

My Students and Asia Then and Now

By Jeffrey L. Richey

Those of us who teach about Asia are well aware that Asia has changed enormously over the past twenty-five years.¹ Two decades or so ago, most Chinese still lived in rural areas; Japan still boasted the world's No. 2 economy; and South Korea was only a few years past its decades of martial law, coups, and repression. Future North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was enrolled in an elite high school in Switzerland. The United States' chief concerns about South Asia focused on nuclear proliferation rather than the extremist political movements and terrorist cells then in formation. East Timor was not yet an independent country, and Hong Kong and Macau were in the midst of their return to mainland Chinese rule. The internet was a novel innovation for many, smartphones did not yet exist, and American global supremacy still seemed assured in the wake of the Cold War.

Not only has Asia changed greatly, but so have our students in Asian studies. What has changed, what has remained the same, and why does any of it matter? A former student of mine who recently graduated from my institution, Berea College, wrote a "synopsis of [her] college career" for our campus newspaper during her senior year. An African-American woman from the Deep South, her reflections included the following:

I strongly disliked Berea when I was a freshman. My excuses at the time: I am only here because my mother forced me, [the college] is in the middle of nowhere and too far away from home, I feel so alone, I am sad and afraid, the dorm rooms are small, the bathrooms are inconvenient and crowded, my roommate is not nice . . . I was going to be a biology major because that's what my mother wanted. We all know this story, right? My biology classes were fine, but I couldn't keep up. The interest and passion just weren't there . . . The situation was so strenuous that it affected my sleep. Lack of sleep led to poor decisions, especially with classes . . . [By the end of my sophomore year, however,] I was excited for my new classes. I was now pursuing the Asian studies major, as well as a minor in African and African-American studies. My adviser was very optimistic about me being able to accomplish my goals, and that made me feel good. . . . I wanted to go to Japan. This was a constant dream of mine since I was a little girl, but with the amount of stress I was under and being behind in classes, I



Berea College charges no tuition and admits only academically promising students, primarily from southern Appalachia, who lack the economic means to pay for an elite liberal arts college education. Ninety-six percent of Berea's first-year students are eligible for federal Pell Grants, which typically go to students whose family incomes are less than \$20,000 (the current mean annual income of a first-year Berea student's family is less than \$30,000), in comparison with the national average of 33% of students who receive such aid.

Berea College. Source: Photo courtesy of the author. See endnote 2 for sources for information above.

