Japanese And Chinese Immigrant Activists

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Introduction

In a letter dated 5 January 1928, and signed in his capacity as editor of the Japanese-language paper *Kaikyusen* (Class War), Japanese immigrant Communist Kenmotsu Sadaichi (aliases Sasaki and Vasiliev) wrote to veteran Japanese Communist Katayama Sen in Moscow. After noting that when Katayama’s last letter “arrived here, the contents were gone, so it was just an envelope,” he reflected on the past year. “Those of us gathering here in SF [San Francisco] are making nothing but mistakes and blunders. But even though we make mistakes, we are steadily rising up and continuing the fight.” Signing off, “Until the next letter,” he gave as the paper’s return address that of the headquarters of District 13 (which centered on California) of the Workers (Communist) Party of America.1

Barely three weeks before Kenmotsu penned his reply and “on the way home” from Brussels to Moscow, Katayama wrote another letter, dropping it in the mail in Berlin. In this letter to the editor of *The Pan-Pacific Worker* (*PPW*), Katayama reported that he had been attending a meeting of the General Council of the League Against Imperialism (LAI), held in Brussels from 9 to 11 December 1927. The *PPW* was the official organ of the recently established Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat (PPTUS), which was in turn an organ of the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU, also known as the Prointern) and whose offices were initially located in Hankow, China. The aims of this new body were broad and ambitious: “To promote a joint struggle against the dangers of war between the Pacific powers and to safeguard the Chinese revolution; “to aid all oppressed peoples of the Pacific to free themselves from the yoke of Imperialism” and “to eliminate all racial and national prejudices”; “to organize and carry out joint actions of the exploited classes and oppressed peoples against the oppressing powers”; and finally to build alliances among the trade unions of the pan-Pacific countries and unify these “with the labor movement of the whole world.”2 Katayama proceeded to describe in glowing terms the
proceedings of both the founding Congress of the League Against Imperialism and for National Independence, also held in Brussels in February of that same year, and the meeting of the General Council. At the founding meeting in February, both Japanese and Chinese delegations were among those from around the world. They included representatives of the Central Executive Committee of the Nationalist Party (also known as the Kuomintang, KMT), the European center of the KMT, KMT sections in Paris, Lyon, Belgium, Germany, England and Holland, a union of Chinese workers in France, and a delegate from Zhongshan Xuehui (Students’ Society for the Advancement of Sun Yat-Senism in America, SASYS), who represented the Chinese in America.

For its part, toward the beginning of 1927 the leadership of District 2 (which centered on New York) of the American party had cooperated with the KMT in organizing a public meeting in Cooper Union in New York City “on the subject ‘Hands Off’ China.” In addition, it had started “building a Hands Off China Committee, with the Kuomintang comrades taking the initiative in this work.”

In the meantime, David Seizo Ogino, Secretary-Organizer of the Japanese Workers Association of New York, wrote a letter in March to Katayama introducing him to American Party and KMT member Sui Peng in anticipation of Peng’s visit to Moscow. Ogino noted that Peng “has been in contact with our Japanese comrades here and has been cooperating with us in anti-imperialist work and other activities.”6 That same month, in San Francisco three Chinese activists in leadership positions in the KMT in America who were simultaneously committed to “the Chinese movement” and “Communists but in name” wrote to the head of the American party to express their belief “that there is great hope both for the advancement of Communism and the strengthening of the Kuomintang in America, if the two parties can cooperate wisely and tactfully [sic].”7 I would note, that all these activities preceded Chiang Kai-shek’s bloody anti-Communist coup in China in April 1927.

