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Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

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This account of African American interest in revolutionary China begins just where it ought to: with the renowned vocalist, actor, and political activist Paul Robeson singing “The March of the Volunteers,” the Chinese equivalent of the Internationale, to a spring 1940 audience at Lewisohn Stadium on the Harlem campus of the City College of New York. A decade later, Robeson’s celebration of the new People’s Republic of China was part of the rationale for his blacklisting and the government seizure of his passport, which effectively ended his public career during the 1950s Red Scare. Nonetheless, as Robeson Taj Frazier’s compelling account demonstrates, China’s vivid anti-imperialist politics maintained its allure for African American radicals who, with China’s encouragement, saw the Black freedom struggle as an integral part of a worldwide insurgency of peoples of color.

Frazier is a media studies scholar who offers his own translations of PRC declarations intended to seal a transnational solidarity of color. He focuses his first detailed case study on the 1959 tour of China by W.E.B. Du Bois and his wife Shirley Graham Du Bois. Since the 1930s, Du Bois had been developing his own heterodox Marxist critique of a racialized, global capitalism. At the center of anti-capitalist world revolution he placed peasant struggle, beginning with the “general strike” of the enslaved that turned the tide of the American Civil War. The Du Boises recovered their passports in 1958 and broke the State Department ban on traveling to China. They claimed to be first-hand witnesses of the great social and economic strides made by the Chinese people under Communist leadership—an instance of what Frazier calls “a credulous ‘politics of seeing’” (61)—just a few years before the failure of Mao’s Great Leap Forward brought devastating famine with millions of casualties.

In his portrait of the intrepid reporter William Worthy of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Frazier presents an exception to such lapses of critical judgment. Worthy (1921–2014) fought U.S. Cold War restrictions on travel in

direct-action style, visiting banned countries without a passport. In the 1950s, he reported that some Black prisoners of war in North Korea, far from being “brainwashed,” recognized truth in the prison camp denunciations of the United States as a white racist power. Worthy had been a World War II conscientious objector and was led into radical politics by the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation. He welcomed a worldwide insurrection of colonized peoples, but also wrote frankly that the PRC’s simple equation of the Chinese revolution with the Black freedom struggle in the United States was misleading and fashioned with the PRC’s own geopolitical interests in mind.

Frazier’s interest lies mainly in analyzing the use of media—newspapers, propaganda posters, performance, and the like—that created the “imaginary” of African-American/Maoist solidarity from the 1950s to the 1970s. With the widening of the Sino-Soviet split and the inception of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Black sojourners in China, particularly the refugees from Jim Crow terror Robert F. and Mabel Williams and the leftwing educator Vicki Garvin, issued broadsides and high school study plans brimming with Mao-glorifying enthusiasm. Both the Williamses and Garvin returned to the United States by the early 1970s and subsequently issued statements recognizing the destructive purges that constituted the Cultural Revolution. Frazier’s focus on media rhetoric and iconography steers him away from inquiring into their private thoughts in the later years of their PRC exile. But he does survey the transformations of policy through the 1970s that led the PRC to team up with the United States and apartheid South Africa against the anticolonial movements backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba, which shattered the allure of China’s anti-imperialist, anti-racist militancy.

Frazier’s narrative of solidarity and disenchantment leaves a profoundly mixed impression: it is still possible to understand the structure of feeling that led Black radicals to see a beacon in Beijing and to embrace the pretensions of Mao’s followers to a different kind of communism that resisted the consolidation of bureaucratic party power. Yet it is also bracing, even depressing, to read through the dispatches of undoubting sojourners celebrating a tyranny, faux-Marxist as it was, that masqueraded before the global left as a new-world order of people’s power.

———Howard Brick, University of Michigan

Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe’s Early Modern World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

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Readable and engaging, *Inventing Exoticism* explores the emergence of a distinctive form of world description during the second half of the seventeenth century and its ideological consequences. Benjamin Schmidt’s focus is on