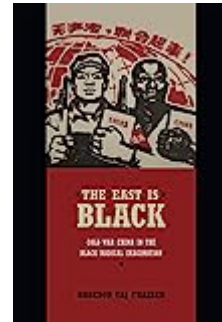


Robeson Taj Frazier. *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 328 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5786-5; \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5768-1.



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Published on H-Diplo (November, 2015)

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Was the East Black?

Robeson Taj Frazier's *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* is a powerful book that refreshes historians's understanding of the activities of black radical leftists in Cold War politics, especially the role of African American intellectuals in projecting China as an alternative global power at the height of the Cold War in the 1960s and '70s. The book demonstrates how these intellectuals contributed in shaping the popular and intellectual dialogues about China's domestic and international politics vis-à-vis United States's foreign policies and domestic race relations during the early phase of the Cold War. Using a diverse range of media sources (the writings of African American intellectuals, political cartoons, iconographies, and other propaganda media), the author highlights the ways by which black radical leftists identified the civil rights struggles in the United States with China's anticolonial and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Believing in China's capacity to lead the disenfranchised colonized world and to provide a model for sustainable development and modernity, these African American intellectuals projected Chi-

na's domestic and international policies as the model for a new world, one that is devoid of racism, oppression, and economic exploitation. The historical figures W. E. B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Vicki Garvin, William Worthy, Mabel William, and Robert Williams saw their activities as part of an emerging global struggle between the powerful nations of the world and those on the margins. However, their experiences of racism and oppression in the United States and their avid, sometimes utopian aspiration to challenge Western hegemony are reflected in their uncritical appreciation of People's Republic of China's (PRC) rhetoric about interracial solidarity, leading them to overlook some of the excesses of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The book's argument is posited against the concept of 'radical imagining,' which Frazier defines as 'a process of ideology that marshals and deploys cognitive faculties, consciousness, and social life for the process of contesting the worlds we inhabit and making and shaping them anew.' With this definition, he interrogates the 'functions of travel, political communication, cul-

tural representation, and traditional media (print culture, radio, film political cartoons, graphic iconography, and teaching pedagogy) in order to highlight black radicals and the Chinese government's constructions of China, Chinese communism, black liberation, racial solidarity, and Third World internationalism (p. 7). In the end, the book's argument stands at the confluence of a number of intellectual discourses: black radicalism in the context of the civil rights movement, the evolving US-China relationship during the 1970s, China's place in the Cold War, and the rapidly changing relations between China and the Soviet Union during the 1960s. Many readers will appreciate the fact that black men and women are strategically placed at the center, not the margins, of these narratives about the Cold War.

Frazier explains why black radicals reached out to China during this pivotal period of African and African American history, a period characterized by the struggle for independence from colonial rule in Africa and the struggle for racial equality pursued by African Americans in the United States. He also explores why China found radical and socialist black leaders viable partners in its own struggles for economic and political developments at the height of the Cold War. He describes the relationship between radical black leaders and their Chinese counterparts as an elective affinity brought about by shared interests in dismantling Western geopolitical hegemony, despite the ambivalence of that relationship. As Frazier notes, "Among other reasons, black leftist radicals perceived the CCP's elimination of foreign occupation and exploitation and its rhetorical commitment to peasant racialism and social uplift as one of several viable globalist Cold War alternatives to a world fueled by capitalism and military expansion." China's commitment to Third World Marxism, therefore, "offered them one, though not the only, utopian model of economic democracy, mass political participation, and antiracist global modernity." Chinese leaders placed China as the "leader of the anti-imperialist world struggle against capitalism, US, empire, and white supremacy" (p. 6).

Yet this transcultural and transnational coalition was not without contradictions. As the author notes, "Given political refuge by the Chinese state, these people's expressions of international racial coalition with China were deeply structured by the unequal power relations existent between them and the hosts and also by the geopolitical divides of the Cold War. They had little choice but to propagate representations that affirmed the superiority of Chinese Communism and they paid insufficient heed to the contradictions of Chinese society and

Chinese Communist ideology" (p. 21). Perhaps too fixated on the global ideological struggles against imperialism, these selected and privileged black radicals overlooked culturally embedded racial attitudes among the Chinese. Moreover, there was the same censorship in the United States as in China. Furthermore, China was not black, and indeed racism and antiblack sentiments were embedded in subtle ways in Chinese perceptions of black people. The contradictions rooted in this elective affinity became apparent in the 1970s when China's rapprochement with the United States exposed the fragility and inconsistency of Third World solidarity against Euro-American imperial domination. Having paved a new line of foreign policies for itself, the radical black intellectuals had to reassess their own place in the emerging new world order.

Frazier also does a good job in presenting black female activists in their own rights. He attempts to avoid the "tropes and attributes of manhood" that pervades many analyses of female activists (p. 51). For example, he contrasts the writings and observations of W. E. B. Du Bois with those of Shirley Graham Du Bois. Whereas W. E. B. ignored the role of Chinese women in China's development, Shirley Graham highlighted the contributions of women in Chinese politics even as she attempted to uplift them from positions of disenfranchisement.

