

BOOK REVIEWS

Beyond Imperial Aesthetics: Theories of Art and Politics in East Asia

Edited by Mayumo Inoue and Steve Choe

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This inspiring collection of twelve essays, some of which were presented at the conference “Except Asia: Agamben’s Work in Transcultural Perspective” held in Taipei in June 2013, reinvigorates earlier critiques of area studies by bringing them into conversation with concepts of biopolitics and aesthetics. The editors, Mayumo Inoue and Steve Choe, situate their efforts within a lineage of 1990s deconstructive and genealogical critiques of Asian studies—most notably represented by the writings of Rey Chow and Naoki Sakai, both of whom are featured among the contributors. The work of Giorgio Agamben is frequently cited in the volume, though no more than that of other thinkers, especially the late writings of Michel Foucault. The volume also nods to Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian’s *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (2002), specifically to their critique of “the field’s collusion with increasingly neoliberal Asian nation-states [which] has compromised efforts to fully interrogate the triangulation of knowledge, power, and capital within East Asia and between East Asia and the United States,” and of “a type of cultural studies [that] has been used to buttress colonial difference, which then upholds the identitarian assumptions that are politically manageable by nation-states and economically valorizable by capital” (5). Underlying the collection is an enduring faith in the power of critique, seemingly unscathed by insinuations that it might have, as Bruno Latour would have it, “run out of steam,” and in the power of art to agitate and revolutionize dominant modes of perception. At the same time, the editors express skepticism about “the commonsense understanding of politics as a teleological project” (14). While the reframing of politics as biopolitics/aesthetics is amply elaborated on in the introduction and resurfaces in several of the essays (most explicitly in those by Inoue himself and in that by Yuriko Furuhashi, one of the only two women authors included in the volume), less clear is how the practice of critique itself could or should be rethought. Characterizing this thought-provoking collection

of essays is a tension (if not contradiction) between the pervasive and seemingly unstoppable reach of biopower, on the one hand, and the alleged disruptive potential of theory and art, on the other, raising the question of what exactly authorizes the faith in the capacity of words and artworks to transcend “imperial aesthetics”—apart from, that is, a neo-Kantian-inspired belief that they might be able to do so.

Inoue and Choe’s introduction clearly lays out the aims of the project: to inject new life in the critique of area studies through a rethinking of politics as art and of art as politics and through a rearticulation of *critical theories of sense*. The argument rests on several premises or interlocking theses that can be schematically summarized as follows:

1. Politics is an aesthetic process through which diverse individuals are organized into nations, races, and populations. Politics is primarily a “politics of sense”—a way of managing the perception of the environment, of others, and of oneself. Being governed means having one’s senses regimented—it means being made to perceive in certain ways.
2. “Imperialism” refers to Japanese imperialism and to the US post-World War II production of local nation-states. The latter exist in a continuum with the former.
3. Local nation-states provide legal and cultural apparatuses that facilitate labor extraction and capital accumulation. Nation-states police people, coopt their aspirations for better lives, maximize their productive capacity, and minimize political agency. They facilitate the production of culturalist identities that both enable and are enabled by the expansion of capitalism. Culturalist identities, capitalist mode of production, and state power stand in transitive, mutually enabling relationships with one another.
4. “Imperial aesthetics” is defined as “a dominant mode of perception in the formation of nation-states that simultaneously causes and is an effect of global-scale biopolitics of capital in East Asia” (2).
5. Artistic works, theoretical articulation, and radical social movements “can produce a sense of enigma, excess, and problematization” (3) whereby dominant modes of perception may be contested and undone.
6. Aesthetics is an affective process occurring between sensation and signification. Drawing on Kant’s assessment of imagination as the “common but . . . unknown root” of sensibility and understanding, the editors posit “theoretical imagination” as a metaphorical mode of thinking that “critically departs from the currently dominant accord between sense and knowledge” (11). They commit to probing into the “aesthetic ‘underside’ of schematic thinking,” and suggest that “despite his alleged status as a Western thinker within the canon of institutionalized philosophy, Kant is . . . one *origin*

(*Ursprung*) among many radical aesthetic theories that move beyond imperial aesthetics” (12).

