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Race, Gender, and Laundry Work: The Roles of Chinese Laundrymen and American Women in the United States, 1850–1950

JOAN S. WANG

SCHOLARS OF Chinese American history have long known of the disproportionate number of Chinese males who made the passage from China to the New World in the nineteenth century. Yet despite a greater understanding today of hegemonic power relations between men and women, there is still a need to study the gendered world of men of color, specifically within the context of industrializing American society. Barred by the Page Law in 1875 on suspicion of prostitution, Chinese women were subsequently forbidden from coming to the United States until World War II.¹ The Chinese American community was thus unbalanced in terms of demographic distribution.² With few women and children in the community, the lives of Chinese American men were markedly different from those of many other immigrants, even other Asian immigrants, such as the Japanese.³

In taking as my subject the experience of Chinese men in America prior to World War II, this article will focus on the growth of Chinese laundries over time as seen from the perspective of the growing consumer demand for domestic services. Ironically, laundering work was the traditional domain of women. Previous studies have explained the involvement of Chinese men in the laundry trade as owing to a number of factors: the small amount of start-up capital needed, the eagerness of Chinese workers to be self-employed, and the limited language requirements of the trade.⁴ Without denying these statements, this article argues that racist and gendered labor conditions worked to keep Chinese American males in a subordinate position in the American economy. From the late nineteenth century, when the majority of women in American society were liberating themselves from laundering work—a particularly onerous and menial task, the lack of opportunity led male immigrants from China to enter the laundry business. Moreover, racist and gendered labor conditions worked in concert to keep Chinese laundrymen at a

disadvantage in their interactions with women in American society. Gender is not simply a biological condition, but a social construct constituted and reinforced by a patriarchal society.⁵ By examining the relations between Chinese laundrymen and women of different ethnic groups, specifically those women working in the same line, we can see how the development of Chinese laundries directly affected gender issues.⁶ As a substantial population of minority women, particularly African American women, continued to work as laundresses in private homes or operatives in commercial laundries, their relations with Chinese laundrymen presented conspicuous characteristics deserving study. It is this historical oppression—a combination of racism and sexism—that entrenched Chinese men in a traditionally female occupation and thus fixed gender roles in the relations between Chinese laundrymen and American women.

WOMEN AND THE ORIGIN OF CHINESE LAUNDRIES IN THE WEST

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese American men played an indispensable role in the labor force of the American West. The burgeoning American economy created the conditions for migration and a redistribution of the global work force. Not only did people from rural America move to industrialized cities, but people from foreign countries immigrated to the United States. These immigrants were recruited as workers to meet the need for cheap and easily exploited labor. Like immigrants from Europe who traveled far from home to the Eastern seaboard of the United States, many Chinese landed in Hawaii and on the Pacific Coast, the areas closest geographically to their distant homeland.

The frontier conditions and the racial hostility that existed in the American West during the second half of the nineteenth century were two significant elements in the involvement of Chinese males in the laundry business. Some Chinese American men had been in the trade since the early days of the Gold Rush. The first Chinese laundries were established at mining sites in western states due to the special frontier atmosphere. In order to meet the demand for clean clothes, white miners—most of whom were either single or without family around—were willing to pay relatively high prices to Native American women or Mexican women to wash their clothes.⁷ As early as the middle of the nineteenth century, these women began to be replaced by Chinese males.

Some Chinese laundrymen provided commercial services that substituted for women's unpaid labor at home, while other Chinese houseboys took the place of female servants. Yet washing clothes was never a significant job in those early days due to the wide range of alternatives for Chinese employment.

The economic development of the American West during the 1860s and 1870s created a surplus of labor and intense competition in the labor market that in turn triggered racial tension. Racial hostility toward the Chinese first forced them out of the waning mining industry in the mid-1860s. Subsequently, a large number of Chinese drifted into the urban centers on the West Coast, while some worked in agriculture. Soon after, Chinese became the objects of discrimination when widespread unemployment followed the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. As anti-Chinese sentiments steadily grew in the later decades of the nineteenth century on the West Coast, nativists began to drive the Chinese out of one trade after another. Under strong pressure from organized labor, tobacco, shoe, and woolen manufacturers barred Chinese employment in the 1880s.⁸ Prohibited from a variety of trades and restricted from owning farms or land, Chinese were compelled to confine themselves to "feminized" jobs such as cooks, laundrymen, and domestic servants.⁹

Due to their non-citizen status, the closed labor market, and the shortage of women, Chinese males substituted to some extent for female labor in the American West. According to a contemporary Chinese newspaper, in 1870 there were more than 1,200 Chinese males working as domestic servants in the homes of white families in San Francisco, and over 2,000 toiling in commercial laundries, though the number of laundry workers did not match the one in the census of United States population.¹⁰ David Katzman notes the peculiarities of the domestic labor situation in the West during the period: "in 1880, California and Washington were the only states in which a majority of domestic servants were men."¹¹ Apparently, this unique situation was created by a strong demand for servants in the West due to its distance from the ports of entry of European immigrants and from black servants in the South. Female labor was scarce, since the population as a whole was still imbalanced in favor of men.

Chinese men in the West not only supplied low-wage manual labor for railroad construction, manufacturing, and agriculture, but also served as temporary replacements for white and black female labor. At the turn of the twentieth century, due to limited employment opportunities and

racial hostility, more and more Chinese males were involved in “women’s work,” becoming domestic servants in private homes, household workers in hotels and rooming houses, and employees in the laundry business.¹² In the early 1900s, Chinese men continued to be highly prized servants in San Francisco, even as their numbers increasingly diminished after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.¹³ At the same time, while many Chinese men remained in the West, more of them migrated to urban centers in the eastern part of the United States. Those who moved eastward found the laundry trade and later the restaurant business profitable. By 1920, nearly half of the Chinese population in the United States was engaged in occupations related to household service.¹⁴

In the western United States, laundry was predominantly Chinese. By 1870, the laundry business became an important source of livelihood for Chinese in the West. There were about 2,600 Chinese laundrymen in California, 1,300 of whom lived in San Francisco. These Chinese laundrymen represented approximately 12 percent of the Chinese population in San Francisco.¹⁵ Moreover, the 1,300 Chinese working in the laundry trade represents a majority of the more than 2,000 laundry workers in San Francisco.¹⁶ Chinese domination of the trade reached its peak around 1880. The census report of that year shows that Chinese operated over three-fourths of all laundries in California. In the same year, California had a laundry-to-population ratio four times higher than Massachusetts and nearly seven times higher than Illinois. This difference was partly the result of the more balanced sex ratios among whites in Massachusetts and Illinois. Before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, more than 7,500 Chinese in San Francisco earned their income by working as laundrymen.¹⁷

The practice was welcome in a frontier society where there were few women to perform these chores. In the Rocky Mountain area, the development of Chinese laundries was correlated with the change in the sex ratio of local areas. In 1870 and 1880, six out of ten persons in the region were male. As the male-female ratio equalizes, the need for such services would decline. And such was the case in Butte, Montana: the population of four hundred or so Chinese there decreased as the sex imbalance among whites diminished after 1890. The number of Chinese continued to dwindle until 1940, when the sex ratio was 1.1 to 1 and only 88 Chinese were left in the city.¹⁸ Rose Hum Lee, in her work on Chinese communities in the West, agrees that Chinese laundries owed their development to the low numbers of women in the West.

None of the Chinese laundrymen originally worked in this field in

their country of origin. As in American society, washing clothes was conventionally part of the domestic domain reserved for women in Chinese society. The practice did not change significantly throughout the period in China. At the turn of the twentieth century, girls in China helped their mothers take care of younger siblings and fulfilled other chores around the house, such as fetching water in buckets, carrying, and cleaning, though men may have sometimes helped fetch water.¹⁹ Even in cases when people were hired to do washing and cleaning in Chinese society, women were always preferred. One study indicates that women were employed as laundresses in the Song Dynasty between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. Poor families in cities preferred to bear girls rather than boys, because there was a demand for female servants to work either in private homes or in commercial establishments.²⁰ In the 1930s, Chinese women in the Pearl River Delta immigrated to Southeast Asia and Hong Kong to work for British families or rich Chinese families as servants. Known as “*amahs*” (from Chinese, nanny). Their responsibilities involved cooking, taking care of children, and general household work. One of the *amahs*’ chief duties was “*sai tong*” (in Cantonese dialect, or *xi tang* in Mandarin) [washing and ironing], while another was called “*ta chup*” (or *da za* in Mandarin) [washing, ironing, tidying, and cleaning chores].²¹ Clearly, neither in China in general nor in the Pearl River Delta in particular do we find any evidence that men ever did the washing.

Chinese laundrymen in America gained the ability to launder clothes in the new land.²² Lee Chew learned laundry skills from an American family, and he did laundry work for many years even after he left them. He came to San Francisco from a village near Canton before the passage of the 1882 Exclusion Act. With assistance, he obtained a job as a house servant for an American family, an experience similar to those of many other Chinese immigrants during that period. Chew learned to do housework, including laundry, from a housewife whose family consisted of a husband and two children. In the beginning, Lee Chew did not know how to do anything and understood nothing the lady said to him. Little by little, the lady showed Lee Chew how to cook, wash, iron, sweep, dust, make beds, wash dishes, clean windows, paint and brass, and polish knives and forks. Contrary to the contemporary American belief that Chinese men brought into the country the laundry skills that they had learned at home, Lee Chew picked up laundering skills little by little from his American hostess who, according to Lee’s own account, managed “the things herself and then overs[aw] my efforts to imitate

her." After working as a servant for two years, Chew used his savings of \$410 to start his own laundry business with a partner. They set up their business about 500 miles inland, where a railroad was being built. They stayed with a railroad construction gang for three years and then left to wash clothes for gold miners.²³

In short, several unique forces in the West resulted in Chinese males' involvement in the laundry line. Laundry work was only one alternative among the various livelihoods for Chinese immigrants in the early years. By the 1870s, racial hostility and the small number of females in the western United States led to the development of Chinese laundries in the area. In the 1880s and 1890s, after Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, more and more Chinese in the West left for other regions of the country looking for better opportunities. Thus the Chinese experience in the laundry trade in western states created a labor pool from which there was later expansion to the eastern states.