The book is divided into two main chronological parts, and each part consists of two chapters that highlight different travelers' encounters and their representations of China. The individual chapters stand out as significant templates for understanding black radicalism during the Cold War and its relationship with the Chinese world revolution on the one hand, and the transformation of China's domestic and international politics, on the other. This transformation, which is analyzed in chapter 7, exposed the contradictions between China's rhetoric about global solidarity against imperialism and the realities of Chinese domestic politics within the dynamics of the Cold War.

After a detailed introductory chapter that discusses the book's main arguments and themes, the two chapters in part 1 cover events during the 1950s. These include the activities of black leftist intellectuals, who strategically located their political struggles in Mao Zedong's social revolution and China's putative rise as the potential leader of the oppressed nonwhite populations of the world. Chapter 1 tracks the movements, residences, and writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham Du Bois. Here, Frazier offers us a clear image of the concep-

tions and expectations of these intellectuals about China's achievements. Believing in China's great economic strides and independence of imperial domination, the Du Boises made efforts to present China as the model for the Third World, an idea they shared with a few African leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who was a close friend of the Du Boises, and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. The chapter closes with an interesting discussion about the dialectics of gender discourse that readers will find interesting (see below).

The second chapter follows the trails of William Worthy, the first African American resident journalist in China since the establishment of the PRC. Worthy's reports and broadcasts became the most important source of newspaper reports and analyses of events in China and, indeed, Vietnam within the African American press. The chapter is tactfully titled "A Passport Ain't Worth a Cent" because Worthy's radical journalism, which he considered the most objective reports about events abroad, resulted in risking his US passport (a fate he shared with W. E. B. Du Bois). But Worthy tactfully employed journalism and foreign correspondence in offering a nuanced, albeit ideologically driven, analysis of transnational politics and criticism of US policies abroad. An ardent believer in the power of public opinion and the need to nurture a well-informed citizenry as part of the struggle for peace and social justice, he committed himself to "producing journalism that situated global events within the local and national understanding of Americans and that linked the U.S. black freedom struggles to foreign anti-imperialist movements" (p. 75).

Part 2, titled "The East Is Red and Black," covers events of the 1960s. Locating the narrative at the height of the Cold War, the author provides some contexts for understanding the Soviet-China rift and how this rift further allowed Chinese leaders to emphasize their rhetoric about offering an alternative ideology and leadership to marginalized people of the world. We also observe the role of black radicals in reinterpreting the Chinese world revolution to Americans, especially African Americans, and contextualizing Mao Zedong's message in the black experiences of racism and oppressions. But the chapters also reveal the complexity and contradictions of expatriate life in China as experienced by Mabel and Robert Williams and Vicki Garvin. The contradictions experienced by these activists provide other important portals for exploring China's racial claims toward black Americans during the 1960s, as well as the experiences of black expatriates in China.

Chapter 3, "Soul Brothers and Soul Sisters of the World," focuses on the writings and activism of the Williamses, tracing their movements first in Cuba and then China to highlight how they linked black Americans' struggles against racial oppression with the struggles of Third World societies against imperialism. What is unique about the Williamses is their attempts to use their observations to "cultivate a grassroots black liberation movement trained in guerrilla warfare and connected to revolutionary struggles elsewhere." A major theme in this chapter is how the Williamses employed gender-specific imageries and symbolism to highlight the importance of all activists in the struggles against oppression regardless of gender. Yet the author explains how they too, comparable with W. E. B. Du Bois, "relied on gender specific constructions of radical internationalism" (p. 20).

Chapter 4, "Maoism and the Significance of Black Political Struggles," provides a clear example of the contributions of African American intellectuals in the transformation of China's education. The chapter also serves as an interesting example of cross-cultural fusion, with an African American intellectual serving as the intermediary or interpreter of this cross-cultural fusion. Here, we encounter the black leftist feminist Garvin, in her classroom in Shanghai. As an instructor in Chinese higher education, Garvin utilized Mao Zedong's writings to reinterpret and translate the history of African American liberation to Chinese English-language students, and in doing so highlighted the common struggles facing the Chinese and African Americans.

The final chapter, "The 1970s: Rapprochement and the Decline of China's World Revolution," exposes the contradictions of China's claims to global solidarity against the hegemony of the West. At the heart of this contradiction was President Richard Nixon's historical visit to China, which was followed by China's shifting relations with Africa. In sum, by the mid-1970s, China had abandoned its commitment to global solidarity against the West, and had essentially become a partner with the West. The shifting waves of the Cold War isolated the black radicals from the new China that had emerged from the government's rapprochement with the West. China's shifting alliances, along with subtle racism in Chinese discourses about blacks, forced the Williamses to reconsider their previous political alliances with China and the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, the 1970s marked the crumbling of the elective affinity that had bonded radical black intellectuals with Chinese Communism. In the end, the East was not really Black!

This lucidly written and carefully constructed history of black radicals in Cold War politics will appeal to many academic disciplines and can easily be adapted in graduate seminars as well as upper-level undergraduate courses. I will certainly use it in my undergraduate seminar on Africa-China relations.

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Citation: Ousman M. Kobo. Review of Frazier, Robeson Taj, *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. November, 2015.

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