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Thinking Through the Other Cold War: Transpacific and Inter-Asia Approaches

By Jini Kim Watson | July 6, 2022

Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* brilliantly diagnoses the fragmentation of postcolonial studies and Cold War studies, showing how the former has often only attended to neocolonial relations of the Third World to the West, and ignored "the competition between Western and Eastern Bloc forms of imperialism."[1] Focusing specifically on the effects on African literature during the Cold War, the book ends with several profound questions for scholarship more generally: "what if the knowledge paradigms specific to the global conflict linger on, shaping the intellectual instruments we use to explain literary phenomena today? What if the impact of the two world-systems persists beyond the demise of one of the superpowers, manifesting itself in the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and the preservation of the West's cultural and aesthetic structures?"[2]

With a focus on East and Southeast Asia, this short essay takes its cue from *At Penpoint* in order to survey some recent scholarly frames that self-reflectively and critically interrogate the Cold War's lingering "intellectual instruments" and "cultural and aesthetic structures." Before examining those frames, we should first note that the study of this region, in contrast to Africa, has been *overdetermined* by Cold War "hot conflicts": the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the standoff between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, as well as lesser-known bipolar violence such as the counterinsurgency campaigns against the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, the Malayan Emergency of 1948–1960, and the 1965 bloodletting in Indonesia. At the same time, with some important exceptions, literatures from these areas have only recently been admitted into the purview of postcolonial studies, which has usually taken South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean as its paradigmatic sites. Moreover, while East and Southeast Asia have been paramount to studies *of* the Cold War, the dominance of both US military power and US knowledge apparatuses has occluded the region as a site that *produces* Cold War theorizing. In what follows I look briefly at three recent disciplinary formations that, in different ways, seek to address these intersecting legacies of power and knowledge. They are: Heonik Kwon's notion of the "Other Cold War"; the emerging field of transpacific studies; and the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies project. My goal is not to adjudicate the "right" path, but, inspired by Popescu's work, to reflect on varying critical approaches to the deep intellectual imprint of the Cold War in studies of East and Southeast Asia.

I begin with Heonik Kwon's 2010 book *The Other Cold War*. Kwon, an anthropologist at Cambridge University whose work focuses on contemporary Korea and Vietnam, makes a number of keen interventions in this important and lucidly written work, of which I'll address just two. The first is directed at mainstream Cold War historiography, which has often posited the conflict as an "imaginary war" or a "long peace" in the EuroAmerican theater. Arguing that the Cold War is not a "unitary historical reality," *The Other Cold War* stresses the

“presence or absence of mass human death and suffering in the collective memory of the cold war.”[3] Kwon continues: “in societies that experienced the cold war as a total war or other forms of organized violence, the history of political bipolarization is analytically inseparable from the social memory of mass death and the morality of death remembrance” (121). This perceptual antagonism, between on the one hand the Cold War as “imaginary” — the superpower standoff that never erupted into war — and, on the other hand, the Cold War as total war and mass death, is precisely what someone like Don Mee Choi has explored in in her two companion poetry collections *Hardly War* (2016) and *DMZ Colony* (2020). As poetic meditations on the Korean War and the ensuing neocolonial power structures on the peninsula, these works aptly describe the epistemological bifurcation of the Cold War. The Korean War was simultaneously a bloody conflagration that killed three million and, to quote *Hardly War*, “It was hardly war, the hardliest of wars.”[4]

Kwon’s second intervention is his critique of postcolonial studies for the way it hews to the EuroAmerican view of the Cold War, missing the role of the “novel imperial order of the Cold War” in complicating decolonizing projects in the Third World.[5] He especially takes issue with accounts of colonial modernity by prominent postcolonial theorists Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee. Writing of those influential theories that aimed to “provincialize” Europe and pluralize modernity, Kwon observes that in these critiques “there are no traces of a modern Europe as we know it; that is, the Europe that, after experiencing a catastrophic war, was divided into mutually hostile forces in an undeclared ideological war.”[6]

Empire in the second half of the twentieth century was not the same entity as the Europe we know from colonial history, and the transition from one to the other was coincidental with some of the most violent events experienced in Africa and Asia. Whereas decolonization and political bipolarization were concurrent processes in much of the non-Western world . . . the scholarship of postcolonial criticism relegates the political history of the cold war to an analytical void (130).

Much postcolonial scholarship, therefore, has misapprehended its object of critique by ignoring the fundamental transformation of empire during the Cold War/decolonizing conjuncture. Kwon further argues that the emphasis on neutrality and the role of the Non-Aligned Movement fails to describe the historical realities of the era since “the majority of postcolonial states were obliged in one way or another, to participate in bipolar politics” (176). I would wager that part of the reason East and Southeast Asian cultural production has formed so little of the postcolonial canon is precisely because of this differential relationship to empire: one cannot think of postcolonial Korea of Vietnam, for example, only in vertical relation to their erstwhile colonizers Japan and France. Like Popescu, Kwon’s work makes visible the dual framework necessary for grasping the *postcolonial* Cold War. By rethinking the epistemology of “cold” in “Cold War,” Kwon shifts the focus in postcolonial studies from the “Europe we know from [South Asian] colonial history” to the transformed imperial power — and the role of the United States — in the Cold War period.

