

Review: *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*

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Ishizuka, Karen. *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*. London: Verso, 2016. 288 pages. ISBN 978-1-78168-862-5

Karen Ishizuka's *Serve the People* is an ambitious book that makes the strong argument that Asian American, as an identity, was formed in the long sixties.¹ Ishizuka largely delivers on that argument in a book that is readable for a general audience, yet still rich enough to be of use to scholars.

Ishizuka's argument is not novel. *Serve the People* joins a loose set of similar-minded scholarship that began during what Diane Fujino aptly labels the 'coming of age' or 'adolescent' period of Asian American historiography.¹ Starting with Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*² and Oyserman and Sakamoto's influential article³ and coalescing in the early 21st century with works such as Song's *The Children of 1965*⁴ and Chou's *Asian American Sexual Politics*,⁵ this body of work offers a strong version of Asian American identity that contrasts with the weak version described by pan-ethnicity scholars such as Le Espiritu.⁶ No work, however, has made the argument for Asian American identity being rooted in the Asian American Movement of the 1960s as starkly and strongly as Ishizuka's. It thus serves as a cogent, readable articulation of this position.

The single greatest strength of the book is the core dataset – over 120 interviews with persons active in the Asian American Movement. This is an invaluable, unique resource that Ishizuka cobbled together over the course of eight years and in a variety of manners. (My guess is that this accounts for Ishizuka's inability to provide us an exact n: what counts as an interview isn't always clear with such varied data gathering). Passages from interviews are deftly woven into the descriptions and pointed analyses Ishizuka makes. For example, to demonstrate

¹ Fujino, Diane C. "Who Studies the Asian American Movement?: A Historiographical Analysis." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11, no. 2 (August 8, 2008): 127–69. doi:10.1353/jaas.0.0003.

² Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1996.

³ Oyserman, Daphna, and Izumi Sakamoto. "Being Asian American: Identity, Cultural Constructs, and Stereotype Perception." *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 33, no. 4 (December 1, 1997): 435–53. doi:10.1177/0021886397334002.

⁴ Song, Min Hyoung. *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American*. Durham; London: Duke University Press Books, 2013.

⁵ Chou, Rosalind S. *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. Reprint edition. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015.

⁶ Le Espiritu, Yen. *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. 1st edition. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

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awareness of the importance of Asian population growth and having it properly counted in the 1970 Census, Ishizuka draws out a wonderful vignette from Legan Wang, a staff member of the New York City Basement Workshop.

I participated in doing a survey of every single building in Chinatown and the surrounding Lower East Side. This is when I realized that behind these old tenement buildings was a hidden building. If you kept going towards the back where there's not light and where all the garbage cans are, across a little alleyway there was a whole other set of apartments. There were literally hundreds of Chinese living there who were not being counted. In our broken Chinese, we would try to talk to them about the census (pp. 125-6).

Given the apparent richness of the interview data, I wanted to hear more – and lengthier – quotes but that would have made for a much longer, detailed book with a consequently smaller audience. For readers who want that greater and clearer exposure to the data, the book may prove somewhat disappointing. Because Ishizuka uses interview quotes largely to illustrate her points, it isn't clear whether it was analysis of the interviews that yielded those points. For example, at the end of the chapter "Arts of Activism", Ishizuka summarizes "Asian Americans generated a new language, new ideas, new theories, and new knowledges that had not previously existed" (p. 163). The rich set of examples and supporting quotes she gives en route to this statement do little to answer basic questions about why activists felt a new language was needed, how widespread this sentiment was, or whether the sentiment preceded the actual doing. Indeed, throughout the book it seems as if activists of the sixties were never conflicted and were mostly fully conscious that they were constructing Asian America.

The book is constructed in sonata form around the stories of the sixties generation of activists. Part one introduces the roots of activists' consciousness in episodes of interpersonal prejudice (e.g., kids being mean) and large-scale discrimination (e.g., internment). This history, which is covered well, should be familiar to anyone who has taken a general Asian American history class. The purpose of Part one, however, is to meld individual experiences of that history into a single question of identity. Part one ends with the inclusive line, "it was time to determine who we were" (p. 55).

Part two focuses on this determination of group identity. This is the strongest section of the book, where activists are young adults intimately involved in social change. Their stories are compelling for a general audience, while the details illuminate events familiar to scholars of Asian America. It is here that Ishizuka's data shine. For example, in the second chapter of Part 2 (chapter 4 of the book), Ishizuka weaves together contemporary and retrospective descriptions of activities ranging from relatively less known Japanese American gang formation in Los Angeles to the famous campus strikes in San Francisco and

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Berkeley, connecting the two – and all that fell between – into a single narrative of Asian America. We hear Ishizuka telling this narrative through some familiar names of Asian American history, such as George Nakano, Alex Hing, and Yuri Kochiyama, but the famous are merely voices in a chorus in which the relatively less known, such as Russell Valparaiso and Lincoln Eng, join.

Part three, in contrast, is briefer and less convincing. It ties present social actions and Asian American identity to those of the previous era. Like most social activists, Ishizuka's respondents seem to remain involved in Movement-inspired endeavors, but with an unavoidable diversification in the ways they remain involved. Thus, the cohesive efforts she presents in Part two gives way to varied reflection and a certain amount of self-conscious nostalgia that acknowledges the passing of the Asian America of the sixties.

Serve the People is appropriate for collegiate audiences and the general reading public with a modest knowledge base about Asian America. For scholars, the utility of this book is two-fold. First, it clearly articulates the position that Asian America was formed in the activism of the long sixties. Second, the dataset of interviews is of great importance to Asian American scholarship.

Serve the People is also best thought of as a generational biography. The book casts backward and forward from the long sixties, acknowledging the movements that preceded and the inspiration that followed these sixties activists. Theirs is the perspective the reader is asked to adopt. Indeed, even the title, *Serve the People*, comes from a speech by Mao that has, I suspect, a different cultural resonance for this generation of activists, with their conceptualization of the 'third world,' than for any other Asian Americans. For this reason, coverage of pre-World War II movements is sparse, even though incorporation of inter-ethnic movements of the time, such as the Japanese Mexican Labor Association, might well have fed into Ishizuka's argument. The post-Movement coverage is also less than satisfying. Although the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 is discussed, the changes it wrought to the composition of Asian America are far underplayed. Not only did the absolute and proportional size of Asian America grow, it also shifted in composition. The activists of the sixties were largely Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino. Most were native born. And most were working class, with strong family ambitions for upward class mobility. Today, Indians are the second largest Asian group with Japanese now only the sixth largest group. Most Asians in the US today are foreign born. And, although class mobility continues to be an ambition, the context of that ambition has shifted greatly. Because Ishizuka fails to grapple with these shifts, she undercuts the claim that the Sixties generation inspires the present and gave it an Asian American identity that today's youthful activists still use.

Despite some thinness in areas outside its focus, *Serve the People* contributes significantly to scholarship on Asian America. Its central claim will, I suspect, become somewhat contentious. But, it is important for that contention to occur as a further maturing of the field.

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