Ambivalent Filiation: Cultural and Representational Mediation of Imperial Japan in *The Samurai's Garden*

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Abstract

This article examines how Gail Tsukiyama's *The Samurai's Garden* (1994) imagines wartime Japan under the pressure of imperial violence. While scholarship on Asian American return narratives has often emphasized cultural recovery and countermemory, less attention has been placed on its complications. Tsukiyama's novel constructs affective attachment to Japan, even as it is also the aggressor in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Drawing on Patricia Chu's theorization of Asian American return narratives, this article argues that *The Samurai's Garden* stages an ambivalent return to wartime Japan. The novel makes return possible through idealized representations of pastoral space, refined cultural practice, and encounters with Japanese figures whose civilian vulnerability or bodily marginalization places them outside wartime national mobilization. Yet these same strategies dehistoricize Japanese cultural forms by bracketing off their entanglement with wartime imperial ideology, thereby compromising the cultural recovery on which return depends. This return, however, remains unstable. The novel problematizes existing accounts of Asian American return narratives by showing that return, orientalist mediation, and historical accountability are structurally interdependent forces.

Keywords: Gail Tsukiyama, Asian American literature, return narratives, Japan, Japanese culture, Sino-Japanese war

Introduction

Assimilation has long shaped the conditions under which Asian American literature has been produced and read in the United States. Early works such as John Okada's *No-No Boy* register the pressure to conform through the "voluntary erasure" of labor histories and emotional ties to ancestral homelands (Huang and Mendoza 3), yet assimilation rarely resolves the structural positioning of Asian Americans as "perpetual foreigners" (Eng and Han 345). The irresolvable gap between the promise of inclusion and its persistent denial has driven Asian American literary production, since the 1980s, toward a retrospective orientation: an impulse to "venture forth and look back," recovering ancestral connections that assimilative pressures have undermined or severed (Ma, *Diaspora Literature* 3). Writers such as Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston and Lisa See have explored family origins and stories outside of America. In *Where I Have Never Been: Migration, Melancholia, and Memory in Asian American Narratives of Return*, Patricia Chu describes how such literary efforts remedy "anxieties about cultural loss" while re-centering Asia as a site of personal meaning and identity (4). By recuperating marginalized or silenced Asian histories, these return narratives serve as counter-memories that bridge the gaps in cultural and ancestral ties.

Gail Tsukiyama is an Asian American writer who presents a distinct case of return narratives. Born in San Francisco to a Japanese American father from Hawai'i and a Chinese mother from Hong Kong, she is of a bi-national or dual Asian heritage. While return narratives focus on just one familial or ancestral homeland, Tsukiyama has both Japan and China with which to contend, complicated by the deep historical enmity between the two nations. Japan's invasion of China during the 1937 – 1945 Sino-Japanese war was brutal, especially during the infamous Nanjing massacre. For Tsukiyama, the struggle to reconcile this violent history while keeping both her Japanese and Chinese

heritage is a challenge that she takes on in her works. In her first novel *Women of the Silk* (1991) set in China, she explores the life of an impoverished young girl, Pei who works at a silk factory, her friendship with the other women there before Japanese military encroachment leads her to flee to Hong Kong. In the second novel *The Samurai's Garden* (1994), the story involves Stephen, a young Chinese man from Hong Kong who travels to Japan in 1937, precisely at the point of the invasion of China. It is argued then that this Chinese character serves as a means through which Japan as an imperial nation is approached and viewed.

This article focuses on *The Samurai's Garden* as a return narrative to Japan and the difficulty involved in navigating such a fraught history. Other Japanese American narratives of return have also confronted Japan's military past, but are framed differently from Tsukiyama. As Patricia Chu argues, these writers choose to "tell the personal stories that are *not* being told by historians", while complementing American knowledge of "Japanese internment, Pearl Harbor, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki", thereby recovering Japanese voices in the process (181). Notably, there is either an American character or perspective through which the return to the homeland is enacted in these narratives. In contrast, Tsukiyama's two novels are fully based in China or Japan where an imaginative reconstruction becomes the primary mechanism through which 'return' is narratively produced.

