

BOOK REVIEW

Arise, Africa! Roar, China! Black and Chinese Citizens of the World in the Twentieth Century

Gao Yunxiang. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 392 pp. \$39.95 (hbk). ISBN 9781469664606

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Amid tensions in contemporary US–China relations, historical studies of transpacific relationships assume a renewed relevance for our understanding of how individual connections persist despite geopolitical tensions. Scholars are increasingly considering the importance that individuals – ranging from scientists to musicians – play in the history of US–China relations, in demonstration of how personal networks between the two countries often exceed diplomatic constraints. Of these connections, a growing body of research is following ground-breaking work by scholars like Robin D. G. Kelly, Betsy Esch, Vera Fennell and Robeson Taj Frazier, among others, to centre the experiences of African Americans in US–China exchanges.

Through an archivally rich and meticulously researched account of five prominent individuals, Gao Yunxiang's *Arise, Africa! Roar, China!* explores the richness of friendships forged between the US and China at the turn of the 20th century. Gao highlights the lives of African American public figures: W.E.B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes; the Chinese writer and musician Liu Liangmo; and the Sino-Afro-Caribbean dancer Sylvia Si-lan Chen. By emphasizing these individuals' overlapping engagement in "politicized transpacific discourse" (p. 3), Gao presents a compelling narrative of how each of her subjects navigated the complexities of their identities through sustained and repeated personal contacts. In doing so, these individuals actively constructed cosmopolitan ideas of race and non-whiteness that firmly located East Asia within Black imaginations of Du Bois's "global color line."

Through the protagonists' travels, correspondences and artistic or scholarly production, this book contributes to our understandings of how African Americans, Chinese and those like Sylvia Si-lan Chen with overlapping identities shaped global interactions in a manner distinct from state-centric studies of the US government's engagement with Beijing. The five body chapters, each focusing on one of the five protagonists, collectively argue that these interwoven relationships stand as a counterpoint to accounts of US–China relations that foreground diplomatic isolation between national governments, and that minimize transpacific African American experiences through the prioritization of "racism and alienation" (p. 295). This centring of Black and African American narratives successfully stands as a rebuttal to accounts that prioritize white voices and the nation state in international affairs.

Where each chapter works as a standalone piece, Gao also weaves together her narrative to demonstrate the interconnections between her cast. This interweaving culminates in the final chapter on Hughes, where the interactions between each actor demonstrate their contrapuntal contributions to transnational leftist activism among legal and diplomatic constraints. The chapter on Sylvia Si-lan Chen, in particular, details how questions of race, gender and class dynamically intersected, with her Chinese-African-French heritage affording her different privileges and barriers as she navigated national immigration restrictions. These intersections provide important signposts for how scholars

of China can think both transnationally and intersectionally about foreign engagements and entanglements.

The book intervenes in two broad fields. First, for China studies scholars, it foregrounds African American and Chinese individuals as active participants in transpacific histories that fragment state-centric narratives of US–China isolation or rapprochement. While Gao acknowledges the growing literature on the connections between African Americans and the Chinese Communist Party at the height of the Cultural Revolution, her intervention is to focus on an earlier period of engagement between intellectual and cultural elites. Gao’s attention on the era of Jim Crow and the Chinese Exclusion Act depicts a time when travel between the US and China was especially fraught with political risks and financial challenges, particularly for non-white individuals. Second, for scholars of African American and Black studies, Gao presents a wealth of Chinese-language sources that complement our understanding of Black Internationalism. Notably, Gao’s framing situates Asia as a crucial component of ongoing discussions as to the foundational transnational ties that constructed African American identities in the US. In doing so, Gao persuasively argues that “Du Bois’s story of the color line in the twentieth century is incomplete without the Chinese perspective” (p. 14).

The book excels in its close reading of primary sources, which paint detailed descriptions of Gao’s subjects. While scholars may be familiar with some of Gao’s sources – for example the Du Bois papers in Amherst, Massachusetts – her interpretation, triangulation and complementation of these sources with extensive English and Chinese-language newspapers and periodicals productively contextualizes them within transnational frameworks. Where the book’s strength is its detailed narrative, deep engagement and contextualization of a broad range of sources, it could have benefitted from a more comprehensive introduction and conclusion to better situate its intervention within broader frameworks of transnational exchanges and solidarities. The relatively brief literature review in the introduction, for example, notes interventions by Julia Lovell on global Maoism and Keisha Blain on Black Internationalism, but there is more limited engagement with theoretical frameworks of foreign exchange and relations “from below” within the body chapters. Moreover, the book leaves open the question of how productive these encounters were in fundamentally shifting the perspectives of political decision-makers in Beijing. Nevertheless, *Arise, Africa! Roar, China!* is a solid addition to this growing field within Chinese history, and individual chapters will be particularly useful for expanding syllabi in courses on China, global history and African American studies.