

# 民族团结



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Illustration by Celia Bui Lê

# THE REED

**2021**

Race, Nation, and Identity



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## Race, Nation, and Identity in Asia



**Eugenia Lean**  
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One of the most striking side effects of the pandemic was the uncovering of long dormant fault lines within our communities. Fearmongering about the origins of the virus encouraged hateful rhetoric and a sharp uptick in violent attacks against people of Asian descent. This animosity has had far-reaching repercussions—even within the academic community, where scientists of Chinese descent have faced persecution. More recently, a bill was passed in Congress prohibiting participants in the Chinese government talent recruitment program from receiving federal funding and preventing institutions that receive federal funding from granting awards to individuals with ties to this Chinese talent recruitment program. These developments are but a few examples of how even a globalized world, forced to confront international challenges as one, is still divided by issues of race, nation, and identity.

This issue of *The Reed* addresses diasporic identity, discrimination, and nationalism across the US and East Asia, including in Vietnam, China, and Japan. An essay by Joseph Nguyen (GSAS '22), titled “Race and Nation in Contemporary East Asia” introduces the complex “intertwining of identities” experienced by Asian diasporas, citing examples from around the world. Nguyen also shares his personal experience as a Vietnamese-American and asks us to reconsider our thinking about nationalism, capitalism, colonialism, communism, imperialism, and racism. A visual essay, “Race, Nation, and Identity: A Look At Ethnic Minorities and the Nation-State,” by Celia Bui Le considers similar issues, with a particular focus on the experiences of ethnic minority groups within East Asia. Her essay features a series of illustrations depicting these experiences, drawn in the style of propaganda posters. One of these images appears on the cover of this newsletter.

In addition to these two thought-provoking essays, this issue of *The Reed* contains a personal essay by WEAI alumnus Mike Fu, who writes about his recent move to Japan and his Asian-American experience. We are also pleased to share two faculty contributions: an essay from Professor Lydia Liu addressing the recent violence against people of Asian descent in the US and an interview with Professor Michael Sharpe, originally published last year at the height of the US protests against anti-Black racism, addressing racism and ethnic identity in Japan.

In closing, we would be remiss to not acknowledge the great psychological toll the past year has taken on all of us. We hope that the resources we shared from our community, including the COVID-19 event series and the Stand against Anti-Asian Discrimination page on the WEAI website, were useful to you during this difficult time. Similarly, we hope you find something that stays with you from among the following perspectives on race, nation, and identity.

Sincerely,

Eugenia Lean  
Director, Weatherhead East Asian Institute

# Race and Nation in Contemporary East Asia

JOSEPH NGUYEN, GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES '22

**A**side from COVID-19, no social themes have more greatly defined the turn of the decade around the world, particularly in East Asia, than race and nationality. In the West, racial solidarity movements have sprung up all over, with minorities united together against the unjust killings of Black people and the dramatic increase of violence against Asian diasporic communities over their perceived role in “causing” COVID-19. Since the outbreak of what President Trump famously called the “China Virus,” it is perhaps not too surprising to see differences of national interest and economic competition between the world’s two largest superpowers manifest as racial violence against Asian diasporas around the world. Yet such manifestations are not limited to opposition to white, Western hegemony.



JOSEPH NGUYEN

The systematic extermination and reeducation of ethnic Uyghurs in the People’s Republic of China as a response to “global terrorism;” the exploitation of Southeast Asian migrant workers in Japan, particularly workers from Vietnam and the Philippines; the ethnic genocide of Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar government, who are only now at the forefront of international politics after the military coup d’état over the democratically-elected administration; even issues of national sovereignty in the South China Sea (or “Eastern Sea” as named by many SEA nations)—all are manifestations of complex racial relations that are further complicated by traditional notions of linguistically and ethnically homogenous imaginations of nation.

How had such an intertwining of identities emerged? This is the work of many prominent scholars at Columbia, and one of particular interest to me. As Professor Lydia Liu describes in Columbia’s first seminar focusing on race and empire in the Asia Pacific, the issue of race has deep roots in definitions of “modernity” and “international standards of civilization” that are rooted in Western imperialism and colonialism. The rise of pan-Asianism as a political movement in the 20th century has been absorbed by both nationalist and internationalist movements, often as a desperate measure for national survival

against Western expansion. Later, pan-Asianism would become reconfigured for different East Asian countries' political goals, such as Japan's infamous "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere," which purported pan-Asian solidarity as an excuse for imperialism. Racial solidarity was also used more globally by scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois to advocate for a "universal color-line" of Afro-Asian peoples uniting together by color to challenge the white, Western order. World War II and the international Cold War that pitted capitalism against communism became coopted with national self-determination against modern Western imperialism through devastating civil wars between the PRC and Taiwan, North Korea and South Korea, North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The dichotomic debate between two economic systems surrounding the Cold War had in reality masked the tangible result of such conflicts—the entrenching of a national identity that had utilized racial, ethnic, and linguistic homogeneity as claimants of sovereignty over the Other, which had a double effect of attempting to block out the West as invaders who had no role in the self-determinations of national peoples.