Attending to what kind of ancestral homeland is constructed clarifies how such pressures shape both the nature of return as cultural affiliation. Answering that question requires attending to the representational conditions under which Asia becomes legible for the literary marketplace and as a place of attachment. Borrowing from the postcolonial theorist Graham Huggan, non-Western texts often rely on a "regime of value" in which cultural difference is consumed as symbolic capital, with exoticism functioning as a

"semiotic circuit that oscillates between strangeness and familiarity" to manufacture otherness even while domesticating it (6, 13). To secure legibility and circulation within dominant representational frameworks, even resistant forms of Asian American writing remain vulnerable to the epistemic pressures they contest, risking falling into a form of orientalism. Sheng-Mei Ma has pointed out that "[w]hile the Asian American identity was constructed in opposition to Orientalism, the two cultural forces are not necessarily at odds" (*The Deathly Embrace* xiv). Cultural representations of Asians are therefore caught between reclamation and being accessible in the marketplace.

This article argues that Gail Tsukiyama's *The Samurai's Garden* stages a structurally ambivalent relationship with wartime Japan. On one hand, the novel makes cultural affiliation possible by redirecting attention from imperial aggression to a culturally refined and civilian Japan rendered through modes of idealization, yet those same strategies bracket off the historical entanglements of culture and thereby compromise the restorative promise. At the same time, by allowing the fact of war to repeatedly intrude upon Stephen's time there, the novel unsettles affiliation and prevents it from achieving full ethical closure. The article contributes to the scholarship on Asian American return narratives, specifically those centered on Japan, showing how it navigates between cultural recovery, affiliation, and imperial history.

Japanese Gardens and Civilians

The novel's mediation begins with its title which invokes Japan through the allusion to samurai and Japanese gardens – what Sheng-mei Ma calls cultural "trade-marks" – well-known, pre-circulated 'oriental' signs that render a culture immediately legible in the Western imagination (*The Deathly Embrace* 102). This pairing also echoes Ruth Benedict's foundational characterization of Japanese culture as simultaneously

"militaristic and aesthetic," embodied in the duality of the sword and the chrysanthemum (2). The conjoining of samurai and garden resolves that tension by placing the former's martial sign within an aesthetic frame of the latter, thus prefiguring the novel's broader representational logic. Moreover, as an Asian American novel about Japan, it also invites readers to view Japan through Stephen whose name is conveniently English and not Chinese. While having such a name is plausible for someone from Hong Kong, the narrative states that Stephen's father chose it, because it allows him to be "addressed with ease by Westerners" (4). Stephen thus enters the narrative already mediated by a logic of 'Western' legibility, his Chineseness framed in less nationally insistent terms that help prepare the ground for later cross-cultural intimacy.

Early in the novel, Stephen notes in his diary, "My mother ordered Ching to prepare for my journey to Japan, while the Japanese occupied Peking and sent their warships to Shanghai" (Tsukiyama 4). The sentence already sets the priorities: domestic preparation for the trip occupies the main clause, while Japanese military maneuver is subordinated. Although Stephen is travelling to Japan at the invitation of his father to recuperate at the family's holiday home in Tarumi, the fact of Japan's militarism would no doubt be troubling. Rather than attempting to resolve that tension, the novel shifts the focus on Japan as a nation towards a smaller and more intimate scale of personal interactions and relationships. Such a possibility depends on two provisional conditions: Stephen's relatively neutral mode of perception and Tarumi's distance from the immediacy of war. After only a few days with his father in Kobe, Stephen travels alone to Tarumi where he finds that "it was difficult to keep up with the war news so far away from everything" (18). At this quiet outskirt, war recedes to the background, allowing Japan to appear not as a militarized imperial nation, but as a local seaside town with people going about their everyday life.

