

Epilogue

Remembering Yuji

GORDON H. CHANG

In reflecting on the lifework of a historian, or of any intellectual, it is perilous to try to separate the personal from the political, or even the personal from the academic. It is not just dangerous to try to do so in writing about Yuji but, in fact, impossible.

Features of Yuji's singular personality are embedded throughout his many contributions to Asian American Studies and to the study of history generally. As anyone who had even the most cursory contact with Yuji knows, he was a passionate person: he always had, and expressed, strong opinions, whether they were about the current NBA season, events in the world, or a recently published work in his field. Would we all be so fortunate to live as fully and as energetically as Yuji, to live with as much feeling and intellectual intensity as he?

Yuji's scholarship is inseparable from his own personal qualities and his political commitments, which were as important to him as his academic work. His efforts to uncover a "buried past," to use his own perfectly chosen words, served the broader purpose of intellectually exposing and opposing racism and empowering those who had suffered such oppression. He had no patience with scholarship that pretended to be nonpolitical or solely dispassionate. But at the same time, he had no use for cant, superficial or trendy analysis, or intellectualism that masqueraded as committed politics. He demanded honesty. Yuji was also not afraid to let his strong opinions be known, and he was therefore not without those who found him difficult. No matter. Yuji wasted little time fretting about what may have been said about him.

He saw no contradiction between engaging in the most rigorous and truthful scholarship and political principle. For Yuji, true history advanced the politics of antiracism and social justice; and in turn, he believed that such political values guided his own historical work. At the same time, he respected what he believed was good scholarship, that is, writing that was smart, grounded in solid research, and truthful. That was the type of work he himself pursued. He described his scholarship as “old school,” history that focused on uncovering new information and new narratives based on the given record. As he would say, he liked to tell good stories in a language that could be widely read and understood. He was eminently successful. His publications have had good legs; they continue to stand firmly and, I suspect, are consulted as widely (perhaps even more so) today than when they appeared over the course of his more-than-three-decades career.

Yuji and I had only sporadic contact from the late 1960s, when we first met, until the latter 1980s, when we began to see each other more regularly. He would sometimes send some of his writing for comment, and I would do the same. But in the early 1990s I approached him with a serious proposal: to collaborate on a study of Yamato Ichihashi, the Stanford professor who during the interwar years wrote about Japanese Americans and Pacific relations. Yuji had been the first to rekindle interest in Ichihashi in a published essay and then in several pages of his now classic book *The Isei*. Ichihashi had slipped into obscurity after World War II, but in the prewar years Ichihashi had been one of the most prominent Japanese intellectuals in America. Yuji's opinion, though, was highly critical, even scathing, of Ichihashi—his arrogance toward fellow Japanese Americans, as well as his almost sycophantic relationship with the Japanese government, angered Yuji. The title of Yuji's essay reflected this contempt of Ichihashi: he was an “attorney for the defense,” an apparatchik who used his academic position to advance the purposes of the imperial government. Even Ichihashi's outspoken defense of Japanese immigrants against the anti-Japanese movement did not redeem him in Yuji's eyes, since privately the samurai-descended Ichihashi frequently expressed disdain toward the dirt farmers and laborers he publicly defended. It was not that Ichihashi served political purposes that so irked Yuji, but it was the sometimes hidden political purposes to which Ichihashi was dedicated. Yuji declined to collaborate. “I have twenty years of Ichihashi's diaries,” I tried to entice him. But Yuji would not change his mind. “I have had enough of him,” he said. And that was that. Yuji wanted to move on.

I completed the Ichihashi project a few years later, with Yuji's research help along the way. He was generous with his time and support. He warmly endorsed the published volume, happy, I think, that it was out *and* that someone other than himself had spent the time on it.

