



Nayan Shah. *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. 384 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-22628-9.



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Shah's *Contagious Divides* is a monograph bursting with insights into the complex interplay between race and public health in San Francisco from the late nineteenth century to the post World War II era. Focusing on Chinese immigrants and Chinatown, Shah innovatively explores issues of belonging, citizenship, and sexuality, and demonstrates the centrality of disease, health, and the body to both literal and symbolic practices of inclusion and exclusion. Shah's approach is at once chronological and thematic. Beginning with a chapter that foregrounds the key concepts driving his inquiry (such as the citizen-subject), Shah examines several intertwined facets of Chinese lives in San Francisco. These include the significance of the anomalous living arrangements of Chinese immigrants, especially bachelors; the racialized mismanagement of epidemic outbreaks of smallpox and bubonic plague by public health authorities; and the adoption of mainstream norms of child rearing and family formation by many middle-class Chinese Americans during the interwar period. In addition, Shah traces a shift in the status of Chinese immigrants, from outsiders demonized as sickly and deprived

in the late nineteenth century to quasi-citizens capable of redemption by the 1950s. Although the reasons for this generational metamorphosis are not always clear, Shah nonetheless effectively utilizes this diachronic scheme as the backbone of his history of the overlapping racial regimes that dominated San Francisco over the course of nearly a century.

Shah's arguments and narrative can be best grasped by reviewing four recurrent concepts and themes he dialogically interweaves throughout the entirety of the book. First, Shah seeks to elucidate the role of space and spatialization in processes of racialization and race marking in San Francisco's Chinatown. Through meticulous attention to strategies of mapping, enumeration, and classification, Shah persuasively shows how Chinatown was demarcated and its dwellers categorized through statistical surveys that claimed the authority of scientific "truth" and knowledge. On one hand, Shah asserts that "Chinatown" functioned as an imperial and cosmopolitan abstraction operative in many cities across the globe at the outset of the twentieth century. In this sense,

San Francisco's Chinatown could be consumed, predominantly by tourists and flaneurs, like any other interchangeable Chinatown, replete with opium dens, joss houses, and restaurants that were both exoticized and derided. On the other hand, Shah illuminates the particularities of San Francisco's Chinatown by examining the fastidious techniques of labeling and mapping that were conducted on a building-by-building and resident-by-resident basis. His focus on the three spatial elements of dens, density, and the labyrinth in white descriptions of San Francisco's Chinatown is particularly insightful. Shah also foregrounds the relationship between spatialization and racialization in his analysis of the ways in which white San Franciscans, both elite and working class, pathologized Chinese immigrants as dirt and germ-infested. When describing how Chinese immigrants were often depicted as syphilitic, Shah contends that such representations "created nightmares of proximity between the diseased and the healthy" (p. 88). Throughout *Contagious Divides*, Shah provides perceptive accounts of the ways in which the stereotyping of the Chinese as infected—be it by smallpox, syphilis, bubonic plague, or hookworm—produced lines of difference and dread that were magnified across a panoply of social spaces.

Second, Shah emphasizes the extent to which normative bodily conduct and comportment determined whether an individual was deemed fit to enter the American nation as a bonafide citizen-subject. As Shah shows, as soon as the first wave of Chinese immigrants set foot on San Francisco's shores, nativists began to portray them as sub-human, animalistic, and intrinsically incapable of the most rudimentary forms of self-discipline. Such representations circulated widely in the late nineteenth century, often in cartoons in which Chinese bachelors were mocked as subsisting in subterranean squalor, enervated by the excesses of opium, ignorant of basic hygiene in the kitchen and bathroom, and unable to control the flow of vermin, above all rats, in their living spa-

ces. For the most part, Chinese women, who comprised approximately ten percent of all Chinese into the twentieth century, were categorized as prostitutes who subverted proper codes of femininity and female sexuality. In the 1920s and 1930s, against the stark backdrop of these racialized images, middle-class Chinese immigrants began to embrace some of the tenets of Americanization and actively to accept dominant bodily regimes. During this period, for example, "Chinese American social workers took up the discourses of hygiene, domesticity, and gender and reworked them in their advocacy for access to municipal social services and for improved housing" (p. 210). This self-education, often through the YMCA and YWCA, was critical to the eventual, yet tentative, incorporation of Chinese American families into San Francisco's postwar body politic.