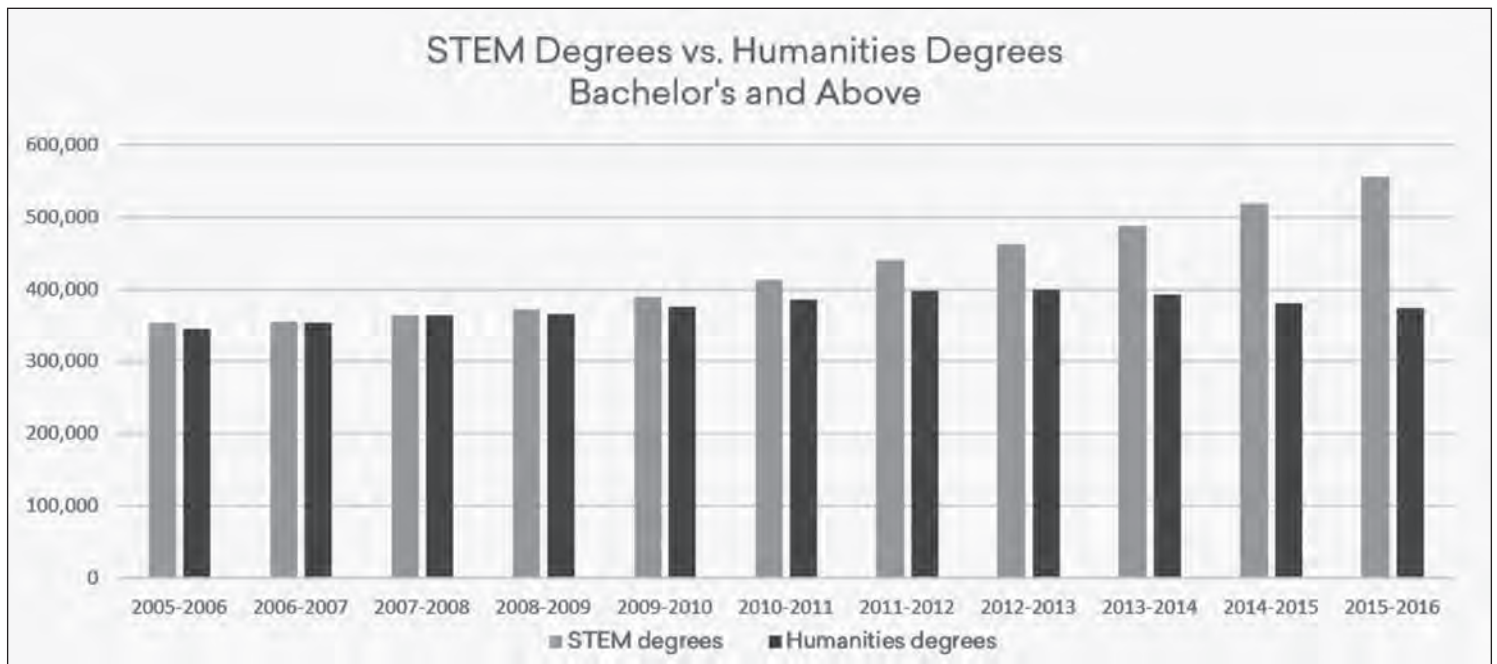
felt that it was something I would not be able to accomplish. . . . I began my junior year. . . . [and] met a couple [of] new best friends who have goals they strive to meet. I had the fortune to have new experiences and applied to study abroad. That summer, I turned my dream of traveling to Japan into reality, and it was amazing. Now I'm finishing up my senior year in college. I am grateful that I came here and that I stayed.

This autobiographical passage and its author's background exemplify what I see as four major changes in the undergraduate Asian studies experience that have taken place over the past twenty-five years or so—at least at Berea, and perhaps at many other institutions, as well. Two may be unique to Berea's distinctive student body²: (1) the emergence of a more female and less white demographic among our majors and minors in Asian studies and (2) the distinctive appeal of Japan and South Korea for our students. But two others are widely attested across the United States: (3) the rising number of university students who struggle with mental health challenges and

(4) the recent decline in humanities majors.

The number of contemporary students who struggle with mental health challenges (especially anxiety and suicidal ideation) seems overwhelming in comparison to what we know—or at least what we remember—of previous students.³ How is this change relevant to Asian studies or to my students at Berea? It is extremely relevant, if only because it means that a significant number of students in any classroom are coping with mental health challenges. Because the students whom I teach come from socioeconomically distressed backgrounds, the well-known and long-established correlation between low socioeconomic status and mental illness makes this change in students even more impactful in my classroom.⁴ As Berea's president remarked in a recent faculty meeting, the "bad good news" is that Berea continues to have an abundant supply of students to serve. I must be mindful that learning about Asia frequently, if not mostly, takes place within the context of students' struggles with mental illness and other challenges.

Not only do our students feel increasingly unwell, but so do the humanities.⁵ Doubtless the myth of the humanities' irrelevance is at least partly to blame for parents' and politicians' negative perception of academe and the declining number of undergraduate majors in English, philoso-



Source: National Center for Education Statistics/Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System on the *Emsi* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y8jdjow8>.

phy, et al. But is Asian studies hurting as a result? At Berea and at many other institutions, it isn't. The steady growth of majors in Asian studies graduated per year may owe something to a different change in the global academic landscape—the long, slow, and seemingly inexorable rise of interdisciplinarity, as Professor Manya Whitaker writes:

[In t]he 1960s, '70s, and '80s, . . . war, civil rights, and health crises forced academics to acknowledge the need for new ways of thinking about the world. Ethnic studies, women's studies, and media studies emerged. . . . Many academics still struggle to accept the validity of interdisciplinary fields, but twenty-first-century students have no such qualms. The number of students majoring in interdisciplinary fields has increased by 37 percent since 2003.⁶

As an interdisciplinary field rather than a discipline in itself, Asian studies is perfectly positioned to benefit from this trend, which may be one reason why it continues to add majors rather than lose them.

