Meredith Oyen. “‘Thunder without Rain’: ARCI, the Far East Refugee Program, and the U.S. Response to Hong Kong Refugees.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16:4 (Fall 2014): 189-211. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS_a_00520. http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00520

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Reviewed by Chi-kwan Mark, Royal Holloway, University of London

Forced migration was a global phenomenon of the twentieth century. While most studies have focused on European, Middle Eastern, and South Asian refugees, Meredith Oyen’s article looks at the Chinese refugees in 1950s Hong Kong through the lens of an American private voluntary organization, Aid Refugee Chinese Intellectuals, Inc. (ARCI). Founded in New York in late 1951, ARCI was headed by Republican Congressman Walter Judd, a medical missionary in pre-war China and a staunch supporter of Chiang Kai-shek and his anti-communist cause since 1949. Despite its declared aim as a “non-profit, non-political, non-partisan, non-sectarian voluntary relief agency,” from the outset, ARCI identified itself with the ‘Free World’ in the Cold War struggle: it aimed to aid in the “resettlement and rehabilitation” of refugee Chinese intellectuals fleeing communist rule and to increase public awareness of the “oppressed and imperilled people in Asia” (197-198). Drawing on multi-archival sources, such as the ARCI and Walter Judd Papers in the Hoover Institution Archives, official records in the U.S. and British National Archives, and selected documents in the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in both Beijing and Taipei, Oyen examines the work of ARCI and its success and failure in the wider context of the Cold War, refugee relief, and transnational migration.

The influx of Chinese refugees to Hong Kong resulted from the civil war on the mainland in the late 1940s. By late 1950, the Hong Kong population had increased from about 800,000 people at the end of the Second World War to 2.1 million. As a small private aid organization with limited financial and personnel resources, ARCI targeted at intellectuals (teachers, professors, scientists, and so forth), many of whom had been trained in the United States and still had connections with the Chinese-American community there. During the first wave of registrations, some 25,000 individuals, or 100,000 people when family members were added, were identified as refugee intellectuals.
In 1953 the new Eisenhower administration, which demonstrated a greater interest in Asian refugees than did the Europe-oriented Truman administration, agreed to render financial support to ARCI. Under the United States Escapee Program (which focused on refugees from the Eastern bloc), the Department of State began to allot some of the funds to ARCI for resettlement of Chinese refugees, with the first grants in five instalments of $50,000, each helping to move refugees from Hong Kong to Taiwan and Southeast Asia. After the passage of the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, which granted 200,000 non-quota visas to refugees and escapees for relocation to the United States, the U.S. Congress, strongly supported by Representative Judd, added an additional 5,000 visas for refugees in Asia, 2,000 of which were specifically reserved for Chinese with passports endorsed by the Republic of China. Oyen details how ARCI was involved in the resettlement of Hong Kong refugees to Taiwan and the United States.

The topic of Hong Kong refugees is important as it touches upon some major issues of the global and international history of the 1950s: the evolution of the international refugee regime; U.S. immigration policy; the cultural Cold War between America/Taiwan and China; and the impact of colonialism on the global Cold War. To begin with, the fate of the Chinese refugees in Hong Kong highlighted the contested label of ‘refugee.’ As Oyen notes, ARCI had been criticized for “registering too many and helping too few” by “[u]sing a vague definition of ‘intellectuals’ that included military police and others with limited higher education” (217). To the Hong Kong government, ‘refugees’ (be they intellectuals or illiterates) could not be easily distinguished from immigrants and squatters, and thus it was administratively infeasible (and politically undesirable) to provide humanitarian assistance to the Chinese refugees alone. The international community, too, contested whether the Hong Kong refugees were ‘political refugees’ or ‘economic migrants.’ In 1954 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sent a survey mission headed by Edvard Hambro to Hong Kong in order to determine whether the Chinese refugees there fell under its mandate of protection. Although Hambro later concluded that more than three-quarters of the Hong Kong migrants were ‘political refugees’ fleeing communist persecution, these refugees did not fall under the UNHCR mandate because they could indeed avail themselves of the protection of their own national government – the government of the Republic of China, which was recognized as the sole legitimate government of China by the United Nations. As Oyen concludes, the United Nations’ ability to act in the Hong Kong refugee problem was circumscribed by Cold-War politics, but the underlying issue was the contested nature of the refugee label in the 1950s when the international refugee regime was oriented toward European refugees.¹

