The Relevance of Post-colonial Imagination in 21st Century Asia

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On May 26, 2025, the workshop *The Relevance of Postcolonial Imagination in 21st Century Asia* was hosted by the International Center for Cultural Studies (ICCS-NYCU) and the International Master's Degree Program in Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (IACS, NYCU) at National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University. The event was part of the sub-project *The Geopolitics and Cultural Economy of Societal Relations in a New Greater China* convened by Professor Allen Chun.

The workshop was divided into three sessions, followed by an open-forum discussion.

I. Memory as Postcolonial Construction

The first session, chaired by professor Chu Yuan-Horng (Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, NYCU), featured three presentations on the theme “Memory as Postcolonial Construction” by the speakers Yoshihisa Amae (Institute of International Reconciliation Studies, Waseda University), John Hutnyk (Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ton Duc Thang University), and Edward Vickers (School of Education, Kyushu University).

Yoshihisa Amae examined the emergence of official memory narratives surrounding two key historical traumas in East Asia: the legacy of the “comfort women” system under Japanese imperialism in South Korea and that of the “228 Incident” in Taiwan. Both narratives, Amae observed, formed in the 1990s amid democratization and the rise of civil movements advocating for political and transitional justice in South Korea and Taiwan.

In South Korea, the testimony of Kim Hak-sun in 1991 catalyzed public awareness of the comfort women issue. While the euphemistic term “comfort women”, coined by the Japanese military, has persisted, activists have promoted the term “sex slaves”, introduced by a Japanese human rights lawyer in 1992. Amae pointed out the absence of official records and the discrepancy between claims of systematic massacres and the number of surviving comfort women, which casts doubt on some aspects of the prevailing narrative. He illustrated how cultural productions like the film *Spirits' Homecoming* (鬼鄉, 2016) and the proliferation of “peace women statues” in South Korea and beyond have reinforced a nationalist and victim-centered narrative, which tends to exclude more ambivalent voices from the survivors themselves, some of whom reject the portrayal of all soldiers as abusers. Amae drew attention to the multi-layered experiences of comfort women, who came from diverse backgrounds across the Japanese Empire and were mobilized through various means. Rather than solely through outright coercion, many were deceived by brokers or felt they had no

other choice due to poverty or family debt. Amae cautioned against the tendency to "subalternize" the voices of the survivors, who are allowed to speak, yet not truly heard.

Similarly, the official narrative around the 228 Incident, once suppressed under Martial Law, later reemerged as a foundational memory for Taiwanese identity, often framed as a massacre perpetrated by the KMT. Amae calls for greater attention to the lingering shadow of the Japanese Empire, noting that many of the rebels had previously served in the Japanese military, wore Japanese uniforms, and spoke Japanese, factors that led KMT forces to suspect continued Japanese involvement.

Amae concluded that dominant narratives in both cases risk oversimplifying complex victim-perpetrator dynamics and exacerbating unresolved tensions, posing significant obstacles to the task of reconciliation today.

In his intervention titled "DFI Anthropology as Memory Cosplay in Postwar Vietnam Museum Studies", John Hutnyk offered a critical overview of recent anthropological work on postcolonial Vietnam, particularly of studies engaging with museum representations of the "American War" ended in 1975. Hutnyk acknowledged that the best of these studies yield valuable insights, especially in tracing how Vietnamese museums recalibrated their portrayals of the war in line with shifting socialist-market dynamics. However, he critiqued how anthropological scholarship, often produced under institutional pressures to publish, is rarely read or translated locally, serving more as academic capital in the West than for meaningful engagement in Vietnam. This dynamic, Hutnyk suggests, mirrors the logic of direct foreign investments (DFI), whereby external actors capitalize on local cultural sites for externally oriented gain. By referencing Viet Thanh Nguyen's tv series *The Sympathizer*, Hutnyk identifies the shared logic underlying anthropological scholarship and cultural productions that are co-opted for external agendas or commodify postwar Vietnamese memory, enacting what he describes as a "memory cosplay".

Hutnyk further suggested that the logic of DFI anthropology echoes the concept of *extractavismo académico*, or "academic extraction" invoked by Michael Taussig in his recent book *Corpse Magic* (2025), which likens to corporate gold or coal mining the anthropologist's desire to extract stories from the field and drive them back to academic institutions.