Here is a glimpse of the migratory, multilingual, and transnational history that I am studying. The sites are many: some are grouped in one city, but others are separated from one another by a continent or both a continent and an ocean; yet near and far travel across land and sea and/or letter, cable, and telegram connected them. Historical moments touched upon are likewise many and variously scaled, some as catastrophic and world shattering as the bloody coup launched by Chiang Kai-shek against the Communists in Shanghai in April 1927. Others were more localized but nonetheless reverberated across space and time. For example, following the blow to Japanese activists on the West Coast of Kenmotsu’s deportation from the United States and voluntary departure for the Soviet Union in December 1931, Kenmotsu was sent to the port city of Vladivostok on the other side of the Pacific from his former residence. There he worked, in his words, “as the manager of the Japanese Section of the International Seamen’s Club up to the 15th April 1936, and as an instructor of the Pan-Pacific Secretariat of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers [TOS IMPR] for a while.”8 Sympathetic Japanese seamen, who frequented the Seaman’s Club (Interclub), then participated in the circulation of ideas and communication across the Pacific. The reverberations, however, did not end there. The above statement was part of an autobiographical account that Kenmotsu wrote at the beginning of Joseph Stalin’s Great Terror of 1936–1938 to which Kenmotsu and up to eighty other Japanese would ultimately fall victim.9

For too long left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrants have been absent from the landscape of the history of the American Communist movement and in Chinese and Japanese American history. Asian Communism has been treated strictly as a phenomenon in the nonwestern world in the historiography of both American and international Communism. On one level, then, this book is a work of recovery of hitherto “lost” histories. At the same time, on an analytical level I am positioning this book at the intersection of several interdisciplinary fields and engaging with a number of critical questions.
First, there is the vexing question of autonomy. Was the Communist International (Comintern) by the end of the 1920s a monolithic structure under the absolute control of Stalin? And as such, were the national parties simply instruments of the Soviet state? More specifically, what was the nature of the relationship of the American party and of Chinese and Japanese immigrant members in particular to the Comintern and the Soviet party? In addition, I ask how longstanding ideas in Russia and the United States about so-called Orientals and the Orient shaped the institutional structures and day-to-day operations of the American and international Communist movements as these related to and operated on the ground in the Russian Far East (which from 1926 to 1938 formed an official province known as the Dalkrai), the Western Pacific, and the United States.

This leads me directly to the other key set of questions with which I am grappling. These concern the practice of proletarian internationalism and its relationship to racial and national identity, gender, nationalism, and migration, and the related more theoretical question of the relationship among the concepts of space, race, gender, and nation. More than any other aspect of the project, this terrain stands at the intersection of various bodies of scholarship with which my work is in conversation, including global labor history/labor geography, Asian American Studies, and American and international Communist history. It is also in exploring this aspect of my study that I first understood the importance of space and geographical scale.

**Practicing Global Labor History/Labor Geography as an Asian Americanist**

I begin with the insight developed by theorists of space and geographers: just as social relations are socially constructed so do societies produce space, and further organized space in turn shapes social relations. It follows that the “making of history” cannot be divorced from the “making of geography.” Space, time, and being are bound together in a “socio-spatial dialectic.” Theorist Henri Lefebvre explains, “Space and the political organization of space express social relationships but also react back upon them.”

Second, I am drawing on geographers’ conceptualizations of the role played by space in the workings of capitalism. Drawing on David Harvey’s work and in particular his idea that capitalism needs a “spatial fix” to resolve its inherent contradictions, Neil Smith zeroes in on the issue of geographical scale in the production of the uneven development of capitalism. He argues, “Uneven development is the systematic geographical expression of the contradictions inherent in the very constitution and structure of capital.” Moreover, scale is produced through the geographical negotiation of capital’s twin but contradictory needs for immobility and mobility in the landscape. Smith’s initial conceptualization of geographical scale heavily favored the power of capital, but
in a recent essay focusing on ant gentrification struggles on New York’s Lower East Side scale instead arises out of political struggle and thereby can become a tool of either repression or liberation. Here, Smith’s typology of scales extends in hierarchical order from the “body, home, community, urban, region, [and] nation” all the way to the global. Yet, these very spatial divisions as a social process are neither complete nor frozen in time. Nor are actions and experiences necessarily confined to a single scale. In fact, social actors may possibly use the very production of geographical scale to “jump scales” and thereby “dissolve spatial boundaries that are largely imposed from above.”