What greets him when arriving at his family-owned holiday home is the beautiful sight of a Japanese garden:

> The sweet perfumes were immediately intoxicating. A silk tree, still heavy with summer blossoms, and two large black pine trees shaded the house. An oval shaped pond, with hints of movement that flashed orange and silver beneath its surface, dominated one side of the garden. It was surrounded by pale green moss. A wooden bridge arched across its width, and lines of odd-shaped, waterworn stones created two paths, one leading through the secluded garden right up to the front door, while the other disappeared around the back of the house. White sand formed soft beds in the crevices. (10)

Stephen's eyes dwells on subtle colour gradations, a wooden bridge, water-worn stones, and the gentle movement of fish beneath the pond's surface, producing an impression of wholeness. He lingers on the fragrance, texture, and mood, describing the garden as "sweet" and "intoxicating" (10). This representational logic constructs Japan as aesthetically self-sufficient, requiring no insider knowledge to be experienced as beautiful, while simultaneously activating what Ma identifies as Western readers' preexisting repertoires of Japanese refinement (*Orientalism* 98; 208). Stephen's outsider focalization is integral to this effect. His position does not signal a lack of understanding so much as demonstrate how the representation itself operates without demanding cultural competence, allowing enjoyment to precede and substitute for explanation. By grounding and idealizing Japan in this aesthetic scene, the novel also presents cultural refinement and quiet beauty as being intrinsically Japanese.

Besides this garden idyll, Japan is also mediated through the representation of its people. Matsu, the caretaker is shown to be an exemplar of quiet efficiency, carrying out

his duties with minimal fuss. Such restraint evokes images of Japanese reserve, in which duty is performed through action rather than speech (Kunihiro 56), making Matsu immediately legible as a Japanese figure. The novel presents him as a humble civilian who wants little to do with war and politics. When the radio broadcasts a propagandistic message praising “the good intentions of the Imperial Army”, Stephen asks Matsu about his thoughts, to which he replies: “Japan is like a young woman who thinks too much of herself. She’s bound to get herself into trouble” (17). This remark strikingly turns away from the masculinist image of a militarized nation, downplaying and characterizing it as merely female vanity, thereby softening any hostility. Moreover, Matsu’s response marks a distinction between military ideology and personal beliefs, between the nation and its civilians, thereby enabling cross-cultural intimacy to take place.

This distinction extends to the cultural framework Matsu embodies. Although not technically a samurai himself, the association is made through Matsu’s disciplined conduct, having loyally maintained the summer house “for the past thirty years” (9). Stephen had remarked how Matsu has “a strong face […] like a samurai” (30). This comparison affixes a chivalric, romanticized image of the samurai already familiar in Western circulation, where it is seen as a noble exemplar of Japanese honor and rectitude (Friday 340; Nitobe 7). What is conveniently laid aside is how the samurai code was mobilized by the Japanese military to promote the “ideal national subject” who is willing to sacrifice himself for the nation’s imperial ambitions (Benesch 207). This tension between the Western idea of the samurai and its military entanglement reveals the novel’s uneasy ambivalence.

Later, Stephen is brought by Matsu to meet his old friend Sachi in a leprosy village in Yamaguchi. This meeting encapsulates the novel’s ambivalence and difficult balancing act when the black scarf covering part of Sachi’s face slips:

> Underneath I could see where the ulcers had eaten away her flesh, leaving white, scaly scabs, creating a disfigured mass as her half-closed left eye strained to open. When she saw my gaze, Sachi quickly looked down and recovered the side of her face. As far as I could see, only her face and left hand seemed affected by the disease; her smooth, white right hand and fingers were untouched […] she turned just enough so that only the right side of her face was exposed to me. While the left side of her face had been devastated, the unblemished right side was the single most beautiful face I'd ever seen. (27)

This equally split division is medically implausible, but made symbolic. The disfigurement caused by leprosy analogously represents the ugly side of Japan which has been caught up in the violence of war. The unblemished side, on the other hand, encapsulates its beauty, for Sachi was once "the most beautiful girl in Tarumi" (78). Meanwhile, Sachi's resilience and quiet strength impressed Stephen whose perspective anchors the novel's orientation towards Japan. The depiction of Japanese refinement and civilian kindness builds an affective weight that directs attention away from Japanese imperial violence. Nonetheless, the distant war is not entirely forgotten, but interjects through letters and news of escalating aggression, unsettling the stability of Stephen's attachment. The narrative is thus drawn toward personal affiliation, yet is unable to displace the violent events at the background.