The role of the United States is key to the second disciplinary formation I turn to: Janet Hoskin and Viet Thanh Nguyen’s 2014 volume *Transpacific Studies,* which announces its field-clearing purpose in its subtitle “Framing an Emerging Field.”[7] Positioning itself at the “juncture of area studies, American Studies, and Asian American studies,” the project is less pitted against the blind spots of postcolonial studies, and more of those of the US institutional

formations of Asian Studies, on the one hand, and American and Asian American studies on the other.[8] Transpacific studies seeks to challenge the hegemony of economic and political visions of "the Pacific" by attending to processes and subjectivities left out of its remit, and interrogating the way that "legacies of imperialism, militarization and colonization" (3) have profoundly shaped the region. In their introduction the authors carefully unpack the links between Cold War bipolarity, the production of so-called Asian miracle economies, and the movement of refugees across the Pacific to underscore the *unevenness* of transpacific flows. Postcolonialism itself is a highly uneven phenomenon since "Asian memories of liberation and decolonization may efface efforts by some contemporary Asian peoples to colonize weaker ones" (9). Referencing not only the Japanese colonization and occupation of much of Asia and the Pacific, they also note "South Korean military participation in the United States' Vietnam War, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979" (9–10). Transpacific studies is a project, then, that takes seriously the ways that Area Studies and Asian American Studies have often produced partial visions of the region, separating out the complexities of regional decolonization and Cold War-backed developmentism from the arrival of Asians in the US. Hoskins and Nguyen thus provocatively call for an "examination of the immigration experience that is as concerned with the *sending* countries as the receiving ones" (19).

As a consequence, a major contribution of Hoskin and Nguyen's work is their acute self-reflectiveness about the disciplinary and institutional power dynamics of the various scholarly apparatuses that have studied Asia. Critical of the way Area Studies was often organized around US security and economic interests, Hoskins and Nguyen offer transpacific studies as a model that "can illuminate the traffic in peoples, cultures, capital and ideas between 'America' and 'Asia' as well as across the troubled ocean that lends its name to this model" (2). Alongside scrutiny of EuroAmerican Orientalist knowledge production, they also note the way postcolonial studies has privileged certain US-based diasporic academics, and how the cultural capital of US theory gets exported back to Asia through publishing networks and US-granted PhDs. As a counter, they outline a transpacific framework that would critically attend to how US Asian Studies, American Studies, and Asian Studies in Asia are often overdetermined by the massive institutional and economic might of the US. Even after its so-called "transnational turn" in the early 2000s, American Studies can still marginalize other sites: "even a post-Cold War, anti-imperialist American Studies could assert either an intellectual imperialism or an insistence on the United States as the primary object of inquiry" (20). For all its subtle field self-reflections, however, we might note that the transpacific is a framework that still centers the Asia-United States relationship over a more complex, comparative notion of global politics and tensions.

The third and final critical framework I examine, the Inter-Asian Cultural Studies project (hereafter IACS), is equally spurred by a critical reflection on institutional hierarchies. Kuan-hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat, prominent cultural theorists from Taiwan and Singapore respectively, describe the origins of the project in their introduction to the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* published by Routledge in 2007. What began as a set of conferences in the late 1990s was followed by the establishment of the journal *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* in 2000, the IACS society in 2004, and the regular IACS conferences which are now held biannually in different cities in Asia. This network began, Chen and Chua write, with the recognition that the "hegemony of the 'West as method' blocks the possibility of us looking

towards relatively similar historical experiences shared in Asia, Latin American and Africa."[9] Since few pan-Asian scholarly networks existed, an editorial collective was formed to "tilt the unbalanced direction of the flow of knowledge through the existing infrastructure" (1). As Chen explains more thoroughly in his 2010 book *Asia as Method*, the point is to use Asian experiences and cultural production as reference points for each other, rather than constantly looking to the West. The question of bypassing the West has been central to the methodology of IACS: its journal was one of the "first pan-Asian international journals in Humanities and Social Sciences to publish and circulate quality interdisciplinary scholarly work . . . generated *directly* out of Asia" (2, italics added), and "inter-referencing" has now become a critical term in its own right. Such an emphasis occurs despite — or rather because of — the fact that many of the editorial collective were trained in the US or West, or have strong links to US, Canadian, and Australian academic formations, while the conferences and journal are all in English. (Both are facts that I, as a US-based academic, certainly benefit from.) The journal is now one of the most prestigious in the region, and the conferences ever larger and more vibrant.