Meanwhile, geographer Doreen Massey turned her attention to conceptualizations of place and the “politics” of the social-spatial dialectic. If the view of space as stasis was problematic, so, too, was the understanding of place as bounded, singular, and fixed. Rather than being seen as “settled, coherent worlds of their own,” places are themselves “meeting place[s], the location of the intersections of particular bundles of activity spaces, of connections and interrelations, of influences and movements.” Crucially, given that “space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation,” these networks of social relations are governed by “a kind of ‘power-geometry.’”

The relationship between space and place brings me to Harvey’s “simple rule: that those who command space can always control the politics of place even though, and this is a vital corollary, it takes control of some place to command space in the first instance.” Evidence for such a dictum is seen in the fact that one key constituent element of the relationship between labor and capital has long been a struggle over the power to command space. In relation to my own work, Harvey’s “rule” proves useful in thinking about the difficulties encountered by Japanese and Chinese activists in their struggles to command space, whether inside the United States or overseas, from a place dominated by exclusionary politics and marked by racial divides and in which they were defined in the immigrant generation as “aliens ineligible to citizenship.”

More recently, others have also turned to the theorization of geographical scale. Most interesting in terms of my study is Kevin R. Cox’s conceptualization of what he terms “spaces of dependence” and “spaces of engagement”: the former are “defined by those more-or-less localized social relations upon which we depend” and cannot be found elsewhere, and the latter are “the space[s] in which the politics of securing a space of dependence unfolds.” By critiquing what he argues is a tendency for scale to be “characterized in areal terms” such that scale is seen as delimiting bounded spaces and “jumping scales” is a “unidirectional” movement “upwards” from one space in the hierarchy to another, Cox proposes that a “more appropriate metaphor for the spatiality of scale . . . is that of the network.” Spaces are never firmly closed, and the production of scale is more accurately understood as emerging contingently out of the process by which agents seek to develop networks that lie beyond those
encompassed by spaces of dependence and hence that are connected to spaces of engagement. From this perspective, “jumping scales” becomes the process whereby agents construct networks of associations that enable them to shift from spaces of dependence to spaces of engagement.\textsuperscript{20}

At the same time, there emerged what practitioners describe as the field of “labor geography.”\textsuperscript{21} Geographers had hitherto focused on how capital creates “spatial fixes,” and labor geographers examine “how workers’ lives were spatially structured and how workers attempt to create what we might call ‘labor’s spatial fix’ as they seek to secure their economic and political goals.”\textsuperscript{22} In his work on California agricultural workers’ “geography of resistance,” Don Mitchell cogently describes the position of labor within the hierarchical and contested geography of capitalism. Applying Marx’s insight into the making of history to the understanding of labor geography, Mitchell concludes: “To rephrase a now hackneyed truism, labor makes its own geographies, but not under conditions of its own choosing . . . As long as labor continues to take hold of geographies and continually seeks to transform them in the name of a justice that, while sensitive to ‘the local,’ is also universal in outlook, the geography of capitalism will always be contested.”\textsuperscript{23} Yet, both Japanese and Chinese immigrant Communists sought to transform their respective geographies in the name of a justice that was shaped not only by “universal” values of internationalism but also by particular nationalist sentiments and at least in the beginning a range of political traditions.