THE DEMAND FOR LAUNDRY SERVICES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE LAUNDRIES

In the East, there was no sex imbalance in terms of numbers. Nevertheless, the rise of Chinese laundries in the area was directly related to the need for female domestic servants and the change in women's employment. In 1870, about two thirds (65.6 percent) of all female nonagricultural workers were servants. By 1930, the percentage had decreased to one fifth (20.2 percent). The change, however, was not caused by dwindling demand, but by the inadequacy of supply. This was supported by the fact that the total numbers of female domestic servants between 1870 and 1910 mounted from 960,056 to 1,829,553. The number of washerwomen listed in census reports from 1870 to 1900 shows the same pattern. The number rose from 58,102 in 1870, to 108,198 in 1880, and 216,631 in 1890, approximately a twofold increase every decade. In the census year of 1900, the number of washerwomen soared to 335,282.²⁴ During this period, the expansion of the urban middle class generated a style of life that demanded household service.²⁵ Yet, domestic service and washing were no longer the only available choices for women working outside their homes. This was particularly true for native-born white women, who were willing to take jobs as factory workers or shop helpers at lower pay yet with more independence than domestic servants were allowed.²⁶ Immigrant women initially filled the vacancies in domestic work. Specifically, in the large urban centers of

the industrial Northeast, newly arrived Irish, German, and Scandinavian women dominated the household labor market.²⁷

The shortage of domestic servants in the East, however, did not improve with the influx of European immigration. In the East, laundry work became more demanding as a result of the process of rapid industrialization that had been underway since the mid-nineteenth century. Manufactured cloth expanded individual wardrobes. The greater availability of washable fabrics, such as cotton, increased the need for washing. Laundry work was the single most onerous chore in the lives of women before World War II, and the first chore women would hire out whenever economic conditions allowed. Not surprisingly, families with higher incomes had servants or washerwomen to do the labor-demanding work. In her memoir of childhood at the turn of the twentieth century, Ethel Spencer in Pittsburgh recalled how laundry work was done in her own upper middle-class family. The laundresses, according to Spencer, "were always Negroes," and unlike other maids, did not live with the family. Minnie, a black woman who worked in the household from 1910 to 1935, was very close to the Spencer family. Even when labor saving devices such as home washing machines and electric irons arrived in the 1920s, Minnie still followed convention and boiled the clothes.²⁸ The memoir reveals a significant feature of laundry work in American households during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While some housekeepers depended on domestic servants to help with laundering work, many had laundresses specifically to do the washing and no other household chores.²⁹

As already noted, laundry work was more difficult than other forms of household labor. A further problem was caused by the lack of space. In many industrial and urban centers, white middle-class families lived in small apartments which lacked adequate space to house laundering equipment. Nor were there enough places to hang clean linen. Women in such families were often forced to send their dirty clothes to commercial laundries. Even some poor urban women sent out at least some of their wash.³⁰ During the 1920s American commercial laundries cited the attitudes of household maids as one reason for the increased business in their wet wash departments. Many maids in affluent families refused to do the washing, but were willing to iron it after laundries had done the wash.³¹ In the 1920s, a survey of laundry appliances owned by employers of domestic servants sheds light on this trend. The survey showed that among 523 employers of black domestic servants in India-

napolis, a little more than half (51.1 percent) did not own washing machines of any kind, whereas 98.6 percent used either electric or gas irons or mangles.³² Some maids would do the laundering work only with the help of machines.³³ Due to the backbreaking labor involved, a number of maids declined to do laundry work before the Second World War, when use of washing machines became widespread.

The tendency to separate laundry work from other domestic work continued even during the Great Depression. In the early 1930s, a survey of household employment in Philadelphia revealed the advantage of hiring washerwomen in addition to domestic servants.³⁴ During the mid-1930s, in an investigation of forty households in a middle-class district of eastern Pittsburgh, Sara Tesh discovered nearly one-third (thirteen out of forty) employers no longer required general workers to do any laundering. Laundresses that visited one day a week did laundry work in those families.³⁵ Even after washing machines began to be installed in American homes in the late 1930s, some households retained laundresses for a day or a half-day's work.³⁶ A study of household employment conducted in Lynchburg, Virginia, pointed out that "[i]t is customary to have extra help for heavy work, but apparently mechanical equipment is not very largely used in Lynchburg homes."³⁷ Before the Second World War, employing laundresses or sending out to a commercial laundry, instead of buying washing machines, was still the dominant mode.

The strong demand for laundry service is attested to by the rapid growth of Chinese laundries in the East before World War II. In 1870, laundries played a small role in the occupational distribution of Chinese Americans. Over two-thirds of Chinese on the continent worked in mining or as unskilled laborers.³⁸ At that time, there were 3,653 Chinese launderers in the United States, most of them in the western states. But during the 1870s, Chinese laundries first began to appear in some midwestern and eastern cities. Harp Lee and Wah Lee established the first Chinese laundries in Chicago in 1873.³⁹ In the Pittsburgh's *Business Directory* of 1875-6, Hong Lee's laundry on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Smithfield Street was listed as the "Chinese Laundry from California." In the late spring of 1876, Qui Lee, an official of the Qing Court, was on his way from California to attend the world's fair in Philadelphia on behalf of the Dynasty. As he crossed the continent, Lee wrote in his journal about Chinese laborers he met in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Washington D. C. After arriving in Philadelphia, on September 1, Qui Lee noted that "[t]here are more than three hundred Chinese

in the city, working in laundries and cigar factories."⁴⁰ In fact, laundrymen comprised the most significant occupational group among Chinese in Philadelphia until the end of World War Two.⁴¹ In New York City, the Chinese working in the Passaic Steam Laundry of Belleville, New Jersey, were pioneers in establishing commercial laundries after their contracts with the laundry owner, James B. Harvey, expired around 1872.⁴² Before long, the number of Chinese hand laundries in Manhattan was increasing.⁴³ When another Qing consul, Lanbin Chen, visited New York City in 1878, he noted that besides the Chinese grocery stores on Mott Street, other Chinese were employed in the laundry and cigar-making businesses.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the census report of 1880 showed that more than four fifths of Chinese lived outside of the Chinese community in New York, indicating the wide geographical distribution of Chinese laundries.⁴⁵ The employment of many Chinese American males in the laundry trade was consistently reflected in accounts of Chinese diplomats and travelers. In 1886, Yinhuan Zhang reported that laundries employed nearly five thousand Chinese in New York City, which supported the group. One year later, a traveler, while returning to China from Europe through America and Japan, stated that laundry and the production of cigars were the major jobs for Chinese in New York City.⁴⁶ Presumably news of these opportunities spread all the way to California and, as that happened, more and more Chinese men moved to the eastern United States. In 1888, there were about two thousand Chinese laundries in New York City, plus another one thousand or so in the vicinity.⁴⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, one report estimated that there were 8,000 laundries in the city of New York and its adjacent areas, though only 6,321 Chinese residents in Manhattan and Brooklyn were listed in the 1900 census.⁴⁸ Although the accuracy of the count of 8,000 Chinese laundries is in doubt, the majority of Chinese were indeed engaged in this line of work. Lee Chew, mentioned earlier, left California for the East in the late 1880s. After several incidents in which he was shot and had shirts stolen by drunken miners in the western states, Chew and his partner eventually fled the area. Chew then withdrew \$500 of his savings from a Chinese banker in San Francisco and went eastward: staying in Chicago for three years, Detroit for four years, and then in Buffalo. He practiced the laundry trade throughout the 1890s, with a one-year break in China from 1897 to 1898.⁴⁹

In short, the laundry trade was a feasible means of support for several thousand Chinese men after the 1870s, even though washing clothes

traditionally belonged to the sphere of “women’s work.” The strong need for domestic service at the turn of the twentieth century made Chinese laundrymen perceive a possible opportunity that could be continually exploited for the next few decades.

Nevertheless, the interim period between 1890 and World War I saw a sharp decline in the Chinese laundry business.⁵⁰ One cannot attribute this stagnation to the dwindling need for household service nor competition by immigrant women servants. [The main reason was the rise of power laundries, which will be explained later.] So, for example, a New York newspaper proposed that employing Chinese men will solve the problem of the scarcity of servant girls.⁵¹ Whether white people in the eastern urban centers learned from their counterparts in the West to use Chinese males as houseboys, a strong demand for domestic help persisted.

The major impediment to the growth of Chinese laundries came from the prevalence of power laundries owned by whites before the First World War. Lee Chew asserted in 1903 that, “the Chinese laundry business now is not as good as it was ten years ago. American cheap labor in the steam laundries has hurt it.”⁵² Indeed, in the census report of 1909, there is a brief mention of a novel change in the laundry industry. “The industry has, however, reached such proportions [manufacturing establishments] during recent years that it should no longer be omitted from the industrial census.”⁵³ The statement pinpointed the emerging importance of power laundries. Specifically, there was a workforce increase of 19.3 percent (from 124,214 to nearly 150,000) in the mechanized laundry industry nationwide between 1909 and 1914.⁵⁴

Moreover, during the First World War, there was a sharp decline in the number of female household workers, the first time since 1870. This decline had implications for the growth of commercial laundries. The supply of potential domestic servants declined by about one-fourth as the tide of female immigrants from Europe ebbed during World War I. Along with the high turnover rate among servants and the tendency of white women to leave service once married, by 1920 the number of immigrant servants had fallen. In addition, expanding factory work due to the war affected the employment of many native-born American women. Under these circumstances, commercial establishments for household service prospered. This was particularly true in the case of laundry work. In terms of the growth of power laundries, in 1909, there were more than five thousand establishments, employing 124, 214 workers with annual receipts totaling \$104,680,086. By 1914, the number of

employees had reached almost 150,000, and the annual income had increased to more than \$142 million. The 1920 census indicated that the receipts from power laundries had risen to \$236,382,369.⁵⁵

With the rapid growth of American power laundries, not only did the number of Chinese laundries decrease, but business for washerwomen also declined. Several factors caused the decrease in the need for home laundresses between 1910 and 1920. First of all, more and more housewives were willing to send their laundry out. Laundry work formerly done within the home was transferred to commercial laundries. Secondly, some middle-class families purchased new laundering appliances, such as washing machines and electric or gas irons, to ease the physical burden on housewives or maids. Thus as one historian comments, "outside of the South, washerwomen were beginning to disappear."⁵⁶ This decline in hiring private washerwomen and the rise of commercial laundries were thus contemporaneous and correlated.

