

Swarthmore College

Works

English Literature Faculty Works

English Literature

2005

Review Of "Asian Diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations" By R.B.H. Goh And S. Wong, Eds.

Bakirathi Mani

Swarthmore College, bmani1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Bakirathi Mani. (2005). "Review Of "Asian Diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations" By R.B.H. Goh And S. Wong, Eds.". *Journal Of Asian Studies*. Volume 64, Issue 4. 980-982. DOI: 10.1017/S0021911805002329

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/16>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

context, the domestic mood in Japan was also cautious concerning revision of its constitution, particularly related to Article 9, the so-called peace clause.

This relatively pro-China, cautious, and peace-oriented foreign policy has been shifting since the late 1990s, particularly since the early years of the twenty-first century. Now one can see a more assertive Japanese foreign policy. Increasingly, Japanese politicians and even the Japanese public have been advocating a more active political and military role in international affairs, so that Japan can become a “normal state.” This new momentum may well include a change to the Japanese constitution and revision of Article 9. Moreover, the two-plus-two meeting of February 2005 in Washington (the foreign and defense ministers of both the United States and Japan) issued a clear statement that included the Taiwan Strait as a security concern of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Given Japan’s past history of colonizing Taiwan and invading China, Beijing naturally viewed Japan’s policy announcement differently than the United States. Furthermore, Japan’s textbook revisions and the prime minister’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine were also viewed as efforts to whitewash Japan’s war crimes. Therefore, Beijing was much angrier with Tokyo than with Washington, which was a main trigger for the latest round of anti-Japanese demonstrations of 2005 in China.

Now we come to a question: How should we understand the shift of Japan’s domestic mood calling for a more active political and military role in the international community, in general, and the changing attitude and policy toward China in particular? There are a number of explanations: a post-cold war syndrome—Japan no longer faces a security threat from the former Soviet Union, so it does not need to cooperate with China to resist the expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union; the rise of China, including rapid economic growth and the strengthening of military forces, has made Japan uneasy about its own position and feel “threatened”; the rising nationalism in Japan and Japan’s drive to become a “normal state”; a failure of China’s Japan policy, symbolized by the high-profile visit of former Chinese president Jiang Zemin in 1998, which resulted in widespread negative sentiments among the Japanese public; and the shift of the domestic political structure, the end of the “1955 system” in 1993 (which resulted in constant political realignments), and the election-system reform. These developments have further weakened the influence of the “left wing” and strengthened conservative forces.

All these elements deserve elaborate discussion to have a better understanding of Japanese foreign policy. The author touches upon some of these issues scantily but does not provide a comprehensive analysis. Therefore, it seems the book does not have enough depth in addressing some fundamental issues of Japan’s foreign policy and its security concerns.

Despite the above-mentioned minor weaknesses, this well-studied project on Japan’s security relations with China is a welcome addition to the field and should be read widely by teachers and students alike.

QUANSHENG ZHAO
American University

Asian Diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations. Edited by ROBBIE B. H. GOH and SHAWN WONG. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004. vi, 208 pp. \$45.00 (cloth); \$22.95 (paper).

The title of this collection of essays, *Asian Diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations*, promises a plurality of viewpoints. Aiming to expand and interrogate our

notion of “diaspora” from diverse geographic sites, the volume incorporates essays across disciplines, including literary criticism, film studies, anthropology, and cultural studies. Based on papers originally collected for the Asian Diasporas and Cultures conference held at the National University of Singapore in 2001, the comparative analytical framework of this book makes an important contribution to studies of Asian diasporas outside the United States, specifically focusing on diasporic populations in Southeast Asia, Australia, Canada, and Britain. As Robbie Goh notes in his introduction, “[a] study of Asian diasporic cultures cannot entirely ignore America, of course, but the condition of Asian communities in the U.S. will then form only one part of a global diasporic picture, rather than the exclusive or main focus that it constitutes in many of the studies of ‘Asian American cultures’” (p. 9). Yet while Goh and Shawn Wong seek to develop a more fluid notion of “diaspora,” the volume remains surprisingly narrow in its geographical definition of “Asia.” The collection focuses on Chinese and Indian diasporic populations, lacking essays on more recent Asian diasporas such as the Hmong or older migratory populations such as the Japanese in South America.