Asian studies as an undergraduate major also owes some of its vitality to an unlikely factor: the number of students who choose to study foreign languages, or at least some foreign languages in particular. While nearly all of the fifteen most commonly taught languages (including Chinese) saw enrollments decline over the past several years, two did not: Japanese and Korean.⁷ So, while fewer students choose to major in humanities disciplines or study foreign languages than was the case in the past, nowadays we can expect students to respond more positively to interdisciplinary majors and to do the hard work of learning when it comes to languages with particular appeal—languages that happen to be central to significant portions of the interdisciplinary field of Asian studies. And this is where two patterns of change that I see at my own institution come into play.

While male enrollment in graduating cohorts of Asian studies majors and minors at Berea has remained fairly constant over the past two decades or so, women increasingly outnumber men—not only in my Asian studies courses, but also on most university campuses.⁸ Since the first majors and minors in Asian studies graduated from Berea in the late 1990s, the average number of women in each senior cohort has more than doubled. The percentages of women and men among Berea's Asian studies graduates from 1997 through 2018 are now roughly equal. The most recent cohorts tell an even more dramatic story of Asian studies' gendered shift on our campus. The ratio of women to men in our graduating cohorts from 2015 to 2016

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Berea College Professors of Asian Studies Jeff Richey (left) and Robert Foster (right) with 2017 Berea College graduates in Asian studies Samantha Blankenship (left) and Tiara Washington (right).
Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

and 2017 to 2018 is three to one, and among Asian studies majors and minors who have not yet graduated, women still enjoy a numerical advantage over men, who represent only 40 percent of our current students in the department—and this on a campus where the numbers of men and women are approximately the same.⁹

Moreover, every year since 2013, the percentage of our graduating majors and minors who are students of color has hovered between 40 percent and 60 percent. At its greatest extent—which happens to match our current Asian studies enrollments—this inverts our overall campus ratio of white to nonwhite students, which is approximately two to one. Of these students of color who choose to study Asia, the vast majority are African-American or identify as multiracial, although the Latinx presence in our cohorts has been growing over the past few years—in part because of our campus's

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recruitment of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students, many of whom are Latinx, but also due to increased Latinx settlement in the southern Appalachian region from which we draw most of our students. Moreover, more than 70 percent of our current Asian studies majors and minors who identify as persons of color—what one of my colleagues calls “emerging majority students”—are female.

These overwhelmingly female and increasingly nonwhite students are part of what Professor Elaine Maimon calls the United States’s “new majority . . . a large number of students who are not being well served and who have never been well served . . . first-generation students, students of color, returning adults, and veterans.”¹⁰ While returning adults and veterans are relatively few at Berea, which more than most US colleges and universities maintains the traditional residential campus with its typical eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old demographic, first-generation students and students of color are quite abundant here. Unusually for a US institution, there are very few Chinese students enrolled at Berea, but that is a function of our unique admissions criteria and our wish to extend opportunity to students from as many foreign countries as possible without privileging any.

Thus, the typical profile of a major or minor in Asian studies at Berea College is becoming more female and less white over time. This intrigues me, because when I attend conferences in the field, I don’t usually see women outnumbering men, and aside from numerous people of Asian descent (who, as previously mentioned, make up a small minority of Asian studies majors and minors at Berea), the field seems to be pretty white. As one of my students—an African-American woman—once remarked, “Most people in Asian studies either look like you [i.e., white] or like the people that you study [i.e., Asian].”

I have found that faculty at other institutions are seeing at least some of the changes that I’ve observed at Berea. One colleague, who teaches at an Ivy League university, says:

Only a third of students in my courses . . . are of Euro-American descent these past few years, and even some of those are students of color. Only the smallest of courses will not include Hispanic and black students. . . . Half of my students are of Chinese or Korean descent.

Another colleague, who teaches at a private comprehensive university in the South, remarks:

We’ve been noticing this . . . [demographic shift] too. We have about 80 percent female students as Asian studies majors. However, we have had quite a few African-American students major with us. . . . Last year’s outstanding student was African-American, and we’ve had African-American students as winners of our awards in Chinese or Japanese three times in the last six years.

