extended families that cross national boundaries. For them connection with Asia is a given. Continuing to insist on the rigid separation between Asian and Asian American can only further isolate these new immigrants and deepen the rift between foreign-born and American-born Asians.

Cultural Nationalism and Community. Generational conflicts aside, many new immigrants have experienced an acute sense of isolation, humiliation, and dislocation. Even highly educated Asian immigrants are often looked down upon for speaking English with an accent instead of being respected for their bilingual skills[5]. One of the most unforgettable examples of dislocation occurred in April 1992, after the "not-guilty" verdict acquitting the four police officers accused of brutally beating Rodney King. In the ensuing uprising that broke out in South Central, the shops of many Korean immigrants were looted and burned. Writing in the wake of the upheavals, Elaine Kim makes a strong case for cultural nationalism: "Korean national consciousness, the resolve to resist and fight back when threatened with extermination, was all that could be called upon when the Korean Americans in Los Angeles found themselves abandoned. They joined together to guard each other's means of livelihood... It is far easier for Anglo Americans to call for an end to cultural nationalisms than for Korean Americans to give up national consciousness, which makes it possible to survive the vicious racism that would deny our existence as either Korean Americans or Americans" (1993: 229–230).

The question remains whether such cultural nationalism might threaten Asian American coalition. This same question, however, is often asked about the current effort at building a multicultural America, whether it would lead to "the disuniting of America" or to "balkanization."[6] Those of us who believe that diversity can lead to a richer and more egalitarian America see no reason why cultural nationalism cannot likewise contribute to a variegated Asian America. But I myself would prefer to put
the emphasis not on nationalism, which does have a tendency to exclude, but on culture and community, which is constantly evolving and interacting with other cultures and communities.

Autonomy or Self-Determination. Speaking of the anti-colonial struggles of the post-World War II period in Africa, Gary Y. Okihiro notes: "Reclaiming the past and decolonizing the culture of the oppressed andesated and accompanied the drive for political liberation" (20). Okihiro further points out that the struggles waged by peoples of the Third World directly influenced the struggle for ethnic studies in American universities: "The institutionalization of Asian American Studies was an outcome of the Third World student movement that repudiated 'brainwashing' and advocated relevance in education" (22)[7]. If Asian Americans distance themselves from Asia in reaction to the dominant gaze, reclaiming a bicultural heritage can be the first step toward autonomy. Trying to be or become American by going against what is stereotypically Asian only reinforces the norm dictated by the dominant culture. Asian Americans need to resist rather than accept the racist equation of cultural persistence with political loyalty. Instead of merely assimilating, we can join other minority groups by turning the mainstream into myriad distinctive tributaries. The traditional image of America as white and Western is currently under siege. Educational institutions and media have stressed the reality and potential of cultural diversity in the United States. This political climate has encouraged Asian Americans to learn more about their ancestral past. But looking to Asia for inspiration can pose challenges and dangers as well. Let me illustrate my point by returning to the two Aliiieee! anthologies.

Diversity. First, connection with Asia involves confronting the diversity within Asian America. An Asian American heritage must reflect its multiple components. The Chinese and Japanese heroic works canonized by the editors of The Big Aliiieee! glorifies male martial heroes primarily. While some Chinese American and Japanese American men may find these works invigorating and empowering, women and pacifists may feel otherwise. Nor can that literary tradition speak to South and Southeast Asian Americans.

Hybridity. Second, by connection I do not mean replicating Asian culture or reclaiming a pure tradition. Asian American culture has roots in the intersection between the Old World and the New. We need not adopt Asian cultures uncritically. Kim, who argues for Korean cultural nationalism after the Los Angeles uprising, nevertheless cautions against some of its tenets, "because it operates on exclusions and fosters intolerance and uniformity of thought while stifling self-criticism and encouraging sacrifice, even to the point of suicide" (1993:229). Nor do we need to reject non-Asian influences. An autonomous Asian American culture does not preclude active engagement with other cultures, though it undermines the notion of a dominant American heritage.

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