
Reviewed by Kevin Y. Kim (Stanford University)

Published on H-Diplo (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

Judy Tzu-Chun Wu’s *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* is a wide-ranging, thought-provoking contribution to a growing literature on radicalism in U.S. foreign relations. As its title suggests, *Radicals on the Road* uses the transpacific journeys of anti-Vietnam War activists as a window into radical American and Vietnamese politics and culture in the 1960s. Its principal claim is as multipronged as its intended audience and intervention: in the 1960s American and Vietnamese antwar activists created a transnational political community, beyond the confines of any nation-state or locality, based on a sustained critique of U.S. policy in Asia. Through Third World tourism, alternative journalism, citizen diplomacy, familial ties, and personal encounters across the Pacific, such activists created “a global public sphere” centered on the war (p. 4). Wu argues that these individuals shaped the era’s tumultuous events in ways not captured by existing accounts. Historians of diplomacy and war, women and gender, African Americans, Asian Americans, and radicalism will find some aspects of *Radicals on the Road* more compelling than others. But it is a must-read for anyone interested in some of the innovative directions in which “U.S. in the World” historiography has moved over the ten years since Melvyn P. Leffler’s influential call for diplomatic historians to span nontraditional subfields and approaches to “reconfigure” the field for broader relevance.[1]

Central to Wu’s argument is the concept of “radical orientalism.” Turning Edward Said’s classic definition on its head, Wu finds that, far from idealizing the East to elevate the West, U.S. and other Western antiwar activists idealized revolutionary, anticolonial Asian societies in Vietnam, North Korea, and China to construct the West—particularly the United States—as an inferior, reactionary empire. Wu enriches this already complex argument by examining relationships among activists of varying races and ethnicities (Mexican American, Asian American, African American, white American, and various Asian subgroups); nationalities and citizenship (primarily U.S. and Vietnamese but also Canadian, North Korean, and others); religions and ideologies; and genders and sexual orientations (particularly among second-wave feminists). Further complicating the classic Orientalist paradigm, Wu foregrounds revolutionary Asians as active participants in the era’s events. In various chapters, Asian elites and non-elites serve as hosts to traveling antiwar delegations, citizen ambassadors to Western audiences, surprising mediators of internecine Western activist squabbles, and even housewives quietly shaping their Western counterparts.

In place of simplistic monoliths or binaries, *Radicals on the Road* finds leftist Americans and Asians animated by overlapping, shifting solidarities, agendas, and identities. While often irascible and semi-articulate, Wu’s subjects remained united—though often barely—through their shared opposition to U.S. Cold War policy and desire for alternative internationalisms. Wu’s approach comes close to nearly deconstructing Orientalism altogether; but like Christina Klein in her very different study of “middlebrow” America, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (2003), Wu finds...
even American leftists misapprehending, romanticizing, and otherwise reconstituting the East and West—though in creative, emancipatory ways aimed at an egalitarian, not colonial, future. “This tension was a productive and generative one,” she concludes, enabling American activists “to develop a sense of social responsibility and mutuality with those from the East” (p. 11).

To make this kaleidoscope manageable, Wu adopts a case study approach to a limited array of prominent, as well as less-known, world-traveling activists. Radicals on the Road is composed of three parts, each of which could stand as a monograph in its own right. Part 1, comprising three chapters, examines the life and career of Robert Browne, a left-liberal African American from south side Chicago who served extensively as a U.S. official in Southeast Asia in the 1950s, before becoming a global activist and U.S. civil rights organizer in the 1960s. As Wu’s detailed account demonstrates, Browne’s time in Southeast Asia was no mere sojourn. It was a transformative bridge between his youthful left-liberal politics (including numerous brushes with racism and his quiet firing from a New Orleans college after campaigning for Henry Wallace in 1948) and his assertive Third World and civil rights activism after his return from Asia.

Browne is a revealing vehicle for exploring, on the ground, what 1950s Afro-Asian alliances and Third World nonalignment looked like: starting a multiracial family in Cambodia; developing closer contacts with Asian locals than with white U.S. government colleagues; harmonizing with Asian nationalist and neutralist aspirations; and cultivating a rich network of contacts and information with Asian activists, monks, and locals. Particularly important was the influential Vietnamese pacifist Thích Nhất Hạnh, whom Browne later introduced to Martin Luther King Jr., the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and other U.S. audiences in the 1960s. Through such intimate connections with politically inspired Asians opposed to the Cold War, Wu suggests, left-liberal Americans like Browne developed the ideas, skills, and resources that launched their activism in the 1960s and 1970s.