Yet another colleague, who teaches at a medium-sized public research university in the Northeast, reports that “we are firmly majority female in our majors, and my sense is that has been the trend for a while,” despite men slightly outnumbering women on his campus.

However, not all my colleagues see this shift happening at their institutions. “What you describe does not ring a bell for me here,” writes one colleague at a large public flagship university, and others who teach on similar campuses echo her perspective. It may not be coincidental that, apart from Berea, all the institutions where this demographic shift in Asian studies enrollments seems to be taking place are located in ur-

ban settings—or that colleagues who report no sense of such a shift teach in rural or suburban settings. I remain struck by the fact that, while African-American students are part of the mosaic of demographic shift in Asian studies at institutions across the country, only at Berea do they seem to be the majority.

So what do these new types of Asian studies students—female, nonwhite, and on my campus, working-class—want to study? More than anything else, they seem to be attracted to Japan and, increasingly, South Korea. Most educators about Asia are well aware of the deep and enduring power of the Japanese cultural imaginary as exported to American youth through Japanese anime (cartoons), manga (comic books), and video games, and their associated fandoms and subcultures, such as “cosplay” (*kosupure*, a Japanese contraction of the English words “costume play”—i.e., dressing up as one’s favorite anime, manga, or video game character). The so-called “weeaboo” phenomenon of intense, pop culture-driven Japanophilia among US youth is so widespread that it prompted the television sketch comedy series *Saturday Night Live* to air four satirical segments of enthusiastic but ill-informed white American teenagers who self-identified as *otaku* (a Japanese term that originally denoted socially awkward, possibly sociopathic individuals with obsessive, arcane interests, but which now has become a kind of equivalent to the English slang term “geek”) during its 2011–2012 season.¹¹ Fortunately, I have rarely seen such grotesque displays among my students at Berea, but they are well-known enough to prompt grimaces from many Asian studies majors who resent being associated with this stereotype. Behind the stereotype, however, is an inescapable truth: Japan—however distorted it may be when viewed through the fisheye lens of contemporary Japanese popular culture—has captured the hearts of American youth in a way that rivals all other Asian countries. Recently, a prospective Asian studies major met with me to discuss his interest in the field. When I asked him why he wanted to major in Asian studies, he answered that he was fascinated with the ancient Chinese warlord Cao Cao (ca. 155–220 CE). Because so few of my students are interested in China, much less early China, I was delighted and asked how he had come to know of Cao Cao. It turns out that he only knew Cao Cao as a character in multiple video game franchises, all of Japanese origin. Even the great warlord who helped bring down China’s Han dynasty must bow before the might of the Japanese pop culture juggernaut, it seems.

But popular culture does not tell the whole story of Japan’s uniquely powerful appeal to our students. In Kentucky, as well as in other southern states such as Alabama, Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee, corporate Japan has a firm foothold, employing hundreds of thousands of locals, generating multiple satellite industries to feed its supply chains, and introducing thousands of Japanese workers and their families to small-town American life. In Kentucky alone—home to Toyota’s largest automobile manufacturing facility outside of Japan since 1985—more than 40,000 people are employed by the company.¹² Thousands more have jobs with one of the 205 other Japanese firms that do business in the state.¹³ This means that many students come to Berea and other institutions in the South having shared school, athletic, shopping, and dining experiences with Japanese expatriates and their children. This kind of people-to-people cultural diplomacy often leaves our students with a strong and positive impression of Japan that other Asian countries’ economic presence in the United States cannot match.

Berea is not unique in this respect, according to one colleague who teaches in the Northeast: “Anecdotally, my sense is that our nonwhite students tend to be drawn to Japanese and, increasingly, Korean more than Chinese.” At Berea, too, we are seeing more and more students drawn to the study of Korean culture—a trend seen across the country.¹⁴ This growing interest in Korea does not seem to be competitive with interest in Japan,

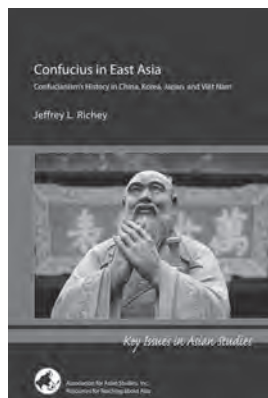
Key Issues in Asian Studies

Confucius in East Asia Confucianism's History in China, Korea, Japan, and Việt Nam

By Jeffrey Richey

Richey has written an engaging and well-crafted book that clearly delineates the oftentimes-fitful development of Confucianism in China, Japan, Korea, and Việt Nam. At the same time, he masterfully demonstrates how Confucianism slowly came to dominate politics, thought, and society in each of these places and still continues to inform their assumptions, values, and institutions. Richey also expertly underscores the outsized role that government has played in promoting and sustaining this tradition's formidable influence.