Reframing our lens of East Asian history through race and nationality allows us to examine the contemporary issues of East Asia today in new ways. Tensions over the South China Sea are not merely territorial conflicts, but reiterations of how governments imagine an ethnic connection with those of the past and exploit that connection to defend claims of national territory. The exploitation of Southeast Asian workers in Japan and the refusal to give "non-Japanese" immigrants citizenship can be

viewed as a hegemonic structure by which national citizenship is tied to the Japanese race, and that citizenship ensures a superiority of ethnic Japanese over ethnic minorities. Even methods of "reeducating" ethnic Uyghurs in China are framed as helping them assimilate into a national "Chinese" society through the learning of Chinese characters, Chinese language, and Chinese history that overwhelmingly privileges a certain understanding of what constitutes "China."

For me, these interactions are personal. To myself, I am "Người Mỹ gốc Việt," Vietnamese-Americans whose identification are tied to the Asian-American movement in the 1960s. To my parents, we are "Người Việt ở Hải Ngoại," as "true" a Vietnamese as any, but having to survive a life overseas. When I visited Vietnam for the first time, I learned a new word - "Việt Kiều," an expatriate, separated from authentic Vietnamese people. And to broader American society, I am just "Asian," or essentialized into "Vietnamese"—synonymous with a war. The simple task of claiming my Vietnamese identity is anything but. My research hopes to use race and nation to better conceptualize transnational identities for Vietnamese diaspora. These identities have been heavily shaped by racial discourse regarding the Vietnam War. Yet despite my community's unique status as refugees of a lost nation, these identities continue to be shaped by how we view the modern Vietnamese nation they had fled.

Our current understandings of East Asia are insufficient because of our tendency to analyze nationalism, capitalism,

colonialism, communism, imperialism, racism—all modern concepts derived from the West—as separate, unrelated concepts. The reality is that such concepts are constantly interlocked in modern society and cannot be separated from each other. In order to better understand East Asia and broader international society through a new lens, a reconceptualization of our paradigms regarding these elements is essential.

*Joseph Nguyen is a master's student in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. His research deals with Vietnamese and Vietnamese Diaspora Studies. He is a Fulbright ETA scholar and will be traveling to Vietnam in January 2022.*

# HOW TO SURVIVE ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE IN THE LAND OF FREEDOM

**I**n the summer of 2019, I joined a meeting with a small group of Columbia faculty and A&S administrators to voice our concerns to the Provost, the Deans, and the central administration about the alarming rate of racial profiling by federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies. We were worried that the new “China Initiative” launched in 2018 by the US Department of Justice in the name of national security would result in the persecution of a large number of Asian-American scientists, particularly faculty and students of Chinese descent. FBI Director [Christopher Wray](#) himself admitted that they opened a new case related to China every 10 hours and that 50% of the roughly 5,000 active FBI counterintelligence cases—roughly 2,500—related to China. At the time, they were seeking active cooperation from universities and research

institutions, asking the administrators to monitor foreign-born students and researchers (mostly of Chinese descent). In response, President Lee Bollinger published an [opinion piece](#) in the Washington Post titled “No, I won’t start spying on my foreign-born students.” We were encouraged by his moral leadership in face of great pressure. At the time, however, most of us viewed the “China Initiative” as a First Amendment freedom issue and did not suspect something more sinister heading in our direction.

Today, we are witnessing a dramatic upsurge of racist violence against Asian Americans across many states. Is it the unintended consequence of the infamous China Initiative or of related anti-China rhetoric in the press since the start of the pandemic? If we are going to have an honest conversation about anti-Asian racism, we must

reckon with the fact that the current wave of violent attacks on Asian-Americans and foreign visitors came from above: the White House, the Department of Justice, and well-funded conservative thinktanks. This was the case well before Trump got into the habit of repeating “China virus” to incite racial hatred, and certainly long before the street-level violence reached the scope and magnitude that has become so intolerable for our communities and society as a whole. When we speak of anti-Asian racism, therefore, we need to spell out who is being targeted when they are attacked and ask some hard questions about what gets repeated in our public discourse and what gets suppressed at the same time. Why is it that we feel more confident about finding a cure for the COVID-19 pandemic than we feel about overcoming a pernicious form of public safety emergency: racism from above and racism from below?

