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# Teaching American Studies in Taiwan: Military Bases and the Paradox of Peace and Security in East Asia

*Chih-ming Wang*

In East Asia, and Taiwan in particular, it is easier to sell America than to teach it. While things with an American tag on it—Levi's, Nike, Apple, Krispy Kreme—represent fashion, quality, and a certain sense of prestige, the United States has been a country of many contradictions. It is regarded as a leader of democracy, a critical ally, and a keeper of security, but it is also seen as a trade competitor, a bully in international relations, and a military empire with extraterritories and overseas bases. At the moment of China's rise to regional hegemony, coupled with the difficult histories between China and its Asian neighbors—especially Japan and Taiwan—the United States has become a hedge for peace against the looming shadows of China's military and economic might. This article argues that the challenge of teaching American studies in Taiwan lies in working through the contradictions of US military bases as the infrastructure of peace and security for the region.

A US Cold War ally and its post-Cold War protectorate, Taiwan is geopolitically and intellectually placed in the “anticommunist, anti-China” conundrum that makes the state of American studies in Taiwan especially ambiguous. Although the American Studies Association of the Republic of Taiwan originated in 1978, the year before the United States cut its diplomatic ties with Taiwan, only a few universities and research institutions have an active program in American studies. These programs are usually directed toward political science and international relations, and assume the functions of a think tank to deliberate on Taiwan's foreign policies as cautiously balancing the tussle between China and the United States. In these programs, including the Institute of European and American Studies in Academia Sinica where I work, American studies takes the form of area studies and international studies where the United States is deemed an uncontaminated, unified, alien object to be approached from the outside—one that we can learn from intellectually but must negotiate with politically, in order to secure and advance

Taiwan's development. Of course, that does not rule out other more critical approaches to American studies in Taiwan in foreign literature and English departments, which contextualize, supplement, and problematize the production of the American canon by references to gender, race, and empire. They also teach ethnic literatures and seek intersections with literary and cultural production from Asia to move beyond professing the canon. The challenge in the critical humanities approach is therefore how to keep abreast of the duality of the United States as both a promise of multicultural union and an empire by bringing literature to bear on and engage with geopolitical reality. This geopolitical–literary divide in the Taiwanese academy refracts the division system where East Asian states have been divided since the inception of the Cold War, forcing knowledge and politics to go separate ways. Indeed, this separation of knowledge (as desire for US–Western modernity) and politics (as critique of US Empire and the division of the state) made it difficult for Taiwan to think about the absence of US military bases, a crucial factor in teaching American studies overseas.

As part of the anticommunist chain of defense in the Asia/Pacific, Taiwan is the only country that no longer has an active US military base. Whereas places like Okinawa still suffer from the burden of the bases, American military presence in Taiwan is traceable only in memory. The absence of US military bases in Taiwan is an interesting and unique history that has not been much discussed or studied. Yet, as both a reality in history and a figure in geopolitics, the US military bases have a crucial role to play in Taiwan's imaginations of security and peace. In fact, the US military presence had been in Taiwan since the 1950s, initially in the form of a "Military Assistance and Advisory Group" and later in the name of military cooperation, endorsed by the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954, to allow the United States to build bases across the island for defense, training, and maintenance. During the Vietnam War, Taipei was also designated as one of the destinations for the Rest and Recuperation Program, which by bringing a large number of US military personnel to Taiwan boosted the sex industry and left a significant number of Amerasians with unknown fathers and brokenhearted mothers. Such is the familiar story of imperial intimacy, sexual violence, and abandonment that one can easily find resonant in such pop cultural representations as *Miss Saigon*, *The World of Suzie Wong*, and the recent critical work on transnational/transracial adoptees. The US military also left a radio station, a bar industry, along with everyday goods, financial support, and a Cold War ideology that constituted what is called "US Aid culture" and remains operative today. Despite a stint of irony, Taiwanese publications on the US military presence presented that period with

much nostalgia, as if lamenting the closure of US military bases in 1978 and the good old days of US base culture.<sup>1</sup>

The 1970s was without a doubt a most difficult period for Taiwan's international status—being forced out of the United Nations in 1972 and derecognized by the United States made Taiwan highly insecure. And the Mutual Defense Treaty was replaced by the Taiwan Relations Act, a congressional act especially created to “maintain peace, security and stability in the Western Pacific” and to ensure US–Taiwan relations, and military aid turned into arms sales that Taiwan must plead for but never refuse. However, both the congressional act and arms sale are taken by Taiwanese government and politicians as endorsing Taiwan's security, to keep Taiwan “safe” from China. Psychologically, the island even depended on the US Seventh Fleet—ironically more than its own military—as the symbol of security, because Taiwan is included in the peripheries that US forces pledged to intervene, should something happens, under the auspices of the US–Japan Security Treaty. In short, though China had effectively forced the US military out of Taiwan, the US military bases for Taiwan are not so much absent as displaced to Okinawa and Guam that host the Seventh Fleet. How to articulate such absent presence—or rather to make the absence present—is a critical issue for teaching American studies in Taiwan.