Indeed, more than nationalism and political heterogeneity is missing from the above picture. Ideologies of race and gender and the historical processes of racialization and gendering must also be integrated into the story of labor geography.\textsuperscript{24} This brings me back to the “socio-spatial dialectic,” but now I focus on the social dimension. I am following the lead of historians who have responded to the twin challenges to include nonwhite and female workers in their narratives and to view labor’s story through the lens of race and gender. Here, race is not solely defined by the black-white binary, and the processes of racialization and engendering are seen as changing over time and varying across geographic locations.\textsuperscript{25}

In addition, I position my work in the context of the newly reinvigorated field of global labor history. Beginning in the 1990s, discussion in scholarly and popular venues about the purportedly new phenomenon of globalization veritably exploded. At the same time, historians of the United States took up the challenge to rethink the national narrative by adopting a transnational rather than national perspective and examining the myriad of ways in which people interacted with other people and ideas across national borders.\textsuperscript{26} When it comes to labor history, this effort was long overdue because in “the deepest sense” write Michael Hanagan and Marcel van der Linden, “labor history has always been global history.”\textsuperscript{27} Moreover, scholars rooted in the fields of migration and immigration history have led the way.\textsuperscript{28} For instance, immigration
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historians Donna R. Gabaccia, Franca Iacovetta, and Fraser M. Ottanelli initiated the pioneering and ongoing “Italians Everywhere” project. By examining the migrations of Italian laborers around the globe and over the course of two centuries, this work shows the long history of globalization and, in their words, “how profoundly—and usually also how ‘nationally’—every multiethnic nation-state understood relations among ethnicity, race or color, class, and gender.”

Historian Robin D. G. Kelley astutely notes at the beginning of his contribution to The Journal of American History’s special issue on “The Nation and Beyond,” “Black studies, Chicano/a studies, and Asian American studies were diasporic from their inception, a direct outgrowth of the social movements from the late 1960s and early 1970s that gave birth to those programs.” Several developments that I have introduced also emerged in the field of Asian American Studies, to which I now turn.

One line of tension within the field of Asian American Studies stems from what is commonly referred to as the “transnational turn” or what Sau-ling C. Wong identifies as a shift from a “domestic” to a “diasporic perspective.” Underlying the debate is the historically fraught relationship between Asian Studies and Asian American Studies. In his book, Chinatown, N.Y., Peter Kwong develops the notion of a “national approach” to the study of American Chinatowns, which “assumes that there will be a close correspondence between a group’s treatment in this country and the international standing of the group’s homeland.” Along similar lines, Sucheng Chan calls for greater attention to “the emigration end of the story” and to “the international political context in which the migrations occurred.” Emigration could, in fact, be a political strategy. More recently, other scholars of Asian American history have begun to bridge the divide by adopting a transnational perspective that recognizes the transpacific and flexible migrant networks and allegiances as well as the social, economic, and political ties binding families and communities across vast distances and years of separation and the connections between conditions in sending and receiving countries.

Like these other scholars, I, too, focus on the connections between social and political developments in sending and receiving countries and the international political context. However, my transnational perspective encompasses both transpacific and transatlantic arenas, as well the interiors of North America, Europe, the Soviet Union, and China and Japan. Chinese and Japanese immigrant Communists initiated and sustained networks and the flow of people, communications, and ideas across both oceans and these many lands. Moreover, they, too, benefited from the existence of an institutional fabric that might be compared to Adam McKeown’s “dense institutional complexes” but that was quite distinct insofar as it constituted a part of the highly complex, multiply scaled, multilingual, official, and unofficial apparatus of the international Communist movement. At the same time, even as
I focus on transnational practices, I keep in mind the continuing and often repressive reality of the state. Erika Lee rightly cautions, scholars’ “emphasis on the transnational rather than the national . . . has obscured the impact of the American nation-state and the exclusion laws in particular in structuring and circumscribing transnational migration, networks, and identities. Transnational interpretations of twentieth-century migration cannot merely replace national ones.”

In addition, I turn to scholarship on the history of Asian America that is grounded within the context of the history of American imperial expansion. For instance, in her study of Filipinos in pre-World War II Seattle Dorothy Fujita-Rony conceptualizes the U.S. West as part of an expanding transpacific empire involving not only trade but also the movement of peoples and ideas back and forth between the “colonial metropole of Seattle” and the colonized Philippines as well as other countries in Asia. At the same time, building on Eiichiro Azuma’s recent study of Japanese America, Between Two Empires, I position the histories of Japanese and Chinese immigrant Communists within the multiple contexts of the expanding U.S., Japanese, and Russian empires.