By examining ARCI’s involvement in the resettlement of Hong Kong refugees to the United States, Oyen shines a light on the history of U.S. immigration policy, which was still influenced by racial considerations in the 1950s (Not until 1965 was the national origins quota immigration system abolished). The processing of refugee visa applications was coloured by long-held racial assumptions and stereotypes. The U.S. Consulate General in Hong Kong was charged with overseeing the Far East Refugee Program and in particular conducting the security investigation of applicants. Yet American consular officers tended to assume that “every Chinese seeking to enter the United States is a fraud,” with the result that 85 percent of cases was found to have evidence of fraud (209). After all, U.S. officials approached the Hong Kong refugees mainly from the perspective of the Cold War. The fact that the United States was helping non-European, non-white refugees was of propaganda value. The United States Information Service (USIS) worked with ARCI to exploit stories of successful refugee relief and resettlement in USIS films, publications, and radio. Through the Free China Literature Program, ARCI was involved in the production of anti-communist material to win the hearts and minds of the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Although Oyen only briefly touches upon the theme of the cultural Cold War, she has made it plain that “the refugee issue was never just about humanitarian aid,” but “was always caught up in the larger rhetoric about Free China, its ability to challenge the PRC,...and winning the Cold War” (220).

In her assessment of ARCI, which was referred to as “thunder without rain” (219) by its critics, Oyen has noted some significant drawbacks, such as its dependence on Washington’s funding, the drastic decline of resettlement opportunities in Taiwan from the late 1950s onwards, and the opposition of Communist China to any attempts to ‘internationalize’ the refugee problem. Perhaps most importantly, the agency exercised by the Hong Kong government determined the scope of ARCI’s activities and of the American cultural crusade in Hong Kong – a factor that is mentioned but could have been discussed in greater detail. From the outset, British colonial officials had reservations about ARCI. The timing of its formation in late 1951 and early 1952 could not have been worse in view of other political events relating to Hong Kong and Sino-British relations.

On the one hand, Beijing severely criticized Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s demonstration of solidarity with America in the Korean War (Hong Kong being a ‘reluctant ally’ in export controls on China and intelligence gathering for Washington). On the other hand, the Hong Kong government’s refusal to allow a ‘comfort mission’ from the mainland to visit the victims (many of whom were refugees) of a squatter fire led to riots in early March 1952 and Beijing’s diplomatic protests. As Governor Alexander Grantham warned of the political implications of ARCI’s formation and activities, “We shall obviously lay ourselves open to Communist propaganda attacks if relief supplies from China are suppressed at the same time as arrangements are being made for Nationalist refugees in the Colony to receive assistance from American sources.” Thus, in agreeing to its presence in Hong Kong, the Governor insisted that ARCI should focus on

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the resettlement of refugees overseas rather than local integration projects (the latter of which would encourage more refugees to come or necessitate a change in existing government policies). Grantham strongly opposed the idea of a ‘Free China University’ for overseas Chinese students and the proposal for creating hospitals and clinics staffed by refugee doctors and nurses. Moreover, the Hong Kong Governor objected to overt identification of Washington’s involvement in ARCI’s operations: any financial assistance given to ARCI should, in his opinion, be treated as a strictly confidential matter. All this underscores the salient role of colonialism in the development of the Hong Kong refugee problem despite the U.S. involvement. The manner in which the cultural Cold War was played out on the ground was determined as much by British colonial officials (and the Chinese refugees themselves) as by ARCI and the U.S. government.

In short, this is a well-researched article on ARCI that helps illuminate the international history of refugees, American Cold War and immigration policy, and British colonialism in Hong Kong in the 1950s.

Chi-kwan Mark is Senior Lecturer in International History at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research interests include the decolonization of Hong Kong and British-American-Chinese relations in the Cold War. He is the author of *Hong Kong and the Cold War: Anglo-American Relations, 1949-1957* (Oxford University Press, 2004) and *China and the World since 1945: An International History* (Routledge, 2012), as well as several articles in *Diplomatic History*, *The International History Review*, and *Cold War History*, among other journals.

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