Shah is also attentive to the intricate and fraught dynamics of gender and sexuality. In a chapter focusing on living arrangements, Shah argues that by forming homosocial groups that included principally bachelors or women and children—not married nuclear families—Chinese immigrants performed queer domesticity or deviant heterosexuality. Alongside other negative iconographies of the Chinese, these non-normative "families" worked to stigmatize San Francisco's Chinese as aberrant and unprepared for citizenship. However, as the relatively few Chinese women in San Francisco began to reproduce children in the 1910s and 1920s, many started to subscribe to models of American motherhood, and in turn, to create more "conventional" families. In one of the most compelling sections of *Contagious Divides*, Shah explains how, once organized into nuclear families by the New Deal era, Chinese Americans were often seen as redeemable and in need of white rescue. Specifically, he examines the politics behind, and the significance of, the Ping Yuen ("Tranquil Garden") housing project, which, showcasing San Francisco's reformed Chinatown, opened its doors in 1951. The Ping Yuen "symbolized a recognition of full citizenship, equality, and

a pledge of civic inclusion" (p. 240). Chosen out of 600 families for 232 coveted units, the favored residents of this complex were picture perfect Chinese American families, usually boasting fathers who had served in the armed forces during World War II and mothers eager to decorate their apartments according to the dictates of *Sunset* magazine. Indeed, the Ping Yuen was a testament to the "ambivalent process by which ghettos created through racial segregation became valorized as ethnic cultural enclaves. During the middle of the twentieth century, descriptions of Chinatown as a site of danger, deviance, and epidemic disease were eclipsed by visions of sanitized exoticism." (p. 249) As Shah reveals, however, the underside of the Ping Yuen's inclusiveness and San Francisco's positive postwar reassessment of Chinatown was the fact that the housing project was segregated—open only to Chinese—and thus reinforced the city's divisions, which were often upheld by restrictive racial covenants endorsed by neighborhood improvement associations. Furthermore, in the midst of this reevaluation of Chinese as deserving modernized citizen-subjects, Chinatown's bachelors were figuratively and physically evicted as the tenements and structures in which they had lived were razed to break ground for the Ping Yuen. Through this and other examples, Shah's interpretive lens highlights myriad and conflicting constructions of gender and sexuality in and around San Francisco's Chinatown. This analysis, especially with respect to "race" and processes of race marking, could have been further enriched by attention to the feminization of Chinese men, whose long queues frequently served as the centerpieces of caricatures that portrayed them as weak and effeminate. While Shah makes a convincing argument that rehabilitating Chinatown revolved in part around the exorcism of bachelors, it also involved the remasculinization of Chinese men more broadly, most clearly achieved through military service or middle-class fatherhood.

Finally, Shah also highlights the perverse dynamics of quarantine and the (mis)management of epidemics. Specifically, Shah expands our understanding of two aspects of the Chinese experience in San Francisco that have been previously studied: the 1900 bubonic plague epidemic and the incarceration and inspection of Chinese immigrants on Angel Island from 1910 to 1940. Shah's chapter on the 1900 plague outbreak is especially rich. Synthesizing much of the existing scholarship on this dramatic incident, Shah explores the social fabric of Chinatown in 1900, challenging previous scholarship that conceives of Chinatown and San Francisco's Chinese as monolithic. He deftly captures the "nightmare of proximity" from the perspective of Chinese workers, who distrusted the powerful Six Companies and suspected them of collaborating with the city's white elite. Shah's intertextual reading of sources (although very few written in Chinese) enables him to probe "heterogeneity and conflict in Chinese responses to public health measures" and to elucidate "layers of resistance, accommodation, participation, and sharp political differences between the merchant elite, on one hand, and small shopkeepers and laborers, on the other" (p. 131). Many of the city's commercial Chinese class, for example, supported a massive vaccination campaign, hoping that, if carried out efficaciously, would deter a quarantine of Chinatown that would adversely affect their businesses. Shah also perceptively explores the rumors that circulated among working Chinese who, instead of perceiving public health officials as purveyors of health and life, saw them as sentinels of death and fear and, moreover, believed that the plague vaccine was poisonous. Shah also sheds light on profound disagreements between medical and scientific authorities about the detection, etiology, and treatment of bubonic plague. While initially many medical practitioners contended that plague was best diagnosed by clinical examination, especially of the lymph nodes, soon bacteriologists and microscopy became dominant. This prompted a change in medical proce-