The good news is that on April 14, 2021, the Senate voted 92 to 6 to advance a legislation that would support federal efforts to address hate crimes directed at Asian-Americans. It will lead to the creation of a new position at the Justice Department to expedite the review of hate crimes related to the coronavirus pandemic, expand reporting channels, and require the department to issue guidance to mitigate racially discriminatory language. The legislation, known as the Covid-19 Hate Crimes Act, would represent a step forward in the cause of social justice. In an earlier hearing on “Discrimination and Violence Against Asian Americans” at the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, Democrat of New York, opened the session with [these remarks](#): “The conversation we are having today is long overdue, and it is vital that Congress shine a light on this issue. The last Congressional hearing held on violence against Asian Americans was in 1987 in this subcommittee” and “34 years is too long for Congress to leave this issue untouched.” Congressman Nadler puts his finger on the crux of the matter when he states further: “It is important to recognize that this surge did not spontaneously arise only out of fears regarding the Coronavirus pandemic. Some of this blame lies squarely on political leaders who have demonized China—both because of the virus and ongoing geopolitical tensions—and in turn Asian Americans have fallen in harm’s way.” Clearly, the relentless China bashing we are so tired of hearing from the mainstream media is no less responsible for this state of affairs.

But China bashing aside, I myself would push Nadler’s point further to suggest that Asian

Americans always suffer when our country’s foreign policy makes us vulnerable by waging imperial wars in the Asia Pacific: the Korea War, the Vietnam War, and other U.S. led military actions across Asia. In fact, Americans are made more vulnerable, not stronger, by our country’s imperialist foreign policy. If we continue to disavow the fundamental contradictions between the goal of social justice at home and the objective of imperial domination abroad, the passing of COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act would not be able to do much for Asian Americans. What we need is something like a World Peace Act that will make our foreign policy accountable and help stop war mongering. Until then, Asian-Americans will not feel safe, not even with the passing of this much needed legislation. We remain apprehensive about the ramped-up US aggression toward China and the US military presence (approximately 300 military bases circling China) throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

To put this in perspective, I recommend a sharp analysis published recently by the journal Nation called [“Anti-Asian Violence in America Is Rooted in US Empire”](#) coauthored by Christine Ahn, Terry K Park, and Kathleen Richards in which the authors argue that what’s happening today is reflective of a long history of US foreign policy in Asia centered on domination and violence, fueled by racism. They show how “belittling and dehumanizing Asians has helped justify endless wars and the expansion of US militarism. And this has deadly consequences for Asians and Asian Americans, especially women.” If we agree with their analysis as I do, we must reimagine our cause of action and do better than focus on containing domestic hate crimes.



Lydia H. Liu is Wun Tsun Tam Professor in the Humanities and director of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University



Mike Fu  
**Migrations**





### MIKE FU

is a PhD candidate at Waseda University. He is also a former employee of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute and translator of *Stories of the Sahara* by Sanmao, published by Bloomsbury for the first time in English. Read our [interview with Fu](#) on the WEAI site.

**D**ays after the 2020 presidential election, I was on a plane bound for Tokyo at last. My journey had been delayed for half a year by the contingencies of the pandemic, namely the Japanese government's shifting policies on foreign nationals, who were, for a time, barred from entry completely. The months had dragged on and on; I wallowed in my purgatory, doubtful about whether we'd ever make it out of the US at all. Then suddenly we were on the plane. Floating somewhere over Alaska, it dawned on me that this was no ordinary trip. I was leaving the country I'd called home for a solid thirty years—getting farther and farther away by the second—and plunging into something totally new and unknown.

Distance is what I had long sought, long needed. It is a selfish and privileged act to be able to pick up and leave like so, in spite of what complications may come. In truth, many strands of the personal and political had been converging and conspiring to infuse my last few years with a sense of restlessness at best, existential dread at worst. Asia beckoned for other reasons, as well: proximity to family, fanciful notions of starting afresh, the capacity to be just another face in the crowd.

New York City has always been my ideal of American cosmopolitanism. I'd moved to the United States when I was a child, and my first memories are of taking the bus into Manhattan and trailing my mother as we visited grocery stores and herbalists in Chinatown. After we settled in suburbia, we'd still come up every summer to see family friends on Long Island or stop by on our way to or from other destinations. I loved the teeming streets full of brash energy, the suspicious smells on the subway, the raucous heat and humanity of it all. As an adult, I would return to New York and claim it as my own. It was a city filled with possibility, so many languages and lineages intersecting in brilliant, mundane, beautiful ways. I fell in love, time and again. Through my image reflected in the city, in the eyes of those around me, friends and strangers alike, I discovered the person I wanted to become.

But America contains multitudes, and New York is neither the beginning nor the end of it. I spent my childhood in a casually diverse town, then my teen years as the only Chinese face in a sea of whiteness. My family's immigrant journey, the fact that I'd been born overseas, our language and customs, the food we ate at home everyday—these became a source of shame for me. To teachers and classmates, let alone strangers, I was reduced to caricature and archetype. My appearance marked me as foreign, an object of scorn or target of blind malice. Even as I cocooned into myself in those years, I found myself desperate to understand those who would look upon me with such disdain or hatred. I couldn't bring myself to believe that we shared no common ground.

I moved west for college and began a long process of unspooling. My parents had repatriated to China by then. Suddenly I was forced to confront the undeniable fact of my origins, flying back and forth between Shanghai and Los Angeles, year after year. And I began to tentatively probe that part of myself that I'd shuttered years earlier, out of self-preservation. Through cinema, through literature in translation, I discovered a great ache within, a ravenous hunger to regain the heritage I'd all but turned my back on. I wanted to study

its history, relearn my first language; I wanted to understand who and where I'd come from.

