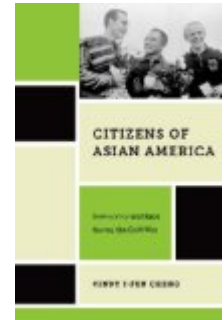


Cindy I-Fen Cheng. *Citizens of Asian America: Democracy and Race during the Cold War.* New York: New York University Press, 2013. 285 pp. \$49.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-5935-6.



Reviewed by Jennifer Fang

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Cindy I-Fen Cheng's *Citizens of Asian America: Democracy and Race during the Cold War* makes a significant contribution to not only ethnic and Asian American history but also our understandings of race relations, civil rights, and cultural citizenship. This well-researched and thought-provoking work explores the intersections, and the contradictions therein, of race, foreign relations, and Cold War policy in America during the early Cold War years. Between 1946 and 1965, as the U.S. federal government worked to demonstrate to the world the superiority of American democracy over communism, it simultaneously secured greater civil rights for racialized people and suppressed the rights of political dissenters. Cheng investigates how the racial formation of Asian Americans as both "foreigners-within" and as "loyal citizens" contributed to the ways that the U.S. government both secured and infringed upon their rights. Drawing from cultural critic Leslie Bow's theory of "racial interstitiality," Cheng explores how Asian Americans were situated in-between the black and white racial bi-

nary of the early Cold War period. Within this dichotomy, Asian Americans were sometimes treated "like whites" and other times "like blacks" (p. 10). The permeable boundaries between black and white experienced by Asian Americans, Cheng argues, helped to shape popular conceptualizations of American democracy.

Focusing on social and political developments during the early Cold War years, the book builds to the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the National Origins quota system that had long restricted Asian immigration. The first two chapters explore different aspects of race and housing. Chapter 1 examines the fight to end race-based housing restrictions. Using the Tommy Amer and Yin Kim cases against racial restrictive covenants, Cheng explores local-level housing struggles in Los Angeles and the interracial activism that emerged to fight against these racist practices. While the Amer and Kim cases both received national attention and were reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court, neither of the cases were officially heard by

the Court. Instead, the Court decided to hear only cases that involved black plaintiffs. Cheng argues that although the Court's 1948 ruling to outlaw restrictive covenants was informed by the United States's desire to promote the credibility of American democracy, its decision to hear only cases of residential discrimination against blacks promoted a limited understanding of race and property rights. The Court's decision determined that blacks would be the "representative racial category that would speak to the interests of all racialized groups" (p. 23). However, as Cheng notes, the Court's focus on blacks in residential segregation made it seem as though "black ghettos, rather than Chinatowns, Little Tokyos, or the barrios, emerged as the preeminent symptom of racial segregation" (p. 54).

In chapter 2, Cheng shifts her focus to the suburbs. This chapter outlines how suburbanization in the early Cold War era acted as a "process of Americanization" for Asian Americans. Utilizing sociological studies and popular newspaper and magazine accounts of racialized minorities in the suburbs, Cheng interrogates issues of assimilation and social belonging. She asserts that portrayals of the transformative abilities of the post-war suburbs helped to play up the superiority of American democracy. However, as Cheng argues, while the entry of Asian Americans into the suburbs helped them come to be regarded by mainstream society as assimilable, loyal citizens, it also "provided a means to account for racial divisions in society without having to tackle the problem of structural racism" (p. 58). Cheng uses the housing dispute between Sing Sheng and the residents of Southwood, a suburban development in South San Francisco, to illustrate the tenuous and contested social position that Asian Americans held within mainstream society. The story of how the residents of Southwood voted not to allow the Shengs, an assimilated Chinese American family, to move into their neighborhood (a vote that Sing Sheng himself proposed) was reported by news outlets across the country. The example of the

Shengs, Cheng argues, illustrates the "negotiations that were taking place in public discourse over the meaning of American democracy" (p. 84). While Southwood residents cited concerns over declining property values and an unwillingness to live next to a nonwhite family, the media portrayed the story as a "failure of American democracy" and a blow to America's image around the world.