7. Intellectuals need to historicize and critique East Asia as an imperial concept and look for new avenues of solidarity within and across regional borders.

That said, several of the contributions exceed the editorial framework and venture into a myriad of centrifugal routes, in turn channeled into four sections. The first, “Beyond Boundaries: Theorizing Aesthetics in East Asia since 1945,” encompassing essays by Naoki Sakai, Petrus Liu, and Akira Mizuta Lippit, focuses on processes of area and knowledge formation, calling attention to acts of temporal and spatial bordering that implicate the United States and Europe in an ongoing projection of alterity and misrecognition of self. The second, “Politics of the Sensuous: Love, Bodies, and Sexuality in East Asia,” with essays by Ikuo Shinjo, Rey Chow, and Chang-Min Yu, turns to the corporeal aspects of fiction and cinema emerging from sites scarred by colonization and war. The third, “Disjunctive Alignments: Critical Aesthetics and Social Movements in East Asia,” offers perceptive readings of artworks ranging from painting to photography and theater against the backdrop of early 1950s US-led expropriation of land in Okinawa and the onset of the Vietnam War (Inoue), violent processes of modernization in South Korea (Youngjune Lee), and the yearning for a new kind of nonnational community in post-1980s Taiwan (Chun-yen Wang). Finally, the fourth section, “Beyond Neoliberal Borders: From Biopolitical Spaces to an Affective Community,” shifts the discussion of biopolitics toward the environment, urbanism, media ecology, and new materialisms. Yuriko Furuhashi argues that the consistent use of metaphors and analogies related to the nervous system betray repressed connections between Japanese imperialist expansion and postwar urbanism, while Jecheol Park’s Deleuzian analysis reveals how films about the *minjung* movement that were much acclaimed for their multitemporal narratives in fact reproduce “homogeneous and pedagogical senses of the nation and its history” (247). Read through Foucault’s and Agamben’s critiques of sovereignty, these narratives turn out to be functional to neoliberal governmentality in South Korea. Whereas these two essays enrich the discussion on how biopolitics operates through arrangements of space and time that suppress heterogeneities, the closing essay by Jon Solomon theorizes an “affective community” of all sentient beings, an aggregate of singularities postulated through the encounter of Buddhist philosophy and speculative realism.

The volume is loosely held together by a shared commitment to a genealogical mode of critique aimed at undoing dominant categories of thought in and about East Asia. War—hot and cold, past and ongoing—is one of the themes that further holds it together, not solely as an event but also as a stylistic feature in

the volume's frequent use of martial metaphors of alertness and vigilance and in its oftentimes combative tone. Overall, the combination of theoretical exploration, close readings of films, novels, performances, and paintings, along with the sharp institutional critique makes the volume well suited for the graduate classroom. The whole book could be assigned in graduate seminars on East Asian studies, and some of its chapters adopted for courses on East Asian performing and visual arts. Putting the book in dialogue with recent writings advocating for a post-critical turn (for instance, *Critique and Post-Critique*, edited by Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski) could generate productive discussions and perhaps help us imagine other ways to move forward.

Beyond Imperial Aesthetics denounces a division of labor between Asia and Europe (and by extension between area studies and Euro-American-centered literary studies), in which the former are allegedly taxed with providing empirical data and civilizational discourses and the latter have exclusive rights over theory. One wonders if such a dichotomy of empiricism and theory across institutional and geographical lines still holds water, or whether reiterating this critique today may amount to beating the proverbial dead horse. Although much too slowly and belatedly, Asian theory-related panels at professional conventions such as those of the AAS, MLA, SCMS, and ACLA are no longer an exception or mirage. Connecting theory and Asia today might not raise as many eyebrows as some of the authors would have us believe—witness the very existence of journals such as *Prism*.

The critique of the area studies paradigm, then, as important as it may be as a reminder of our problematic institutional history, may also risk reifying the field and rendering it an obsolete caricature of itself. The volume is useful, nonetheless, not least because it raises the question of what area studies is today. Might it be that, intellectually if not institutionally, the critique of boundaries and celebration of heterogeneity is the only thing that still holds it together?

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