

**Theoretical Encounters: Postcolonial Studies in East Asia**

Melissa Kennedy

**Abstract**

Postcolonialism has grown from a minor branch of English literary studies applied to the decolonising movements of the British Empire in the 1950s to a term increasingly applied to various legacies of exploitation, exclusion and discrimination around the world. As globalisation is recognised as a contemporary form of cultural and economic imperialism, and as world literature and the global circulation of media make available voices from hitherto under-represented peoples, postcolonial studies has become a many-headed beast. While South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) and South-East Asia (former British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish colonies) are represented in the field, East Asia remains under-explored. This essay applies postcolonial precepts to minority communities in Japan, particularly the indigenous Ainu, and assesses the strengths and weaknesses of applying the postcolonial framework to a non-European setting.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial studies, Japanese imperialism, Ainu, East-Asian studies

The last room of the museum at Japan's national shrine, Yasukunijinja, Tokyo, features a map of the world highlighting the decolonisation movements that swept the world from the 1950s. Centred on this giant map is the following explanation:

Not until Japan won a stunning victory in the early stages of the Greater East Asia War did the idea of independence [for Asian peoples] enter the realm of reality. Once the desire for independence had been kindled under Japanese occupation, it did not fade away, even though Japan was ultimately defeated. Asian nations fought for their independence, and achieved triumph.<sup>1</sup>

And so ends Yushukan, the national museum devoted to “high-principled people” and “enshrined deities” who “devoted themselves to build[ing] ‘a peaceful nation’” (brochure). The context of peace in this last room is an abrupt and jarring end to the museum, of which the fifteen exhibition halls detail a long history of warfare in Japan. This begins with the first plaque of the first room, which defines “the spirit of the samurai” as fighting in the name of patriotism and concern for Japan's future, before moving on to outline “overseas expansion” and “expedition to North East Japan which conquered and quelled uprisings” in the eighth century. Claims of liberation-motivated warfare continue throughout the museum, from Japan's 1894 invasion of and later annexation of Korea as liberation from the Chinese, to the December 1941 declaration of war on the US, Great Britain and the Netherlands as Japan's protection of Indochina and the Dutch East Indies from Western colonisation.

Yushukan's framing of Japan's military history as dually motivated by peace and Asian national independence promotes a view of Japan as benevolent big brother and leader of the East Asian region. Japan cultivated a role as protector of pan-Asian regionalism through expansion and colonisation from the Meiji era until its defeat in the Pacific War. Such self-styled leadership, however, did not end with the War. On the back of the Japanese economic miracle, the nation's position as Asian ambassador re-emerged in the 1970s as leader of Asian industrialisation and modernisation. This was consolidated in the 1980s by Japan's entry to international Western fora as often the only Asian representative, and continues in current times in its much-vaunted role as one of the largest foreign aid donors in the world—funding which has been gradually decoupled from its original purpose as reparations payments for war damage. The ideological segue from coloniser to benevolent regional leader, from war reparations to aid donations, and from imperialist expansion to South East Asian liberating force, all display a retrospective historiography that places Japan as central and foremost supporter of regional decolonisation, championing a pan-Asian identity clear of European and American control. In gathering together South-East Asian nations under the umbrella of post-war independence, Japan was promoting regional postcolonialism long before the academic discipline thought to look at it, albeit without employing the terminology. Although the term “postcolonial” is not employed at Yushukan, the other terms against which the postcolonial is positioned are present, including: colonial/colonialism; Empire; expansion; occupation; imperialism; annexation; and settlement. Furthermore, the Japanese need for labour and mineral resources that was used to justify Japanese annexation of the Korean peninsula and its invasion of South-East Asia is a specifically colonial motivation that might be separated from a more general imperial drive for regional power.

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from the English language museum plaques and information brochure. Visit on 25 February, 2012.

Corroborating a sense that the use of colonial terminology to describe nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century Japanese imperialism entails a post-War terminology of the postcolonial, the theory has been applied by scholars of East Asia in Korea, and in the Chinese context to Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. There is a smaller amount of research applying the postcolonial to minority and indigenous communities in Japan to Zainichi Koreans, indigenous Ryukyuans, Okinawans and the Ainu, and post-War Japanese literature in general. Although none of these individual studies has attempted the daunting project of outlining a distinct East-Asian context of colonialism, they each identify marginalised indigenous or ethnic groups which experience lack of voice, rights, recognition, and negative perception by the national dominant discourses of Japan and China. The connection with postcolonialism is made through claiming these minorities to be subjected to oppression, dispossession, and exploitation, coupled with national ideologies that contain systemic yet barely acknowledged discrimination, selective historical remembering, and claims of national identity that shut out recognition of these cultures. These broad criteria certainly suggest that the scope of the postcolonial is potentially very large indeed. In fact, in a comprehensive collection of essays under the title *Indigenous People of Asia* (1995), that includes minorities from Balochistan, Asian Russia, Nepal, China and Japan as well as South-East Asia, the real criteria of inclusion is not indigeneity *per se* but group self-identification of a culture whose ancestral lands are occupied. Indeed, the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues and the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) defines as indigenous “colonized peoples of the world who are prevented from controlling their own lives, resources, and cultures” (Gray 1995, p. 35).