It is a lifelong project, I came to realize. In New York, I created the mental and emotional space to explore these issues from a multiplicity of angles: as a half-baked scholar, aspiring fiction writer, and eventual translator. We each have our singular journeys, yet they are all threads in the vast fabric of diasporic yearning, of American dreams, of America. A nation is a construct, a house of cards. What does it mean to be native to a place where you weren't born? By a fluke of fate I grew up an American, in spite of those who sought to deny me this identity. But is this category of personhood immutable? Who would I be, though, if not American?

My husband and I were ready to leave for Japan last April. Then the pandemic forced us to retreat our plans, stringing us along an unpredictable path for the next six months, while the news cycle rose and fell with flagrant falsehoods, xenophobic speech, conspiracy theories. A political system saturated with violence, a nation marred by death. A wholesale refusal to accept the basic humanity of minority others, or science, depending on the day. On the plane to Tokyo, I wondered what would come next. No president is a panacea. How does one treat inequities that have long taken root—those rotting tendrils reaching deeper, to ever darker places?

In Japan, I'm finally just another face in the crowd. Despite my foreignness, I can pass with relative anonymity. I have no claim on this country, but I am grateful to call it home for now. In the morning, I wake up and read the news from the other side of the world. Sometimes word reaches me at odd hours of mid-afternoon, late evening. American violence continues, in grocery stores and nail salons, in legislation and media discourse. America is the only language of which I am a native speaker. From across the Pacific I hear the scrape of its syllables, feverish tongues twisting, ululations of grief and exaltation. Who am I, if not American? What is America, if no longer mine?

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**“We each have our  
singular journeys, yet  
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dreams, of America.”**



# RACISM AND IMMIGRATION IN JAPAN

## *An Interview with Michael Sharpe*



Michael Sharpe is a research scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute and Associate Professor of Political Science at York College, City University of New York

### **Q: First, could you introduce yourself and your research background?**

I am an associate professor of Political Science at York College of the City University of New York as well as an adjunct research scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University. My areas of expertise are comparative politics and international relations and my research involves examining from a comparative perspective the politics of migration and immigrant political incorporation, and political transnationalism in the Netherlands, Japan, and around the world. My first book, *Postcolonial Citizens and Ethnic Migration: The Netherlands and Japan in the Age of Globalization* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), is a cross-regional investigation of the role of citizenship and ethnicity in migration and immigrant political incorporation, exploring the political realities of Dutch Antilleans in the Netherlands and Latin American Nikkeijin (Japanese descendants) in Japan. I have a special interest in remigration policies or paid voluntary return for immigrants and their descendants to return to their countries of origin and what this means for liberal democracies. Other current projects include research on Japan as an “emerging migration state,” the role of the Japanese government in Japanese diaspora politics, as well as the questions of sovereignty, autonomy, and freedom of movement in the non-sovereign Dutch Caribbean and other parts of the European Union’s Overseas Countries and Territories.

**Q: What brought you to study Japanese politics, and, more specifically, to focus on immigration and discrimination in Japan?**

Well, this is a long story full of serendipity. I was the first child born in the United States to immigrant parents from the Dutch Caribbean island of Aruba (formerly a part of Netherlands Antilles) and the Dominican Republic. Hence, I am a dual citizen of the US and the Netherlands. My immediate and extended family have been immigrants across generations, moving to parts of the Dutch, French, and British Caribbean; the Netherlands; Belgium; Germany; Hungary; and the US. Having lived with multiple identities and citizenships, I have always had an interest in the politics of membership, inclusion, and exclusion.

During my studies as a master's student at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, I learned I had to move to a country in the Kingdom of the Netherlands or the European Union to keep my Dutch citizenship (lost and restored) and so I relocated to the Hague and continued my studies at the Institute of Social Studies. I happened to be there during a mass migration of Dutch Antilleans/Arubans, who are legal Dutch citizens. I was intrigued by some of the dilemmas of language, culture, and discrimination impacting the Dutch Antillean/Aruban postcolonial citizen as well other ethnic minority communities in the Netherlands: a self-described liberal, multicultural, tolerant, and open country. While researching for my graduate diploma thesis on international

legal resources to combat racial and ethnic conflict, I frequently came across references to the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR). IMADR, the brainchild of the Buraku Liberation League, a Tokyo-based international nongovernmental human rights organization with United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status that networks and advocates for minorities and marginalized groups at the level of the United Nations. I was moved to learn about the Buraku, a group of people in Japan who are ethnically and culturally Japanese and hold Japanese citizenship, but face multigenerational systemic discrimination in self-described conservative, monoethnic, homogenous, and closed Japan.