Hutnyk's study surveyed a range of scholars and cultural producers—Victor Alneng (2002), Scott Laderman (2007, 2009, 2010), Christina Schwenkel (2008, 2009), Jamie Gillen (2014), and filmmaker Nguyen Kim Hong (2017)—who have engaged with the postcolonial renegotiation of Vietnam's war memory and museum culture. These studies read the evolving politics of representation within the museums as a reflection of the changes in domestic politics, particularly those following the 'post–Đổi Mới reforms'. Hutnyk placed particular emphasis on their representations of Côn Đảo, a site of a series of notoriously brutal French and American colonial-era prison camps. For Vietnamese visitors, Côn Đảo functions as a sacred site of memorialization that honours revolutionary martyrs and their suffering, and simultaneously recalls the role of the prisons as sites of political education for future communist militants.

Hutnyk concluded by questioning how postcolonial scholarship might move beyond academic extraction to build genuine transnational solidarity.

In his presentation on “National Security Education and Hong Kong's ‘New Remembering’ of the Colonial Past”, Edward Vickers critically examined how official narratives about Hong Kong’s colonial history are reshaped under Beijing’s influence, particularly in the fields of education and museum curation. Reflecting on his positionality as a British scholar with family ties to the colonial system in Hong Kong, Vickers nonetheless underscored the risks inherent in the current prevailing tendency to treat indigeneity or uncritical acceptance of local discourses as the sole legitimate standpoint for engaging with politically sensitive matters in Chinese Studies.

Vickers reflected on the limitations of postcolonial theory, which he faulted for its vagueness and inattentiveness to the specificities of Hong Kong, and for its inadequacy to account for the complete disregard of Hongkongers’ agency and will in the territory’s transfer from one regime to another during the 1997 handover.

The core of Vickers’s intervention centered on the subtle shifts in Hong Kong’s educational and cultural policies from the 1997 handover to the implementation of National Security Law since 2020. He contrasted the early post-handover decades—when local civil society still resisted the full-scale implementation of patriotic education—with the more recent imposition of “National Security education”. This shift, he argued, has worked to erase particularized local history from education programs and to replace it with a markedly patriotic national curriculum. It marks a departure from the CCP’s earlier, nominal commitment to a multicultural vision of Chinese identity, now replaced by an emphasis on “cultural confidence” in Chinese civilization and the imperative to instill “cultural security” through education, one that increasingly frames Western influences as a threat.

Vickers identified as key reforms the abolition of the critical-thinking-oriented “Liberal Studies” curriculum and its replacement with the more one-sided “Citizenship and Social Development” course, which promotes national unity and includes mandatory field trips to patriotic historical sites in mainland China. Museums, too, have been reoriented to support this agenda, emphasizing a unified Chinese cultural tradition. The opening of the Hong Kong Palace Museum in 2025, framed as a celebration of 25 years since the retrocession, symbolizes Beijing’s effort to advance a monolithic narrative of national identity.

The post-session discussion, moderated by Professor Chu, elicited a series of thought-provoking responses. Chu began by engaging with Yoshihisa Amae’s research, proposing a comparison between Taiwan and South Korea to interrogate why postcolonial memory has taken divergent forms, despite both societies having experienced Japanese colonial rule and the system of comfort women. In Taiwan, he observed, public discourse on the issue tends to be significantly less confrontational than in South Korea. The discussion then broadened to comparisons with other post-communist and postcolonial contexts. With regard to Hutnyk’s research, Chu remarked on how post-Soviet Russia has reframed the memory of the October Revolution as a coup, suggesting a pattern of historical revisionism that differs from contexts like contemporary China and Vietnam. He also suggested differences in the ideological framing of communism in contemporary China and Vietnam, and, in response to Vickers, pointed out China’s self-identification as a "civilizational state."

Professor Joyce C.H. Liu (International Center for Cultural Studies, NYCU) also intervened in the debate, noting how the three presentations collectively interrogate the forms of denial embedded in contemporary postcolonial narratives. She underscored the importance of examining how colonial structures resurface in present-day political and social structures, particularly through spatial

divisions that reproduce hierarchical orders—for example, the structure of migrant labor in contemporary East Asia. Liu further noted that comfort women were not the only victims of Japanese colonial exploitation in Taiwan; many were coolies brought from across East and Southeast Asia. Turning to postcolonial China, she argued that the myth of Chinese civilizational continuity operates as a powerful form of historical denial, obscuring the violent conquest and subjugation of the empire's frontier peoples. This ideological fiction, she warned, continues to legitimize the ongoing oppression of groups such as Tibetans and Uyghurs. Liu concluded by calling for a critical inquiry into the underlying logics that sustain contemporary state violence.

II. **Degrees of Epistemic Violence**

The second panel, chaired by Joyce Liu, hosted three presentations, in order, by C. J. Wee Wan-ling (School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University), Magnus Fiskesjö (Department of Anthropology, Cornell University) andAllen Chun (Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, NYCU), revolving around the common theme of epistemic violence.