While Browne and his Asian allies’ efforts to end the war collapsed by the late 1960s, the broader message that Radicals on the Road conveys is the strength of such transnational relationships well before the 1960s. As the older generation of activists that Browne represented faded, a new one arose with more centrifugal tendencies: the New Left. Part 2 approaches this familiar story by focusing on the U.S. People’s Anti-Imperialist Delegation (USPAID). Including Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver, journalist Robert Scheer, Asian American activists Pat Sumi and Alex Hing, and other representatives of the antiwar movement, this delegation took a rare two-month-long tour of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), People’s Republic of China, and Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Like Browne, these delegates had numerous intensely moving experiences with their hosts. These ranged from well-tended pregnancies in the DPRK and tours of strikingly modern socialist facilities to memory-searing meetings with war-scarred civilians. In one typical example that Wu recounts, Laotian government representatives presented Cleaver with a flower vase crafted from U.S. aircraft debris: “a death machine,” a representative said simply, “transformed into a symbol of life” for his American comrades (p. 144).

Unlike Browne, USPAID made journeys that were brief, foreign state sponsored, and afflicted by the left’s growing divisions in the 1970s. Wu does not shy from these problems; she addresses them repeatedly in the narrative. An entire chapter is dedicated to USPAID’s revealing—and often sorry—interpersonal dynamics. But for the most part, the book remains focused on the activist experiences and emotions driving its main argument. While this does attenuate USPAID delegates’ deeper political contexts, it does illuminate the exhilarating, empowering aspect of their experiences; as one Black Panther reported of USPAID’s diplomatic treatment by its host Asian governments, it felt like the first time in their lives that they “were treated as human beings and as respected members of the human race” (p. 137). Such treatment does much to explain how many marginalized antiwar activists at the time could overlook the highly manufactured, state-sponsored nature of their travels. “They showed us these sites where we could see the devastation of what the U.S. did,” Hing told the author in a personal interview, but held “no ill feelings” toward Americans and were “the most loving people that you’d ever meet…. You go back after that and you dedicate your life to ending the war” (p. 147).

Drawing strongly on the author’s expertise in women’s studies, Radicals on the Road concludes with an exploration of transnational collaborations between Vietnamese and North American women at a series of international women’s conferences in Canada in the early 1970s. Though distinct from previous sections, part 3 finds North American and Vietnamese women beset by similar political, social, ideological, and interpersonal issues as other groups in the antiwar movement. More than previous sections, these last chapters provide an or-
organizational and movement history; but they also highlight how extensively some Asian actors—in this case, Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU) representatives from North and South Vietnam—intervened in American activist struggles not only over the war, but also over their identity as a movement and as human beings. Wu’s adoption of the term “Woman Warriors” to describe the VWU is apt. VWU delegates undertook much more arduous physical journeys across the Pacific than their Western peers; they mediated Western feminists’ at times embarrassing, petty quarrels; they assuaged and bonded with Native American and Asian American women slighted by white peers; and they applied popular-front tactics and ideas, which had worked so effectively in Vietnam, to American public opinion. As Wu persuasively illustrates, it was their emboldening by the VWU that propelled some American feminists to engage in some of the confrontational antiawar tactics well known to students and survivors of the sixties—but reinterpreted, and in many ways easier to understand, within this book’s transpacific framework.

Though reaffirming Vietnam War-era historians’ emphasis on the United States and Vietnam, *Radicals on the Road*’s attention to other Asian and Western actors should broaden the geopolitical frame of future studies. Ultimately, though, the book’s lasting contribution stems from its emphasis on activists’ global experiences. Much of this is due to Wu’s creative, energetic use of oral interviews, leftist periodicals, Federal Bureau of Investigation files, obscure archives, and other sources whose challenging material conditions reflect their difficult history. Some readers might find the book’s personal and experiential emphasis too strong. Certainly, *Radicals on the Road* and similar studies could devote more attention to activist interactions with state power and mainstream society, internal left politics, and the hoary but critical question of activists’ precise relationship with Communist and socialist governments and ideologies. Closer treatment of such issues would do much to correct the scholarship’s general weakness—reflecting, to be sure, the left’s own contradictions—in presenting U.S. radicalism’s positive content as clearly as its oppositional agendas. But as a pioneering survey of the compelling human side of the era’s activism, *Radicals on the Road* is an important addition to existing and new studies that are tackling these issues with growing force.[2]

Notes


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