It was also during this period in my graduate studies that I met my future wife, Miho, who was born in Osaka and raised in Tokyo. I followed Miho from the Netherlands to Japan, got married, obtained a spousal visa, and started taking a Japanese course. At the time of my arrival in Japan in the late '90s there were very few visible foreigners. I had doubts as to whether I would be able to get a good job in a society often labeled as closed and xenophobic. Much to my surprise, I found employment as an English editor at a cable television station backed by the famous Japanese author Nobuhiko Ochiai, a person you might call a kind of Geraldo Rivera of Japan. Later, I worked for the aforementioned IMADR in Tokyo as a project coordinator for the Asia campaign of the 2001 World Conference on Racism in South Africa. IMADR was at that time led in part by Professor Kinhide

Mushakoji, the former rector of the United Nations University in Shibuya. It was there that I was exposed more thoroughly to the struggles of Japan's historically marginalized minorities: the Burakumin, indigenous Ainu, Zainichi Koreans, Chinese, and other more recent foreigners in Japan. As in the Netherlands, I happened to be living in Japan at a time of Nikkeijin (Japanese descendant) mass migration from Latin America (made possible by an ethnic visa on their presumed assimilability) and became familiar with some of the barriers to their inclusion including language, culture, discrimination, and minority status. I began to think about the similarities and differences between these two mass migrations, the politics behind them, questions of membership and minority status.

My own immigrant family background, immigrant experience in Japan, and work in antiracism and social justice there as well as my later work as a political analyst at the Japanese Consulate General in New York made me fascinated with Japanese politics and the prospect of Japan as a new or latecomer country of immigration. Japan is a very well organized and disciplined society that has reinvented itself multiple times and been at the forefront of several important postwar innovations. With an ageing population and demographic decline, Japan has a de facto immigration policy that is inevitably expanding, even as it refuses to call itself a country of immigration. Depending on how immigration is framed, managed, and rights are realized in Japan, the country could become a model of acceptance and democratic inclusion or an exemplar of

illiberal intolerance and exclusion for the region and the world.

**Q: There is a narrative that Japan and other East Asian countries are largely homogenous, and therefore racism is not as pronounced in the region as it is in the West. What is your response to that suggestion?**

Japan is not homogenous and racism there and in other East Asian countries is just as pronounced as in the West. It simply manifests itself a bit differently. Japan has just about always had indigenous Ainu and Okinawans, and the Burakumin minority traces its origin to well before the 17th century early Edo era. Like Germany, Japan is a “late developer,” meaning it formed its modern state with the late 19th century Meiji Restoration from a disparate populace and used a common narrative of ethnically homogenous nationalism as a kind of glue. With the promotion of Japanese empire, there was expansion via colonialism into Asia, where racism and ethnic hierarchy were readily established and weaponized. This was in fact a multiethnic empire that strived to create a colonial structure with the Japanese at the top of the hierarchy and other Asian peoples denigrated as backwards and inferior.

Many colonial subjects moved into Japan and some of their descendants are now known as Zainichi Koreans and Chinese foreign residents. In the pandemonium around the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, hundreds of thousands of Japanese perished and some six thousand Koreans were killed by vigilantes because

of groundless rumors that they poisoned the water supply to murder Japanese and commit crimes. It is worth noting that with Japan’s defeat of WWII and end of empire and the signing of the 1954 San Francisco Peace Treaty, former colonial subjects lost Japanese nationality in a so-called “unmixing of Japan.” The concept of Japanese homogeneity was once again embraced, with strict border controls promoted by both Japanese and US authorities as a way to control the perceived communist threat from nearby Korea and China and their foreign residents in Japan.

Racism against visible foreigners in contemporary Japan often takes the form of country of origin and level of development. Ancient Japanese art reveals a preference for pale skin, as darker skin was more than likely associated with field labor. The more recent doctrine of white supremacy converges with this and—by virtue of Japanese colonialism—development, and later pop culture and soft power influence, resulted in the proliferation of skin lightening and whitening beauty products all over East Asia. In an effort to “claim” the brown skinned Japanese-Haitian-American tennis star Naomi Osaka, Nissin Foods distributed a cartoon of her with white skin and light brown hair. The advertisement was widely described as white-washed, and Nissin ultimately apologized. Other examples of this infatuation with white skin are visible with the popularity of J-pop and K-pop idols, many of whom have whitened skin, dyed blonde or brown hair, and undergo cosmetic surgery to likely appeal to a Caucasian standard of beauty. For these reasons, some argue

that white Americans and white Europeans are at the top of the food chain of visible foreigners within East Asia, with Africans and South Asians towards the bottom.

There is an interesting fascination with African Americans renowned for cultural, athletic, and musical innovation in popular culture. For a variety of reasons, some African Americans living in Japan feel much freer and empowered there than in the United States. I think my status as a Black male from the West, my Columbia education, and marriage to a Japanese woman opened doors for me. In a very gender-stratified country like Japan, there are times when I experience degrees of freedom and privilege that I do not have in the United States or Europe. However, sadly, I often witness Africans perform what seem to be hip-hop inspired, stereotypical caricatures of African Americans in the trendy Tokyo neighborhoods of Roppongi and Harajuku, likely because of their perception that it is more appealing. I have heard of South Asians and Africans and other Black and brown people being stopped and harassed by police, denied housing, relegated to certain types of employment, and exploited. In 2017, the government released the results of its first national survey on racial and ethnic discrimination, featuring reports of employment discrimination, racist taunts, discriminatory speech, Japanese-only recruitment, and denial of rental applications.

