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New York Chinatown History Project *by John Kuo Wei Tchen*

The New York Chinatown History Project is a community documentation endeavor designed to reconstruct the 120 year legacy of what is now the largest Chinese community outside of Asia. Founded in 1980, scholars, community workers, photographers, and artists have been collaborating with the community in fighting stereotypes and reclaiming a largely neglected past. It is our belief that all the history and folklife we learn from Chinese New Yorkers must help contribute to the effort to improve and educate the community. We've produced a range of bilingual programs and productions, ranging from traveling exhibitions and slide shows to walking tours and roundtable discussions. The History Project houses a library, archives, gallery, bookstore, and media room. Our primary work has been on the history of hand laundry workers, the major occupation of our forebears. The following discusses the origins of this occupation and offers some reflections on how community history can be reclaimed. '

Chinese have been in the United States as long as, if not longer than, most Euro-American immigrant groups. Entering California in large numbers even before the territory became a state, Chinese played a fundamentally critical role in building the infrastructure of the American West's economy. During the 1850s, for example, Chinese composed one out of four wage workers in San Francisco. Besides the well-known case of 19th century Chinese laborers building the railroads, they reclaimed the swampland that is now Los Angeles; they built the roads, the levees; and they taught their agri-bosses how to grow fruits and vegetables. Chinese fishermen supplied much of the fresh seafood for the major cities and even exported thousands of tons back to China. Others built the wineries in the Napa-Sonoma Valley. They worked in the first factories making woolens, shoes, garments, and other light industrial goods. Chinese, it turns out, were the first proletarians of the western frontier. Slowly, year-by-year, the story of the early Chinese contribution is being pieced together.

This breadth of occupational entry did not last long, however. All these jobs were first rejected by white laborers. They wanted to strike it rich with gold. So the burgeoning entrepreneurs, like railroad moguls Leland Stanford (later Governor and founder of Stanford University) and Charles Crocker (later of Crocker National Bank), had little choice but to hire this 'heathen' labor. But once the transcontinental railroad link was completed, and once Anglo-Americans and European immigrants began to flood the western economy, Chinese were systematically evicted from these occupations one-by-one. Lynchings, random and mob violence, anti-Chinese ordinances, and general racist antagonism earned Chinese the dubious distinction of being the 'niggers' of the American frontier.

Increasingly, Chinese were pushed into segregated sections of urban areas that became known as China Quarters or China Towns. Occupations then became restricted to what has been traditionally considered 'women's work' in the United States. Cooking, serving, washing clothes . . . servicing white genteel culture. Chinese laundries emerged and spread eastward through the Midwest and eventually to the great cities of the Eastern seaboard.

In 1882, a compromise immigration law was reached. The Chinese Exclusion Act forbade any more laborers from entering. Merchants, students, and diplomats were exempt. Those laborers who were already here could stay. And that was the compromise. The most virulently anti-Chinese forces wanted complete eviction. Subsequent Acts tightened loopholes and effectively forbade Chinese women from balancing out the largely male population. At times the ratio was a lopsided 20:1 males to females. Laborers, unlike the exempt merchants, were hard-pressed to have families in the United States. The Acts were finally repealed in 1943, but their effect was not changed until 1965/68. The ruling interests in the United States simply did not want Chinese becoming Americans. America was to remain as white as it could be.

Laundry work became the single major occupation for Chinese during the exclusion period. With a few hundred dollars, a washboard, a bucket, and an iron, a wash-house could be opened virtually anywhere and make a few tens of dollars-a-week. It was a low-status occupation, marginal to the neighborhood where it was located, and socially anonymous. Often several rounds of owners would operate the same laundry with the same store name, such as 'Sam Wah' or 'Wong's.' All laundry men were referred to as 'Charlie.' Their real name simply wasn't important. Chinese were seen as perennial foreigners. As generations of Euro-Americans moved upward in the social structure, Chinese basically remained laundry workers until World War Two.

Chinese were structurally pushed out of mainstream work and life, marginalized in the service sector, and then stereotyped in the mass culture. The national memory, to the degree that it existed in standard accounts of any ethnic or racial group, repeated the partial truth. Americans have grown up with textbooks that stated: Chinese helped to build the railroads. And we looked around and saw Chinese worked in laundries. The two 'historical facts' became part of a constellation of stereotypic images of opium dens, dark Chinatown alleyways, tong hatchetmen, gang wars, etc. Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985) is but the latest expression of this traditional 'yellow peril' genre. Usually the images were combined. Laundry men were actually secret tong hitmen running opium dens in the rear, seducing innocent white virgin women, and/or the target of comic relief. All of these were combined in such animated cartoons as *A Chinaman's Chance* (1933).