Imperial political realities

While Stephen's time spent with Matsu and Sachi are removed from wartime antagonism, his first meeting with Keiko unfolds under its latent presence. He approaches Keiko and her sister Mika on the beach "searching for all the right Japanese words" in a

moment of marked linguistic self-consciousness (34). Earlier, Stephen had attributed his initial awkwardness with Matsu to his "poor Japanese", suggesting that their relationship cuts across linguistic difference (13). Although Keiko's polite response allows the exchange to proceed, Mika giggles at his "halting" speech, highlighting his status as foreigner who cannot speak Japanese fluently. This distinction is sharpened when Mika repeatedly "tug[s] at Keiko's arm … whisper[ring] something quickly" (35), urging her sister who then leaves. The moment foreshadows the sharp divide under which Stephen and Keiko's relationship unfolds: Keiko may be open to him, but her family will not permit it. Despite noting Mika's negative reactions, Stephen still expresses a desire to see the sisters again, holding to the hope of transcending national hostilities.

Over time, Stephen's effort to sustain this personal and cultural mode of attention becomes increasingly strained and difficult. After a storm hits Tarumi, he joins Matsu and Sachi in rebuilding the garden, a moment of shared labor in which they "becom[e] good friends" (57). Digging "deep into the cool, dark soil" and breathing "the damp dirt and pine", the episode briefly restores the pastoral mode that has shaped Stephen's experience of Tarumi (57). That calm, however, is short-lived. During a lunch break, as music plays on the radio, the broadcast is "abruptly interrupted" by news of a Japanese victory in Shanghai (59). The private space of personal intimacy that Stephen hitherto enjoyed is confronted again with the reality of Japan's imperial ambitions. The three received it in shared silence. Matsu's "smile slowly [leaves]" as he presses his lips together, while Sachi "looked down and remained silent" (59). Their response withholds identification with the broadcast's triumphalism and sustains the separation between civilian life and state violence on which their relationship had been based. Yet the silence also marks a limit, being unable to deny the brute facts of the Japanese invasion of China. Stephen then gags "as if the noodles I'd just eaten were lodged at the bottom of my throat

and I had no voice" (59). The discomfort stems from his inability to occupy a neutral position: to speak out would require choosing between his Chinese nationality and his newfound friends. Stephen turns away instead "tr[ying] to keep [his] thoughts off the war in China by working in the garden" (60). Interestingly, in a study of garden-making during wartime, the landscape historian Kenneth Helphand notes how gardens serve as "a cessation of hostility, a peaceful place, a field that is not one of battle" (18). In Tarumi, this private space of curated tranquility was previously untroubled, but the radio announcement broke any illusion of escaping the bitter truth of Japanese imperialism.

Keiko's sudden appearance at the gate interrupts this uncomfortable scene, and Stephen notes how his "spirits were lifted" (Tsukiyama 60). The narrative deflects this tension with the promise of romance. Yet the arranged meeting the next day reveals this attachment as socially untenable. Keiko arrives late, explaining that she had to occupy Mika in order to secure "only one chance to get away alone," and remains "anxious that Mika might find us" (65). As Keiko's younger sister, Mika holds no formal authority over her; her reaction instead signals the structural logic of wartime mobilization that makes such intimacy impermissible. Moreover, the fact that Stephen and Keiko's first two encounters take place on an empty beach, apart from the village, indicates that their intimacy can only take place under the cover of privacy and secrecy.

Keiko reveals that her brother is "with the Japanese army in China" in response to Stephen's questions, a disclosure that, like the earlier radio announcements, makes the larger conflict unavoidable between them (65). The exchange ends quite quickly with silence between them, yet this pause offers Stephen no indication of her position. In Matsu and Sachi, involuntary bodily unease had marked a distance from the national stance. He now looks for a comparable sign in Keiko and projects one, "I thought I saw her shudder" (65). The narration immediately corrects his inference: she merely "wrapped her arms

around herself for warmth," her face "giving me no hints as to what she thought" (65). In the absence of any such sign, Stephen presses more directly. When Keiko refuses to let him walk her home, he asks, "Are you afraid to be seen with me?" (65), attempting to force an articulation that would stabilize the terms of their relationship. Keiko, however, attributes her hesitation to her "very old-fashioned" father, shifting the issue onto personal terms and avoiding any explicit position (65).