However, racial hierarchy can be relational and perspectival based on context. When I moved to Japan, I had fairly low expectations. Yet I found exceptionally good employment while my wife had

difficulties. When we moved to the United States, our circumstances were reversed. At the same time however, even if you have lived in Japan for decades and speak the language fluently, visible foreigners may still be offered forks instead of chopsticks in restaurants and treated like permanent guests. The number of mixed or “hafu” people in Japan has steadily increased, including such famous examples as Naomi Osaka, sprinter Asuka Cambridge, baseball player Yu Darvish, and judo master Mashu Baker. These accomplished individuals are celebrated but still face discrimination. Although the recent crownings of a biracial Miss Universe Japan Ariana Miyamoto, who is of Japanese and African American descent, and Miss Japan Priyanka Yoshikawa, who is of Japanese and Indian descent provoked backlash, it does speak to a changing self-perception of Japan.

**Q: Japan’s public broadcaster NHK recently came under fire for releasing an animated video which attempted to explain the Black Lives Matter protests. The video was decried internationally and domestically for its stereotypical and racist depictions of Black Americans as well as for failing to mention police brutality or the killings of unarmed Black Americans such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. How could such a gaffe have been made?**

The NHK video speaks again to the denial and consequential reinforcement of racism in

Japanese society. Naiveté is an argument often made by some in Japan and European countries to disavow Anti-Black racism with the claim that they never had slaves on their territory or a significant Black population. Remember, Africans have been in Japan since the 16th century (see Yasuke who achieved samurai status) having been brought as servants by the Europeans. Despite Japan’s fascination with contemporary African American pop culture, it is important to recall that the US brought the minstrel show to Japan in the late 19th century with whites in blackface performing demeaning caricatures of Blacks that sought to justify their subordination. The doctrine of white supremacy, although with nuances, exists in Japan as it does all around the world. Similarly, the NHK video portrayed stereotypical caricatures of Africans Americans looting, an African American man in a sleeveless purple suit and fedora playing guitar while sitting on a fire hydrant in sandals and a single overly muscular African American narrator in a tank top speaking in crude and vulgar Japanese language about the impact of inequality and COVID-19 as the source of the protests. NHK’s attempt was superficial at best and did not address the roots of systemic racism in the US—namely 400 years of enslavement of Black people, Jim Crow, and racial segregation. The video failed to address the issues that Black Lives Matter has brought to light, i.e. the systemic killings by the police of unarmed Black people, racial profiling, police brutality, and racism against African Americans in the US justice system. The US Embassy in Tokyo condemned the video. NHK apologized and now says it

is retraining its staff on human rights. Why did NHK do this? One speculation is that NHK, as Japan’s only public broadcaster, bowed to government pressure as it wanted to turn attention away from the police brutality that occurred against a Kurdish man in Tokyo days earlier and incidents of discrimination against foreigners more generally.

Racism in all its forms is a system of power, history, and institutions that promote one group and demeans or undervalues another. Recalling the minstrel show, there is a longstanding phenomenon in Japanese media of Japanese actors, comedians, and musicians appearing in blackface that has drawn the criticism of racial insensitivity and the defense of paying homage. For example, a few years ago the popular comic Hamada appeared in blackface to impersonate Eddie Murphy in the movie Beverly Hills Cop. And although the historical context is not nearly as loaded, sometimes Caucasians are also impersonated by Japanese actors wearing blonde wigs and exaggerated long plastic noses. Both ANA and Toshiba had to pull ads that did this in stereotypical ways. Though a bit different, some white Westerners living in Japan experience discrimination and challenges to their white privilege for the first times in their lives and become sensitized. One way for Japan to understand racism in media is to recall the racist stereotypical images of Japanese in US wartime media that were deployed to help justify internment and in postwar US films. More recently there was a very derogatory depiction of a Japanese woman and a Dutch Antillean woman in the Dutch television comedy Ushi and Dushi where a white Dutch

female host appears respectively in yellowface and blackface. The use of racism in media can be systematically denounced and potentially dismantled with reflection, self-education and organization, something that has been made not only possible, but necessary in our globally interconnected societies. White supremacy and systemic racism have to be addressed in every part of the world, including Japan.

