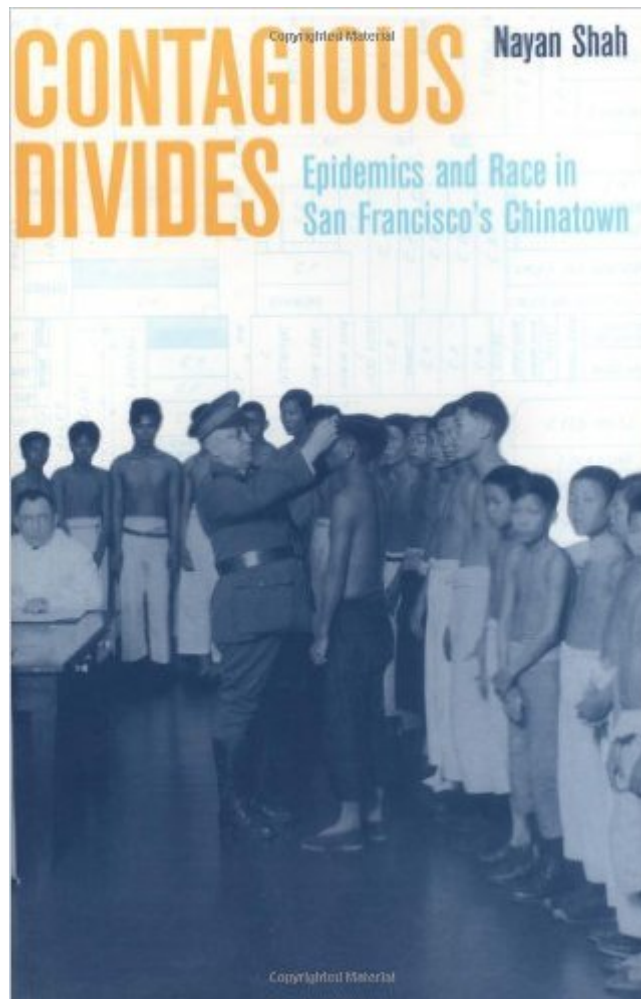


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Contagious Divides: Epidemics And Race In San Francisco's Chinatown (American Crossroads)



Synopsis

Contagious Divides charts the dynamic transformation of representations of Chinese immigrants from medical menace in the nineteenth century to model citizen in the mid-twentieth century. Examining the cultural politics of public health and Chinese immigration in San Francisco, this book looks at the history of racial formation in the U.S. by focusing on the development of public health bureaucracies. Nayan Shah notes how the production of Chinese difference and white, heterosexual norms in public health policy affected social lives, politics, and cultural expression. Public health authorities depicted Chinese immigrants as filthy and diseased, as the carriers of such incurable afflictions as smallpox, syphilis, and bubonic plague. This resulted in the vociferous enforcement of sanitary regulations on the Chinese community. But the authorities did more than demon-ize the Chinese; they also marshaled civic resources that promoted sewer construction, vaccination programs, and public health management. Shah shows how Chinese Americans responded to health regulations and allegations with persuasive political speeches, lawsuits, boycotts, violent protests, and poems. Chinese American activists drew upon public health strategies in their advocacy for health services and public housing. Adroitly employing discourses of race and health, these activists argued that Chinese Americans were worthy and deserving of sharing in the resources of American society.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Even though the United States was still a young country during the nineteenth century - where Shah

begins his interweaving of public health, race, and citizenship - a strong enough sense of identity had been established to create a milieu of xenophobia with regard to non-Western cultures. In setting up the perspective of the alien as Other and tracing its influences throughout the health crises of San Francisco into the twentieth century, Shah establishes viral contamination as metaphor for cultural contamination. The threat from invaders comes not merely from their different cultural practices but also from their very biology, conflating a social threat with a physical one. White culture became the normative body by which Chinese difference was articulated. As viruses and other contagious diseases were just beginning to be studied scientifically, some of the advancements were applied for the improvement of individuals while other advancements were used for the improvement of the society around those individuals through suppression or quarantine. A study of the maps of San Francisco that Shah provides read almost like an anatomy diagram, showing the growing cell of the foreign invader in the body politic. Maintenance of a spatial boundary, in order to control disease, transformed into maintenance of a racial boundary. Throughout the text, Shah presents a considerable amount of evidence from many disparate sources, showing the collusion - often conscious, but sometimes not - of scientific, economic, legal, and other forces.

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