At a village funeral, Stephen is confronted with the fact of being "the only young man", as all other eligible males had been conscripted for war (108). While the villagers have "grown used to [his] presence" (108), suggesting his provisional inclusion among them, Keiko's father's "unsmiling glare" indicates otherwise, a stark reminder that he is not entirely welcomed (110). The encounter recurs "like a nightmare," making him "shiver", a disturbance that leads him to ask, "if I were Japanese, would I still be feeling such hostility from him?", thus briefly recognizing the hostility against his Chinese nationality that his selective views had deferred (111). Stephen then attempts to rationalize that Keiko's father was the exception, insisting that it was "the only time that I feel I'm amidst some kind of enemy here in Tarumi" (111). However, that does not lead to any resolution, instead it postpones the inevitable confrontation with the reality which he continues to suppress. This tension is subsequently contained through Keiko's apology, explaining away her father's "rudeness" that brings "shame to our family" (112). It is precisely this personal reframing that prompts Stephen to press one step further, tentatively venturing to say: "Your brother and the war…" (111). What he does not articulate is whether she has "heard anything from her brother, or if Keiko knew much about the Nanking massacre", since this would risk ending the relationship (112). In turn, Keiko's response sidesteps the question. By presenting her brother's military service as "his own decision to go fight for our Imperial Emperor" (112), she again recasts the war

on individual terms. In this regard, the narrative attempts to separate individual and collective culpability, thereby maintaining the possibility of personal attachment.

While Stephen's vexed position is exposed through his interactions with Keiko and her family, he refuses to accept any severing of ties. His father visits him, bearing more recent troubling reports of the war during the course of his business dealings. Stephen registers in his father's sadness and silence an irresolvable dilemma. He understands that his father has "loved Japan second only to China," yet now "would have to show his loyalty to one or the other", exposing the incompatibility of maintaining both attachments (85). This intransigent situation reflects Stephen's own predicament, as he "couldn't even begin to imagine Sachi and Matsu as [his] enemy", even as Japan continues to destroy his homeland (85). Here, the contradiction can no longer be rationalized, yet it still does not lead to action: the words about returning to Hong Kong "moved slowly to [his] lips" and he "couldn't bring [himself] to ask" (85). But as the war escalates and letters from friends and family bring accounts of Chinese suffering into Tarumi's enclave, the suspension becomes progressively more difficult to maintain. His personal attachment clashes against the struggle to account for Japanese military actions, as his deferral is no longer a passive inability to choose, but the active cost of holding both losses at bay.

Suffering Bodies

Under such pressure, Stephen's engagement shifts toward forms of suffering that can be sustained without requiring explicit national alignment. Across cultures, leprosy has historically been interpreted as moral punishment (Burns 21; Longmore 67), and its sufferers occupy the position of a "public secret," generally known yet unarticulated (Manes 50). Yet it is their position within wartime Japan that makes this visibility

narratively usable. Though Japanese, the Yamaguchi residents have long been expelled from ordinary social and political life, placing them at a remove from the nationalist fervor organizing the Sino-Japanese conflict. Where the soldier's body is defined by discipline, mobilization, and the capacity for violence, theirs are marked by physical diminishment and incapacity, redirecting perception of militarist ideology to embodied vulnerability.

This logic becomes visible in Stephen's first visit to Yamaguchi. Before arriving, he has heard that Chinese lepers were "forced to live on the streets, left to beg or eat rats, while they simply rotted away" (Tsukiyama 24). At Yamaguchi, this mediated knowledge gives way to direct encounter: bodies marked by "missing fingers and toes" and "mangled features that had once been noses and ears" (25). Though Stephen does not intend to stare, his attention is drawn to these bodies disfigured by leprosy. Where staring typically marks, objectifies, and enforces the boundary between the normal and the deviant, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that it can instead open "a circuit of communication and meaning-making" (3). The exchange that follows enacts exactly this possibility: Stephen smiles "at all of them" and receives "nods and friendly greetings in return" (Tsukiyama 25). Together, the reciprocal encounter opens a space of connection, and Stephen's implicit comparison between Chinese and Japanese lepers frames their condition as a shared, pre-political form of suffering, enabling attachment to be maintained even as the pressures of war intensify.