Despite its geographic proximity, Okinawa's burden remains invisible to most Taiwanese, who tend to regard Okinawa as a tourist paradise with Japanese aura. Yet for a territory that constitutes less than 1 percent of Japan to carry 74 percent of the US military bases in Japan, Okinawa literally exists, as the Okinawa thinker Nakasato Isao writes, “on the edge,” an extreme state of both marginality and precarity. Okinawa is not only an edge of Japanese empire, its “edgy” condition is also created by the Cold War division system that separated Okinawa from Japan first through direct US military governance (1945–72) and later as a space of exception that bears the military burden for Japan, an exchange for Okinawa's return to Japan. The Japanese thinker Takahashi Tetsuya identifies Okinawa—along with Fukushima, where the nuclear meltdown occurred in 2011—as constituting a system of sacrifice that placed both prefectures on the altar of Japan's industrial and “de-militarized” modernity.<sup>2</sup> More significant, the primary strategic objective of US forces in Okinawa is to contain China. The US reassertion in 2012 and 2014 that the US–Japan Security Treaty covers the Senkaku Islands, a disputed territory between Japan, Taiwan, and China, signals the centrality of this geopolitical concern and the “extent” of Okinawa's sacrifice. In other words, Okinawans are risking their lives and islands to host the US military because China remains an imminent threat to the security and peace in East Asia. But that is precisely what makes

China uneasy, therefore producing a dangerous balance that may tip over to the brink of war. While the call to remove US bases from Okinawa is becoming more urgent each day, East Asian states seem unready and reluctant to confront a powerful China without US military support. Without an active and constructive dialogue within the region to imagine a post-US Asia/Pacific, the US military will continue to be the hedge for security, and Okinawa will still carry that heavy burden, forced into sacrifice for a militarized peace in East Asia. At the core of Okinawa's burden is hence the paradoxical structure of peace formed and shaped by US military empire, Asian nationalisms, and the uncertain future of China's rise to global hegemony.

Herein, I believe, lies the challenge and importance of teaching American studies in Taiwan as a critical pedagogy, because the critique of US bases overseas not only presents a polemic against US imperialism but moreover a self-inquiry of Taiwan's position within Pax Americana. Taking Okinawa as a reference point, I intend not only to suggest how Taiwan benefits from the absent presence of US military in Okinawa but also to articulate how Taiwan may share its fate, should the US military stay. In fact, the genesis of US popular culture in Taiwan had much to do with the presence of US military bases.<sup>3</sup> The United States therefore is never an uncontaminated, unified, alien object outside Taiwan but a formative element in the country's geopolitical and national imaginations. The challenge before us is less teaching what happened in US historical formations than engaging with the present and operative American culture that manifests itself with its military prowess. Mark Gillem's *America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire* presents a useful example to think through the problems of US overseas presence by looking at how the spatial arrangements of military bases project US imperial might. He looks in particular into how land is used by imperial powers to create not just military facilities but also a complex of living, social, and business spaces with spillover effects on the local communities.<sup>4</sup> That is, the houses, the pavement, the malls that are forced onto the occupied land are no less significant aspects of US imperial powers than its battleships, tanks, and cannons. Yoshimi Shunya's analysis of Japan's postwar obsession with American culture also attests to the duality of American presence in East Asia.<sup>5</sup> An analysis of how US imperial culture grows on foreign land is crucial for an understanding of how US Empire reconfigures the world spatially, economically, culturally, and politically. As the United States "pivots to Asia" for another round of Cold War containment, American studies in Taiwan, as a form of critical pedagogy, must confront its own complicity with empire and dig farther into the intersections of local and regional histories to contest the grips of imperialism so as to undo the paradox of peace and security.

## Notes

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1. See, for instance, Shin Cuiling, *American Footsteps in Southern Taiwan: Our People in a Defining Era, 1950–1980* (Kaohsiung: National Sun Yat Sen University American Studies Center, 2010), the publication of the museum exhibition under the same title organized by Kaohsiung's Museum of History and sponsored by the American Institute in Taiwan painted a nostalgic picture of the US Aid era. Inadvertently, *US MAAG-Taiwan: An Oral History*, edited by Taiwan's Ministry of Defense (Taipei: Ministry of Defense, 2008) also speaks highly of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and includes interviews with both Taiwanese military officers and American soldiers with positive experiences of the era.
2. Takahashi Tetsuya, *Gisei no system: Fukushima and Okinawa (The System of Sacrifice: Fukushima and Okinawa)* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2012).
3. See Allen Chun's "Nomadic Ethnoscapes in the Changing Global-Local Pop Culture," in *Charismatic Modernity: Popular Culture in Taiwan*, ed. Marc L. Moskowitz (New York: Routledge, 2011), 86–104.
4. See Mark L. Gillem, *America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
5. Yoshimi Shunya, "America's Desire and Violence: Americanization in Postwar Japan and Asia during the Cold War," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4.3 (2003): 433–50. See also Yoshimi, *Shinbei to Hanbei (From Pro-America to Anti-America)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2007).