Transnational Asia: New Books

Politics in Positioning Taiwan in a Global Context: Being and Becoming
Edited by Bi-yu Chang and Pei-yin Lin.

From Confinement to Containment:
Japanese/American Arts during the Early Cold War
By Edward Tang

Following the People’s Republic of China’s meteoric economic rise in the last two decades, East Asian histories and geopolitics have garnered increased academic attention from scholars of all fields. It is thus no surprise that recent years have also seen a corresponding increase in interdisciplinary scholarship on the history, aesthetics, and politics of Taiwan. Given Taiwan’s complex relationship with the People’s Republic (and the KMT’s Cold War era “Free China” branding), its unique post-colonial trajectory, and consequent cultural transformations, studies on Taiwan are a valuable resource for scholars interested in post-colonial studies and comparative histories of Asia. Recent work in the field has moved away from the limitations of the Cold War rhetoric that has traditionally influenced studies on Taiwan. The Taiwan sketched out in recent scholarship is no longer one associated with isolation and cultural homogeneity. Instead, in accounts such as Japanese Taiwan: Colonial Rule and Its Contested Legacy (Morris, 2015), Connecting Taiwan: Participation—Integration—Impacts (Storm, 2018), and Comparatizing Taiwan (Shih, 2014), the emerging picture of Taiwan highlights the country’s diversity, its connectedness with the rest of Asia, and the multiplicity of influences behind its cultural, political, and social transformations.

Like the books just mentioned, Bi-yu Chang and Pei-yin Lin’s edited volume Positioning Taiwan in a Global Context: Being and Becoming (Routledge, 2019) is an interdisciplinary collection that brings together scholars from different fields, including history, film and literature studies, geography, tourism studies, and cultural anthropology. In the introduction, Chang and Lin explain that while much of the existing scholarship on the history of modern Taiwan and Taiwanese identity is
rightfully concerned with the island’s imperial and colonial influences, it is not enough to focus only on relations between Taiwan and China, or Taiwan and imperial Japan, in considering modern Taiwan’s changing cultural and political climate. Such a perspective, Chang and Lin imply, risks oversimplifying the process of cultural transformation in Taiwan as being inevitable and dominated by external forces (2). The scholars contributing to this volume thus seek to broaden the horizons of scholarship on Taiwan by considering the island’s “subjectivity.” By prioritizing Taiwan and the perspectives of its inhabitants, the authors convey a sense of Taiwan as a site of cultural and political exchange that is historically distinct from mainland China, Japan, or the anti-Communist bloc.

Chang and Lin emphasize that their focus on Taiwanese subjectivity does not imply an opposition to mainland China (or the world), but instead simply seeks to examine Taiwan’s hybrid culture and the effects of globalization with more attention paid to the agency of domestic actors in the process of negotiating and resisting global influences (4). Additionally, the concept of “indigeneity” plays an important part in the theoretical foundations of the book. While they attempt to make the perspectives of Taiwanese actors central to their analyses, the contributing scholars also caution against essentializing or romanticizing Taiwan in the process. In other words, the volume shies away from considering what is original or “authentic” in Taiwan to be simply a matter of original descent (i.e., aboriginal groups, separate from Chinese and Japanese colonizers). Rather, what can be considered authentically Taiwanese, ethnically, culturally, and aesthetically, is constantly being redefined and negotiated.