Suffering bodies reroute attachment by suspending conflict, but this suspension relies on compensatory intensification, revealing its limit. Months later, his beloved younger sister Pie writes from Hong Kong with firsthand testimony: mainland refugees crowd into "filthy, dark boxes," living "like ants on a hill," their makeshift shelters collapsing "like paper houses" in the rain and burying families in mud (118). These

images reduce human life to fragile, disposable matter, making the violence of war materially immediate. Pie unambiguously names the perpetrators: "the Japanese devils have raped and slaughtered their families and friends" (117–18). Earlier, in response to his friend King's letter on the Nanjing Massacre, Stephen was able to hold this dual tension simultaneously: "part of me grieved for Nanking even while another part couldn't imagine leaving Matsu, Sachi, and Keiko" (97–98). Pie's letter, however, does not permit such contradiction, by relaying their mother's request that he return because it was not safe for him to remain longer in Japan. To grieve openly here would mean acknowledging Japan as the perpetrator inflicting suffering on the people in China, thus unsettling the personal attachments that sustain his presence there. In his diary, Stephen avoids confronting the facts, as he describes his admiration for Pie's work with the Red Cross as "already more courageous than any of us", while leaving out the question of Chinese war refugees (118). He ruminates: "Wishing I could tell her how safe I felt here with Matsu and Sachi" (118). The subjunctive marks a deliberate withholding of what he could write but does not, hence recognizing that his personal feelings cannot be openly expressed in light of the ongoing war between Japan and China.

When fire tears through Yamaguchi, Stephen writes that he "couldn't help but think of Pie's letter and how the refugees who lived on the mountains were swept away by the rain" (120). The phrasing "couldn't help but think" signals an involuntary linkage, allowing what remained unarticulated to take form in his response to the villagers (120). Yet this connection depends on a selective reframing of suffering. Stephen recalls the refugees in terms of natural vulnerability without invoking the violence that produced their displacement, and refers to them simply as 'the refugees', detaching them from their political and wartime context. Their suffering is thus universalized and made analogous with that of Yamaguchi villagers. Stephen goes further: "There was no Red Cross to turn

to, no volunteers like Pie to help out, no family" (123), intensifying his sense of their abandonment as being greater. Drawing on Sarah Ahmed, "the differentiation between forms of pain and suffering in stories that are told […] is a crucial mechanism for the distribution of power" (33). Here, that hierarchy of suffering enables the transference of sympathy but also exposes its limit: precisely because the national antagonism remains, the text must work to establish Japanese suffering as immediately more pitiable in order to sustain this emotional alignment.

This contradiction reaches its affective peak in Stephen's dream of rebuilding Yamaguchi, where the leprosy village appears "in the midst of bustling Hong Kong," with volunteers like Pie tending to bodies marked by "eaten-away limbs" (Tsukiyama 159). The explicit depiction of leprosy-ravaged bodies echoes earlier images of Chinese suffering, producing an immediate, unmediated appeal to sympathy. Moreover, Pie, who had named Japan as aggressor, now appears as a caregiver who transcends the war between the two countries. This dream is but a personal fantasy of reconciliation that is impossible. Sympathy alone, however, does not fully account for Stephen's deep attachment to the lepers. As Claire Manes points out, Tsukiyama's portrayal "subverts the notion of leprosy as a stigmatizing condition", reframing the afflicted as a community defined by solidarity and collective agency (50).

Sachi's backstory, meanwhile, bears out the novel's complicated representation of Japan. Her diagnosis with leprosy was treated as "a great dishonor" to her family for which she was expected to "restore honor" by committing suicide (Tsukiyama 136–37). Instead, she ran away and built a new life in Yamaguchi among other leprosy sufferers. As Matsu comments, "It takes greater courage to live" (139). Yet Sachi's decision is mediated through Japanese cultural codes, as the language of honor situates her within a binary logic between the choice of shame and death (Hinton 4). This positionality

resonates with Japanese wartime ideology where dying for the honor of one's community is elevated into the highest expression of national loyalty (Ohnuki-Tierney 10). Her refusal to commit suicide therefore represents both personal courage and a rejection of the militarist ideology that her cultural script was made to serve.