An initial argument against the inclusion of East- and South-East Asia under the postcolonial umbrella is that such globalisation stretches the field too far away from its original conception; to describe the legacies of European colonisation starting from the decolonisation energies of the 1950s. However, as a discipline committed to understanding contemporary—and thus changing—issues of local, national and regional identity and belonging, postcolonial studies has, in recent years, expanded in response to cultural and economic globalisation. The postcolonial framework has thus become more interdisciplinary, informed by world literature in translation as well as non-literary fields such as macro-economics, human geography, sociology, anthropology, and migration studies. For most Asian indigenous peoples, access to postcolonial discourse has been through the IWGIA, which is closely linked to the United Nations Human Rights Council and the UN Forum for Indigenous Affairs. Each of these international NGOs is founded on the United Nation’s principles of recognition, rights and autonomy.<sup>2</sup>

The entry of East-Asia into postcolonial studies corresponds to the field’s expansion in the past decade into parts of the world not touched by European empires and away from its predominantly literary field of study to become more interdisciplinary. Indeed, even without this expanded version of the postcolonial, the impact of British and other European imperialisms on Japanese expansion and Chinese practices of aggression against their own dissenting peoples is well worth investigating. A lack of analysis of the legacies of European colonialism in these two nations may stem from the same reason as that cited in a special

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<sup>2</sup> The UN and IWGIA charters are virtually interchangeable in terms of their criteria for inclusion and professed aims, with UN policy recommendations embodied in the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

issue of the journal *Postcolonial Studies* entitled “Southeast Asia’s absence in postcolonial studies”: the post-War decolonising period which proved so generative of independence and national solidarity for Indian, African and Caribbean nations was not experienced in Asia, which was immediately plunged into the Cold War and debilitating civil wars (Beng Huat 2008, pp. 232-233). Another reason might be that the Asian thinkers and cultural critics who shape their respective national ideologies do not find the Western concept of the postcolonial useful. However this flies in the face of widespread embracing of parallel and related Western critical paradigms in cultural and literary studies, particularly of postmodernity and deconstruction. Indeed, IAFOR’s remit and the themes of the *Librasia* journals of cross-cultural and cross-theoretical study exemplify the pervasiveness of this approach.

In the countries in which it is common currency, the postcolonial viewpoint has helped unmask the colonial-era origin of many historical inequalities, ingrained prejudices, and unconscious discriminations that remain in place in contemporary democratic and independent nations. This in turn has led, on occasion, to some policies aiming to rectify such imbalances, which may include target-area funding in the social sector such as housing and health care, work or education quotas for underrepresented communities and other forms of affirmative action, and reparations of land or money for past injustices. In white settler nations such as the United States, Canada and Australia, the postcolonial creates a framework for discussions of the place of indigenous peoples as well as of later immigrants. By contrast, Japan’s professed cultural homogeneity and social classlessness ignores a range of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic differences. Challenges to this perception have multiplied in recent years, with both Japanese<sup>3</sup> and Western sociologists calling for recognition of its national minorities, which include the internal Burakumin caste, the indigenous Ainu and Ryukyuan, Chinese and Koreans forcibly settled in Japan during Japanese occupation, and labour immigrants from the Philippines, Brazil and Peru. However, very few of the many texts claiming Japan’s cultural heterogeneity refer to postcolonialism, and those that do—in passing—use it to contrast nations that accept contemporary responsibility for the ongoing ramifications of colonialism with Japan’s official non-acknowledgement (Befu 2001; Clammer 2001; Kuwayama 2004; Lie 2008). John Clammer accurately captures the repercussions entailed by accepting a postcolonial perspective on the citizenship rights of Zainichi Koreans and Nikkeijin South Americans: “to *have* a policy would be to publicly acknowledge Japan’s historical and economic debts and to link itself morally with the fate and future of those nations from which migrants [. . .] come” (Clammer 2001, p. 54, italics in original). This in turn would, at the very least, require addressing the social imbalances outlined above.