**Q: How are issues related to racism addressed in Japan through the media and education? Politically?**

The Japanese media as an institution does little to address or educate the public about racism. It often presents racism as a problem emblematic of heterogenous Western societies. Ironically, Japan has become the darling of the white supremacist US Alt-Right, who admire what they perceive to be an ethnically homogenous country. As previously explained, this perception is flawed. However, at an institutional level, Japan has avoided implementation of a national law against racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation or gender identity discrimination on the basis that discrimination itself is not a serious enough problem. Following the US's lead, in 1995 Japan became a signatory with reservation to the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). The UN Special Rapporteur Doudou Diene's scathing 2006 special report on racism and discrimination in Japan was largely ignored by the Japanese media and faced harsh criticism from Japan's right wing. The UN Human Rights Commission

recommended that Japan prohibit hate speech, regarding racial discrimination, citing increasingly serious vitriol particularly against ethnic Koreans. There is significant anti-Korean and anti-Chinese sentiment on Japanese social media and anti-Korean demonstrations have been held in cities like Tokyo and Osaka, led by right wing extremist groups such as Zaitokukai who call Koreans "criminals" and "cockroaches," and even suggest they be killed. Japan's Diet passed anti-hate speech legislation in 2016 but the law does not include penalties and is thus viewed by many as ineffectual.

Education is not compulsory for foreign national children so schools can refuse foreign children if proven to not have resources or if it is seen as too difficult to teach them. This has created many problems with Brazilian and Peruvian children and school non-attendance, labor exploitation, and juvenile criminality. Japanese textbooks have also been the subject of controversy, with many criticizing the curriculum for teaching a revisionist history that downplays Japan's wartime aggression. There is little in these books about Korean forced labor or atrocities against Chinese and others. Since the 1960s, there has been Dowa and human rights education. The Dowa education focuses on Buraku issues and is taught in elementary school and some years of high school. Dowa education has been the prioritized by particular municipalities rather than by the national government, which has sought to reduce emphasis on the Dowa curriculum. It is therefore not evenly taught across regions and has survived where the Buraku

liberation movement remains strongest. However, it is unclear to me whether the human rights education incorporates sufficient anti-racism elements to address all newer and older marginalized groups. It seems that local teachers and administrators have had to innovate to accommodate children of migrants and avoid hate-based harassment and receive little guidance from the national government. My understanding is there is a part of the educational curriculum called "moral education" which are general classes on civic morality but not focused on antiracism.

Racism and xenophobia have appeared in contemporary Japanese politics. In 2000, Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara said in a speech that illegal foreigners were committing atrocious crimes and that foreigners would cause civil disorder in a national disaster. Ishihara never apologized and won reelection three times before stepping down in 2012. In 2015, Ayako Sono, the ageing famous author, commentator, and a former member of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's education reform panel argued in an opinion piece published in the conservative Sankei Shimbun that an apartheid South Africa system where foreigners are kept in separate living quarters from Japanese would be the best way to solve the labor shortage problem. Makoto Sakurai, the former head of Zaitokukai won 110,000 votes in in the 2016 Tokyo election for governor advocating no public assistance be given to non-Japanese residents of Japan. In February 2018, Prime Minister Abe said, "my government has no intention of adopting a so-called immigration policy," but at the same time announced a proposed



expansion to accept some 500,000 unskilled foreign workers by 2025. This aversion to declaring a formal immigration policy seems intended to avoid negative backlash from the voting public.

However, there have been some encouraging developments over the last two decades. The first foreign-born politician of European origin, Finland-born Marutei Tsurunen of the Democratic Party of Japan, was elected to the Japanese Diet in 2001 and served until 2013. Two well-known former dual national “hafu” politicians were elected to the Japanese Diet: Shinkun Haku a Japanese-Korean who was elected in 2004 from what is now known as the Constitutional Democratic Party and Renho Murata, a Japanese-Taiwanese woman who was also elected in 2004 from the same party. In April 2019, two politicians: Puranik Yogendra, born in India, and Noemi Inoue, from Bolivia, won seats in Tokyo’s local assembly elections. There are also active civil society groups such as IMADR, Solidarity with Migrants Japan (SMJ), and several others that are trying to fight discrimination and help foreigners. Policy advocates such as Hidenori Sakanaka, founder of the Japan Immigration Policy Institute, are advising the formalization and expansion of Japan’s immigration system and foresee Japan as a future immigration nation. And in recent weeks, Black Lives Matter held demonstrations in Tokyo and Osaka facilitated by social media that were well attended by young people in solidarity with those in the US and internationally, using the opportunity to raise the issue of racism and discrimination in Japan.

**Q: Can you speak about your experience as a Black scholar in the field of East Asian studies? How do the challenges you face working in Asia compare with the challenges you face in the US?**

My experience as a Black scholar studying the politics of immigration in Japan is, at times, puzzling. The first time I presented at the Annual Graduate Student Conference on East Asia here at Columbia, I must say I felt like I did not belong. There is a funny thing that happens in East Asian studies where white scholars speak with a sense of entitlement, as if they know this experience better than anyone else. Sometimes it seems like they are unconsciously suggesting that I should be at a Black Studies conference. They forget that Japan, as a non-white and non-Western power, was an inspiration for some Black intellectuals such as Du Bois and Garvey, and that Japanese intellectuals and politicians like Nobuaki Makino used Jim Crow and lynching as a wedge issue to embarrass the United States and proposed a “racial equality bill” at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. At the beginning of my research career, scholars in Japan, particularly political scientists, did not really take seriously the issue of immigration in Japan. As time went on and I became an established scholar it has become easier as immigration has become a reality and a critically important economic, political, and social issue. But there are still awkward moments that occur. When I make an appointment in Japan and they see my name without checking my website, they generally expect to see an older white or Anglo

man. I think being black has sometimes helped me as I think it may surprise and pique some people’s curiosity making them more intrigued. The challenges I face in Japan tend to do with language and access, whereas the challenges I face in the US are more so around inclusion, but things have improved over the years. We all must self-educate and confront racism in our societies.

