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Authoritarianism, Affect, and Queerness; Engaging the Role of Subjectivity, Identity, and Social Movements in an Asian American Context

An interview with Wen Liu, *Academia Sinica*

Interviewers: Jingxue Zhang and Lukas Bullock, *University of Kentucky*

Wen Liu is a Taiwanese scholar, educator, and writer currently based in Taipei, Taiwan. She is an Assistant Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica. She received her Ph.D. from Critical Social Psychology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York in 2017. She is also an affiliated faculty in the Department of Sociology, National Taiwan University, teaching the subject of Queer Theory. Liu is currently working on a prize-winning book project under contract with the University of Illinois Press titled, Synthetic Feelings and Experimenting Flexibility: The Psychologization of Asian Americans, where she draws from queer theory, affect, and diasporic postcolonial studies to examine how psychology as a scientific discipline has created Asian Americanness as a measurable, bio-cultural population. Instead of treating Asian Americanness as a racially and nationally bounded category, the project illustrates the historical and contemporary articulations of Asian Americanness in the intertwined geopolitical relations between the US and the Asia Pacific with the use of ethnography, narrative, archive, and discourse analysis.

Lukas Bullock (LB): *As China-US relations have increasingly soured over the past decade, how do you see the ‘transnationally asian’ activism you describe in Internationalism Beyond the “Yellow Peril” fitting into activist resistance against this dynamic?*

Jingxue Zhang (JZ): *Furthermore, how do you think Taiwan, as a contested space/place fits into this picture?*

Wen Liu (WL): From the standpoint of Asian American studies, a mass amount of work has been invested in creating an anti-assimilationist and anti-nationalist politics in Asian American subjectivity. Similarly in Queer Studies, the the question of the US empire has been the main site of critique ever since its transnational turn in the early 2000s. While such work has been very influential and productive in the critique of the US empire, complicity with White Supremacy, and Western-led imperialism, much less work has been focused on the rise of China as not only a regional dominance but a global hegemony in competition with the US. This epistemological problem can be partially attributed to why there isn’t a strong consensus from both of the academic circles (Asian American and queer) to support social movements such as the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong as well as the anti-Extradition Law Amendments Bill movement in 2019, or even a strong critique of Chinese state violence in Xinjiang. The “anti-imperialist left” based in the US largely dismisses these movements and issues in a dichotomous framework of the Cold War and arbitrarily assigns them as aligning with US imperial interests, neglecting protestors’ complex social contexts and subjectivities.

As to why there is such a tendency--which we now name it “tankism” (more discussion on this concept from the Roundtable on China in Spectre)--emerging in the US critical academic circles, it’s certainly beyond the influence of a few Chinese apologist academics. It can be attributed to the past

decades of (failed) US foreign policy on engagements with China and its inherent capitalist drive in guiding the direction of international relations. But more interestingly, I argue it is a problem within our US centric knowledge production process. Despite our reflexive and critical take on the US empire, the US has remained to be the sole and most important concern over other “areas.” It turns our scholarship--despite being done by critical scholars from many national and cultural backgrounds--addressing the same issues over and over again, replicating the same Cold War critique.

What’s crucial about this emergent “transnationally Asian” activist milieu across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, is that the activists who stand critically against US imperialism and the right-wing faction in their home spaces, but also support the self-determination projects of the people in these regions. That is, struggling toward “democracy” isn’t always about aspiring toward the US model of capitalist-democracy. By critically engaging with Black Lives Matter activists’ critique against US racial capitalist project and police brutality, the transnationally Asian movements see *internationalism from below* a space for negotiating and engaging with these complexities.