C.J. Wee Wan-ling presented a paper on "The Shanghai Biennale 2000 and the 'Postcolonial' in its Theme", which explores the link between cultural expression and economic development. His presentation focused on two artistic events - the *Shanghai Biennale 2000* (SB2000) and Gao Shiming's *Ho Chi Minh Trail Project* (HCMTP) - situated at a critical juncture in China's transition into global capitalism, culminating with its entry into the WTO in 2001.

According to Wee, the SB2000 is an emblematic moment of China's (and Shanghai's) attempt to redefine its place in the world through contemporary art, revealing a desire for the global filled with latent contradictions. SB2000 was promoted as a cosmopolitan, reformist exhibition—China's first truly international biennale—that aimed to project Shanghai as a global cultural hub. However, this global orientation revealed an unresolved tension: while non-local curators like Paris-based Hou Hanru and Shimizu Toshio envisioned Shanghai as a cosmopolitan city capable of transcending both Western and national frameworks, local curators like Zhang Qing adopted a more defensive stance, emphasizing the need to assert a Chinese alternative to the Western dominance of the global art market. Moreover, the invocation of "Shanghai Spirit" ambivalently echoed the semi-colonial and cosmopolitan legacy of 1930s Shanghai. The exhibition's framing thus both evoked and tried to transcend colonial history.

In addition, Wee critically observed that while the SB2000 hinted at China's regional leadership in Asia, it did not articulate a clear vision of inter-Asian solidarity. In contrast, Gao Shiming's *Ho Chi Minh Trail Project* (HCMTP) sought to build a cultural network based on shared postcolonial and Cold War legacies across Northeast and Southeast Asia through performative art. With regard to the concept of "adjacency" invoked to conceptualize the transborder vocation of the event, Wee's analysis raised the question of whether proximity is a sufficient principle to generate meaningful solidarity. Responses from figures like Dinh Q. Lê revealed lingering geopolitical asymmetries, especially between China and Vietnam, which complicate efforts to construct a transnational postcolonial or inter-Asian art discourse.

The presentation concluded by underscoring the persistent contradictions at the heart of China's cultural positioning as it aspires to a prominent global role. The politics of financial investment following China's rise in the global market has ensured that the PRC remains a dominant force in the cultural representation of the region. Yet while any discourse on the Asian contemporary cannot

afford to ignore the PRC, China's growing cultural and economic influence increasingly enables it to subsume Asia both symbolically and structurally, to the point where China is often taken as synonymous with Asia itself.

Following Wee's intervention was Magnus Fiskesjö's presentation on "Chinese Imperialism Revived: The Ideological About-Face of the Chinese Communist Party". Fiskesjö argued that China's most relevant unresolved question today is whether to self-identify as a nation-state or as an empire. He contended that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has abandoned its earlier anti-imperialist stance and reembraced the logic of empire, manifesting in practices of cultural erasure and assimilation, particularly targeting Uyghurs and Tibetans.

In the 1930s, the CCP officially repudiated the Empire, recognizing the violent subjugation of various people under Qing imperialism and endorsing their right to self-determination. The 1931 draft Constitution for a future revolutionary state established the rights to secession and political independence from China for conquered nations such as Uyghurs, Mongolians, Tibetan, Miao etc. However, Fiskesjö identified an ideological reversal in the years after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and even more so in recent decades. Ethnic minorities were granted nominal autonomy after 1949 but were ultimately integrated into a centrally managed state. Today, the CCP not only represses cultural difference and ethnic minorities, but also reinterprets the Qing imperial legacy as a model for national unity. Xi Jinping's symbolic visit in 2021 to the Puning Temple – a monument built to commemorate Qing Emperor Qianlong's military conquest and genocide of the Dzungars - serves as a chilling illustration of this ideological alignment.

Fiskesjö interprets this imperial revival in contemporary China as linked to the ongoing repression of Uyghurs. Actions undertaken today by the PRC against the Uygurs, he argues, meet key criteria outlined in the Genocide Convention. Their ideological framing during 1949-2017 portrayed Uyghurs as unreliable and backward, legitimizing their subjugation; since 2017, the branding of the entire people as terrorists is used to legitimize their elimination through genocide.