But Yuji's work on Ichihashi in some way had signaled the beginning of a shift in his own intellectual attention. Yuji's first work emphasized the difficulties and hardships the Issei suffered in America. The early history of Japanese immigrants in the United States, he wrote, was above all, "a history of a racial minority struggling to survive in a hostile land." "It was also labor history," he added. Yuji's historical interests nicely coincided with his own commitments to racial justice and sympathy with working people. But in the mid-1980s Yuji moved his attention to the post-1924 period and away from writing "history from the bottom up." He began to write increasingly about identifiable community leaders and writers among the Japanese in America. He was less interested in how the Issei established organizations, struggled against discrimination, and made their lives as immigrants but more and more interested in how the Issei and Nisei understood their cultural and political relationship to a hostile America and to an expansionist Japan.

To be sure, aspects of his work in the latter 1980s and 1990s still exhibited his earlier concerns. He continued to be personally interested in the fortunes, and tragedies, of Japanese American revolutionaries, such as Karl Yoneda and some of his communist comrades, but he actually wrote little about them. Yuji kept in touch with Yoneda until Karl's death. Yuji also wrote respectfully about the sometimes maligned Japanese American social scientists involved in the Japanese Evacuation and Resettlement Project. (See *Views from Within: The Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Study*.) But increasingly, Yuji began to work on topics that he believed were important to confront but which also troubled him. For the last ten years or so, Yuji explored the problem of the ties, emotional and formal, Japanese Americans developed with militarist Japan, from the 1920s to the 1940s. He hated militarism and chauvinism of any sort, and it was disturbing to him to reveal the various ways a good number of Japanese Americans supported Japanese expansionism in Asia in the interwar years. He wrote less and less about liberals, workers, and leftists and more and more about rightists and others who maintained or developed attachments with imperial Japan.

Yuji's interpretations properly placed these individuals in the context of

the times: the long-standing ostracism of Japanese in the United States. But it is clear that he felt a need to understand the Japanese nationalist sentiment of the prewar years. This was probably not easy for him to do psychologically or intellectually. Yuji originally attended graduate school to study Chinese history, and he well knew the brutality of Japanese aggression against China in the 1930s and of Japanese colonial rule over Korea. He had great sympathy for the victims of Japanese aggression.

Yuji also knew he was treading into sensitive terrain. Other scholars were also working on what might be called a “revisionist” approach to the interwar years, an approach that was not preoccupied with Nisei Americanism, which has dominated the writing of Japanese American history. But as undeniable as was that part of the history, so was the difficult story of those who crafted their lives around the fortunes of imperial Japan. And this is what Yuji increasingly addressed. He called for an appreciation of the “complexity of Japanese American history,” by which in part he meant the need to go beyond the geographic borders of America to understand the Japanese American experience. He was interested in the transnational and diasporic connections—the Nikkei in the Americas, those who went to Japan for their careers in the 1930s, and so forth. But more important, he urged the need to confront the thorny and controversial problem of political identities. He asked us to think about “the meaning of loyalty in a racist society.” (See the issue of *Amerasia Journal* edited by Yuji, entitled *Beyond National Boundaries: The Complexity of Japanese-American History* [winter 1997].) He certainly would never have wanted his work to be seen in any way as justifying internment, which he and his family had suffered. Never. But his own political and intellectual integrity pressed him to address awkward questions that begged discussion.

Yuji never got to finish this intellectual journey, although he was well on his way when he died. Before his decline in health, Yuji had gathered together a number of his published and unpublished essays that explored the issue of Japanese American “loyalty” and political identity in characteristically provocative and substantive ways. The subjects of these efforts were no longer workers or unassuming farmers; they were journalists, prominent community leaders, and even agents of Japan in America. He even completed a brief introduction to this collection and asked me for my comment. Not knowing how weakened he was, I suggested that his introduction could benefit from some expansion of the ideas he tentatively raised. He wrote

back, saying he agreed and would tackle the challenge soon, after he had regained some strength. But it was not to be. A few days later Yuji passed away.

I first met Yuji (and Emma) in the summer of 1969 in Berkeley. Yuji had recently coined the term *Asian American*, a contribution he always claimed proudly. Yuji and Emma were simultaneously helping found the academic field of Asian American Studies and the political project called the Asian American movement. It feels like those heady days were a lifetime ago. Or, was it just yesterday?

September 20, 2002