Clammer’s point signals the political viper’s nest that admitting to the presence of internal minorities entails. Several essays in *Indigenous Peoples of Asia* similarly comment on the lack of government intervention which necessitates work by foreign NGOs to revitalise indigenous minorities, often in impoverished or developing countries. Even some developed nations with commitments to, negotiation of and redress for indigenous communities, such as Canada and New Zealand, were unable in 2007 to ratify the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on the grounds that several of the provisions contradict national

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<sup>3</sup> In agreement with points made by both Margaret Hillenbrand and Takami Kuwayama I acknowledge that the Japanese scholars from which I draw, all work outside of Japan: Befu, Kuwayama, Lie, Murakami, Sugimoto, and Oiwa and Suzuki. The influence of postcolonial theory on academics educated and working solely within Japan is thus still not covered.

constitutions and even some indigenous frameworks (Banks, 2007). Certainly, any government would be unwilling to potentially alienate one constituency in favour of another, especially concerning indigenous or internal minorities. On the other hand, the multiple and ongoing civil strife afflicting many Asian countries (recently Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia) begs the question of whether any nation-state can afford to ignore social imbalances of identity and citizenship both within its boundaries and in relations with its neighbours. Passing into a postcolonial phase that begins with sensitivity to opposing perspectives of history with an openness to accepting historical fault might cause fewer diplomatic gaffes, standoffs, boycotts, and impasses both internally and internationally. For example, a key focus of Japanese minority lobbying groups is the correction of national history text books to include accurate and representative information about, for example, the Ainu, the Nanjing Massacre, and Pacific War Japanese atrocities in Okinawa and overseas (Chan 2008; Hein & Seldon 2000; Loos & Osanai 1993; Suzuki & Oiwa 1997). Notably missing from the decolonisation map at Yushukan is mention of independence movements in Tibet, Taiwan, or the fracture of North and South Korea. In fact, Korea, China and Taiwan are not even on the map,<sup>4</sup> although their regional relationships with Japan are the closest. Indeed, these communities have been most vocal in protesting incidences of Japanese historical nationalism. Examples include anti-Japanese demonstrations in China and Korea in 2005 following Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni, which enshrines convicted war criminals, and the Chinese-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku Islands, escalating since 2008. Most recently, violent protests broke out in China in September 2012 in response to Japan's further claims to the Islands. It would thus appear that the kind of pan-Asian identity and regional solidarity that Japan has long advocated is unrealisable as long as the participants do not address historical sore points, foremost of which is Japan's Meiji-era colonisation and Pacific War invasion of its neighbours, closely followed on the national level of addressing the presence of a large population of Korean and Chinese in Japan.

On the national level, the indigenous Ainu provide an example of the kind of demands made in Japanese minority discourse through deployment of postcolonial principles. Despite ratifying the UN Human Rights Committee's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1979, the government claimed that there were no indigenous peoples in Japan. After joining the IWGIA in 1987, the Ainu brought international attention to their situation by hosting visits by the IWGIA Chair in 1991 and two World Indigenous Peoples' Summits in 2008 and 2010 timed to coincide with Japan hosting the Kyoto G8 Summit and COP10 respectively. In each case, Japan responded to this international attention (Siddle 1996, p. 185) by declaring the presence of Ainu as a minority (1991), recognising Ainu as indigenous (2008), and beginning government advisory roundtable talks with Ainu representatives (2010). Thus it would seem that joining with other indigenous peoples in an international NGO setting helped the Ainu circumvent national recalcitrance. On a larger scale, an Asia-specific commitment to postcolonialism might be one such platform that could conjointly agitate for minority issues throughout the region, as indeed is already the case in terms of indigenous rights.

Despite dedicated and long-standing efforts toward minority and indigenous empowerment, such movements have rarely translated into policy change. Indeed, postcolonial ideologies have not proven very useful in offering decolonising or liberating strategies in the real world. Even once a minority community achieves recognition and has a forum to be heard, this is no

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<sup>4</sup> The map outlines the mainland continent in order to only emphasise South-East Asia.

guarantee that any real progress will be made in political representation or socio-cultural respect. The Ainu situation is a case in point: following two years of roundtable negotiations, the outcome was a list of recommendations with no timeline for action to be taken. At least partly in frustration to well over 100 years of protest and few government concessions,<sup>5</sup> Ainu launched their own political party in January 2012.<sup>6</sup> A similar mismatch between ideals and political practice in modern nation-states is evident on the international scale. The UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which has been ratified by 148 nations, only provides guidelines only that have yet to be implemented by any government. Although institutionalisation of the Declaration is top of the agenda for the new Ainu Party, there is little international incentive or precedent for the Japanese government to acquiesce.