The question of empire leads me directly to the subject of Orientalism. In his pioneering book Orientalism, Edward W. Said was the first to develop a critique of the systems of knowledge developed by Western European academic elites by which the “Orient” was constituted and introduced to Europe and against which European civilization was defined; these systems were put in service of colonial conquest, occupation, and administration. More recently, however, scholars of Asian America have focused on the particular history of American Orientalism, revealing the ways in which ideas about “Orientals” and the “Orient” helped to define whiteness in America and to define and exercise control over the lives of Asian Americans. In his book Orientals, Robert G. Lee examines intersections of race, gender, class, and nationality. Of special relevance to my study is his analysis of the figure of the Chinese “coolie.” Originating in the 1870s and 1880s during the period of formation of the white working class, Lee shows that the image of the “coolie” not only effectively excluded Chinese from the working class as “a racial Other unfit for white work or white wives” but also shored up the status of the white working class against the very real threat of proletarianization. Upholding the ideal of artisan labor, the white labor movement racialized common labor as “coolie labor” to be performed by only the “coolie” or the “nigger.”

In her work, Immigrant Acts, Lisa Lowe also grapples with historical racial formations of Asian Americans by focusing in particular on the “contradictions of Asian immigration,” that is, the ways in which Asians have been simultaneously placed “within the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked as ‘foreign’ and ‘outside’ the national polity.” Moreover, legal regulations both racialized and gendered Asian Americans. Crucially, she argues, the very “universals” put forward in
the national political sphere generated Asian Americans' critical “immigrant acts”: “The racialization of Asian Americans in relation to the state locates Asian American culture as a site for the emergence of another kind of political subject, one who has a historically ‘alien-ated’ relation to the category of citizenship.” In the case of Chinese and Japanese immigrant Communists, this “alien-ness” provided the ground for their resistance and gendered transnational activism. At the same time, it is important to recognize that there were very real risks and costs involved in such resistance to the nation-state.

Where does this leave the historian who seeks to write about Asian immigration to places in the West and the East from a “nonimperial perspective”? In a wide-ranging essay, anthropologist Fernando Coronil explores the question of how to challenge the constructions of Orientalism and Occidentalism—the latter defined as Orientalism’s “condition of possibility, its dark side (as in a mirror)” —with the aim of developing “nonimperial geohistorical categories.” He argues that the task confronting scholars is to shift the focus from Orientalism to Occidentalism, thereby turning attention away from the ways in which the West misrepresents the Orient and toward “the conceptions of the West animating these representations.” This shift makes evident that the origins of representations of the Orient and the Occident lie in a history of “asymmetrical relations of power” that are “underwritten by global capitalism” and of western dominance the world over.

Tony Ballantyne’s recent Orientalism and Race offers an exciting model to those seeking to write “nonimperial” histories. Ballantyne rejects both “nation-based colonial histories and metropolitan-focused imperial history.” He also challenges the notion that Europe and European culture were unaffected by the “cultural and intellectual transformations enacted by colonialism.” Instead, he adopts “a mobile approach” that enables him to trace the movement of the idea of Aryanism as it traveled through imperial networks of circulation and systems of intellectual and cultural exchange across metropole and colonies as well as between colonies. In so doing, Ballantyne emphasizes the interplay and interdependence of the local, national, and imperial, “the transmission of ideas, ideologies and identities across space and time,” and, perhaps most important, the understanding that “the structure of empire was constantly reworked and remade.” Here, the web replaces the wheel as the “organizing analytical metaphor,” and a singular empire is seen “as a complex agglomeration of overlapping webs,” or more simply as “webs of empire.”