—Keith N. Knapp, Chairman, History Department, The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina



whereas students who are interested in Japan and/or Korea often are not very interested in China or other Asian countries. As with Japan, the “soft power” of popular culture—especially serialized television dramas and highly stylized pop music “boy bands” and “girl groups”—may go some distance in explaining American youth’s burgeoning fascination with South Korea, but it does not account for why students of color, in particular, seem to gravitate toward Korean culture. But although South Korea’s corporate investment in the United States is dwarfed by Japan’s, there is one South Korean company that has established a manufacturing facility in the US, and it is located in Alabama—which happens to be a key recruitment ground for African-American students who attend Berea.¹⁵

So, in comparison with students whom I taught some twenty years ago, as well as my own graduate school cohort, my students today are less white and more female, less interested in China and more interested in Japan and Korea, less comfortable and more troubled, less discipline-oriented and more field-focused—but why does this matter?

I believe that the majority of my students—now mostly people of color and/or women from working-class backgrounds—seek out the interdisciplinary study of Japan and/or Korea for one or both the following two reasons:

1. Some are “cultural refugees.” While it is true that members of any ethnic or cultural community do not constitute a monolithic group, they often are treated as such, and that includes behavior within their communities as well as the behavior of outsiders. Among our Asian studies majors and minors, I consistently encounter African-Americans, in particular, who feel they do not quite fit into the stereotypes associated with their ethnicity—including the stereotypes that they say other African-Americans impose upon them. One of my students, an African-American woman with a deep passion for both Japan and Korea, described herself as “racially nonconforming.” By that, she seemed to mean that she perceived herself as not only failing to fit into predominant models of blackness in her community, but also choosing not to fit into such models. I know dozens of other such students. But where can a “racially nonconforming” young African-American person (or other student of color) fit in? According to my students, as well as recent research, if s/he excels academically (as opposed to athletically) and demonstrates an interest in cultures and times other than his/her own, s/he runs the risk of being accused of “acting white” and experiencing social ostracism as a result.¹⁶ It might be thought that Asian studies, conceived in the shadows of colonialism, imperialism, and Cold War politics, may not enhance such a student’s standing with his/her peers. But Asia (specifically East Asia, and more specifically Japan and Korea) has come to represent a kind of third cultural option for many of my students of color—one that is neither “black” nor “white.” By finding meaning through engagement with Asian cultures, such students may be able to sidestep polarizing boundaries within their own cultures. And studying Asia may not sound quite as “elitist” as studying literature, philosophy, or art history—even though, when properly done, it will entail all these disciplinary approaches and more—which means that “emerging majority” students who choose to study Asia may face fewer accusations of “acting white” from their peers and their parents.

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2. Some are “living their truth.” By this, I mean what my students say they mean when they use it: to “live one’s truth” is to engage and express oneself truthfully and completely. Students who struggle with mental illness may live their truth by seeking to learn from cultures that struggle with mental illness. Students who identify as members of minority groups may live their truth by seeking to learn from the experiences of minority groups in other cultures. Of course, not every student’s motivation for study will fit into either or both of these two categories. But every year, I watch my students pursuing more and more research projects on East Asian psychological phenomena such as *hikikomori*; bullying; gender dysphoria; anxiety about changing modes of performing masculinity and femininity; youth suicide; or discrimination against *Zainichi-Kankoku-jin* (ethnic Koreans in Japan), *Burakumin* (traditional “outcasts” in Japan), and *hāfu* (mixed-race persons) in Japan and South Korea. Perhaps the pressures that come with life as “emerging majority” persons in the contemporary US exacerbate the mental health challenges familiar to all students nowadays. Perhaps our students see in what some call the “precarity” of contemporary East Asian life an instructive and illuminating echo of their own “precarity.”¹⁷

