

Major Themes and Significance

My talk draws from my recent book titled *In Search of Our Frontier: Japanese America and Settler Colonialism in the Construction of Japan's Borderless Empire* (University of California Press, 2019). The following list includes some of the most important aspects of my book's inquiries:

1. My book considers the manners in which the historical example of and popular discourse on American-style "frontier development" inspired many Japanese to engage in overseas migration and agricultural colonization (agricultural *settler colonialism*) inside and outside Japan's formal empire under the slogan of "overseas development" (海外発展 *kaigai hatten*).
2. My book traces origins of Japanese settler colonist "discourse on overseas development" (海外発展論) to the first modern-era settlements of Japanese immigrants in North America, especially northern California and Hawaii. Starting in the late 1880s, these immigrants—the first generation of Japanese Americans known as "Issei (一世)"—took the lead in discursive formation on imperial Japanese destiny for overseas expansion and settlement even before Japan acquired its overseas colonies, including Taiwan. In this context, Japanese communities in San Francisco and Honolulu emerged as major sites of expansionist/colonialist knowledge production that corroborated the simultaneous politico-ideological developments among intellectuals, social elites, business leaders, and government officials in Tokyo. Because these U.S.-based immigrants had a first-hand experience as settler colonists in the most famous "New World" frontier, they exerted an enormous influence on the shaping of imperial Japan's colonial thinking and practices, which would soon unfold in its formal colonial territories, like Taiwan and Manchuria.
3. My book interrogates how these American "Issei" residents helped influence imperial Japan's racial/racist thinking on the basis of their own experience of racial victimization in white settler society when they took the lead in the processes of expansionist knowledge production, as noted above. They almost always called for Pan-Asianist assimilationism instead of race-based "exclusion" by defining the latter as a major mistake made by Anglo-Saxons. As another "master race" and the leader of the "Asiatic," the U.S.-based immigrants and returnees therefrom asserted that the Japanese needed to "guide" other Asians, like Taiwanese, in the context of global racial/imperial struggles.
4. My book traces the footsteps of some of the remigrants from Japanese communities in North America to Japan's formal colonies ("new frontiers") to serve as teachers and facilitators of agricultural colonization and settlement-making. By looking at the "trans-local" migration nexuses that linked up parts of North America's Japanese settlements and imperial Japan's formal colonies, my book pays special attention to California-Manchuria connections and Hawaii-Taiwan connections. These remigrants were often recruited by Japan's colonial regimes and monopoly capital interests to help "develop" Japan's new "frontiers" with their previous experience as settler colonists in the U.S. frontier.

Interpretive Frames and Analytical Concepts

In my book, I employ the following analytical concepts and interpretive frames.

1. I introduce the concept of **“settler colonialism”** into the studies of the Japanese empire, its colonialism, and mass migrations. Having been popularized in Anglophone academia, including the United States, the concept of “settler colonialism” allows us to problematize and complicate the entwined processes of colonial economic changes, socio-cultural assimilation and civilizationist reform, displacement and exploitation, and oppression and genocide, from the perspectives of “natives.” Their perspectives were shaped in the context of their everyday experiences as the colonized peoples, whose land was robbed by “immigrants”/“colonizers,” whose cultures were decimated and replaced by the colonizers’, and whose life-styles completely altered under the influences of immigrant settlement-making, economic “development” (開拓・発展), and civilization building/modernization (文明化・近代化).

Yet, because “settler colonialism” as a theoretical framework has its roots in Anglophone/Eurocentric historical case studies, its application to the Japanese imperial context requires critical perspectives and careful theoretical adjustments. My book shows the utility and limitations of “settler colonialism” as an interpretive frame and a historical method in the study of Japanese migration-led expansionism and colonialism, and its impacts on Japan’s various colonial territories and extraterritorial immigrant settlements.

2. My book also adopts an **“inter-imperial” and “trans-imperial” perspectives** by looking at the movements of migrant bodies, ideas, and technologies of colonial development and governance between the two Pacific empires: United States and imperial Japan. By doing so, we can rescue the study of colonialism and migration from the conventional single empire perspective that looks only at the relations between the imperial metropole (Japan) and its colonies (Taiwan). Because Japanese imperialism did not emerge in a geographical “vacuum” detached from other parts of the world, it is important to have an inter- and trans-imperial perspective to understand how it was always entangled with other imperialisms.

3. My book looks at specific manifestations of **“trans-local” entanglements** in the context of relations between the United States and imperial Japan. Because local political economies in one empire were already diverse enough, the inter- and trans-imperial perspectives need to be attentive to varied “local” conditions. It means the specific manifestations of inter-/trans-imperial entanglements between the two empires tended to be place-specific. For example, colonial Taiwan’s relationship to Hawaii became so salient and strong because the Taiwan-Hawaii nexus entailed overlapping/shared imperial aspirations for and trajectories of the tropical agricultural industries, like sugar, coffee, and pineapple. These local connections were not randomly forged.