The mismatch between aspiration and application cuts to the heart of current debate over the parameters and ambit of postcolonial studies. The exercise of applying the framework to East Asia fruitfully reveals holes and weaknesses in the discipline's theoretical basis and current modes of application. In particular, when applied to an ex-colonial situation that is not European in origin, postcolonial theory reveals its Eurocentric foundations, a concern that must be addressed at this juncture as the discipline spreads itself increasingly thin.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the ideological suppositions which underpin postcolonial theory are deeply Eurocentric. Although perhaps nobody would deny that liberal notions of equality, freedom and fair treatment for all are principles that ought to be aspired to, the very particular post-War European genesis of the UN organisation (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is troublesome. Founded on indisputably European, Christian values steeped in the modernising project (Slaughter 2007), it is clear that applying these precepts to Asia is bound to be problematic. The question over Japanese postcoloniality may well be as thorny as that over Japanese modernity. The literature on Japan's position vis-à-vis modernity is large and disparate, with little consensus on how post-War Japan became the only nation to modernise without passing through European colonisation, or, according to some, bypassed modernity altogether to pass directly into the postmodern. Nevertheless, all studies search for their answers in unique aspects of Japanese society, including, to name a few, Shintoism, family and corporate structure, and political soft totalitarianism. Similar investigation would be fruitful in considering Japanese colonialism and postcolonialism. While postcolonial theory—like postmodernism—is based on a deconstructionist model that contests the perceived Eurocentric hegemony of the colonial and modern paradigms by advocating local and indigenous philosophies, the human rights model is never far from the surface.

Just as Asia must find its own way of accounting for its relationship to modernity, any Asian adoption of postcoloniality would also need to be grounded in local structures of meaning. The East-Asian, or Japanese variety of postcoloniality must surely be explored by East Asianists and Japanese, both abroad and, crucially, at home. Once again we are confronted with the sticky issue of the inadequacy of applying Western theory to Asia and the associated supposition of a hierarchical relationship which configures Western thought as superior to

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<sup>5</sup> For detail of the long years of Ainu protest against and resistance see Siddle *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ainu-org.jp/>, last accessed 15 January, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> For analysis of current trends in critiquing postcolonial studies, see Melissa Kennedy, "New Directions in Postcolonial Studies."

that produced in the East. Margaret Hillenbrand expresses the problem eloquently in her introduction to another *Postcolonial Studies* special issue, *Contemporary East Asia, in Theory*: the problem “lies not in the exteriority of [European theory to East Asian contexts] *per se* but in the internal void that the routine recourse to other interpretative conditions cannot help but imply” (Hillenbrand 2010, p. 318). While it is neither possible nor desirable to expunge Western theory from Asian studies, which would in any case inaccurately negate the considerable long-term influence of Western thought on and in the region, the antidotes commonly proposed to redress the imbalance are to pay attention to Eastern and local indigenous philosophical traditions (Clammer 2001, p. 74; Hillenbrand 2007, 2010; Kuwayama 2004, pp. 53-55). While the idea is applaudable, its implementation to date is lamentable. Hillenbrand’s 2010 bibliometric survey that measures the frequency of citations of theorists in a leading Asian studies journal, *positions: east asia cultures critique* reveals the following most-cited theorists since its inception in 1993: Foucault (110), Benjamin (82), Spivak (61), Freud (60), Jameson (55), Said (53), Bhabha and Derrida (51), Anderson (43). The top-scoring Asian researchers score significantly lower: Rey Chow (34), Naoki Sakai (28), Karatani Kojin (25), Dai Jinhua (18). Both Hillenbrand and Takami Kuwayama further claim a concomitant lack of cross-cultural scholarship between Asian scholars (Hillenbrand 2010, p. 327; Kuwayama 2004, p. 60). Examples include Chinese scholars lack of collaboration with those of Greater China, particularly from Taiwan and Hong Kong (Hillenbrand 2007, p. 48), Korean anthropologists whose work is relatively unknown in Japan, and even reluctance from Japanese scholars to investigate cultures of their former colonies. Two cases in point are John Lie’s *Zainichi: Koreans in Japan: Diasporic Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity* (2008) and Chunghee Sarah Soh’s *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (2008). Soh’s and Lie’s books already point to the aptness of the postcolonial framework in discussions of Korean national identity and the Korean diaspora in society and literature. These works also illustrate the round-about circulation of knowledge and dissemination of research across disciplines: Lie is Professor of Sociology at UCLA, Berkeley, and Soh is Professor of Anthropology at San Francisco State. Similarly, Japanese scholar Fuminobu Murakami, well-known for his work on contemporary Japanese literature, was a Professor at the University of Hong Kong and wrote predominantly in English. These three academics, as well as Hillenbrand herself, have made significant contributions to the study of postcolonial Japan without themselves being part of Japanese academia.