At the same time, the novel also situates Sachi's personal resilience and healing within the idealised representation of Japanese gardens, specifically the *kare sansui* (dry landscape) garden composed of raked sand and arranged stones that evoke mountains and water. In this space, she spends "hours rearranging those stones […] that brought [her] calm" (Tsukiyama 142). As Haruo Shirane notes, such gardens present "a world away from the world", offering an image of contemplative detachment (86). Yet the novel presents this calm as immediately accessible, describing it as a "strange, mesmerizing power" without accounting for the practices or disciplines that produce it (142). This effect aligns with a recurring Western association of Asian cultural forms with spirituality and "mystical esotericism" (Ma, *The Deathly Embrace* 61), rendering Japan as naturally disposed toward contemplative wisdom (Wicks 113; Yamada 161). What this framing excludes is significant: the Zen philosophy underlying the *kare sansui* tradition was systematically mobilized during Japanese imperialism to cultivate soldiers' calm acceptance of death and self-sacrifice (Victoria 104). It is this selectivity that makes wartime Japan intimate and accessible, but is also what quietly undermines the narrative's capacity to reclaim culture on its own terms.

Limits of Attachment

As wartime pressure intensifies, Stephen is forced to face the contradictions within himself. When Keiko ends their relationship after her brother's death at Hsuchowfu, declaring "There can never be any 'us'" (Tsukiyama 187), the novel's most

intimate cross-cultural bond finally collapses under the pressure it has long deferred. For a moment, Stephen considers:

> I wondered how many Chinese he had killed before his own death? I suppose the question held no relevance to a Japanese family who had lost their only son. But what of all the Chinese civilians killed during the last year? Did Keiko and her family grieve for those sons and daughters, mothers and fathers? (188)

Stephen's questions expose a structural asymmetry in mourning. To borrow from Judith Butler, "[s]ome lives are grievable, and others are not" (xiv). For Keiko's family, Toshio remains the named and intimate loss of a son, while the Chinese civilians he killed have no names, no faces, no place in that mourning. The moment suggests that Stephen and Keiko's intimacy has always depended on crossing a boundary that grief now makes visible and harder to deny. He attributes it to "the madness of war," which destroys even "someone as decent and humane as Keiko" (Tsukiyama 188). This rhetorical move delinks people from the nation by including Keiko into this mutuality of civilian innocence and suffering, thus avoiding from passing any final judgment on Japan.

That unresolved question is carried to Tokyo, as Stephen accompanies his father on a business trip. Wandering the city on his own, he finds that militarism dominates the public space: military vehicles and soldiers appear "everywhere" (200), a marked contrast to the "small groups of soldiers" Stephen noticed on arriving in Kobe at the beginning of the novel, signalling the extent the military has reorganized the city itself (5). But Stephen attempts to mitigate his perception, choosing to view the soldiers as "young and excited" with rifles "hanging loosely" from their shoulders (200). These qualifiers recast militarized bodies in terms of immature youth, softening the threat they posed. The reworking extends to the Imperial Palace, which served as wartime Japan's symbol of

power. Stephen describes it as having “loomed up ahead, stately and imposing”, a language of architectural awe that aestheticizes the building as timeless grandeur and ignores its implications (200). Likewise, the crowds who come “religiously to honor their Emperor” are framed through ritual devotion and ceremonial reverence (200); even though in wartime Japan the Emperor had been institutionally sacralized as the legitimating figure for territorial expansion and military sacrifice (Fält 97; Askew 143). This mediation is not a matter of ignorance. Stephen clearly recognizes the Emperor as “the one person for whom an entire nation would go to war and die” (Tsukiyama 201). Yet, as a Chinese subject, he describes the encounter only as “strange” (201), a word vague enough to register imperial power without hardening into an explicit condemnation that would rupture his attachment to Japan.