*This interview was first published in July 2020.*

# Race, Nation, and Identity: A Look At Ethnic Minorities and the Nation-State

ARTWORK AND ESSAY BY CELIA BUI LÊ, COLUMBIA COLLEGE '22

In 2018, satellites over Xinjiang captured something astounding: sprawling camps that had not been spotted on previous shots of the region now dotted the landscape. It would later come to light that these camps were constructed specifically for the internment and reeducation of Uyghur Muslims, an ethnic minority group. Yet, these camps are just the signs of a bigger issue, intertwined with creations of nation-states throughout Asia. This visual essay will attempt to briefly illustrate the history of constructing a nation-state through ethnic unity and its effects on Asia today.

When Sun Yat-Sen founded the Revive China Society, he advocated for The Principle of “Minzu” in order to develop a Chinese Nationalism (Zhonghua Minzu) to unite many ethnicities of China against the threat of Western imperialism. The Republic of China was a nation of Five Races: Hans, Mongols, Tibetans, Manchus, and Muslims. As Sun put it: “The blood of ancestors is transmitted by hereditary down through the race, making blood kinship a powerful force.” To him, unity was a necessary tool to assert China’s strength and ensure her survival. Although Sun’s party, the Guomindang, eventually lost to the Communists, the policy of ethnic unity was eventually revitalized to construct an image of a multiethnic nation-state. The concept of National Unity



Four women of different ethnic groups/“nationalities” against a yellow background that spells 民族团结 (minzu tuanjie, national unity) in the style of Chinese propaganda posters.

was then solidified: China’s non-Hans were to be classified into 55 ethnic minorities with Han Chinese as a leader, a Big Brother of the state.

However, the classification process of the 55 minority groups isn’t a streamlined procedure, as classification depends on “creat[ing] state subjects out of the diverse people who had been unevenly governed for centuries.” As Benedict Anderson defined, nation is a modern concept and “an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign,” in which every person inherently belongs to a nation, yet every nation is unique.

To create a nation-state, then, a communal consciousness must be established to strengthen unity.

The previous regions that weren’t included in China Proper such as Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang had seen major acts of resistance like the uprisings of Tibet, which the nation-state perceives as a major threat. As recently as 2019, Xi Jinping elected to hold “local study sessions” in Xinjiang and other minority areas to increase patriotic and ethnic unity education. To Xi, patriotic and ethnic unity is “an engineering project of the soul” and “hostile foreign forces” can leave China vulnerable if she lacks unity. As such, minorities

must conform to Han norms, be it eating pork for the Uyghurs or wearing Hanfu for Tibetans.

This issue isn't just confined to China. The Rohingya people, much like Hua-Yi Distinction in China, have historically been viewed as foreigners—they are not part of the 135 ethnic groups offered citizenship in the country, which leaves them vulnerable from human rights abuses. For the state, the identity of the Rohingya as Muslims threaten the fabric of unity of the nation, of Buddhist Burmese nationalism. Similarly, ethnic Karen people are being driven out of Myanmar as the coup in the nation continues. Kawthoolei, the independent state which Karens fought for, is yet another threat to the nation-state and to the “unity in diversity” narrative.

Another example is Zainichi Koreans, ethnic Koreans who permanently reside in Japan. Many are the children of Koreans who lived under Imperial Japanese rule during WWII. As the term “Zainichi” implies temporary residence in Japan, ethnic Koreans have face heavy discrimination despite assimilation into Japanese society. For example, the ultra-nationalist group Zaitokukai has described ethnic Koreans as “criminals” and “cockroaches.”

Article 15 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares: “Everyone has the right to a nationality.” Going forward, the question remains: How do we recognize the sovereignty of ethnic groups that were united by the construction of the nation-state which emphasizes solidarity and permissible differences? How do we ensure a democracy that guarantees civil rights not depending on the moral authority of the state? Human rights abuses continue to transpire, and the world must keep watch.



Graphic in blue depicts far-right protests in Japan against Zainichi Koreans (photographed by Kurashita Yuki); above, hands holding up the sign “NO” with the Hinomaru (日の丸) and Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, depicting anti-Japan protests in Korea.

Poster depicting a woman in the style of Chinese propaganda posters for agriculture production as a means of advancing the state's development. The Constitution of China stipulates, “The state does its utmost to promote the common prosperity of all ethnic groups in the country.”



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