Both Kuwayama and Hillenbrand describe the lack of communication between disciplines, academic traditions and nations in terms of periphery-centre power relations between Asia (periphery) and the West (centre), in which many Asian scholars tend to refer to the West rather than to their own scholarly traditions and to each other. To counter this current effect, Hillenbrand proposes a pan-Asian academic *clique*, based on the French *Tel Quel* group that now stands metonymically for “Western theory.” She proposes this group would present a consolidated front based on sustained collaboration, exchange, and translation that would make Western scholars sit up and take notice (2007, p. 47-48). Rather than criticising Western epistemological “neo-imperialism” (2010, p. 322), Hillenbrand incites East Asian scholars to *construct* rather than *deconstruct* on their own East-Asian terms. Hillenbrand’s citation of Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd to support her call for East-Asian solidarity intuits the potential usefulness of postcolonial precepts, as these theorists are also part of the postcolonial roll-call. Thus, to add to the suggestion of this paper that postcolonial principles are already at work *culturally* in East Asia, albeit by other names, they are also invoked *theoretically*, applicable to describing many forms and modes of power relations and hierarchies.

Hillenbrand's initiative for more equal weighting of East and West theoretical and critical approaches is equally pertinent to postcolonial studies, which has similarly slipped into a rut in which a small group of researchers continually refer back to a core group of theorists while overlooking a vast reserve of primary and secondary material available—albeit often outside the Anglo-American academy. Indeed, a bibliometric survey of the most oft-cited theorists in postcolonial critique would probably come up with a very similar result to Hillenbrand's. Several of the names that appear most frequently on her list are also central to postcolonial theory, namely Said, Spivak and Bhabha. In a similar fashion to Kuwayama and Hillenbrand in the East Asian Studies field, postcolonial scholar Neil Lazarus, in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), critiques postcolonialists for academic short-sightedness. He diagnoses a self-afflicted paralysis in the discipline due to the narrow range of primary texts, even smaller number of theorists, and tendency to use the same methods and draw the same conclusions (Lazarus 2011, pp. 18-19). In postcolonial literary studies, East-Asian writers could have a much larger role to play. Lazarus's challenge to broaden the texts under postcolonial consideration would certainly take up diasporic writers such as Hong Kong-Macau writer Brian Castro in Australia, Chinese-born Dai Sijie in France, and Japanese Kazuo Ishiguro in England, as well as those translated into English: Lazarus calls on Chinese writers Bei Dao, Jia Pingwa, Lao She, Lu Hsun, Mo Yan, Shu Ting, Yu Hua, and Korean Hwang Sun-won for work which taps into postcolonial concerns.

Despite criticising postcolonialists for their reluctance to risk new approaches and the tendency to follow fashions and funding—surely critiques applicable across academia—Lazarus deeply believes in the ongoing pertinence of postcolonial studies: “the ‘urgent’ task facing those in the field today [. . .] is to take central cognisance of the unremitting actuality and indeed the intensification of imperialist social relations in the times and spaces of the postcolonial world” (Lazarus 2011, p. 16). Lazarus's discussion of the US war in Iraq as an example of modern day imperialism, to which can be added the neoliberalism behind the financial crisis and fallacies of development discourse, revives the relevance of the work of Franz Fanon, another cornerstone of postcolonial theory. In Lazarus's words:

[the] ‘new world order’ has already turned out not to be so very different, after all, from the ‘old world order’ of Fanon's time [. . .] Far from having nothing concrete to say to us today, his work seems to me, to have lost nothing of its relevance or its urgency. *La lucha continúa*, in the famous words of Fanon's exact contemporary, Che Guevara: the struggle continues. (Lazarus 2011, pp. 181-182)

Certainly, the indigenous and minority groups in Asia which struggle for recognition and rights have grounds on which to extend Fanon's claims for minority struggle to their particular contexts. More than yet another exercise in Western academic authority, I believe that applying the postcolonial to Japan can move forward urgent debates in Japan on its internal minorities and regional relationships. At the same time, adding East Asia to the postcolonial framework helps the discipline address its own structural issues. Both outcomes, I think, support and validate the aims of the social sciences to be meaningful and useful in the “real world,” and foster the kind of academic internationalism and interdisciplinary cross-fertilising that liberal globalisation encourages.

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