Following Ballantyne’s lead, I employ a “mobile” approach to trace the multidirectional movements of activists, information, and ideology outward from Moscow as the center toward the periphery and among regional nodal points located in Europe, the United States, and on either side of the Pacific. In addition, at the individual level and in relation to the leading Chinese and Japanese organizers, I draw upon L. Eve Armentrout Ma’s concept of “peripatetic organizers,” whom she describes as “usually men of high social standing
with some prior experience in political movements or political agitation" and "invariably either eloquent speakers or eloquent writers." Thus, I explore both the connections among international, national, and local spheres of activity and the ways in which communication and exchange operated both through and at cross-purposes to the institutions of national and international Communism.

Reenvisioning American and International Communist History from a Transnational and Nonimperial Perspective

At the risk of oversimplification, I summarize the historiography of the field of American Communism. "The Old Left" has been and remains a controversial subject in U.S. history. The first generation of scholars of the Old Left, many of them former Communists, viewed the American Communist experience as a story of increasing Soviet manipulation in which the Communist Party, U.S.A. (CPUSA) functioned as an arm of international conspiracy. The individual party member was a tool of the Soviet system and therefore, by definition, a traitor to American democracy. This approach has become known as the anti-Communist tradition of scholarship. Any critique of such an interpretation was largely confined to testimonial literature written by less bitter veterans of the Left.

Beginning in the late 1970s, influenced by the idea of history "from the bottom up," a younger generation of "revisionist" scholars sought to reconstruct the history of American Communism from the perspective of the rank-and-file. Fundamental to this new work was an emphasis on rank-and-file agency and autonomy. Rejecting earlier portrayals of American Communists as either party hacks or fellow-traveling dupes, these scholars focused on the struggles within both the Party and the national as well as neighborhood campaigns. In their view, although the CPUSA was dogmatically Stalinist in terms of formal adherence to policy, official dictates were of far less importance for the local practice of workers in the movement. Furthermore, autonomy at the local level was sometimes seen as predicated on poor and/or irregular communication with the center. As shown by Kelley in his book on Alabama Communists, this as well as the Party’s general inability to direct the work of people of color created space for autonomy. This approach has become known as the anti-anti-Communist tradition of scholarship. Important to this scholarship was the “discovery” of oral history. Recognizing the rich historical opportunities of such fieldwork, the new historians of the Left turned to a wide range of communities as well as labor and social organizations to collect the life stories of the “ordinary” radicals of earlier generations.

More recently, the field has continued to expand, not only including the full range of actors but also regarding the scope of the inquiry. For instance, in his work on the involvement of Caribbean migrants in the radical
movements in the United States during the first three decades of the twentieth
century, Winston James broadens what constitutes the American field. The
scope of his study encompasses not only the Caribbean “diaspora in the United
States” but also the region of the Hispanic and non-Hispanic Caribbean. From
this examination of the broader region James arrives at one of his most strik-
ing conclusions: “it is not only possible but probable that the commitment
to radicalism amongst Caribbeans in New York was not at all evenly spread,
regardless of provenance, as we are led to believe. Indeed, there is strong evi-
dence indicating correlation between island provenance and different political
responses in America.”

Similarly, the first studies of Asian immigrant radicalism chart an equally
dramatic re-visioning of the history of radicalism in the United States. At the
forefront of this research is the work of two historians, Him Mark Lai and
Yuji Ichioka. Lai is the first to recover the history of the Chinese Marxist Left
in America, while Ichioka is the first to illuminate the history of Japanese
immigrant (Issei) socialists and anarchists at the turn of the century in the
San Francisco Bay Area and Fresno. This scholarship confirms the truth of
Ichioka’s and Lai’s dictum: to understand either the Japanese American or Chi-
nese American Left, scholars must broaden their research horizons and move
beyond national boundaries to look at historical developments within both the
international Communist movement and the immigrants’ homelands.