In spite of the impact of white owned power laundries, the laundry business still played a big part in Chinese American lives. The profound involvement of Chinese males in this line of work continued to be confirmed by visitors from China. In his travels to the United States in 1903, Qichao Liang, the famous political reformer during the late Qing dynasty, observed that the laundry business indeed was the most vital occupation among Chinese immigrants. In the eastern states, nine out of ten made their living in these establishments. When visiting New York City, he noticed that the Chinese in Manhattan and Brooklyn accounted for three-fourths of the total Chinese in the state; laundry was the foremost occupation for New York City's Chinese, followed by restaurant worker, cook, and day laborer for American families.⁵⁷

The expansion of Chinese laundries altered the development of the Chinese labor market in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1900, one out of two Chinese in the general labor market was employed in domestic or personal services (52 percent of gainful workers over the age of 10 in the United States, including Hawaii). The group of laundry operatives alone consisted of nearly half of Chinese in the category of domestic and personal services (25,910, or 24.6 percent of gainful workers over age 10 in the United States, including Hawaii).⁵⁸ By 1920, there were 12,559 laundry workers in the census report, a 50 percent decline from 1900.⁵⁹ However, proportionally, the laundry business continued to eclipse all other Chinese occupations.⁶⁰

The 1920s witnessed a peak in the growth of Chinese laundries.⁶¹ A postwar boom followed World War I. In a speech to Chinese students at

Columbia University, one speaker talked about the occupational distribution of Chinese Americans. He indicated that while the Chinese on the west coast were employed in agricultural production, those in the East and Midwest worked predominantly in laundries and restaurants. Quite a few of the Chinese in the latter area made their fortunes in these lines of work.⁶² As a matter of fact, this regional differentiation highlights the rapid growth of Chinese laundries in the East during the 1920s. New York State had roughly 2.5 times the number of Chinese in the laundry trade as California.⁶³ And the figure was probably an underestimate, since quite a few Chinese in New York City avoided the census taker altogether due to their illegal status.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the number of Chinese laundrymen dwindled, though a brief boom occurred during World War Two. According to a report by Peter Kwong, 3,350 Chinese hand laundries existed in New York City during the 1930s. During the war, about 37.5 percent of Chinese in the city were in the laundry business.⁶⁴ Between 1930 and 1950, laundry work, though still important to many Chinese, gradually relinquished its dominant place to other occupations (such as restaurants and later the garment industry).⁶⁵

TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE GENDERED MEANING OF LAUNDRY WORK

Chinese laundrymen altered the gendered nature of laundry work in two ways. First, an examination of the many varieties of Chinese laundry service helps to better clarify the gendered nature of the laundry work in which Chinese laundrymen were involved. Before World War I, commercial laundries provided limited laundry services. The origin of the commercial laundry began as a means of cleaning men's linens, specifically their shirt bosoms, collars, and cuffs, and had to do with a specific feature of men's fashion. In the nineteenth century, while women wore long crape skirts that were stiffly starched and ironed to a glossy finish, men had stiff-bosomed shirts as a standard and, by the turn of the century, plaited bosomed shirts. The latter style displayed eyelet holes for studs. In the meantime, most men wore shirts with detached collars and cuffs.⁶⁶ For almost one hundred years, from the 1820s to the 1920s, gentlemen wore shirts for many days, needing only to change the collars and cuffs. Clerks, proprietors of stores, boarding-house keepers, station agents, and sheriff's deputies paid for their collars, cuffs, and plaited bosoms to be starched and stiffed. Before industrialization, offices were

usually small. Clerks and employers came from essentially the same class, and clerks had considerable status. Consequently, they dressed as much like their employers as they could afford. High, stiff collars and bosom shirts were formal business apparel. At the turn of the twentieth century, softer shirts and low collars began to appear.⁶⁷ In 1900, the catalog of Sears, Roebuck and Company contained some men's soft "negligee" shirts. Although the shirts were made "in the way that a shirt ought to be made to give perfect satisfaction" with fine white pearl buttons, patent extension neck band, shaped sleeves, and other fancy patterns, and only cost 48 cents, they were not popular. Many well-dressed men at that time scoffed at the soft shirt, feeling it was inappropriate attire. The stiff-bosom shirt with a detached starched collar indicated that the wearer was a white-collar gentleman who labored mentally rather than physically. For formal daywear, the outfit always included a white shirt with a detached high-standing wing or poke collar.⁶⁸ Starching and ironing was therefore essential.

Ironing men's collars, cuffs, and shirts required special skills. While washing these clothes was not much different from doing the rest of the family's laundry, success in starching, damping and ironing them depended upon the skill and knowledge of the ironer. Normally, a garment went through cooked starch and then was dried and ironed to produce the stiffness. But detached collars primarily were subjected to raw starch presses with a hot iron, which created a glossy appearance. The starch grains, being merely separated and not really dissolved, would settle to the bottom if allowed to stand. It was quite difficult to obtain good results with this type of raw and cold starch.⁶⁹ Because the operation of starching and ironing collars and cuffs demanded advanced laundry skills, women eventually sent their husbands' shirts to Chinese laundries or other commercial laundries to give men's wear a professional touch unattainable at home. No wonder, then, that early in the twentieth century, an author, responding to the glossy shirtfront worked on by a Chinese laundry, wrote in the *Chicago Daily News*, "After all, I believe the Chinamen are our friends" and "They must be our bosom friends."⁷⁰

The earliest commercial laundries were connected to the collar manufacturers, who could ensure that the job was done properly. In 1827, the Independence Star in Troy, New York, a company which began as a collar factory, established a laundry to take care of its own product.⁷¹ This seemed reasonable, in light of the fact that fine starched collars could hardly be done at home, in contrast to the work done in commercial laundries with professional standards. Following in its steps, other

early commercial laundries dealt principally with bachelor bundles.⁷² A writer, J. G. Wallach, recalled standing in line in 1880 in front of a laundry on Bond Street in New York City for an hour to access the little window where collars and cuffs were returned to their owners at the high price of five cents a collar. Between 1880 and 1900, a number of large-size laundries were established in New York and Brooklyn, catering mainly to a collar-and-cuff trade, and these were gradually extended to take in shirts and other materials for men.

While there were very large steam laundries in the metropolitan district, several thousand small laundries, known as “Hand Laundries” operated by both Chinese and non-Chinese, solicited neighborhood business. They offered moderate rates and convenience to their patrons. Into the twentieth century, laundry work in New York City was done at a lower price than anywhere else in the country, though the service was said to be better than anywhere else. “The large volume of business offered has made this possible,” Wallach concluded.⁷³ Throughout the period before World War I, men’s collars and cuffs constituted a conspicuous part of the laundry businesses. In the early 1920s, an American laundry owner could claim: “Nothing in the power laundries repertoire is a more accepted matter of fact than the starched collars,” and, he added, “they [collars] are profitable.”⁷⁴

While Chinese laundries did appear in some eastern cities in the mid-1870s, unfortunately, due to the lack of contemporary reports, there is no way to know what kind of laundry service they provided. But, as early as 1879, Chinese laundries were regarded as a “menace” to their white owned American counterparts. One of the key laundry owners’ associations, comprised mainly of power laundries, referred to this competition from Chinese laundries.⁷⁵ At the Laundryowners National Association Convention held in 1889, one American laundry owner expressed his worry about the laundry trade. He asserted that there was no business that from within and without had more adverse influence to contend with than the laundry trade. In his opinion, Chinese competition from without and American competition from within had in many places cut prices in half. And, if the downward tendency continued in the future as it had in the past, he warned, in a few more years profits would be wiped out.⁷⁶ Given the sorts of garments sent to commercial laundries, it was very likely that Chinese laundries laundered men’s wear, such as shirts, handkerchiefs, cuffs, and collars. Thus, they competed directly with their American counterparts. In 1898, Chinese laundries in New York City worked in the same line as those American laundries.