Structurally, the book is divided into three parts, “Repositioning Taiwan,” “Cultural Flows and Becoming,” and “The Production and Contestation of Indigeneity.” The first part features five chapters focused on literature, and explores themes related to indigenization of genres and the politics of translation. Iris Ma’s chapter, “The Making of Taiwanese Martial Arts Fiction: The Case of Gu Long,” for example, explores the ways in which Gu Long, one of Taiwan’s most celebrated martial arts novelists, refashioned (or discarded entirely) traditional wuxia tropes in the context of Taiwanese and world politics between the 1950s and 1970s. Because of the KMT-led “Cultural Cleansing Movement” in the early 1950s, Taiwan’s sociopolitical environment in the post-war decades was not receptive to many existing sub-genres of Chinese fiction, on the basis that they did not reinforce “nationalist-moralist” values strongly enough. It was precisely such pressures, combined with Gu Long’s own eclectic tastes, that led him to reconsider wuxia conventions by blending influences from world literature and traditional Chinese martial arts novels in his own writing process.
The second section, “Cultural Flows and Becoming,” explores multi-directional cultural flows by considering power relations and the impact of globalization/glocalization. Michelle Huang’s chapter, “Let’s Talk about Love: Hong Kong’s Geopolitical Narratives of Emotion and Stories of Lifestyle Migration in Taiwan,” is timely, given the ongoing political crisis in Hong Kong. Huang analyzes the recent “Taiwan craze” among Hong Kongers in light of the rapid transformations that have occurred since the 1997 transition to the PRC. Specifically, Huang examines the language used by Hong Kong “lifestyle migrants” to Taiwan. Lifestyle migration is termed a privileged type of movement defined by the migrant’s association of travel with therapeutic, self-making, and hedonistic qualities. Huang shows how, increasingly, Hong Kong migrants to Taiwan (whose numbers have been growing steadily since 1997, and exponentially since 2011) have described Taiwan in a variety of terms that seem to hearken back to colonial-era descriptions. Taiwan is imagined by migrants to be both “pastoral” and conducive to a “slow-paced life,” in contrast to the bustling, ever-busy streets of the city of Hong Kong. Taiwan is both feminized, a land where welcoming and docile women can “feed men’s egos” (qtd. in Chang and Lin 150), but also rendered gender-neutral, as a place where both Hong Kong men and women can cast a romantic gaze and form emotional bonds to the land. Hong Kong artists, writers, and business people have imagined the island largely in optimistic and idyllic terms, and home to a variety of “small pleasures,” and the possibility of a comfortable petty-bourgeois life. Huang shows how these imaginings of Taiwan have formed in stark contrast to young Hong Kong people’s impressions of their own city, rendered “unlovable” because of the pro-China associations embedded in terms like aiguo aigang, and aigangli (156). Faced with increased competition from mainland Chinese and fewer job opportunities in Hong Kong, young Hong Kong people (especially small business owners, and cultural/creative industry workers) have increasingly entertained these Taiwan dreams. Huang shows how the idealized Taiwan often runs up against reality: Taiwan is itself a highly urbanized and bustling landscape, with increasing property prices, and economic pressures that are particularly hard on young graduates. However, it is nonetheless important to realize how such images and impressions of Taiwan have emerged from within an unexpected context. Rather than from colonials (or patriots), a romanticized Taiwan arises from the disaffected youth of Hong Kong, as both a creative escapist’s utopia, and as a political and cultural foil to the People’s Republic.

Section Three, “The Production and Contestation of Indigeneity,” explores cultural appropriation and adaptation between national and ethnic boundaries. Like the first section, the chapters featured here largely focus on an analysis of media,
specifically cinema and manga. Teri Silvio, in “Localizing the Japanese Manga System and Making Folk Religion Manga-esque,” shows how the Taiwanese artist Wei Tsung-cheng adapted the visual style and business model of widely popular Japanese manga comics to his own Taiwan-centered creations. Specifically, Wei’s series *Ming Zhan-lu: Final Destiny of the Formosan Gods*, which ran between 2014 and 2016, features a narrative completely grounded in Buddhist and Daoist ontology, with characters inspired by figures from Chinese folk religion (such as Mazu, goddess of the ocean). The series’ aesthetics, however, are drawn from Japanese manga traditions, which are evident in the character types (like that of the “beautiful young man” and the “cutesy” moe school girls and kawaii deities) and the interesting incorporation of Shinto anthropomorphic nature spirits into the setting’s predominantly Buddhist and Daoist mythology. By analyzing the *Ming Zhan-lu* series, Silvio shows how innovation emerges from an attempt to localize Japanese manga. The series is one cultural artifact among many that exemplifies how Japanese pop culture has been absorbed into Taiwan’s culture, and it suggests changing attitudes among Taiwan’s young generation about the boundaries between Japanese and Taiwanese culture and aesthetics. By reinventing Taiwanese deities with a Shinto twist, perhaps artists and creative workers like Wei are also bringing about subtle and profound transformations among the younger generation’s concepts of religion, divinity, and humanity.