Like the journal more broadly, the essays in the *Reader* are a lively mix of interdisciplinary and multi-sited inquiries. They address questions of theorizing "Asia," the ongoing dominance of the US in the region — its militarism, its cultures, its desirability — and the circulation and cross-pollination of Asian media, cinema, queer cultures, and social movements. But it is perhaps not surprising that the journal's focus, in its early years at least, tended to be essays from the economically developed "Asian Tiger" nations — South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore — plus China and India as rising powers. In other words, one of those "relatively similar shared historical experiences" that the West had blocked perception of was the US-aligned Cold War experience of postcolonial development. Indeed, we could argue that the project itself emerges as a post-Cold War effort to move beyond Cold War knowledge boundaries, even as it tends to partially reinscribe them. In recent years, the journal has expanded its remit to include more regional diversity, diasporic themes and translated work from less dominant languages; a special issue in 2011, for example, focused on Islamic feminism, and one in 2019 showcased the intellectual cross-pollination that occurs through Asian-American studies in Asia.

One might consider the inclusion of Hee-Yeon Cho's essay in the 2007 volume, "Revitalizing the Bandung Spirit," representative of the project's ambitious but sometimes contradictory efforts. In it, Cho, a sociologist at Sungkonghoe University, briefly surveys the vicissitudes of the decolonizing era: the brief optimistic moment of Bandung and the Non-aligned Movement, followed by the cooptation of most postcolonial states by authoritarian developmentism of either the capitalist or socialist stripe. In turn, "the overlapping processes of democratization and globalization . . . drove the post-authoritarian regime [of the Third World] into the neo-liberal policy line."[10] The essay explicitly raises the question of how to think about the legacy of Third World dreams of non-alignment and solidarity in a region marked by ongoing Cold War stand-offs, uneven development, unresolved imperial resentments, as well as converging aspirations of Global Asia and the market socialism of China and Vietnam. Cho concludes, somewhat nostalgically, that, "We have to find a transnational commonality and transnational common solidarity based on it in the Bandung principle. This is what we have to revive in the Bandung declaration."[11] The invocation of Bandung clearly recalls the "initial impetus of Inter-Asia as a solidarity network" and the

effort to push beyond Western Cold War knowledge paradigms and neoliberal orthodoxies.[12] And yet, despite devoting a journal issue in 2015 to "Bandung at 60," any potential for "reviving" the Bandung spirit remains decidedly mixed. In a 2016 article, Hilmar Farid notes that "none of the original objectives [of the Bandung Conference] has been achieved," and, in Asia especially, "today we witness competition through the imposition of low wages to create cheap labor, relaxation of investment laws, and the establishment of Export Processing Zones (EPZs)."[13] I have argued elsewhere that Cold War repression in Asia played an outsized role in what David Scott has called "liberalism's world-historical defeat of its principal Cold War political adversaries."[14] At its broadest, however, in "problematising Asia," IACS helps us think through our post-Cold War present in terms of its postcolonial, post-authoritarian, and globalizing cultural formations.[15] Reflecting less a unified methodology or political-social movement, it offers rather an array of interdisciplinary critical tools and analyses that respond to the region's contradictions.

Jodi Kim has insightfully noted that the Cold War unfolded not merely as a "historical epoch or event, but as itself a knowledge project or epistemology."[16] All three projects described above help us better understand the nature of those knowledge constructs and how they live on into our present. To be sure, none of the three approaches is perfect or entirely sufficient. Kwon's "other Cold War" does not explicitly offer a comparative lens for other parts of the world affected by the global Cold War; transpacific studies remains centered on the Asia/America relationship above all others; and inter-Asia grapples with its own centers and peripheries. But what we see, as I hope to have to have shown, is how all three projects productively grapple with formations of Cold War/postcolonial knowledge and inspire new thinking around the study of contemporary Asia, a region in which the Cold War continues to shape and subtend our globalized liberal order. As Popescu intuits, questioning "the triumph of neoliberal capitalism" — and the Cold War knowledge projects that linger within it — remains a paramount task.

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[1] Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War* (Durham: Duke UP, 2020), 6.

[2] Ibid., 186.

[3] Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 121. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[4] Don Mee Choi, *Hardly War* (Seattle and New York: Wave, 2016), 6. See also Sunny Xiang's rich analysis of Choi's poems in *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War* (New York: Columbia UP, 2020).

[5] Heonik Kwon, "The Transpacific Cold War," in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, eds. Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen (Honolulu: Hawai'i UP, 2014), 69.

[6] Ibid., 76.

[7] See also Simon Fraser University's Institute for Transpacific Cultural Research: http://www.sfu.ca/itcr/about.html

[8] Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Introduction: Transpacific Studies: Critical Perspectives on an Emerging Field,” in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, eds. Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen (Honolulu: Hawai’i UP, 2014), 24. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[9] Kuan-hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat, “The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies: Movements Project,” in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader,* eds. Kuan-hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat(London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 1. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[10] Cho Hee-Yeon, “Revitalizing the Bandung Spirit,” in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader,* eds. Kuan-hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat(London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 588.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Olivia Khoo, “Diaspora as Method: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies and the Asian Australian Studies Research Network,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2019), 296.

[13] Hilmar Farid, “Rethinking the Legacies of Bandung,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016), 18.

[14] David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014), 138. See Jini Kim Watson, *Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization* (New York: Fordham UP, 2021).

[15] Khoo, “Diaspora as Method,” 292.

[16] Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Culture and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010), 8.

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