They charged 10 cents a shirt, two cents for a collar and a pair of cuffs, and also two cents for each handkerchief.⁷⁷ From 1915 or so on, the scope of white owned power laundries expanded from laundering collars, cuffs, and shirts to a variety of fields.⁷⁸ Against this background of expansion, Chinese laundries maintained shirt and collar starching as their chief areas of expertise. A power laundry's white owner in Iowa revealed that "the collars are the profitable part of our business and the Chinaman seems to have discovered that fact earlier than we did, for when he opens up a laundry, he goes right after the collars the first thing."⁷⁹

Changes in fashion again played a role for laundry services starting with the First World War. In the beginning of the twentieth century, men increasingly had their shirts made with collars and cuffs attached.⁸⁰ Experiences in World War I with attached collars on the shirts of military uniforms established this fashion and by the late 1920s the detached collar had passed from the scene. Moreover, with the addition of colored shirts in the mid-1920s, men's clothing choices proliferated and their wardrobes expanded.⁸¹ Nevertheless, from university men to businessmen, a clean shirt and a starched collar, usually in white, did not lose its popularity. At Princeton and Yale, male students' wardrobe centered on a dozen or two plain white collar-attached shirt, though by 1928 some colored shirts were beginning to catch on. In the summer of 1929, *Men's Wear* surveyed Wall Street to determine the shirt and collar fashions being worn in lower Manhattan. It found that 52 percent of the well-dressed brokers and bankers favored starched or stiff collars. In the torrid summer heat, it was indeed striking that starched collars remained prevalent, which apparently indicated how fashion conscious such men were. For those affluent men spending their winters in Palm Beach, a survey conducted in 1931 revealed that white stiff collars were still favored by one out of every ten men.⁸²

The task of maintaining clean male family members in clean clothing forced mothers and wives to maintain a high standard of laundering. The new style of shirts with attached collars required that the entire shirt be washed and ironed to get clean collars and cuffs. Large quantities of clothes and linens were laundered because people now changed their clothing with greater frequency. In addition, various fabrics of shirts needed different attention. For example, men liked to wear shirts made of seersucker and linen in the summer. But seersucker fabric was hard to maintain in a tailored appearance after laundering. Moreover, men had different ideas about what constituted the appropriate degree of stiff-

ness.⁸³ Ironing a shirt, collar, and cuffs involved several steps. To place the collar and cuffs just right, one stretched the neckband and yoke, pulled the tail and sleeves into shape and then gave it a final touch. All of these procedures took time and demanded experience; and men were often not satisfied with their wives' efforts.⁸⁴ Due to the difficulty of starching and ironing a shirt, most housewives simply looked for an expert's help. A housewife in the 1920s said that she had never ironed a shirt in her life. Thus, while some housewives laundered at home to give their husbands a fresh shirt everyday, many preferred to let commercial laundries do the work. During the Depression, in order to save money, many home care magazines guided women in learning to reach the standard of commercial laundries or professional laundresses in washing and ironing men's shirts.⁸⁵ Apparently, quite a few shirts were sent out rather than laundered at home.

Secondly, starting at the turn of the twentieth century, the strong demand for laundry services and the handsome profits one could earn drew Chinese to the eastern United States. In the mid-1890s, according to an American woman who worked in the Morning Star Mission on Doyle Street in New York's Chinatown, a laundryman earned from \$8 to \$15 a week, plus board and lodging. This was higher than either white or black laundresses, who made from \$4 to \$10 a week without board and lodging. However, it should be noted that Chinese laundrymen worked very long hours, from eight o'clock in the morning until one or two o'clock at night.⁸⁶ In his American journey of 1903, Liang claimed that the weekly income for laundrymen ranged from \$8 to \$20. In Pittsburgh, weekly earnings even reached \$17 to \$22. Such income levels eclipsed those of immigrant laborers working in local steel mills. According to the Pittsburgh Survey of 1907-8, workers in the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation earned \$1.50 a day for ten hours of work. United States Steel paid \$1.65. Work in other steel mills and in different types of occupations, such as railroad workers and contractors, paid as low as \$1.25 per day.⁸⁷ No wonder Liang, while presumably from the viewpoint of a traditional Chinese intellectual, despised the work, stressed that it was the big rewards that made the laundry trade widespread among Chinese Americans in the eastern states. According to him, the income level of laundrymen was better than that of an official clerk in a remote area of China.⁸⁸

Liang's investigation in 1903 lets us see that earnings gradually declined in subsequent years. Ming Mars came to the United States through Angel Island in 1922. He later learned the trade as an apprentice in a

laundry owned by his cousin in Ambridge, a town near Pittsburgh. In his first three months he earned \$5 per week. After that, he was promoted to \$10 a week. Two months later, he was promoted again, this time to \$15 a week. After a seven-month apprenticeship, he became a skilled laundryman. Because the laundry was close to factories, which employed 5,000 workers, the business thrived. Shun Huang claimed the golden age of Chicago's Chinese laundries was in the 1920s when he worked with his uncle in that city. The laundry did a good business and brought in a stable income. While the laundry made \$50 each week, he earned about \$15.⁸⁹ Huang's earnings, however, were not better than other Chinese counterparts in the same city. In 1926, one study of Chicago's Chinese indicated that 42 percent of laundrymen earned a weekly income of between \$20 and \$29, and 28 percent earned \$30 to \$39.⁹⁰ In Chicago, this income level was moderate compared with other ethnic groups. In 1919, black migrants from the South employed in packing houses or in the building trades as unskilled laborers earned \$25 a week, an average weekly wage. Black women earned \$12 to \$18 a week for factory work in Chicago and earned about the same wage working in domestic service.⁹¹

Although laundrymen's earnings decreased over time, many Chinese still considered it better than returning to China. In New York, Win Hay Louis made \$16 a week in his father's laundry at 47 Fulton Street, Brooklyn, after he arrived in New York City in 1924. As he recalled those hard days without machines and hot water, using a coal stove to heat irons, deep in his mind was the thought that "Life was bad in China. It was easy to make money in America."⁹² Given such a lure of better earnings, a miserable life of "no sleep, just work" still seemed rewarding.

No matter how high or low their income, Chinese laundrymen almost invariably managed to save part of their earnings to send home. Sending remittances became a ritual binding many laundrymen to their hometowns and keeping the patriarchy intact. Fan's study revealed that of the income made by Chicago's Chinese, "a goodly share was sent home." Although some Chinese laundrymen might regard letters asking for money from their hometowns as an irresistible summons, the action of sending remittance had implications for gender issues.⁹³ Win Hay Louis stated "he [his father] never spent a penny wrong," which, out of a salary of \$10 to \$20 a week allowed him to save enough money for his family in China. As his father sent money back to China and raised him in this way, so did Louis with his own family after coming to the United States

in 1924.⁹⁴ The remittances sent back home allowed Chinese laundrymen to retain their roles as breadwinners and thus created a sense of male self-esteem, which compensated for the difficulty of doing “women’s work.”

As seen in the study above, since Chinese males were regarded as substitutes for American women doing such domestic work as laundering, entry into this sphere threatened the gendered division of labor. An examination of the varieties of Chinese laundry service along with the relatively high income of these laundrymen reveals not only the laundering skills of Chinese laundrymen, but also the changing gendered nature of laundry work once done by males who applied professional processes in a workshop.

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHINESE LAUNDRYMEN AND WOMEN OF DIFFERENT GROUPS

Given the fact that Chinese laundrymen crossed over to the traditional domain of women’s work, it was inevitable that they interacted with women working in the same field. The following sections of this article examine the gender relations between Chinese laundrymen and women from different groups: (1) laundresses in private homes or boarding houses; (2) female workers in commercial laundries (either Chinese or non-Chinese); (3) the wives and daughters of Chinese laundrymen; and (4) women outside the workplace, such as neighbors and prostitutes.⁹⁵ Looking at the interaction between Chinese laundrymen and these women, the role of race and class in shaping gender relations is analyzed.

(1) Laundresses comprised the largest group with which Chinese laundrymen interacted. In 1880, nearly 150 Chinese laundrymen worked in Virginia City, Nevada, which was located near a silver mine district on the Comstock. They accounted for over 80 percent of all those employed in laundries, though seven out of ten of the Asian male population in the city worked in other areas like mining and woodcutting, or as domestic servants. From 1860 to 1880, Chinese hand laundries coexisted with other forms of laundry service, such as power laundries or Irish and Native Indian washerwomen. While many Chinese laundrymen ran their businesses by employing six to eight compatriots in workshop nearby major commercial districts, their principal competitors were not washerwomen, but large power laundries. This is evidenced by the fact that white power laundry owners on the Comstock took advantage

of anti-Chinese sentiments during the late 1870s and early 1880s to take over the businesses of Chinese laundries. Most of the washerwomen in the town were Irish with young children; they were either widowed, divorced, or separated from their husbands, due to the hardship of mining work. They usually worked alone, at times with the help of their children, in small spaces, such as rented houses. While commercial laundries, both Chinese and non-Chinese, solicited to the general public, washerwomen relied on informal networks to gain customers through word of mouth. Customers of Irish washerwomen thus tended to be their compatriots. Chinese laundrymen and Irish washerwomen thus exploited their own markets without disturbance. Yet, the “trade wall that protected them [Irish washerwomen], also formed limits beyond which their businesses could not easily expand.”⁹⁶ The strategy the Irish washerwomen employed to insulate their business could not hide the competitive advantage of Chinese laundrymen in terms of price and efficiency.

The interaction between Chinese laundrymen and Irish washerwomen on the Comstock shows the impact of white racism and male hegemony on the capitalist economy. Based on a common desire to have clean clothes and linens without the drudgery of laundry work, the laundry industry allowed different groups to exploit specialized parts of the market. The people involved in the laundry trade pursued their fortunes differently depending upon their ethnicity, gender, and resources. Since both Chinese and American males were engaged in the laundry trade, we can see the boundaries between male and female labor beginning to blur, as in the Comstock example. Nonetheless, the anti-Chinese movement rampant in the West during the period did not benefit the businesses of Irish washerwomen. Instead, white power laundry owners, with the advantages of capital and new technology, and a strategy of questioning the masculinity of these Chinese laundrymen, claimed superiority.⁹⁷ Ultimately, both Chinese laundrymen and Irish washerwomen became the victims of racial hierarchy and male hegemony.

