Introduction to the Special Edition on Imagining Geopolitics Across Media and Artforms in Asia and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

This introduction provides an overview of the two main themes of this special issue—contemporary cultural engagements with Asian geopolitics and the roles played by new media and genres in shaping these geopolitical imaginations—as well as summaries of the following six articles.

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This special issue centers on two main themes: contemporary cultural engagements with Asian geopolitics and the roles played by new media and genres in shaping these geopolitical imaginations. As literature and culture specialists, the contributors to this issue all highlight that geopolitical knowledge takes form not just at the level of policy and statecraft but also, crucially, in the myriad realms of cultural expression and consumption—in what Shaohua Guo emphasizes in her lead article as the micropolitics of everyday life. The geographic scope of the issue spans mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Asia and its diaspora, and the media discussed range from popular cinema and television shows to YouTube, computer-generated poetry, and the global Anglophone novel. Collectively, the essays here spotlight the dynamism and diversity of cultural routes by which Asian writers, filmmakers and actors, mass readers and audiences, and even computer programmers participate in and actively construct geopolitical discourses in our time. Whether in relation to the persistent legacy of colonial and wartime histories or current debates about cross-Strait politics, Japan-Taiwan relations, development of national economies, or international copyright laws, contemporary culture constitutes a significant terrain on which geopolitical views are continually formulated, contested, and reassembled.

The first two essays focus directly on new popular media and genres as key cultural sites for examining contemporary Chinese geopolitical discourses. Shaohua Guo's (Carleton College) "You Tube, We Comment" investigates YouTube as an emergent social platform for overseas Sinophone communities, not simply for accessing Chinese-language television programs but also for debating political issues with other viewers both within and beyond mainland China. Zeroing in on the reality show *I Am a Singer*, which enjoys trans-regional popularity across East Asia, Guo demonstrates that YouTube's comment section exemplifies a fertile geopolitical public sphere, one in which Sinophone audiences of diverse national, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds can express and exchange viewpoints over such sensitive topics as cross-Strait relations. Indeed, analysis of this new digital platform stands to revise traditional understandings of political discourse that privilege rational consensus, underscoring instead the critical role of affective appeal in transnational dialogues about identity politics.

Similarly, Jie Zhang's (Trinity University) "The Geopolitics of 'Being Lost' (*Jiong*) in China's Most Popular Movie Franchise" mines an emerging genre in China's popular media culture for geopolitical insights—the high-grossing movie franchise, epitomized by actor-director Xu Zheng's *Lost* series: *Lost on Journey* (2010), *Lost in Thailand* (2013), *Lost in Hong Kong* (2015), and *Dying to Survive* (2018). As Zhang notes, the incorporation

of an expanded geography with foreign Asian locales is a relatively recent phenomenon in post-socialist Chinese cinema. On the one hand, these films readily adopt generic tropes of exoticism and otherness, often playing up ethnic and cultural stereotypes that circulate among Chinese viewers about Thailand, Hong Kong, and India. On the other hand, beneath their geotourist ethnographies, the films stage complex commentaries on domestic social issues, whether through a lower-class rewriting of the New Year Comedy genre, a skeptical critique of China's materialist consumption, or a morally charged realist narrative about prohibitive modern health-care costs. Ultimately, the film series mobilize foreign geographies not for a deep engagement with Asian geopolitics but as a marketing vehicle for China-centered concerns.

The next two essays carry forward this focus on film to the context of Taiwan, as both Flora Chuang (Hope College) and Scott Langton (Austin College) explore the contemporary geopolitics of colonial memory. In "Rediscovering New Taiwan Cinema in and outside of Greater China," Chuang isolates two recent films in New Taiwanese Cinema—Wei Te-sheng's *Cape No. 7* (2008) and Chang Tso-chi's *Soul of a Demon* (2008), both of which deploy Taiwan's colonial history to address the plurality of Taiwanese identifications today. Rather than simply embracing or rejecting Japan as a former colonial power, these films showcase the fractured identities produced by colonial experiences across several generations. One important function of New Taiwanese Cinema, Chuang suggests, is to document the stories that have been suppressed by various state powers, capturing Taiwan as a distinctive Sinophone community with its own linguistic heterogeneity as well as a spectrum of political and cultural identifications that do not fall neatly into nationalist scripts. This task of cultural and historical preservation becomes all the more vital in the context of China's growing geopolitical power today.

Likewise, Langton's "Japanese Imperialism through a Taiwanese Lens" analyzes Wei Te-sheng's films as a window into Taiwanese cinema's recent return to the colonial period. However, Langton juxtaposes two dramatically opposing works by Wei—*Cape No. 7* (2008) and *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* (2011)—in order to provide two contrasting modes by which Taiwan-Japan relations are rendered for contemporary audiences. While the former film nostalgically depicts Japan's regional influence in terms of soft power, the latter excavates the brutalities of Japanese colonial violence during the 1930 Wushe Uprising. Ultimately, Langton reads both films within the framework of the Taiwanization movement and as performing the cultural work of recovering lost or buried local histories and languages, including those colonial experiences that get downplayed or erased in subsequent narratives constructed by both the Taiwan Nationalist and Chinese communist governments.

The last two essays examine emerging aesthetic forms in contemporary literature, considering the ways that technology interlocks with geopolitics both past and present. In "As If Poetry," Scott Mehl (Colgate University) discusses the recent surge of interest in AI literature in Japan, focusing on two examples of computer-assisted poetry: the Inu-Zaru Instant Tanka Generator by Sasaki Arara, a website where users can generate new poems by simply clicking a button, and the Twitter bot by programmer Inaniwa, a program that combs through Japanese Wikipedia for existing prose that falls "coincidentally" into the tanka form. Mehl suggests that AI poetry presents a superb platform for readers to engage in "as-if thinking"—to imagine authorship as wholly human even when we know it's not—and to potentially expand the boundaries of what we consider literature to include nonhuman creations. At the same time, matters of AI authorship and ownership are increasingly caught up in geopolitical competitions, as both the US and Japanese governments have in recent years revised their copyright laws to spur artificial intelligence technologies and research. AI poetry thus opens up a fertile window into the intersecting geopolitics of contemporary culture and technology.

Finally, expanding our scope beyond East Asia, Hilary Thompson's (Bowdoin College) "Altering Time, Altering States" links globalizing war technologies to new modes of narrating time consciousness in the contemporary South Asian Anglophone novel. Isolating a corpus of what she calls "untimely fictions"—Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015), Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), and Karan Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016)—Thompson proposes that these works take up various destructive geopolitical histories such as the Opium Wars, World War II, and the Kashmir conflict in order to offer, however fleetingly, alternative models of historical time, spiritual cognition, and communal connectivity that override the entrenched divisions wrought by those histories. While the novels cannot sustain their visions of a common world, they nonetheless mark out a praxis, a way of imagining humans' capacity for mindfulness, for living within and beyond geopolitical partitions. Together, these last two essays highlight how technology does not have to be reductively dystopian or utopian, neither displacing human agency entirely nor representing a radical break from history in posthuman terms, but can reach beyond the geopolitics of state rivalries to open up new portals for literary creation and philosophical thought.

We hope that our readers will find this special issue, with its network of ideas about the new cultural terrains of geopolitics, exciting and inspiring—for both research and teaching.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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