Another event of enormous importance regarding scholarly develop-
ment on American Communism, as well as other national parties and the
international Communist movement more generally, was the collapse of the
Soviet Union, which led to the opening of the Comintern archives in Moscow.
Scholars of American and international Communism were almost overnight
provided with a wealth of new evidence to shed light on both the operations
within and the directives issued from the center as well as the activities at
national and local levels in all the countries hosting national parties. I discuss
the impact on the field of Comintern scholarship when I focus on the struc-
ture of the Comintern in chapter 3. It is ironic in some ways that opening the
archives has allowed consolidation of the two opposing traditions of schol-
arship, in particular with the resurgence of studies in the anti-Communist
tradition documenting Soviet influence over and Soviet-directed espionage
activities within the ranks of the American party. At the same time, an effort
to forge a multidimensional approach has significantly emerged. Such an
approach seeks to ground the experiences of party activists within local and
national contexts; the approach simultaneously recognizes national sections’
relationships to the Comintern and the Soviet party as well as to the inter-
national Communist movement and the impact of changes in the Comintern
program and practices.

Drawing on multilingual historical sources in the Comintern archives
as well as various archives in the United States, this book combines
bottom-up and top-down approaches with Ballantyne's "mobile approach." I offer a needed corrective to both the predominantly national and eurocentric models employed by scholars of American Communist history and metropolitan-focused histories of international communism.

My work challenges us to look at party membership and activism as a complex set of relationships within and among various sites—including Moscow and in this case cities in the United States, the Americas, Europe, China, Japan, and the Russian Far East—and at various geographical scales. I also address the related, but largely unexplored, questions of the relationships: of Chinese immigrant Communists to the international Communist and Chinese nationalist movements as well as to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); of Issei Communists to the international Communist and Japanese nationalist movements as well as to the Japanese Communist Party (JCP); of Japanese and Chinese immigrant Communists to Communist-led unions and to the larger American labor movement; and of Japanese and Chinese immigrant Communists to Japanese and Chinese immigrant communities, respectively, in the United States.

Writing about “Lost” History

These questions raise another issue, namely, the existence of gaps, or silences, in the historical record. In fact, much of the history of left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrants’ activism remains hidden and difficult to uncover but not entirely lost—so I learned throughout the course of my research. For example, just when I was about to conclude that my search through pages and pages of microfilmed bulletins issued by the Women’s Department in District 13 was altogether futile or misdirected, I came upon a brief article, “THE CHINESE WOMEN WORKERS IN THE NEEDLE TRADES,” signed “Chinese Needle Worker-S. F.” This history is hidden in the United States and throughout the world. In my many conversations with international scholars of Communist history, the first response to my topic is typically one of surprise; surprise and confusion is also prevalent among archivists in the Comintern archives. Upon my arrival in Moscow, I learned that archivists were unaware that some Japanese and Chinese Communist immigrants to the United States had first (and in some instances only) joined the American national section, CPUSA, and those individual files were therefore archived as such.

A related issue is the language problem. Much of Chinese and Japanese immigrant Communists’ correspondence, minutes of meetings, and reports exist only in translation in English or in one or more of the three other main languages used by the Comintern, that is, Russian, French, and German. I have no trouble reading and translating Russian- and French-language materials, and I can figure out enough of the German to know if I should request a copy of a document to be translated later. I also made copies of Chinese- and Japanese-language documents whose file descriptions or margin notes in Russian or
English indicated that they would be of interest to my project. And I have benefited from the generous assistance of a number of Chinese- and Japanese-language translators.

Given the fact that much of this history remains buried and that a large portion of the archival record consists of translations of the original documents, one cannot therefore assume that the extant material represents a complete and undistorted account of the past. For example, whereas the reports produced by the secretaries of the Chinese and Japanese bureaus are carefully archived, the voices of dissenting members of the respective groups receive only scattered references. In addition, the use of grandiose and hyperbolic language is pervasive in many of the groups’ official communications. Interpreting the evidence is crucial when the lines between recounting what happened in the past, exaggerating the present situation, and projecting events into a radically transformed future are so unclear.