The fourteen chapters presented in this volume succeed in sketching out Taiwan as a hub for multi-directional cultural exchange, interaction, and human movement. The contributing scholars’ diverse approaches complement each other well and are able to bring out the many layers of different cultural influences behind Taiwan’s contemporary culture. Moreover, by examining elements of Taiwan’s land and culture from the perspective of foreign observers, as several of the authors do, new insights can be made about the figurative and symbolic place Taiwan occupies in Asia and the world. However, it is worth noting that the present collection is heavily reliant on literary and film analysis, which dominate the first and third section of the book. While these approaches are effective in highlighting specific instances of innovation and hybridity within Taiwanese cultural artifacts, and while the present articles have contained compelling arguments for the symbolic importance of these works, there can be a limit to how broadly such analyses can be extrapolated beyond specific creators and genres. Therefore, the incorporation of studies on other aspects of Taiwan’s culture, such as those drawing upon the realm of sports or other cultural events, as Chang and Lin acknowledge, would provide some balance to a collection that relies heavily on textual analysis.
In terms of the book’s geographic coverage, *Positioning Taiwan in a Global Context* provides excellent articles that incorporate transnational analyses, but most concentrate on cultural interactions and migration between South East and East Asian countries, especially among Taiwan, Japan, and China, undercutting the title’s claim to a broader, global reach. This is a puzzling limitation, considering the many prominent Taiwanese writers, filmmakers, entrepreneurs and artists with international connections beyond Asia, whose lives and careers can be explored critically and with an eye to future Taiwanese cultural and economic prospects. Temporally, the book skews toward modern-contemporary, so additional studies that draw on history, historical anthropology and economic methods would be welcome for insights into human movement, indigenization, and cultural exchange in Taiwan prior to the twentieth century. However, *Positioning Taiwan* is still an excellent contribution to the field of Taiwan studies; each article brings forth original topics and insights, is a joy to read, and is presented in a way that fits with the book’s prescribed aims.

Edward Tang’s *From Confinement to Containment: Japanese/American Arts During the Early Cold War* (Temple University Press, 2019) is a study of the lives and works of four Japanese American artists and writers who were active during the Cold War era, and whose work was shaped by the Second World War, along with a consideration of the global trends that took place in the decades afterwards. In focusing on post-war Japanese American history, and specifically on how prominent Japanese Americans were influenced by wartime confinement, Edward Tang sheds light on an important period that complicates the triumphal narrative of America’s “Good War.” While many historians have discussed Japan’s rapid transition from savage enemy to docile ally of the United States after the 1950s, and Japanese confinement during the war and the subsequent transformation of Japanese-Americans into “model citizens” are also well-trodden historical avenues, fewer have combined these topics with direct attention to the arts.

In addition to using the arts as a mode of cultural critique, Tang’s choice of characters, who are defined by their complex backgrounds and transnational movement, is also a unique contribution in itself. By extrapolating from the lives of one Japanese and three Isei and Nissei artists and writers, Tang shows how they acted as both “products and shapers” of cultural and political exchanges between Japan and America (13). Between the late 1940s and the 1960s, the literary and visual narratives produced by such artists exhibited their conflicted emotions about America’s
treatment of Asian immigrants, official Cold War ideologies, institutions, and cultural authorities. However, many of these same works also fell short of outright resistance or accommodation when faced with postwar US demands for Japanese Americans’ “fidelity and forgetfulness,” due in part because of the artists’ need to appeal to mainstream American audiences, critics, and institutions for professional survival (11). Tang argues that these artists had to develop “flexible strategies” to convey stories,” which often entailed strategic revisions (or omissions) of political stance in their work, and the adoption of themes and methods from a diverse set of artistic and literary traditions (11).