The longtime US expatriate author in Japan Donald Richie (1924–2013) was fond of answering the question, “What do you think of Japan?” by replying, “I like myself here: Japan . . . allows me to like myself because it agrees with me and I with it. . . . It allows me to keep my freedom.”¹⁸

I sense that many of my students like Japan and South Korea because they “like themselves there”—that is, they feel empowered and liberated by their location in a field that allows them to be themselves, to take their deepest questions and concerns seriously, and to see them reflected and clarified in the mirror of other cultures. This enables them to feel at home, not only in those cultures, but in Asian studies. But it will not truly feel like home to them until Asian studies faculty begin to look more like them, which still isn’t the case at most institutions, including my own.

Will the future of Asian studies as a field, as a community of scholars and teachers, in any way resemble its present, at least at institutions such

as Berea where the demographic shift is apparent? One colleague pointed out, “It seems that white male students are more likely to see themselves as future professors too, based on the composition of applicant pools even now. We often seem to face a choice between a white male applicant and no one.” But my colleague also sees hope in the present for a more cosmopolitan, less ethnically hegemonic Asian studies of the future, evidenced by this comment: “Socialization of kids into professions seems to start early. But at an equally early stage, kids are coming to Asian material (manga, *hallyu*, sushi) and finding it fascinating. It’s up to us to turn that excitement into intellectual pursuits—hard as that may be.” ■

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the many colleagues who responded to my queries and granted permission for me to share their perspectives anonymously in this essay, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers whose comments helped improve an earlier draft.
2. Berea College charges no tuition and admits only academically promising students, primarily from southern Appalachia, who lack the economic means to pay for an elite liberal arts college education. Ninety-six percent of Berea’s first-year students are eligible for federal Pell Grants, which typically go to students whose family incomes are less than \$20,000 (the current mean annual income of a first-year Berea student’s family is less than \$30,000), in comparison with the national average of 33 percent of students who receive such aid. See “Quick Facts,” *Berea College*, <https://www.berea.edu/about/quick-facts/>; and Peter McPherson, “Our College Students Are Changing. Why Aren’t Our Higher Education Policies?,” *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y9lzmggp>.
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5. Eric Hayot, “The Humanities as We Know Them Are Doomed. Now What?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ybczrjx4>.
 6. Manya Whitaker, “The 21st Century Academic,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 2, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y9bqyqeq>.
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 8. Nancy S. Niemi, “Why Does the Public Distrust Higher Ed? Too Many Women,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 13, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y7f2e6uh>.
 9. I am grateful to my colleagues in Berea College’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, Judith Weckman and Clara Chapman, who supplied me with statistical data on our students, and to my wife, Kelly A. Smith, for helping me tabulate and analyze this data.
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 11. See “J-Pop America Funtime Now!,” *Vimeo*, October 18, 2011, <https://vimeo.com/30767628>.
 12. Ashlie Stevens, “How Toyota Helped Create a Thriving Japanese Food Culture in Kentucky,” *National Public Radio*, January 26, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ycn3e7o4>.
 13. Graham Shelby, “Consul-General of Japan: There Are More Japanese Business Opportunities in Kentucky,” *Kentucky.com*, February 9, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yb4kwj5x>.
 14. On the “Korean wave” in global popular culture, see Youna Kim, *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); and Beng Huat Chua and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analyzing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).
 15. Hanno van de Bijl, “Korean Manufacturer to Invest \$33M in Alabama Facility Expansion,” *Birmingham Business Journal*, April 18, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y8ccensq>.
 16. Roland G. Fryer, “Acting White: The Social Price Paid by the Best and Brightest Minority Students,” *Education Next* 6, no. 1 (2006), <https://tinyurl.com/yav2qh23>.
 17. See Anne Allison, “Ordinary Refugees: Social Precarity and Soul in 21st Century Japan,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 345–370.
 18. Donald Richie, “I Like Myself Here,” in *The Donald Richie Reader: 50 Years of Writing on Japan*, ed. Arturo Silva (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2001), 183, 188.

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