JZ: *How can Queer Theory situate itself to more effectively critique (neo)imperialism, neoliberal capitalist order, and militarized police states in the 21st century? How can affect and temporality be tied into this?*

WL: I’ve come to think that perhaps Queer Theory alone is not sufficient to answer all the questions about the current states of global hegemonies we are facing. The discipline’s habit of resorting to cultural marxist critique and not taking the material conditions particularly in the Global South more seriously has resulted in its partial perspective that is still privileging the North American experiences. However, Queer Theory has been particularly productive for me to help me think alongside what “solidarity” means that is beyond an identity based politics. By rejecting any “proper subject” as the focus of our analysis, we pay more attention to the historically and structurally constructed process of any community. For instance, in my work on Asian American political subjectivity, I question the blanket statement on pan-Asian ethnic empowerment rhetoric as Asian Americanness itself is a very particular state-assisted racial craft that aims toward depicting the upward class advancements of racial minority and postraciality. Of course there are radical elements in Asian Americanness--but such claims often still run into contradictions with other racial minority communities, class interests, and the current realities of geopolitics. Queer Theory helps me to think alongside Asian Americanness also as a “subjectless critique” in order for it to produce useful analysis for the problems we are facing under globalized neoliberal capitalism.

LB: *Could you speak more on the ‘hyphenated subject’, is this subject inherently queer?*

WL: The concept of the “hyphenated subject” signifies the neoliberal futurity of postracialism of Asian Americanness that Rey Chow talks about, in which the particularity of “Asianness” gives multicultural contents to the nationalist allegiance of the US nation-state. In that sense, it can be read side-by-side with how the mainstream queer subject has become integrated into the idea of American exceptionalism and homonationalism. In this conceptualization, both the Asian American and the queer subject are no longer “excluded” from the US national imagination, but rather, bolsters its moral

legitimacy as a multicultural world leader and neoliberal hegemony. This is why the distinction between “culture” and “race” is so crucial. Once our analysis is flattened to the level of tokenized culture rather than structural racism, such as seeing Asian Americans as culturally homogenous, we ignore the class conflicts and contradictions within these categories themselves.

LB: *Can the diasporic melancholy you describe be the grounds for a coalitional solidarity between disparate marginalized groups?*

JZ: *How do you think contested intra-Asia geopolitics (e.g, Han supremacy and Japanese colonization) complicate this futurity?*

WL: I’m always cautious about diasporic forms of activism as it very often romanticizes the home nations as the ultimate psychological savior of the diasporic subjects (such as second generation Asian Americans desiring a radical “Asia” or even “China” that is no longer real in relation to its concrete political realities). However, I do think that this sense of melancholy is inevitable, and should not always be pathologized. The task lies in how we politicize this sense of melancholy--desiring connection with home states--toward analysis of intra-Asian geopolitics and critique of Han supremacy and settler colonialism. For instance, in Taiwan, the realization of the tensions between Han settlers and the indigenous communities is imperative toward any progressive projects on social equality and nation building. Similarly, a queer analysis helps us to unpack how such Han settler colonial projects have always been tied to the reinforcements of heteropatriarchy and the erasure of alternative forms of kinship and alliances even in the “home states.” Both the Asian Americanist critique and queer theory have shown us why any coalition project must be “struggling with” rather than simply “identifying with.”

JZ: *Can you share more about your new book project?*

WL: In my book project I’m thinking specifically about the construction of Asian Americanness as a racially injured yet culturally superior group by post-WWII psychology. The kind of unassimilability of Asian/Americans in the US has traditionally been understood as what excludes Asian Americans outside of national imagination. Ironically, the absorption of multiculturalism under the neoliberal capitalist project has allowed such cultural particularly of Asian/Americans to thrive economically in the US and globally. In other words, Asian/Americans are positioned not just as the “model minority” but an exceptional neoliberal subject--that is self-sufficient, productive, yet “different enough” to signify the neoliberal multicultural values. In this sense, I’m quite critical of liberal Asian American politics that is taking advantage of such construction. By analyzing the contradictions of how Chinese American immigrants organized against Black Lives Matter protests since 2014, I argue that we should be cautious when Asian Americanness is mobilized through this lens of the politics of injury.

LB: *How exciting and timely! Thank you so much for your time and for your scholarship, we look forward to reading your new book!*