The first chapter of the book introduces Hanama Tasaki (1913-96), a Hawaii-born writer most famous for his antiwar novel, Long the Imperial Way (1950). Tasaki’s story complicates the historical narratives of Japanese Americans in Hawaii, which have portrayed the Nisei as patriotic and loyal model citizens. After studying at Oberlin College and the University of Hawaii, Tasaki became increasingly interested in his ancestral homeland, which was gaining power and influence in Asia. Because Tasaki was unhappy about the racial prejudice he faced at the hands of Hawaii’s Haole (upper-class white) population, he decided to uproot himself in 1936 to enlist in the Imperial Japanese Army, which stationed him in China, before carrying him into tours in the South Pacific after 1941. After the war, Tasaki remained in Japan and worked variety of jobs, and his war experiences, and especially feelings of guilt, drove him to work on a novel. Tasaki wrote Long the Imperial Way in English, and privately published the book, which he offered to Tokyo bookstores catering to Occupation forces in 1949. Unexpectedly, an American officer in Japan recommended the book to a Boston-based publisher, which published it a year later to widespread critical acclaim. The novel is about the life of a Japanese soldier, Takeo Yamamoto, who suffers physical and emotional struggles during his time stationed in China in the late 1930s. Takeo not only suffers under incredibly abusive leadership, but is also forced to dole out violence to the Chinese populace. The novel traces the development of Takeo’s moral conscience, as he turns from a believer in the cause, to someone who rejects the war and the empire’s brutal expansionism. Tasaki presents an unusual case study: he was a Nisei who migrated away from the States, while his work aimed to appeal to American audiences. Moreover, Long the Imperial Way does not contain any mention of the Nisei or Issei, and seems completely unconcerned with American life and culture. It is a novel solely about the drudgery and violence of war in China. Yet Tang stresses the importance of analyzing Tasaki’s life in work through Susan Koshy’s concept of “minority cosmopolitanism,” which argues for the significance of works that “address, reconfigure, and result from contacts beyond
national borders” (17). Tasaki’s life was shaped by the economic and racial pressures he faced in America, but he remained a double minority subject in Japan as a Nisei soldier in the Imperial Army, even as he was given the power to oppress others. In interviews, Tasaki stated that he hoped his work would promote free cultural exchange between Asia and the United States, which in turn would lead to more peaceful international relations. However, Tang also argues that Tasaki’s novel can be interpreted as a warning against the United States and the intertwined legacies of war and empire building in Asia, just as America began to reassert itself militarily in Japan and Korea in the 1950s.

The second chapter is about Yamaguchi Yoshiko (1920-2014), a singer and actor who was born in Manchuria to Japanese parents, but who was fluent in several languages and identified culturally with China. Like Tasaki, Yamaguchi inhabited multiple, “overlapping” worlds, and the trajectory of her career was determined by a complex set of factors including her ethnicity, postwar (and Cold War) politics, and her experiences working in productions that dealt with two very different kinds of “empire.” Yamaguchi became famous in wartime Japan and China for portraying the Chinese love interests of Japanese servicemen. Upon the end of World War Two, Yamaguchi was accused of treason by the Kuomintang government in China for collaborating with the Japanese, though they released her when she revealed her Japanese identity. She then appeared in several productions in Japan, before deciding to venture into Hollywood in 1950. After the war, Yamaguchi replaced her Chinese film persona with a Japanese one: originally known as Li Xianglan in Chinese, she was now Shirley Yamaguchi, and she quickly gained popularity for portraying the “Japanese war bride” wooed by American G.I.s, appearing in such films as Japanese War Bride (1952) and House of Bamboo (1955). These films were produced at a time when US-Japan relations and race relations were especially controversial in both countries. To the many Japanese, the idea of native women fraternizing with the occupying Americans heightened feelings of defeat, and disgust at the mixed-race progeny that resulted from such pairings. For many Americans, Japan was still remembered as a hated wartime enemy. The presence of such Japanese war brides in the US in the 1950s and 1960s challenged segregation and miscegenation laws, though the United States was also trying to improve its image abroad as a multi-ethnic democracy and downplay its racist practices to appear as a superior alternative to communist societies. Yamaguchi’s decision to portray Japanese war brides was intriguing because of the similarities between her previous associations as a Chinese love interest: her characters brought out the tensions of empire in both the Japanese and post-war American contexts, and showed how gender was an essential symbol
within imperial hierarchies. Yamaguchi’s career in Hollywood was relatively short, and although she was married to Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi from 1951 to 1955, she did not pursue American citizenship. However, she became an important symbol for Nisei audiences in America, who saw commonalities between themselves and the characters she portrayed. Tang emphasizes the historical significance of Yamaguchi’s career because she “epitomized [both Japan and America’s] intersecting stances on interracial intimacies that validated and disrupted their colonizing presence” (56). Yamaguchi’s complex cultural background and the timing of her productions gave her the opportunity to evoke broader social and political developments surrounding US-Japan relations for a diverse audience.