The incident in Butte, Montana, a few years later showed how lethal this blend of race, class, and gender was. Like other mining towns in the West, Butte’s male population outnumbered its female population. Women found few employment opportunities outside the service sector. This group, in addition to the few blacks in the town, frequently competed for the same jobs with Chinese male immigrants (i.e., domestics, cooks, or laundrymen). There were anti-Chinese movements during the mid-1880s and the early 1890s, though at the time the number of Chi-

nese in Butte had diminished from its peak in 1870 when the area had prospered as a gold mining district. Starting in the 1870s, as more and more former white miners were forced to become unskilled laborers, concern over displacement by Chinese labor gripped over half of the white wage earners in Butte. Male unionists expressed anti-Chinese sentiments by using the rhetoric of a crusade to protect workingwomen from competition by cheap Chinese male labor in the service sectors, arguing that the competition forced white and black women to earn their livelihoods in saloons and brothels. Xenophobia opened the door through which white women entered the house of labor. Though fewer in numbers than the Chinese men in the town, black workingmen and women benefited from the Chinese exodus as well. With community approval, anti-Chinese agitation helped working-class union members to persuade the middle-class people not to employ Chinese domestics or patronize Chinese laundries. White professionals and entrepreneurs, especially the proprietors of restaurants and laundries, gladly offered guidance and financial aid to organized labor in an effort to push the Chinese out of Butte. Therefore, from the perspective of gender and racial conflict, the anti-Chinese effort in Butte, under the banner of protecting women's morality, not only triggered the clash between Chinese laborers and American male union members, but also exacerbated the tension between Chinese laundrymen and white women.⁹⁸

As stated before, the advantages of commercial Chinese laundries over washerwomen were mainly in pricing and efficiency. The issue of competition between the two even extended to military institutions. In 1909, when two Chinese laundrymen were designated the official clothes cleaners for the seventieth company coast artillery in San Francisco, soldier-wife laundresses protested. Captain Edwin C. Long responded that the change was based on two reasons: complaints about the poor grade of laundry work at the post and the economy.⁹⁹

In the East, the strong demand for laundry service (as described in the previous section) generated tension between American laundresses and Chinese laundrymen too. In their survey of Philadelphia in the 1890s, W. E. B. Du Bois and Isabel Eaton revealed the competition between independent black laundresses and Chinese laundrymen or other commercial establishments. While the source did not provide as much information about the working condition of Chinese laundrymen as it did of black laundresses, it indicated the existence of a struggle between men and women of two racial minorities in the United States.¹⁰⁰

In New York City, the tension was even worse. Commercial laun-

dries outnumbered washerwomen for private homes in the city. A report stated that while family washerwomen in Manhattan were not extinct, they were comparatively few in number. The phenomenon was attributed to two factors. First, in Manhattan, one came across a laundry (specifically small hand laundries run by Chinese or non-Chinese) almost every direction one turned. Secondly, as most people lived in flats or apartments, there was little or no room for laundering appliances and drying space. One article in a power laundry trade journal reported many washerwomen's advertisements in the newspapers. The reporter analyzed forty employment ads in the classified section of the *Brooklyn Eagle* and found out that "respectable colored women" made quite a showing. These black women generally preferred to take washing home, but some were willing to go to Manhattan for the work, with an inference by the reporter that the return trip would be made without extra charge.¹⁰¹ Apparently, black women in New York City tried to give themselves an edge to compete with commercial laundries.

In the southern United States, the development of Chinese laundries lagged behind their counterparts in the western and eastern states. In the years leading up to World War Two, Chinese in the area made up a small part of the total Chinese population in the country.¹⁰² The construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad brought hundreds of Chinese men into southwestern and southern states such as Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas to work as track workers. Some of them remained in the region after the completion of the railroad in the early 1880s. Because the Southern Pacific Railroad linked many southern cities and towns to the Pacific Coast, it continued to facilitate the movement of Chinese from the West Coast to the South after its completion.¹⁰³ Yet, compared to the experience of Chinese in the East, the slow growth of the Chinese population in the South can be attributed to the less rapid urbanization of the area by the turn of the twentieth century and consequently the lower demand for laundry services in the cities.

While a number of Chinese in the South were engaged in the laundry trade, the strength of black washerwomen as a collective force impeded the further development of Chinese laundries. As early as the 1870s, black washerwomen in Galveston, Texas, held a strike over the low wages paid in a power laundry. During the incident, the group of black women demanded that Chinese laundries in the city close and leave the city within fifteen days.¹⁰⁴ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Hannah Monroe, president of the washerwomen's union in Richmond, Virginia, urged washerwomen to organize against their "oppressors"

and the “heathen Chinese.” She criticized the fact that Chinese men, instead of doing men’s work, deprived poorly paid colored women of their already limited means of support. Like her counterparts in Galveston, Texas, several decades before, Hannah Monroe initiated a series of raids against the offending Chinese laundrymen.¹⁰⁵ The main source of the conflict between the two groups lay in the fact that unlike power laundries dealing with items from ships, hotels, hospitals, or restaurants, both Chinese laundrymen and black washerwomen did household washing work.¹⁰⁶ However, the fact that some black women were hired at a Chinese laundry in Newberne, North Carolina, which posted a big challenge to the business of one local power laundry, indicates that the relationship of Chinese laundrymen and black women was not always discordant.¹⁰⁷

Indeed the tension between Chinese laundrymen and black washerwomen should not be exaggerated. First of all, while the workforce of black washerwomen in the South impeded the development of Chinese laundries in the area, it affected the growth of white owned power laundries as well. The less rapid industrialization and urbanization in the South confined the job opportunities for black women to household servants or personal services. Laundry work remained women’s work, particularly married women’s work. Partly because of the attributes of easy entry and the flexibility of taking in or going out to do it, laundry work attracted many married women. At the beginning of the twentieth century, one out of every five white washerwomen and two out of every five black washerwomen nationwide were married. Some of these married women were actually widows. Owners of power laundries were so bothered by this group that they suggested in a laundry trade journal cutting off widows’ pensions.¹⁰⁸ In the 1910s, with more and more single women leaving the occupation, the proportion of married women increased to nearly half. The rate of married washerwomen was especially high in urban regions and among blacks.¹⁰⁹

Secondly, Chinese had greater economic opportunity in the South. In the post-emancipation era, some Chinese had been brought by southern entrepreneurs to work under contract on cotton plantations in the Mississippi River delta area and in the adjoining territories of southwestern Mississippi, southeastern Arkansas, and northeastern Louisiana to ease the labor shortage. By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, these laborers either became sharecroppers, one form of labor that survived the cotton plantation system, or settled in small towns throughout the South, establishing a socio-economic niche in various enterprises.¹¹⁰

The variety of job opportunities had a lasting impact on the experiences of Chinese in the South and contrasted sharply with the pattern of clustering in limited trades that were prevalent in the East. Thus, laundry work was not a significant part of the occupations of Chinese in the South, at least not to the extent that it was for Chinese in the eastern states. Other jobs, like running grocery stores catering to black customers, were numerous and lucrative.

Nevertheless, for commercial laundries in the southern states, the pressure from black laundresses working in private homes was quite evident. One piece of research reveals that "the spread of commercial laundries reduced the number of washerwomen in all urban centers everywhere except in the South, where laundry firms never appeared in large numbers until after World War II."¹¹¹ During the Depression in the South, according to an assessment of household employment in relation to trade union organization, employers justified low wages in laundries by claiming that these were necessary in order to compete with home laundresses.

Complaints from commercial laundries that home laundresses lowered rate levels were quite common. Accusations such as the following were often heard: "[g]reatest competition is colored washerwomen. [Colored washerwomen] will take a 30-pound bundle for a dollar. Some of them do a week's washing for fifty cents;" or "[t]he washerwomen charge only 60 to 75 percent of what the laundry charges for the same sized bundle." Some washerwomen were satisfied with exchanging a day's work for carfare, lunch, and an old dress, according to one manager of a white owned power laundry.¹¹² Another report stated that the principal competitors of power laundries in Charlotte, Charleston, and Jacksonville were washerwomen. It was said in these cities that these competitors accounted for at least a 50 percent loss of business in power laundries during the Depression.¹¹³ These reports give us some idea of what the relationship was like between black laundresses and power laundries. While there is no first-hand evidence directly proving that black laundresses had a negative effect on Chinese laundries, the relatively slow growth of Chinese laundries, coupled with other factors, was no doubt due, at least in part, to their presence.

(2) Besides laundresses, women working in commercial laundries, either Chinese or non-Chinese ones, are another important group to examine in terms of the relationships between Chinese laundrymen and American women. Chinese laundrymen, particularly during strikes, took advantage of the friction between power laundry owners and their union-

ized workers. In 1904, a group of female laundry workers in Toledo, Ohio went on strike against the local power laundries. To resolve the problem of customer inconvenience during the strike period, one of the committee members organizing the striking laundresses said “yes, we would much rather that you [customers] would take your laundry work to a Chinaman than patronize a “scab” laundry that’s trying to keep us poor working girls down.”¹¹⁴ Although the strike failed due to lack of support from the drivers/agents of laundries, the alliance that developed between Chinese laundries and female workers at power laundries was provocative in two ways. First of all, the gender difference was dismissed by these female laundry workers as irrelevant. Unlike the black washerwomen’s strike of Galveston, Texas, in 1870, the presence of Chinese laundrymen this time worked as a temporary substitution for the special occasion and thus eclipsed the gender concern of these female workers. Secondly, the claim of the committee member suggests laundry workers’ ambiguous position on class bonding with Chinese laundrymen. As a matter of fact, some power laundry owners often accused union workers of conspiracy with Chinese laundries and sought ways to fight back.¹¹⁵ Yet, without further evidences of class cohesion, the relationships between Chinese laundrymen and those female laundry workers remained far from solid.

At times, class issues cut across gender and racial differences and became apparent in the lives of Chinese laundrymen, as shown in the Xifu Tong incident (a laundry worker organization in San Francisco) at the beginning of 1929.¹¹⁶ Working hours were long in Chinese laundry workshops, sometimes lasting for fifteen hours a day (from seven in the morning to ten at night). In early January 1929, Chinese laundrymen protested against long hours as well as low wages, asking for shorter hours on Saturdays. Under the leadership of the Kung Yu Club, a labor union first founded among workers of Chinese groceries and Chinese restaurants, Chinese laundrymen went on strike against their Chinese bosses. The latter sought to employ black women as scabs, and yet found that very few black women responded to the call to break the strike. Black labor activists praised this event as a stirring example of class solidarity between black and Asian workers. They advocated a worldwide working-class union and appealed for those Chinese workers exploited in America and in China by American capitalism to join.¹¹⁷ The incident indicates that at times class-consciousness did exert a guiding force over racial and gender differences between Chinese laundrymen and black women.

