

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Internationalism Beyond the “Yellow Peril”: On the Possibility of Transnational Asian American Solidarity

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3n6934zz>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 11(2)

Author

Liu, Wen

Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/T8112050102

Copyright Information

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Internationalism Beyond the “Yellow Peril”: On the Possibility of Transnational Asian American Solidarity

WEN LIU,
Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica

The Covid-19 pandemic has rearticulated racial discourses in unprecedented ways and at an accelerating pace. The resurgent protests of Black Lives Matter (BLM) demand fundamental changes in the criminal (in)justice system and racial relations in the US following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor as well as the brutal shooting of Jacob Blake. While systemic racism is often framed in Black and white terms in the US, the pandemic has again reminded us that white supremacy functions across racial communities and geographical scale. Despite many political frictions still existing among Asian Americans concerning their support for the movement, there are more visible representations of Asian Americans in the streets challenging the antiblackness within their communities and voicing support for Black lives, especially compared to the 2014–2015 pro-police Chinese American mobilization over Peter Liang’s shooting of Akai Gurley.¹ Firstly, the shift can be attributed to the fact that Asian Americans can no longer see police as mere bystanders of white crimes. The presence of Tou Thao—the Hmong American officer at the scene of George Floyd’s murder—amplified that not speaking up equals reinforcing the structure of racial violence. Secondly, amidst the pandemic, people of Asian descent face an incrementally high number of incidents of harassment and assaults in the streets and in public discourses, in which President Trump racializes coronavirus as the “China virus.” The transnational circulation of the archetype of the contagious Orientalist demystifies the colorblind façade of Asianness as the subject of neoliberal multiculturalism. Asianness, too, is a marked body that holds the white projection of racial Othering.

However, the point of Asian–Black solidarity is neither recentring Asian American experiences in the struggle toward police abolition nor placing racism against Black and Asian American communities in the same comparative framework. These approaches would minimize Black people’s repression by the carceral state and fall into the unproductive logic of an “Oppression Olympics.” The 1960s slogan that some Asian Americans have repopularized—“Yellow Peril Supports Black Power”—in order to support the current movement² has stirred up debates relating to Asian Americans’ relationship to the ongoing Black struggles. While it highlights the historically bounded fate and formation of the Asian American and Black Power movements,³ it should also remind us that the 1960s Asian–Black solidarity was made possible by the antiimperialist positions of anti-Vietnam war and the decolonial movements in the global South. The Orientalist depiction of Asian nationals as “foreign enemies” during World War II constituted the “perpetual foreigner” status of Asian American subjects, thus demanding an Asian American critique of racial exclusion and the US empire. In other words, the demand for racial inclusion and equality as the basis of Asian–Black solidarity without problematizing the transnational reach of US imperialism is not only anachronistic but also counterproductive. As Minju Bae and Mark Tseng-Putterman articulate, the interconnected events of Orientalist racialization of the Asian body as virally contagious and BLM’s uprisings against policing “require an analysis that sutures the discourses of antiblackness and Orientalism, not as equivalent but constitutive components of global racial capitalism,”⁴ rather than flattening the differences of white supremacist operations under the US nation-state.

In the midst of a global pandemic and social upheavals, how will transnational Asian–Black solidarity take shape? Currently living in Taipei, Taiwan, I am involved in an emergent circle of diasporic Asian radicals who write and organize around the vibrant left-leaning movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong and seek to build international solidarity based on a critique of both US and Chinese imperialism. This new activist milieu that has been described as “transnationally Asian”⁵ not only rejects Asian American assimilationist politics and the narrow focus of liberal international politics around democracy and human rights, but also actively seeks cross-national and cross-racial points of racial encounters and challenges the orthodox Western leftist takes on social movements that often defer to a reductionist binarism of “capitalism versus communism.” For example, a Hong Kong activist was excluded from participating in a BLM solidarity event hosted by the Sunrise Movement, an American youth-led climate organization, due to some US leftists’ Twitter commentaries that misrepresented Hong Kong’s protests against Beijing’s increasingly harsh conditions of authoritarian control as being funded by the US military. Writers from *Lausan*, a leftist Hong Kong press, have condemned such mischaracterization of Hong Kong’s ongoing mass movement as merely manipulated by US imperialism and, instead, insisted on the importance of building alliances between Hong Kong’s struggle against authoritarianism and BLM’s vision of police abolition.⁶