The third chapter features the Japan-born Issei artist Henry Sugimoto (1900-90), whose postwar work often revisited the harrowing time he and his family spent in the wartime internment camps in Jerome and Rohwer, Arkansas. Sugimoto was born in Wakayama, Japan, but immigrated to Hanford, California in 1919 to live with his parents, who had already immigrated years before. Sugimoto studied oil painting at the California College of Arts and Crafts, and graduated in 1928. Soon after, he spent several years in France painting and refining his skills, before returning to California in 1932 where he began to enjoy success exhibiting his work, and where he married his wife, Susie Tagawa, in 1934. However, Sugimoto and his family were forced from their Hanford home following the advent of America’s war with Japan in 1941, and eventually ended up in inland War Relocation camps in Arkansas. Sugimoto and other detainees were forbidden from documenting camp life at first when the camps were under US Army supervision, but once supervision duties were transferred to the War Relocation Authority, Sugimoto and other aspiring artists were allowed to paint and photograph their surroundings and document life in the camps. Tang notes that, like Tasaki, Sugimoto complicates the success narrative of Japanese-born immigrants becoming loyal model citizens of the United States. Unlike many other artists that were influenced by their experiences in the camps, Sugimoto was haunted by it for most of his career, and his work often featured subjects and landscapes derived from these memories, racial discrimination, and the dropping of atomic bombs on Japanese cities. Still, Sugimoto embraced the opportunity to become an American: he became a naturalized citizen in 1952, and spent most of his postwar life in America. Tang points out that Sugimoto’s work, which combined elements from Mexican mural art and French Post-Impressionism and folk art, did not enjoy as much success in the postwar years due to the surge in popularity of expressionism and abstract modes (like Abstract Expressionism, which was both touted by the CIA and State Department as a symbol of American freedom, and
practiced in resistance to McCarthyism and Cold War politics). Despite his interrupted career, the trauma of incarceration and subsequent postwar challenges, Sugimoto remained undaunted, and enjoyed success in international exhibitions (especially in Japan), and went on to become a key figure in the Japanese-American redress movement in the 1980s.

The final chapter centers on Yoshiko Uchida (1921-92), a Californian-born Nisei and award-winning author of young adult literature. Uchida had a career spanning from the late 1940s to the early 1990s, but Tang focuses his analysis on the earlier half of her career, up until the 1960s. Uchida’s early work was heavily influenced by her experience of being incarcerated in a War Relocation camp in Topaz, Utah. Although as a child she had wanted to be “American, not Japanese,” she realized that the federal government saw otherwise (161). Many Issei and Nisei were all too familiar with racial discrimination in the States and after Pearl Harbor many tried even harder to distance themselves from their ancestral culture as a survival strategy. For Uchida, however, confinement marked the beginning of a lifelong appreciation for Japanese culture. Like Sugimoto, Uchida’s career was shaped by her experiences in the camp, but rather than representing an explicit and solemn social and political critique, many of the earlier stories Uchida told (especially in children’s books) were inspired by the stories and Japanese folktales that she heard in the camps. Nonetheless, one of Uchida’s primary missions was to foster an understanding of common humanity and appreciation for different cultures among her young readers, precisely in order to dampen the fear and anger that led to conflict and racially discriminatory acts like wartime incarceration. Uchida also acknowledged her role as a cultural broker in her adaptation of the folktales to make them more meaningful to American children. The Dancing Kettle and Other Japanese Folk Tales (1949) and The Magic Listening Cap: More Folk Tales from Japan (1955) are two early publications that exemplify these features: many of the stories feature fairy-tale themes and characters similar to other traditions found around the world. Tang points out that the stories frequently contain anthropomorphized objects, trees, and animals (like *kami* spirits from Shinto tradition), but are in many ways hardly different from classic morality tales (often facilitated by animals) in *Aesop’s Fables*, *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, and stories from African American folklore. However, Tang also explores other writings by Uchida from the same period that suggest a growing interest in memory and justice, and which feature deeply tragic explorations of camp life. For example, the unpublished story “Crepe Paper Flowers,” likely written in 1952, was based on the real-life shooting of an elderly Issei man, James Hastuki Wakasa, at the hands of a Topaz camp guard who claimed that Wakasa was attempting escape. The incident
was traumatizing for the Japanese-American community in Topaz, and was documented by several other Japanese American artists and writers. Although her literary agent supported the story, Uchida could not find a publisher for this and other similarly tragic stories: they seemed to be too different from what the general public wanted to read in the 1950s. Although outside the scope of Tang’s book, he emphasizes that Uchida is now remembered most often for the books she began publishing as part of the redress movement in the 1970s and 1980s—works such as *Journey to Topaz: A Story of the Japanese-American Evacuation* (1971) and *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family* (1982) on Japanese incarceration—despite the fact that she still continued to publish children’s books and folktale collections up until her death.