It is also interesting, but not surprising within the gendered context, that when Chinese laundries hired workers outside of their own race, they chose women. Before the Great Depression, black women were employed by roughly one hundred Chinese laundries in Chicago as hand ironers, probably because of the massive influx of African Americans into northern cities during the Great Migration. These black women, according to one report, earned more than those employed in American-operated power laundries. But the shrinking business during the Depression years prompted the Chinese owners to give all the work to their relatives. In the meantime, the report indicated that a number of Chinese wet wash plants in Boston installed ironing machines operated by white girls in order to avert the charge of discrimination against white laborers.¹¹⁸

Generally, hiring Americans was contingent upon the economic situation and labor cycle—most busy during boom periods and wartime, when labor shortages were frequent. In the 1930s, when receipts increased during the summer months, one-man laundries in New York City hired black women to assist for several days, paying two to three dollars. An illiterate Chinese laundryman, Fu'er Fang, with the help of Manli Zhang, a manager of the *China Daily News*, described his impression of black women working in the Chinese laundries in New York City: blacks were the people most discriminated against in American society. They usually suffered from hunger and unemployment. Yet most black women were decent and kind. They displayed great appreciation when receiving payment from their occasional work in the Chinese laundries, and asked them to call again when needed.¹¹⁹ The assertion of Fang about black women reveals an interesting shift in gender relations under the racial hierarchy of American society.

(3) Wives of Chinese laundrymen are the third group who came into contact with Chinese laundrymen. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were so few Chinese women that not many Chinese laundrymen had families. For those who did in the West, their wives also tended to be Chinese, whereas in the East their wives were most likely white immigrants or African Americans.¹²⁰ In the early 1900s, Liang Qichao noted that Chinese laundrymen in the eastern cities of the United States were less likely to have families than those on the west coast. He explained this phenomenon by the greater distance of the eastern cities from China.¹²¹ The argument clearly overlooked the restrictive immigration laws. A survey in 1935 by a Toronto church revealed that eighty-five Chinese males had married white women, most of whom were foreign-born.¹²²

Whether black, white, or Chinese, the wives of Chinese laundrymen usually assisted their husbands in the business. In Siu's study, a Chinese laundryman's black wife helped her husband out in the laundry when the family first moved to Chicago during the late 1900s, especially when business was heavy.¹²³ Another Chinese laundryman had come to New York City in 1905. He had a white wife and two daughters. His wife was anxious to visit China and had no objection to their daughters marrying a Chinese.¹²⁴ A Chinese couple in New York City worked hard together in the laundry. Later they used the earnings from the laundry business to establish a grocery store and prospered. After her husband died, with three daughters in school, the wife had no intention of going back to China.¹²⁵ In a novel about the Tom Fong Hand laundry on 80th street in New York City, Mother Fong helps her husband Tom in many ways. She conveys a sound sense of the family-run business. In addition to good cleaning work and quick delivery, she offers "something extra to satisfy her customers." Mother Fong does not send laundry back with buttons lost or seams torn, because she fully understands that "this was a great extra inducement to housewives who sent their laundry to her." And she does the mending and sewing of buttons at no extra charge.¹²⁶ Only a few exceptions were noted. In New York City, the wife of a Chinese laundryman with six employees did not cook. Instead, one of the employees would cook and send the food to the proprietor's house nearby.¹²⁷ An easy life might only be found in such a big establishment. Another case appeared in Philadelphia where one Chinese laundryman was married in 1915. In 1926, his wife, after suffering for many years, declined to work in the laundry, claiming that she was a decent woman from an upper-class family. The couple's divorce made them the first divorce case in the city's Chinese community.¹²⁸ But in most cases, the wives of Chinese laundrymen seldom refused to help. They worked as hard as their husbands, though their language capabilities were limited.¹²⁹

Some Chinese women displayed no fewer entrepreneurial talents than the men. Daniel Chu's mother was such an example. Departing from tradition, his parent's marriage was not arranged. His father was born in Central America and his mother was from Honolulu. Daniel Chu was born in 1914, the tenth child of his parents. In the summer of 1928, his father brought Chu and some of their family members from Honolulu to join his mother in New York City. His competent mother already had a share in a wet wash laundry in the Bronx. She later established another laundry of her own at the intersection of 149th Street and Woodlock

Ave, at which young Chu helped collecting and delivering clothes to retail laundries after school during labor shortages. Daniel Chu's mother is an extraordinary example of an independent Chinese woman in the laundry business, though Chu also mentions the fact that his father was often gloomy!¹³⁰

(4) The interaction with women outside the workplace is the last area examined. Interestingly, the experience of learning English in local Sunday schools was a vital part in the lives of Chinese laundrymen to meet the opposite sex or establish a relationship with local Americans. Siu describes how Chicago's Chinese laundrymen made acquaintance with those English teachers in Sunday schools, usually women.¹³¹ In New York City, English night schools were held in several mission rooms on Doyle Street and Mott Street to fit the working schedule of the Chinese.¹³² In Pittsburgh, the East Liberty Presbyterian Church was known to many local Chinese laundrymen. Albert H. Kemerer founded the Chinese department in the church in 1894. The membership at times had exceeded two hundred, according to a report in 1919. Chinese Sunday schools sometimes organized picnics and entertainment, which drew the attention of local newspapers and likely became social occasions for male Chinese that broke the dull routine of laundry work.¹³³

The lonely image of the Chinese laundryman without a family certainly shaped sexual fears of them, especially among little girls in the neighborhood. Stuart Miller indicates that such fears were expressed nationally, and were not just confined to the west coast of the nineteenth century.¹³⁴ In the late 1900s, Charles Lee Sing in Milwaukee was charged with assault and battery of Anna Kurz, who was ten years old and lived a couple of doors away from Sing's laundry. Another five girls, between the ages of 8 and 12, appeared as witnesses against Sing, whom they accused of misconduct toward them. Though information on the verdict is unavailable, the case did reveal sexual fears about Chinese laundrymen.¹³⁵

Because they lacked families, Chinese laundrymen turned elsewhere to satisfy their needs. In New York City, regional associations and tongs brought Chinese women to Chinatown's brothels.¹³⁶ After World War I, certain district associations in Chicago ran brothels out of their office buildings. While no other evidence is available to confirm this, in the period before the Depression, Siu's study of Chinese laundrymen in the late 1930s and early 1940s reveals some details of the lurid trade in women. Apparently, brothels in Chinatown offered Chinese prostitutes. Some laundrymen had their first sexual experiences in Chinatown. But

most likely there were few Chinese prostitutes, given the fact that immigration laws banned Chinese women from entering the country. Patronizing prostitutes of other nationalities and races thus became commonplace.

Thus Chinese laborers often consorted with white women. White women as well as pimps solicited Chinese laundrymen by leaving names and addresses on business cards or in handwritten notes to Chinese laundrymen in their shops. The practice was so prevalent that in some conversations laundrymen teased each other by asking “got some new addresses?” Chinese laundrymen usually visited these places in groups, perhaps as much to kill time with their countrymen as desire for sex. Sometimes, laundrymen went to see a “leg show” or spent their Saturday nights in small American hotels and asked bellboys to find women, usually white, for them. A number of Chicago’s Chinese laundrymen patronized Filipino prostitutes or picked up black women on street corners when visiting dance halls or nightclubs in black neighborhoods.¹³⁷

Besides prostitutes, some Chinese laundrymen were involved with their mulatto or black helpers. Having worked in Chinese laundries for a period of time, some black female assistants developed friendly relations with their Chinese bosses and they eventually lived together. Interestingly, the relationships seldom went as far as marriage or children, probably because many Chinese already had wives in China, or because of concern about their retired lives in China in the future.¹³⁸ Such arrangements did not seem unusual for Chinese laundrymen in New York City and Chicago, but were more common in the 1930s and 1940s.¹³⁹

CONCLUSION

This essay views both racism and sexism in American society as systems that organized and shaped the daily experiences of Chinese laundrymen. The dynamics of race, gender, and class were driven by changes in capitalist society. By examining the expansion of Chinese laundries in the United States and the gender relations of Chinese laundrymen, I integrate race and gender to illustrate that the experiences of Chinese laundrymen were connected to a variety of members of the larger society. Yet racism and sexism gave the connections a special character. The growth of Chinese laundries between the 1850s and 1940s marks laundry work as one of the major employment opportunities for Chinese males. The driving force was the strong demand for domestic service in American society before the Second World War, as illustrated in this essay by the close relationship between the development of Chi-

nese laundries and the changes in women's employment in the United States.

Nevertheless, an investigation of the content of laundry services in Chinese laundries and the income levels of Chinese laundrymen enables us to discover the complex of gender issues that laundry work involved. Articulated by systems of race and gender, laundry work was organized to produce and reproduce the social relations of power. As Chinese males were regarded as substitutes for American women—whether female members of the family or female servants doing domestic work—their entry into the domestic sphere threatened the gendered division of labor. Yet the stress on professionally laundering men's shirts allowed the males to develop a real craft, as revealed in the articles sent to commercial laundries and professional skills that commercial laundrymen applied to their work. On the one hand, by mastering the new technologies of industrialized culture, Chinese laundrymen transformed the feminized nature of laundry work. On the other hand, by supporting the existing patriarchal system in American society, they benefited economically as well from the mechanism by sending money back to their families in China, and thus maintained the system of gender hierarchy through the practice of remittance. Therefore, to a certain degree, while Chinese laundrymen have been understood as victims of the racist and gendered labor conditions in the United States, they also acted as accomplices.

In examining the interactions of Chinese laundrymen with American women of various groups, the essay pinpoints the conspicuous force of race in shaping the gender position of Chinese laundrymen in America society. Gender is a socially constructed category of power, formed by the social and political relations for a given group to act or react at a given moment. Men of color in America society, like Chinese laundrymen, benefit differently from a patriarchal system that is designed to maintain the unequal relationship between men and women. The fact that Chinese laundrymen performed "women's work" played a significant role in establishing their relations with American women of various ethnic groups. Each group of American washerwomen considered Chinese laundrymen as competitors, and, on limited occasions, allies. Considering the development of Chinese laundries and the multiple modalities of Chinese laundrymen's lives, we see that depending on their race, men in the United States experience gender in different ways. The study thus reveals the distortion and struggle of Chinese laundrymen under the racial hegemony of American society.