dures, especially with regard to immigrants: "the discovery of the plague bacilli and the ensuing production of therapeutic sera and prophylactics contributed to the medical perception that only invasive procedures on the human body could detect, protect one from, and cure bubonic plague" (p. 145). Shah applies these insights to his chapter on the inspection and detainment of Chinese and other Asian immigrants on Angel Island. He demonstrates how class distinctions meant that steerage passengers were much more likely to undergo invasive medical procedures in the hunt for trachoma (by everting the eyelids) and hookworm (by demanding a stool sample). Shah demonstrates the triumph of bacteriology as well as the flexible classification of disease by the United States Public Health Service: "In the twentieth century, health-screening practices moved from quarantining epidemic diseases to screening for the fitness of future citizens" (p. 180). Given that hookworm was so central to the symbiotic medicalization and racialization of Chinese immigrants, it would have been helpful if Shah had explained (as he did with most of the other diseases under consideration) that the hookworm parasite is transmitted primarily through exposed skin on the feet or ingestion of contaminated soil and thus was common among farm laborers who toiled in the rice fields, or in the U.S. South, harvested cotton or tobacco.

Shah's portrait of Chinatown is creative and nuanced, definitively demonstrating how critical race, public health, and body are to understandings of Sinophobia, Chinese exclusion, and eventual inclusion as citizen-subjects. However, several aspects of this story beg further elaboration. Most pressing, Shah needs to explain further from whence emerged the "middle-class Chinese professionals" who facilitated the inculcation of new and acceptable bodily regimes among Chinese mothers and families. Although not explicitly compared, Shah's story resonates with George Sanchez's description of the making of Mexicans in interwar Los Angeles into Mexican Americans.

[1] This process was spurred in large part by the slowing of Mexican immigration, the establishment of the Border Patrol, and the forced and voluntary repatriation of Mexicans in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In this context, Mexicans began unevenly and selectively to become Mexican Americans, a process spearheaded by working class Chicana/o activists and a burgeoning cadre of middle-class students and professionals who founded reformist organizations that were simultaneously anti-racist and assimilationist. Shah does not satisfyingly explain how the Chinese immigrants in his early chapters become the Chinese Americans in the latter half of the book. What was at stake for these reformers and how was their presence linked to immigration restriction and the near total debarment of all Chinese to the United States by the 1920s? In addition, Shah presents the homosocial male worlds of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco as unique. Yet one of the most widely recognized features of the booming cities tied to mining, railroads, and industry in California, Colorado, and Nevada in the late nineteenth century was their overwhelmingly male composition and the paucity of women. Indeed, as Susan Johnson has shown, similar accusations of gender perversion were cast upon the gender bending all-male Gold Rush households of miners and migrants comprised mainly of Euro-Americans.[2] To explore these questions, Shah needs to address the historical specificity of San Francisco, in relation to California, the U.S. West, and other cities with sizable Chinese populations. Finally, although Shah defines race as an easily naturalized social and political category, at times he seems to ignore the shifting parameters of "race" and racial categories during the period under consideration. From the 1880s to the 1940s, for example, racial hierarchies and continuums that influenced popular notions of who was "Chinese" or "Asian" - whether through evolutionary taxonomies or the fusion of race and nationality - were contested and reconfigured. [3] How did broader patterns of racialization and re-racialization, especially in the

interwar era, affect images of the Chinese and Chinese Americans' strategies for inclusion and self-identification? Entertaining this question might also enable Shah to unfurl the fairly taut binary of aberrant/normal that he employs to juxtapose racialized distinctions between Chinese and white discourses and practices.

Contagious Divides offers a novel window on to the interlocking dynamics of race, space, public health, and the body in San Francisco during a tumultuous period that witnessed the bacteriological revolution in public health, increasingly stringent immigration laws, two world wars, and the beginnings of civil rights discourses with respect to the domains of education and housing. Deftly threading several potent concepts pertaining to modernity, liberal democracy, and citizenship, Shah's monograph stakes out an original, highly imaginative, and rewarding approach to apprehending both the microcosm of San Francisco's Chinatown and the history of Chinese and Chinese Americans in the United States.

Notes

[1]. George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[2]. Susan Lee Johnson, "Bulls, Bears, and Dancing Boys: Race, Gender, and Leisure in the California Gold Rush," in Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, eds., *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 45-72.

[3]. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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