Last, there is the matter of “haunting,” what sociologist Avery Gordon describes as “ghostly matters,” that is, “ghosts and gaps, seething absences, and muted presences.”57 These “ghosts and gaps” confronted me regularly. Kenmotsu’s English-language version of his “Autobiography,” for example, traced his life story from his background in Japan and social position upon arrival in the United States to his ideological trajectory prior to joining the Party followed by the character of his Party membership,58 all without either using the first person pronoun or naming any people with whom he worked or referring to any experiences or events that occurred between September 1932 and April 15, 1936.59 In the Chinese Buro’s membership tables from February 1929 the column “Expelled” includes the lone figure six for the period August 1928 to February 1929.60 I have refused to accept as final the silencing of this oppressed past.61 I endeavored to write about these and other Communist activists as active subjects in their own and other people’s lives, and when the sources permit I consider “the subjective dimension of the experience.”62

Finally, a word about periodization is apposite. I am organizing my narrative into two periods: the first covers the early- to mid-twenties, and the second is commonly understood in Comintern historiography as the Third Period.63 The concept referred to the last stage in what was theorized as a three-phase development of capitalism during the post-World War I period. The Third Period was marked by increasingly sharp contradictions in capitalism that would in theory bring about a revolutionary upsurge among workers and the growing strength of Communist Parties around the world. Although Nikolai Bukharin first articulated the term at the seventh plenum of the executive committee of the Communist International (ECCI) held in November–December 1926, the Sixth Comintern Congress, held from July 17 to September 1, 1928, adopted an ultraleft antisocial democratic platform, including the policy of “class against class,” the tactic of noncooperation with all reformists and direct confrontation between labor and capital.64 However, to construct a narrative that is
responsive both to historical changes occurring in China and Japan as well as
the United States and to policy shifts dictated by the Comintern. I begin with
the year 1927. The year marked an important moment in the development of
the Communist and labor movements in China and Japan. Regarding the other
boundary, at the Seventh Congress, held from July 25 to August 21, 1935, the
Comintern officially ratified the break with Third Period policies and called for
the establishment of a broad united front, called the Popular Front, of commu-
nist and social-democratic forces on a national as well as international scale
in the fight against fascism. However, because the years 1933 to 1935 offered a
period of transition at both the highest levels of the Comintern and the course
of Japanese and Chinese immigrant Communist activism, I largely focus on
developments through the end of 1934.

I have organized my book into three parts. Part I presents an overview of
the larger historical background, including the relationship between Asia and
China and Japan in particular and the Comintern, and the history of Chinese
and Japanese immigrant workers’ encounter with racial anxiety and organized
labor in the United States (chapter 1). In chapter 2 I turn to the origins and
early years of left-wing and Communist Japanese and Chinese immigrant
activism.

In Part II, I adopt a top-down and metropolitan-centered approach to the
entire period by examining several elements: first, the formal institutions and
structures of the international Communist movement in the capital of Moscow,
in particular as they relate to the activism of Japanese and Chinese immigrant
Communists (chapter 3); and second, the emergence of the pan-Pacific inter-
national movement as it spread across and organized around regional nodal
points located in Shanghai, Vladivostok, Berlin, and San Francisco (chapter 4). By international Communist movement, I understand both the institutions
of international Communism and the movements and activities of individual
Communists who sought to advance the cause of international Communism
through their activities as Communist functionaries.

In Part III, I trace the individual trajectories and individual as well as col-
lective activism of left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrants
from 1927 until the beginning of 1934 within both the international (chapter 5)
and American Communist movements; chapters 6 and 7 focus on the Chinese,
and chapter 8 discusses the Japanese. More specifically, I examine the transpa-
cific and global networks of activity, communication, and influence in which
the respective groups of activists participated. In addition, I pay attention to
the question of geographical scale and to the ways in which both organizations
and individual actions shaped and were shaped by the making of geography
across the multiply scaled and hierarchical landscape of global capitalism.