**APPENDIX:
SEX RATIOS OF CHINESE
IN SELECTED STATES, 1880-1950**

	1880-M	F	M/100F	1890-M	F	M/100F	1900-M	F	M/100F
US TOTAL	100,686	4,779	2107	103,620	3,868	2679	85,341	4,522	1887
* -----									
AR	1,599	31	5,158	1,152	18	6,400	1,387	32	4,334
MA	222	7	3,171	980	4	24,500	2,940	28	10,500
CT	119	4	2,975	270	2	13,500	598	1	59,800
NY	897	12	7,475	2,902	33	8,794	7,028	142	4,949
PA	144	4	3,600	1,126	20	5,630	1,909	18	10,606
NJ	166	4	4,150	604	4	15,100	1,387	6	23,117
OH	109	0	NR	182	1	18,200	366	5	7,320
IL	206	3	6,867	725	15	4,833	1,472	31	4,748
MI	27	0	NR	117	3	3,900	240	0	NR
MD	5	0	NR	187	2	9,350	533	11	4,845
LA	460	29	1,586	324	9	3,600	572	26	2,200
TX	134	2	6,700	698	12	5,817	823	13	6,331
CA	71,244	3,888	1,832	69,382	3,090	2,245	42,297	3,456	1,224
ID	3,256	123	2,647	1,938	69	2,809	1,420	47	3,021
MT	1,685	80	2,106	2,473	59	4,192	1,700	39	4,359
NV	5,103	313	1,630	2,749	84	3,273	1,283	69	1,859
OR	9,346	164	5,699	9,270	270	3,433	10,032	365	2,748
WA	3,161	25	12,644	3,210	50	6,420	3,550	79	4,494

* Excluding Hawaii

	1910-M	F	M/100F	1920-M	F	M/100F	1930-M	F	M/100F
US	66856	4675	1430	53891	7748	696	59802	15152	395
TOTAL									
*									
AR	1242	63	1,971	963	174	553	845	265	319
MA	2518	64	3,934	2307	237	973	2530	443	571
CT	452	10	4,520	536	30	1,787	340	51	667
NY	5065	201	2,520	5240	553	948	8649	1016	851
PA	1749	35	4,997	1695	134	1,265	2246	311	722
NJ	1089	50	2,178	1132	58	1,952	1608	175	919
OH	554	15	3,693	876	65	1,348	1168	257	454
IL	2030	73	2,781	2523	253	997	2796	396	706
MI	239	2	11,950	717	75	956	902	179	504
MD	373	5	7,460	350	21	1,667	389	103	378
LA	478	29	1,648	346	41	844	327	95	344
TX	582	13	4,477	716	57	1,256	546	157	348
CA	33003	3245	1,017	24230	4582	529	27988	9373	299
ID	839	20	4,195	542	43	1,260	295	40	738
MT	1227	58	2,116	805	67	1,201	427	59	724
NV	876	51	1,718	630	59	1,068	410	73	562
OR	7043	320	2,201	2629	461	570	1525	550	277
WA	2519	190	1,326	2088	275	759	1723	472	365

	1940-M	F	M/100F	1950-M	F	M/100F
US	57389	20115	285	77008	40621	190
TOTAL						
*						
AR	965	484	199	1134	817	139
MA	1974	539	366	2562	1065	241
CT	213	79	270	302	148	204
NY	11777	1954	603	14875	5296	281
PA	1166	311	375	1524	734	208
NJ	969	231	419	1262	556	227
OH	688	233	295	1037	505	205
IL	1955	501	390	3034	1173	259
MI	708	216	328	1122	497	226
MD	328	109	301	518	277	187
LA	258	102	253	324	202	160
TX	756	275	275	1526	909	168
CA	27331	12225	224	36051	22273	162
ID	177	31	571	171	73	234
MT	221	37	597	148	61	243
NV	221	65	340	205	76	270
OR	1459	627	233	1351	751	180
WA	1749	596	293	2288	1120	204

NOTES

1. George A. Pfeffer, *If They Don't Bring Their Women Here: Chinese Female Immigration Before Exclusion* (Urbana, IL, 1999).

2. See Appendix.

3. Regarding the differences in age and sexual distribution between Chinese and Japanese immigrant populations, see Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: a History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (Princeton, 1990), 251–3.

4. See Tiexin, “Niuyue huaren canquan zhi jinxiqian” [The Change of New York’s Chinese Restaurants], *Minqi Ribao* [The Chinese Nationalist Daily], 1 July 1930, 8; and Thomas Chow, “Chinese Laundry Associations,” (WPA, Federal Writers’ Project, NYC Unit, 1937), microfilm, folder 48, 1. For recent studies, see Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia, 1992), 10.

5. For a discussion of the concept of gender and its uses, see Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in her *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 28–50.

6. One source mentions that until the early nineteenth century, the term “laundry” was applied only to ironing, while washing was simply called washing, which gave rise to various terms such as launderers, laundresses, washermen, and washerwomen. See *The Maytag Encyclopedia of Home Laundry* (Newton, IA, 1965), 18. Nevertheless, the emergence of American commercial laundries in the mid-nineteenth century was accompanied by the use of “laundrymen” to refer to owners and managers of these establishments, since nearly all of these people were male. No doubt the term contained a class meaning in the beginning, differing from laundry workers or laundry operators. See Arwen P. Mohun, *Steam Laundries: Gender, Technology, and Work in the United States and Great Britain, 1880–1940* (Baltimore, 1999), 53–4, and 59. Because many Chinese laundries were usually operated as partnerships, without a clear class distinction among the persons who conducted the work, the term “laundrymen” fit their circumstances well and I shall apply it in this article.

7. See Albert L. Hurtado, “Sex, Gender, Culture, and a Great Event: The California Gold Rush,” *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 1 (1999): 1–19.

8. See Stuart C. Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785–1882* (Berkeley, 1969); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971); and Elmer C. Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana, IL, 1973).

9. Compared to other types of service work, several conditions in the laundry trade prompted Chinese to work in this line. According to Qichao Liang, cooks and servants had the highest incomes among Chinese took at the turn of the twentieth century, about one third higher than those employed in laundries. But, the latter field, like agricultural work, was more independent. See Qichao Liang, “Xin da lu you-ji” [Journal of Travels in the New Continent], *Wan Qing hai wai bi ji xuan*, [Selections of notes written abroad in the late Qing Dynasty], ed. the History Department, Fu-jian Normal University (Beijing, 1983), 203.

This statement is in agreement with one study of Chinese in Los Angeles between 1870 and 1900. The study reveals that both domestic and laundry services offered wages higher than or the same as agricultural work and day labor. Day laborers were paid about one dollar per day. Domestic workers received between forty and fifty dollars per month. Laundry workers earned around thirty dollars per month. But entry into live-in domestic service was limited. In addition, the skills necessary

for working as a servant in an American family were usually acquired through a long apprenticeship. Laundry work was thus an alternative. See Raymond Lou, "The Chinese-American Community of Los Angeles, 1870–1900: A Case of Resistance, Organization, and Participation" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Irvine, 1982).

10. Youkuan Huang, "A Brief History of Overseas Chinese in the United States," *The Chinese Nationalist Daily* (New York), 25 February, 1927, 5. Yet the number of Chinese laundrymen in San Francisco in the census of 1870 indicated only 1,333. It is possible that the author overestimated or the census undercounted the people of this group.

11. David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York, 1978), 55. A recent study about San Francisco, however, stated that a significant number of Chinese servants working in white neighborhoods were female, see Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943: A Trans-Pacific Community* (Stanford, CA, 2000), 65. It might be possible that the author mixed this with "mui tsai"—young girls working as domestic servants in affluent Chinese homes and brothels in San Francisco. For information about *mui tsai*, see Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley, 1995), 37–41.

12. Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1850* (Seattle, 1988), 74.

13. Evelyn N. Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service* (Philadelphia, 1986), 106.

14. Ivan Light, *Ethnic Enterprise in America: Business and Welfare among Chinese, Japanese, and Blacks* (Berkeley, 1972), 7.

It should be noticed that, during the period, the Chinese community in the United States remained, after the 1850s, predominantly male (87.4 percent) and a bachelor society (with a small female population mostly under the age of ten, according to the 1920 census record). See Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York, 1990), 251, and Chart 9.1: Age and Sex Distribution of Chinese Americans, 1920.

15. Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Berkeley, 1986), 62–3.

16. S. W. Kung, *Chinese in American Life: Some Aspects of Their History, Status, Problems, and Contributions* (Seattle, 1962), 183; also see Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943*, 65.

17. Betty Lee Sung, *The Story of the Chinese in America: Their Struggle for Survival, Acceptance, and Full Participation in American Life* (New York, 1967), 190.

18. Rose Hum Lee, *The Growth and Decline of Chinese Communities in the Rocky Mountain Region* (New York, 1978), 66, 139–40.

19. Kenneth Gaw, *Superior Servants: The Legendary Cantonese Amahs of the Far East* (Singapore, 1988), 29, 36; Delia Davin, "Women in the Countryside of China," in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford, 1975), 251.

20. Hansheng Quan, "Songdai nūzi zhiye yu shengji" [Women's occupations and livelihoods in the Song Dynasty], *Funü fengsu kao* [Investigation of Women's Customs], eds. by Hongxing Gao, Jinjun Xu, and Qiang Zhang (Shanghai, 1991), 673.