The scene that finally makes this affiliation untenable takes place in a renowned Tokyo restaurant where he and his father have dinner. The room is crowded and noisy, a scene of conviviality, yet Stephen quickly realizes that “most of the conversations taking place were about the war in China” (201). His father responds immediately by “refrain[ing] from speaking Chinese” and using “only Japanese in his soft, measured tones”, a practiced adaptation meant to avoid standing out (201). Stephen clearly understands this as situational caution, acknowledging that his father “had a clearer picture of the situation than any of us” (201). However, when his father suggests that he return to Hong Kong before Christmas, Stephen follows this logic only partially, lowering his voice but still asking in Chinese, “Are things getting bad?” (201). Instead of accepting what he is told, the question form keeps the situation open. Stephen’s insistence on speaking Chinese, rather than switching to Japanese like his father, rejects the fact that Chinese identity has become a liability here. It also functions as a test: if the language that marks his vulnerability draws no consequence, the personal attachment survives.

The illusion finally collapses when the radio announces the fall of Canton. The two sides of the war become visibly opposed within the same room. Stephen feels "an unexpected blow to my stomach" and struggles to breathe, while the surrounding diners "cheered" (202). What Tarumi had allowed him to avoid through silence and ambiguity now becomes unmistakable. Outside, Stephen imagines passers-by "noticing that I somehow didn't belong" and senses that he is "being watched" (202). No longer the observer who can filter out what he sees, he becomes the object of identification, and the distance that had sustained attachment collapses into vulnerability. Yet Stephen concludes only that "it was time to leave Tokyo" and that he no longer felt "welcome" there, confining the rupture to the capital rather than extending it to Japan as a whole (202). Once back in Tarumi, he returns to Matsu's garden and the shrine, seeking "the sense of peace that I needed" (208). His retreat to these spaces reinstates the novel's earlier strategy of aesthetic refuge, turning to cultural forms legible as calm and continuity while bracketing the shrine's wartime entanglement in emperor worship and mobilization. But the war makes departure unavoidable. When leaving Japan, Stephen begins, "I hope the war …", leaving his sentence hanging in the air (211). Matsu replies: "It is another life. It will never have anything to do with us" (211). This reassurance reasserts the belief that national politics and personal attachment are separate, that the friendship with Stephen transcends the enemy status of each other's countries. Indeed, Stephen's unfinished words leave open the vague possibility of future reconciliation. Gail Tsukiyama's *The Samurai's Garden* therefore serves as a recuperation of Japan even with the imbrication of its violent imperial history, mediated by a personal and cultural intimacy that allows for a form of attachment that holds that tension together or at bay.

Conclusion

Asian American return narratives intervene in bridging the distance of family and cultural origins, but such recovery is not always smooth or without complications. Return to Japan, however, cannot dismiss or avoid the fact of its imperial military history, thus its place as an ancestral homeland depends on the textual production of a Japan to which attachment can still be directed. This article has shown that *The Samurai's Garden* makes return to wartime Japan possible by constructing a Japan grounded in its cultural refinement and common people, shifting the national focus to private virtue and everyday life. Shielded within Tarumi's provisional distance from the warfront, Stephen's friendship with civilians like Matsu and Sachi who are governed more by private ethics than by wartime mobilization allow Japan to become available for attachment. This personal affiliation develops through this immersion and growing appreciation of the culture. Yet what Stephen comes to value is also a Japan shaped by a degree of orientalist idealization, viewed through his eyes as an outsider, and in the broader context of the novel, represented for an American and English language readership.

Gail Tsukiyama's sixth novel *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms* (2007) makes the return to Japan complete, as it uses a multiperspectival narration that organizes the lives of various characters into a shared experience of wartime hardship and postwar recovery. By depicting ordinary Japanese as victims of both internal repression under the military regime and external devastation from American bombardment, the novel articulates a countermemory of Japan that foregrounds civilian vulnerability and stoicism. Not dissimilar to *The Samurai's Garden*, it delves even further into Japanese cultural heritage, namely Sumo wrestling and Noh mask carving, as practised by the two young male protagonists, Hiroshi and Kenji who become masters in their craft in the years following Japan's postwar rebuilding and recovery. As in *The Samurai's Garden*, such

mediation brackets off civilian complicity and extricates culture from the apparatus of war, while also furnishing the aesthetic and moral terms through which an affiliation becomes imaginable. As Asian American return narratives, the two novels by Gail Tsukiyama perform a key role in recovering Japanese roots, even as it is evident how such cultural reclamation is entangled with orientalist mediation in the literary marketplace, presenting a Japan that is aesthetically attractive and consumable.

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