From this single case, one can understand that building transnational solidarity is complex and arduous work, both conceptually and practically. It requires us to maneuver from one ideological trap to another across geopolitical contexts and locally specific historical conditions. While transnational iteration is emancipatory and necessary to achieve a genuine form of Asian–Black solidarity, it must be built on a bidirectional and bifocal analysis instead of merely relying on the US-centric epistemology of what constitutes leftist politics. By seeking transnationalism from the West toward the non-West and not vice versa, it's easy to fall into the logic of Western “China apologists” or neo-Cold War logic, dismissing the interasian conflicts that also have global ramifications. To put it in another way, as China criminalizes Hong Kong's fight for fundamental democratic rights and implements mass arrests of young activists under the National Security Laws,⁷ a progressive Asian American politics must not only be focused on racial relations domestically but challenge multiple forms of Empire beyond the borders of the US. Only through this multidimensional transnational praxis can we begin to see the underlying mechanisms that allow BLM activists from Minneapolis to Seattle to adopt Hong Kong protesters' strategies against the police.⁸ These possibilities for alliance among “transnationally Asian” activists include protesters in Hong Kong and the US using umbrellas and tennis rackets to protect themselves from tear gas, the joint coalition between Taiwanese indigenous organizations and Black Lives Matter Taiwan calling out racism,⁹ and Singaporeans debating whether to topple their colonial monuments.¹⁰

Our current shared struggles against the rapid right-wing turn of global hegemones do not draw lines between the simple binaries of “East vs. West,” “white vs. Black,” or “authoritarianism vs. democracy,” but underscore the interconnected fights against the militarized police state, neoliberal capitalist order, Han supremacy, and the continued impacts of Euro-American coloniality. The “yellow peril” may have been a useful metaphor describing the shared racialization of the Asian body against white supremacy and US imperialism; the politics of internationalism in the present conditions requires a much more nuanced analysis of interregional geopolitics across the transpacific. The possibility of transnational Asian American solidarity must be situated beyond the framework of “one united race against one empire.” Indeed, the fast-growing infection and mortality rates of Covid-19 show that the virus cannot be simply contained by national borders, and our racial critique must also be extended transnationally. When a disease is racialized, it not only exposes the racial inequalities built in the global public health infrastructures but also how mechanisms of national security require the domination of subjects who are deemed to be “outsiders.” Rather than falling into a nationalistic blame game based on the Cold War logic—choosing sides between one empire (the US) and another (China)—the pandemic requires us to engage in the racial justice and antinativist struggles in our different localities as well as hold one another's movements accountable to an internationalist vision of collective survival.

Notes

- 1 Wen Liu, “Complicity and Resistance: Asian American Body Politics in and against Black Lives Matter,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 3 (2018); 421–451, DOI:10.1353/jaas.2018.0026.
- 2 Re the debate on “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power,” see Taylor Weik, “The History behind ‘Yellow Peril Supports Black Power’ and Why Some Find It Problematic,” *NBC Asian American*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/history-behind-yellow-peril-supports-black-power-why-some-find-n1228776>.
- 3 Diane C. Fujino, *Samurai among Panthers: Richard Aoki on Race, Resistance, and a Paradoxical Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), DOI:10.5749/minnesota/9780816677863.001.0001.
- 4 Minju Bae and Mark Tseng-Putterman, “Reviving the History of Radical Black-Asian Internationalism,” *ROAW Magazine*, July 21, 2020, <https://roarmag.org/essays/reviving-the-history-of-radical-black-asian-internationalism>.
- 5 E. Tammy Kim, “Transnationally Asian: A New Media Neighborhood for an Emerging World,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 21, 2020, https://www.cjr.org/special_report/transnationally_asian.php.
- 6 J. N. and J. S., “We Can’t Let China Apologists Stop Us from Supporting Black Lives Matter,” *Lausan*, June 18, 2020, <https://lausan.hk/2020/we-cant-let-china-apologists-stop-us-from-supporting-black-lives-matter/>.
- 7 J. S. and R. S., “Under China’s Thumb: Hong Kong’s Struggle for Democracy amidst the New Cold War,” *Spectre Journal*, August 1, 2020, <https://spectrejournal.com/under-chinas-thumb/>.
- 8 Allison Williams, “How Umbrellas Became the Symbol of Seattle Protests,” *Seattle Met*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.seattlemet.com/news-and-city-life/2020/06/how-umbrellas-became-the-symbol-of-seattle-george-floyd-protests>.
- 9 “Taiwan Black Lives Matter Protest Gets Indigenous Twist,” *Reuters*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-minneapolis-police-protests-taiwan/taiwan-black-lives-matter-protest-gets-indigenous-twist-idUSKBN23K0CE>.
- 10 Kim, “Transnationally Asian.”