To understand imperialist legacies in contemporary China, Fiskesjö proposed examining China's historical role through the lens of world-systems theory (WST). While much postcolonial scholarship focuses on recent European imperialism, he argued that empires have existed since ancient Mesopotamia, consistently concentrating wealth and power, generating inequality, then declining, but often eventually regenerating, aided by a nostalgia for becoming 'great again'. World-systems theory provides tools to analyze these long-term global patterns. Although WST initially centered on the post-Columbian capitalist world, later critical engagements have led it to consider the earlier emergence of these cycles starting from ancient Mesopotamia. Fiskesjö suggested that by acknowledging China's resurfacing imperial structure and understanding its operations through world-historical frameworks, rather than cultural exceptionalism, we can better diagnose and resist these new forms of domination.

Instead of presenting his originally planned position paper, *"Empire as State of Mind: Can the Postcolonial Speak in Sociological Theory?"*, Allen Chun offered an extended commentary on the preceding presentations, while advancing his own argument that postcolonial memory is fundamentally a political construction.

Commenting on Yoshihisa Amae's paper, Chun contrasted Taiwan and Korea, noting that in Taiwan memories of Japanese rule have been reinterpreted with a degree of nostalgia, rather than

resistance. The memory of the Japanese colonial past became increasingly positive in Taiwan in relation to the negative experience of postwar KMT rule. The 228 Incident not only laid the foundations for opposition to the KMT but also fostered a sense of postcolonial nostalgia for Japanese rule. For these reasons, pro-Japanese memory later became closely tied to the political agenda of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). What is particularly striking, however, is that for many Taiwanese educated during the Japanese era, cultural affinity with Japan did not necessarily conflict with national identification with the Republic of China (ROC). This is evidenced by the fact that, in the immediate aftermath of Taiwan's retrocession to the ROC, there was little to no resistance to Chinese national rule. This suggests that national culture and ethnically rooted identity can coexist peacefully without fundamental contradiction. Therefore, Chun argued that postcolonial memory has little to do with culture, but is rather a political construct shaped by external forces.

Discussing John Hutnyk's work, Chun underscored how it is grounded in the theoretical articulation of sociologist like Maurice Halbwachs and others on collective memory. He argued that in their work, the generic concern with collective memory does not exclude the diversity of societal experience and the various ways in which a society remembers. Here, again, collective memory involves a political construction. Chun further observed that in Hutnyk's broader work on prison museumification, the scope of memory transcends simplistic rewritings of history and ritual narration by becoming institutionally routinized in complex ways which go beyond the impact of anthropological or sociological accounts. Chun pointed out that while it is true that anthropology is complicit in these constructions, we should also consider the collusion of academia and the cultural industry.

Turning to Edward Vickers' work on the education system in Hong Kong, Chun stressed his own critical distance from binary categorizations such as nationalist *vs* colonial or Chinese vs Western, which are routinely used in describing the phases prior and after the 1997 retrocession, despite their proving inherently flawed. Chun pointed to how the post-1997 implementation of nationalist education in Hong Kong has contributed to the emergence of a form of positive nostalgia for British colonial rule, echoing the nostalgia for Japanese colonialism in Taiwan. Drawing parallels between National Security Education in Hong Kong and KMT-era Taiwan, Chun argued that both educational systems share techniques of historical rectification and cultural assimilation. However, Chun argued that such nostalgic imaginaries are recent inventions and should not be taken as direct reflections of historical experience; they are constructed and mediated by present-day political conditions. Chun further noted that after the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, there was an increasing sense of cooperation in Hong Kong, if not outright assimilation, with mainland China. In fact, censorship and ideological shifts were often implemented internally, rather than imposed directly by Beijing. Moreover, democratization efforts in Hong Kong began in the 1980s, though they were met with resistance from the British colonial administration.

Regarding Wee Wan-ling's paper, Chun remarked how his research on the Shanghai Biennale continues Wee's broader interest in the Asian Modern, now further nuanced by questions of globalization and cultural repositioning within the context of the contemporary PRC. The 2000 Shanghai Biennale's effort to distance itself from earlier, more nationalistic and sinocentric frameworks reflects a dual ambition: on one hand, to embrace a broader Asian cosmopolitanism; on the other, to assert a position in competition with the universality of Western-centered models. According to Chun, Wee invokes the term "imperialism" to describe the politicizing effects of globalism. In this framing, neo-imperialism operates less as a physical structure and more as a metaphorical construct, as an effect of perception.

Regarding Magnus Fiskesjö's work on the current plight of the Uyghurs in the PRC, Chun pointed to his different deployment of the concept of empire. While it may be true that China's role today can be understood only in relation to its unresolved imperial legacies, Chun raised attention to a fundamental difference between the Qing Empire and present-day China. The logic of the Empire in the Qing dynasty was consistent with that of traditional Empires insofar as it incorporated different ethnic groups into a supranational polity. In this sense, traditional Empires were multiethnic in ways that diverge from the homogenizing tendencies of the nation-state. Nonetheless, Chun noted, it remains productive to reflect on contemporary China through the lens of internal colonialism. While acknowledging world-systems theory as a valuable lens, Chun stressed that empires cannot be understood solely in terms of extraterritoriality, given their historical diversity.