Suddenly, right before and during World War Two, the United States became an ally of China in a mutual fight against Japan. The image of Chinese Americans shifted in a positive direction. As the United States economy prospered from the spoils of the war, Chinese Americans began gaining entrance into the rapidly expanding scientific and technical sectors of the economy. The so-called 'positive' stereotype gained ascendance over the viciously negative portrayals. Charlie Chan, the inscrutable yet likeable Chinese Hawaiian detective, embodied this new image. He was clever, but used his intelligence to aid mainstream cultural authority. He was a company player. In the 1950s, Chinese soon became touted as a 'model

minority' and laundries reinterpreted as the key to Chinese immigrant advancement. The formerly interchangeable, anonymous laundry man now became portrayed as the enterprising small businessman on his way up the American success ladder.

Do the Chinese laundry workers have a sense of the history of early Chinese contributions and/or the history of their own occupation? The answer is both yes and no. What can be described as a folk history was carried on from generation to generation. Its transmission was primarily through stories told from one laundry worker to another. Its staying power, its memory, was as strong and as limited as the continuity and discontinuity of laundry life. Through this folk history we have learned a great deal about the subjective life. Ghost stories, traditional tales retold, anecdotes, what is remembered and what is not have helped us probe these memory-bound dimensions. However, the memory of a coherent history has been ethereal and uneven. Handicapped by few means of refining and more permanently transmitting their folk-sense, an account of the history doesn't really exist. Instead, there is even a sentiment that there is no history. In our early field work, we randomly visited operating laundries. One visit was especially memorable. When we stated, in Cantonese dialect, who we were and our desire to learn about the history, a gaunt, tired-looking laundry man screamed out at us in broken English, 'Laundries have no history! Laundries have no history!' Such a terse, bitter feeling and self-perception, we soon discovered, was not unique. A great deal of 'eating bitterness' embodies the laundry experience. Many were ashamed of their life-long livelihood, and this shame was often passed on to their children, if they were lucky enough to have them. For some, the understanding that they were washing people's dirty clothes was not communicated to their families back in the villages. The Chinese name simply referred to 'clothing store,' a very high-status achievement back in the village.

The first commercially published historical account written by a Chinese American was Betty Lee Sung's *Mountain of Gold* in 1967. The section on laundry work perpetuated the post-WWII 'model minority' stereotype. Chinese were hard-working, did not complain, and were budding capitalists ready to move up the ladder once racial restrictions were 'deregulated.' Not only were the actual voices marginalized, but now some descendants of laundry workers authenticated the stereotype.

If the past has been privatized and limited to obscure folk remembrances and metamorphosed into a stereotyped reality, how can a strong, resistant, ethnic counter-culture be nurtured? And what role can the reclamation of this history play in promoting this cultural identity? What can a strong sub-cultural identity do in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful mass culture and political economy? I wish I knew. But, till these matters can be figured out, we've taken some steps that can help us better think through the problems.

Reclamation is necessarily collective and the brokers of that effort have to seriously consider the methods by which they will gather the historical resources. In the case of Chinese laundry worker history, the written and artifactual record has been scanty at best. We've been pulling together what available scraps of evidence we can find, but the greatest resource has clearly been laundry workers themselves. Our major obstacle has been developing bonds of trust to gain the most frank and deepest levels of their reflection. As Chinese, we are insiders to the community, however we are all outsiders to the laundry experience. As outsider-insiders, we've

developed what can be called a native-defined research-production process. Who are we to interpret their experience? And given their expert status, what role can we play in developing a critical history? The relationship between ourselves, as the self-appointed historian-researchers, and laundry workers is a fundamental question.

Our five years of work with laundry workers has been a process of exploring deeper and deeper layers of insight and reflection. This native-based orientation has worked itself out in a methodology which does not look upon any given historical 'product,' such as an exhibit or book or radio program, as the definitive, expert 'last word.' Instead, we have used our productions as a means to bring our collaborators and potential collaborators together and gather more information and insight. We first produced the draft of a modest exhibit and hung it up in our office gallery for selected comments. Journalists, laundry workers, and many others added, criticized, pointed out omissions. The exhibit was named the *Eight Pound Livelihood* which paid homage to the same term used by laundry workers themselves to describe their hourly, daily, yearly ordeal of ironing. *Eight Pound* was displayed for several months at the senior center where we did most of our fieldwork. We sat with the exhibit and received a wide range of additional comments and oral histories. In fact, we could not handle all the information that started flooding forth. All of this new information was then used in a revised and expanded version of the exhibit which has traveled throughout New York State.

As our work has gained some national attention, more and more voluntary contributions, ranging from individuals offering to write their own remembrances to photographs, have been sent in. Last year we produced a half-hour video-documentary exploring the lives of five of our closest and most insightful collaborators which was telecast on national educational television in spring 1986. The next chapter of our work is assemblage of a highly illustrated, popularly-oriented resource book on the eight pound livelihood. This will be written in a way to encourage more local documentation efforts across the nation.

We welcome visitors to the History Project. A catalogue of our productions is available, as is our bilingual, triannual newsletter, *BU GAO BAN*. Inquiries should be directed to: New York Chinatown History Project, 70 Mulberry Street, New York, New York, 10013, 212/439-7378.