The essays primarily engage theories of hybridity and multiculturalism. Homi Bhabha’s work in postcolonial studies provides a singular analytical framework for many essays in this volume: several authors contest and affirm Bhabha’s contributions to theories of hybridity and difference. Yet, one of the pitfalls of Bhabha’s work, the absence of a critical study of race, also marks this collection of essays. Asian diasporas are sites of hybrid cultural and political identities, but diasporas are also, importantly, productive sites of racial difference. In this context, the volume’s contribution to critical studies of multiculturalism must be strengthened. While many of the essays briefly note that multiculturalism is the primary organizing narrative of racial difference in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Britain, the distinct history of racial formation in each of these geographic sites is largely elided. Instead, Ryan Bishop and John Phillips argue in “Diasporic Communities and Identity Politics” that Asian diasporas are formed under “the insignia of the military” (p. 162)—the symbolic violence of military conflict—thereby eclipsing distinct histories of colonial (and racial) difference that give rise to divergent narratives of hybridity in diaspora.

The strength of *Asian Diasporas* lies in its comparative geographical and methodological framework. Goh’s essay “Diaspora and Violence: Cultural/Spatial Production, Abjection, and Exchange” provides a provocative synthesis of the physical and psychic architecture of Chinatowns in London, Birmingham, Vancouver, Chicago, and Melbourne in order to foreground the multicultural politics that attempt to contain Chinatown as a tourist destination, while also drawing attention to the racial violence that limns its spatial borders. Likewise, Wenche Ommundsen’s ethnographic study of Chinese immigrants in Australia explores cultural citizenship across class, generation, and geographical origin. Situating her ethnography within the longer historical context of anti-Asian immigration policies in Australia, Ommundsen begins to outline notions of “Chineseness” in diaspora. Many of the strongest essays in this collection are literary readings of diasporic writers, including Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Russell Leong. Walter S. H. Lim’s essay on Leong’s short stories, *Phoenix Eyes*, importantly examines the impact of sexuality on formations of diasporic Asian identity; yet when Lim argues that *Phoenix Eyes* cannot “finally transcend the *Orientalist* inflection of the East as an inchoate cultural space that supports thriving deviant sexualities” (p. 159), his work denies the analytical import of queer diasporic reading practices.

One of the major challenges that the volume faces is in reconciling two divergent political viewpoints: what Jeffrey Partridge calls the rift between “claiming America” and “claiming diaspora” (p. 132). In his essay on Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s novel, *Joss and Gold*, Partridge assumes that there is a dichotomy between Asian American and diasporic analytical frameworks, which leads him to argue for the autonomy of Lim’s female protagonist, who claims neither one nor the other. Indeed, when the protagonist chooses to leave Malaysia for Singapore rather than the United States, Partridge asserts that Lim succeeds in deferring the hegemony of an “Asian American” narrative of diaspora. While Partridge’s reading of the novel remains incomplete, his essay highlights the dominance of U.S.-centered frameworks of diaspora, which, as the editors of this volume argue, often eclipse the multivalent histories of globalization that characterize narratives of Asian migration. Emphasizing this productive debate—among the categories of Asia, Asian America, and diaspora—would enable the authors in this collection to broaden not only the geographical map of Asian diasporas but also the intellectual domain of diaspora studies.

BAKIRATHI MANI
Swarthmore College

In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai under Japanese Occupation. Edited by CHRISTIAN HENRIOT and WEN-HSIN YEH. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xii, 392 pp. \$75.00 (cloth).

Recent studies of the impact of war on various aspects of Chinese lives in the 1930s and 1940s have greatly benefited from hitherto unavailable research materials, including archives and published personal memoirs, and from a more liberal mindset and political atmosphere. Existing viewpoints are being challenged and new topics explored. Shanghai thus stands out as an area that attracts more attention from scholars who are drawn to the city both because of its unique position during the war and the relatively easy access to its vast amount of well-preserved documents. The current publication represents a worthwhile effort to explore various experiences in Shanghai under the Japanese occupation.

This work under review contains fourteen articles arranged broadly into three areas of concern: economy, politics, and culture. The articles are selected from papers presented at a 1997 conference in Lyon, France. Most articles are further elaborations based on themes developed in earlier studies, while a few have dealt with topics quite original. Although the book is quite readable, it is primarily intended for the scholarly community and university students.

The first two articles, by Christian Henriot and Parks M. Coble, deal with Shanghai’s industries and industrialists during the war. In spite of the early heavy damage that the war inflicted on industries in Shanghai, both studies show that a quick recovery happened due to the influx of capital, laborers, and small workshops from the surrounding countryside. The “boom” period, however, was short lived. After 1941 the Japanese occupiers and the puppet authority imposed strict monopolistic control, which resulted in a rapid decline of industries in Shanghai. The Japanese army was unable to utilize the industrial potential of Shanghai to its own advantage. In his study of the wartime experience of the prominent Rong family, Coble raises the interesting question of the adaptability of Chinese capitalists in wartime Shanghai. The Rong family tried its best to avoid collaboration with the enemy, but significant compromises had to be made after 1941 for its crucial survival.