Cheng's examination of Asian American "firsts" in chapter 3 further explores issues of Asian American assimilation. The chapter draws on the experiences of Sammy Lee, the first Asian American Olympic gold medalist; Jade Snow Wong, the first Asian American to author a nationally acclaimed book; and Delbert Wong, the first Chinese American judge. Cheng examines how the federal government used these accomplished Asian Americans as models of assimilation to promote their Cold War international agenda of promoting democracy. Cheng also asserts that these Asian American firsts formed the foundation of the "model minority" stereotype of the high-achieving Asian American, in contrast to other scholars who have argued that the stereotype emerged in the late 1960s.

Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate contrasting ways that the racial formation of Asian Americans as "foreigner-within" and "loyal citizens" impacted their civil rights. In chapter 4, Cheng examines the arrests and deportation cases of two immigrants from Korea under the McCarran Internal Security Act at the onset of the Korean War--David Hyun, a labor activist, and Diamond Kimm, a pro-communist newspaper editor. She compellingly demonstrates how the federal government infringed upon the rights of racialized minorities in the name of bolstering the superiority of American democracy. The Hyun and Kimm stories build the book's stated goal of examining the securing and restricting of Asian Americans' rights. However, this chapter is the only area of Cheng's study that thoroughly addresses the suppression of civil

rights and pro-communist viewpoints in the interest of promoting freedom and equality.

Citizens of Asian America culminates in chapter 5 with an examination of the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The 1965 reforms, Cheng posits, were shaped by the political climate of the Cold War and illustrate “the nation’s shift toward an internationalist approach to containing communism (p, 150). Over a decade earlier, the 1951 Chinese extortion racket and the 1956 Chinese slot racket had helped push the federal government down the path of immigration reform. Cheng convincingly demonstrates that these two events gave rise to a public discourse over what type of immigration policy would best support the nation’s Cold War objectives. At the same time, Chinese American community leaders, organizations, and newspapers seized the moment to rally public support for broad immigration reform that would put Chinese Americans on equal footing with their Euro-American counterparts. These activists helped to lay the groundwork of the eventual passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act by framing the issue of immigration reform as necessary civil rights and Cold War measures.

While Cheng’s work is meticulously researched and compellingly written, the book’s most notable weakness is that it relies heavily on Chinese Americans, and Korean Americans to a lesser extent, to tell the story of all Asian Americans during the early Cold War decades. In particular, the inclusion of Japanese American experiences would have helped round out the analysis and offered a useful complement to the stories of Chinese and Korean Americans she explored.

Cheng’s work is a valuable addition to studies of mid-twentieth-century race relations because it theorizes race in the United States beyond the dominant black and white paradigm. It also adds to the histories of Asian America, the Cold War, civil rights, immigration, and political activism. In Asian American history, it builds on the burgeon-

ing field of Asian American experiences during the Cold War, particularly the years between the end of World War II and the 1965 immigration reforms. The book’s focus on Asian American civil rights struggles during the Cold War builds on and complicates the groundbreaking studies on African American civil rights struggles in the Cold War era by Mary Dudziak and Brenda Gayle Plummer.[1] Similarly, Cheng’s assertion that immigration reform was indeed a civil rights issue for Asian Americans due to the unique ways that they had been racialized offers a counterpoint to Mae Ngai’s hesitation to classify the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act as civil rights reform.[2] The book’s examination of Asian American and interracial activism complements Scott Kurashige’s work on black and Japanese American housing activism in Los Angeles.[3] Scholars interested in thinking about the relationship between racial formation and the development and implementation of Cold War policies will find *Citizens of Asian America* to be an insightful and informative work.

Notes

[1]. Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[2]. Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[3]. Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

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