Tang’s contribution is valuable for several reasons. First, his choice in examining the lives and work of Asian and Asian-American artists and writers who were active across national borders complements well the extant literature dealing with both American Cold War cultural legacies in Asia and US-Asia relations, where the themes of justice, immigration, and “outsider” populations (including expatriates and their mixed-race families, refugees, and orphans) are much in evidence. Tang’s choice of figures provides for insightful analysis, for they clearly each represent exceptions to the norm: Yoshiko and Tasaki lived truly transnational lives and their backgrounds allow for interesting interpretations of their careers, while Sugimoto and Uchida both engaged with their memories of confinement in ways that diverged from most Japanese-American artists with similar experiences. Moreover, the book’s structure allows for a contained monograph of each figure, which is necessary for the vastly different circumstances they inhabited. Yet Tang maintains thematic consistency in a way that connects each person’s story to the book’s broader interest in early Cold War cultural exchanges, empire and occupation, Japanese-American liminality, and the process of healing that incarcerated Japanese-Americans endured.

However, at the same time, the complexity of the characters does present a challenge for Tang, especially insofar as the book is concerned with broader themes that revolve around transnational exchanges and empire building in the Cold War era. The narrative and analysis provided for Tasaki and Yoshiko diverge from Sugimoto and Uchida in this regard: the former are largely stories that do not directly concern America from the perspective of Americans (despite Tasaki’s Nisei status). Tang is correct in highlighting how their work is significant for our understanding of postwar US-Japan relations, especially with issues regarding occupation and the molding of Japan into a “model ally,” and the section examining Yoshiko’s career, and portrayal of Chinese and Japanese brides in varying contexts provides excellent insight into the
similarities and differences between attitudes toward inter-ethnic couplings in Japan and America. However, considering that the book’s primary focus on Japanese/American interactions, perhaps an increased focus on the reception of Yoshiko’s work by Issei and later generations of Nisei, for example, could have helped link this section more seamlessly with the subsequent ones. Moreover, Tang’s emphasis is on early (pre-1965) Cold War interactions, but in the case of several figures, most notably Uchida, the production and reception of work leading up to the redress movement in the 1980s would be worth exploring in greater detail.

These points notwithstanding, From Confinement to Containment is an engagingly written and well-researched contribution to Cold War and Asian American studies. Tang provides close readings of Japanese and Japanese-American artists with an eye to Cold War geopolitics and culture, and despite his focus on only four individuals, he argues adeptly for recognition of the symbolic significance of their work for the broader Japanese and American communities.

Works Cited

About the Author
Aidan Lee is a recent graduate of the University of Chicago’s Social Sciences Master Program, with a concentration in East Asian History. His research interests include the cultural history of Japanese- and Chinese-Nationalist-ruled Taiwan. His MA thesis, titled “Game of Empire: Baseball, Assimilation, and Representations of Japanese Taiwan,” is an examination of cultural assimilation policies during the Japanese era from the perspective of the history of sports and physical education. He hopes to continue research in this field at the PhD level in the coming years.