In conclusion, Chun maintained that the postcolonial imagination remains a useful concept if properly conceptualized. He suggested that the logic of coloniality is rooted in the political function of "othering". Specifically, he contended that colonialism does not need to rely on existing racial divisions, as it can create its own distinctions between Self and Others. In his view, challenging the idea of Chineseness and its imperialist legacies should not automatically entail the promotion of Taiwaneseness, Hong Kong identity, or other local identities. According to Chun, postcolonial critique is needed to demystify all kinds of political fictions, including the political construction of postcolonial memory.

The post-panel discussion, moderated by Joyce Liu, expanded the conversation around empire, coloniality, and postcolonial critique. Liu opened by reflecting on the concept of coloniality as a persistent structure of unequal power, maintained through legal, institutional, and discursive techniques of othering. While Allen Chun had earlier distanced his analysis from race, Joyce emphasized that such differentiations between "Us" and "Them" are inevitably racialized through a biopolitical mechanism, even when not explicitly framed in racial terms.

One key theme that emerged, as highlighted by Wee Wan-ling, is the link between money and knowledge production: following China's economic boom in the aftermath of the late 1990s Asian financial crisis, scholarly and institutional attention increasingly shifted toward China, resulting in the marginalization of research on other parts of Asia. This trend, coupled with the fact that contemporary art, though almost always framed in terms of resistance, is readily absorbed into circuits of commodification, has hindered the consolidation of meaningful regional solidarity.

III. **The New Rise of China as "Empire"**

In this session, Chih-ming Wang (Research Fellow at Academia Sinica) presented his reflections on the question of China as empire, offering both a commentary on earlier presentations and a theoretical intervention grounded in his engagement with the Chinese contemporary.

Wang addressed Wee Wan-Ling's earlier framing of the "contemporary" as gesturing toward a particular kind of subject formation in Asia that is not necessarily framed in national terms. In response to this, he invoked Peter Osborne's notion of the contemporary as crisis, meaning that as different places become connected through a shared global platform, there remain temporal discrepancies, even though they seem to share a coeval time.

The core of Wang's intervention lied in deconstructing the notion of "One China": while the "One China" policy remains a geopolitical constant, critics—especially in the field of contemporary

art—have identified at least three Chinas: revolutionary China, traditional China, and global China. Wang suggested expanding this framework to include diasporic China, frontier China, and the *yizhi* 異質 (heterogeneous, multiethnic) imperial China. This plurality, he argues, exposes the internal contradictions of the Chinese state's unifying narrative.

Crucially, Wang proposed shifting the analytical focus from the "new rise" of China to the emergence of a "new China". This new China is marked by: 1. A question of subjectivity, oriented around a socialist legacy; 2. A place-making dynamic, internally and globally transformative; 3. The official rhetoric of newness. Wang called for a critical interrogation of this "newness" in relation to the question of Empire. He cited the project of "national rejuvenation", which is grounded in the narrative of "two hundred years of humiliation", as an example of this articulation.

In response, in the open forum discussion, Joyce Liu expressed skepticism about pluralizing the concept of China, arguing that such an approach risks deflecting attention from structural violence. She pointed out how the PRC has tried to strategically redefine the notion of human rights—shifting from one of individual rights to one of equality among nations—in order to justify the oppression of ethnic minorities. This logic, she argued, has real consequences: Tibetan refugees become stateless, Uyghurs are persecuted, dissidents are arrested, and the state's adoption of *tianxia* functions as a system of universal patronage.

Professor Chu expanded the discussion by invoking Bourdieu's concept of "homology misrecognition" to interpret the forms of historical misrecognition at work in contemporary Russia and China, highlighting how selective parallels and distortions are mobilized to legitimize their present-day imperialist actions. With regard to China, Chu suggested that the concept closest to *tianxia* is Negri and Hardt's formulation of *Empire*, due to their shared logic of universal values and all-encompassing order.

Finally, Amae called for future scholarly attention to shift toward the lived experiences and perspectives of the people, rather than remaining focused on grand narratives and theoretical discourses, which dominated much of the workshop's discussion.

Event Information

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Organizer: National Yang-Ming Chiao-Tung University International Center for Cultural Studies (ICCS-NYCU)

Moderator: Allen Chun（International Program in Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, Specially Appointed Professor）

Reported by: Serena Di Maria (PhD Student, Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies, NYCU)

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