21. Kenneth Gaw, *Superior Servants*, 91.

22. See Ng Poon Chew, "The Chinaman in America," *Independent* 54 (3 April 1902): 802.

23. "The Life Story of a Chinaman: Lee Chew," *Independent* 55 (19 February 1903), reprinted in *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans: As Told By Themselves*, ed. Hamilton Holt (New York, 1990,) 179–81. The quotation is in 180.
24. David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 47, Table 2–1; 53, Table 2–2.
25. *Ibid.*, 46. Also see John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore, 1999), 251.
26. Lucy Maynard Salmon, *Domestic Service* (New York, 1897; reprint ed., 1972).
27. David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 65–9.
28. The household staff mentioned in Spencer's memoir included cooks, nursery workers and helpers, domestic maids, and laundresses. Ethel Spencer, *The Spencers of Amberson Avenue: A Turn-Of-The-Century Memoir* (Pittsburgh, 1983), 30–43, especially 32.
29. For a similar situation see the letter of Mrs. C. K. Hook to the Urban League September 12, 19???. Mrs. Hook specifically excluded "laundry or porches" from the household responsibilities of general domestic servants. She indicated that "[t]he laundress you sent has been so satisfactory." Archives of Industrial Society (University of Pittsburgh), Urban League 81:11, File Folder 137, Women's Service, 1918–1919.
30. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mothers: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, 1983), 65, 98.
31. The yearbook of the 44th Annual Convention, Laundryowners National Association of the United States and Canada, held on 10–14 October, 1927, (La Salle, IL: The Manager's Office of the Laundryowners National Association of the United States and Canada), 3, 8.
32. Elizabeth Ross Haynes, "Negroes in Domestic Service in the United States," *Journal of Negro History* 8 (October, 1923): 431.
33. Christine Frederick, "If Your Laundress Retired," *Ladies' Home Journal* 37 (September, 1920): 106.
34. Amey E. Watson, *Household Employment in Philadelphia*, Department of Labor, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 93, (Washington, D. C., 1932), Part IV- Case Histories, 58–61, cases 1–2, 5, 7–9.
35. Sara C. Tesh, "Household Employment: A Study of Practices in the Linden Avenue District of Pittsburgh" (Master's thesis, Margaret Morrison Carnegie College, 1934), 18, 37, Table XI.
36. An article, while illustrating criteria for domestic workers to be able to graduate from vocational training classes, claimed that the worker should have learned "how to use a washing machine, a vacuum cleaner, and all the other machines comprising the mechanical equipment of the up-to-date home." Selma Robinson, "Maids in America," *Readers Digest*, 1937.
37. Archives of Industrial Society, Urban League 81:11, File Folder 349, "Brief on Household Employment in Relation to Trade Union Organization," material prepared by Mrs. Jean Brown, Department of Labor, the Women's Bureau, (New York: Leadership Division, National Board, Y.W.C.A., 1938), 7. Sponsored by the joint colored-white committee of the Y.W.C.A. and the Interracial Commission, the study, done in 1937, showed that only nine washing machines were found among the 114 cases in Lynchburgh, though laundry work was done by 35 employees.
38. Miner and unskilled laborers accounted for 42.8 percent of all Chinese (27,045 out of 63,199), while 14.8 percent (9,349) of Chinese were domestic service workers. Numbers were drawn from the 9th Census Report, 1870.
39. "Some Laundry History in Chicago 1869–1882," *National Laundry Journal*

59, no. 12 (1908): 56. The Chinese laundry, located at the rear of 167 West Madison Street, had a sign of both "Tobey & Co." and "Chinese laundries." Paul Siu also indicated that this first Chinese laundry appeared in *Edward's Directory of Chicago* in 1872. See his book, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York, 1987), 23, and 43n.

40. Qui Lee, *Dong xing ri ji* [Diary of Eastward Passage], reprinted in *Wan Qing hai wai bi ji xuan*, 111, 115–6.

41. David Te-Chao Chen, "Acculturation of the Chinese in the United States: A Philadelphia Study," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1948), 68–9.

42. See Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves*, 9; Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 250.

43. Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 237.

44. Lanbin Chen, "Shi Mei ji lue" [Brief notes on the mission to America], *Wan Qing hai wai bi ji xuan*, 127.

45. Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 248.

46. Yinhan Zhang, "San zhou ri ji" [Itinerary in Three Continents], *Wan Qing hai wai bi ji xuan*, 131; and Yongni Wang, "Gui guo ri ji" [Diary of the returning trip to China], *ibid.*, 157.

47. Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 249.

48. Louis J. Beck, *New York's Chinatown: A Historical Presentation of Its People and Places* (New York, 1898), 58.

49. "The Life Story of a Chinaman: Lee Chew," in *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans*, 181.

In some cities, Chinese started to pursue the laundry trade earlier than Americans. A biographical reference to one prominent proprietor of a dyeing and laundry house in Pittsburgh commented, "As there were no laundries in Pittsburgh except those operated by Chinamen, Mr. [Charles] Pfeifer opened one in connection with his dyeing establishment." Yet the source also mentions that Pfeifer secured an experienced laundryman, Charles Pine, from the East Coast, indicating that some big cities might have had laundry service earlier than the appearance of the Chinese laundry. See *Biographical Review: Containing Life Sketches of Leading Citizens of Pittsburgh and the Vicinity* (Boston, 1897), 24: 146.

50. Similar to the decrease in the total number of Chinese in the continental United States, the number of Chinese laundries nationwide was stagnant, or even decreased, in the years between 1895 and 1910. There was a 35 percent decrease in the number of laundries in Chicago between 1893 and 1903. See Paul Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 30, and Figure 3.1 in 37. The percentage of laundry workers in the total Chinese population in Pittsburgh declined from 29 percent in 1900 to 27 percent in 1910. A government report in 1917 noted 1,200 Chinese hand laundries in the city of New York, a decline from the eight thousand laundries alleged by Louis Beck to exist in the late 1890s. See The United States Health Service, *Public Health Reports* 32, No. 6 (1917): 230. The total Chinese population in New York City was 5,042 in the 1920 census report.

51. The newspaper report was discussed in *National Laundry Journal* 52, no. 6 (1904): 80. There were Chinese males worked as servants in American families around New York City. According to Tchen, several missionaries in the city had Sunday schools teaching English and training male immigrants from China to have employment as servants. See John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 245, 248.

52. "The Life Story of a Chinaman: Lee Chew," in *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans*, 181.

53. 13th Census of the United States, 1910, V. 10, Manufactures: Reports for Principle Industries, 887.

54. 14th Census of the United States, 1919, V. 10, Manufactures: Reports for Selected Industries, (Washington, DC, 1923), 1026.

55. 13th Census, 1910, V. X, Manufactures: Reports for Principle Industries, 887; 14th Census, 1920, Vol. X, Reports for Principle Industries, 1027; Isabel Taylor, Maxell Hurwitz, and Saul Held, *Survey of the Laundry Industry* (New York: US, The Works Progress Administration, Project 6006, 1937), 2. Moreover, the following table provides further information about the receipts of American power laundries:

Table 1: The Growth of American Power Laundry Industry, 1909–1948

Year	1909	1914	1919	1925	1929
receipts (\$)	104,680,086	142,503,253	236,382,369	362,294,749	541,158,197
Year	1935	1939	1944	1948	
receipts (\$)	369,452,459	453,579,000	685,022,980	970,479,000	

source: Amounts of receipts before 1940 were from the US Census Report. Data after 1940 were collected by the American Institute of Laundry. Fred DeArmond, *The Laundry Industry* (New York, 1950), 21.

56. David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 49, 52.

57. Qichao Liang, “Xin da lu you-ji” [Journey in the New Continent], *Wan Qing hai wai bi ji xuan*, 193.

58. 12th Census of the United States, (Washington, DC, 1900), Statistics of Occupations, Table 3—Colored Persons 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Each of 140 Groups of Occupations, Distinguished as Negro, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian, Classified by Sex, 14–5.

The laundry business as a leading source of Chinese employment marked the distinction between the two major Asian populations in the United States. In 1910, census investigators indicated that farming, domestic service, and laundry work were the top three occupations among Chinese and Japanese employed in the continental United States. But, within the category, some differences existed in the employment patterns of the two Asian groups. While many Japanese pursued agriculture, most Chinese worked in domestic service and in laundries. See Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Bulletin 127, *Chinese and Japanese in the United States*, 1910, 12.

59. S. W. Kung, *Chinese in American Life*, 57.

60. The rest of the Chinese were employed as cooks, waiters, and servants (19.6 percent), merchants and clerks (13 percent), and farm laborers (9 percent). The number of those engaged in manufacturing and mechanical industries was insignificant (0.2 percent) and mainly centralized in the food industries, such as fish curing and packing or fruit and vegetable canning. In the iron and steel industries, the total number of people was no more than one hundred for the total Chinese population. 14th Census of the United States (Washington, D.C., 1920), Occupation, Table 4—Total Persons 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged In Each Specified Occupation, Classified by Sex, 343–59. It was evident that Chinese men still concentrated their employment in so-called “women’s work.”

61. For example, Siu’s study of Chicago demonstrated the highest point of the

number of Chinese laundries as the year 1928, see Paul Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 37, Figure 3.1.

62. Youkuan Huang, "A Brief Economic History of Chinese in America," in the series of popular discourse for overseas Chinese, *Chinese Nationalist Daily*, 26 February 1927, 5. Another observation indicated the fishing industry in Seattle and Portland, dominated by Chinese, was increasingly taken over by Japanese. As for the Chinese in the South, they consisted of a smaller group who were self-employed in grocery stores serving non-Chinese customers. See *ibid.*, 26 October 1928, 3.

63. Comparing to the case of laundries, the figure for servants was reversed. That is, the number of Chinese—many of them male—working as servants in California was 2.8 times that of New York. Both of the sources are derived from the 15th Census of the United States (Washington, DC, 1930), Occupation: Color and Nativity of Gainful Workers, Table 6—Chinese and Japanese Gainful Workers 10 Years Old and Over, by Occupation and Sex, for the United States and Selected States, 97, under the category of "Domestic and personal service."

It was also in the 1920s that Chinese laundries in some eastern cities extended their business scope through vertical integration. Chinese in New York City and Boston built up large power wet-wash houses for their ethnic fellows, who then concentrated on hand work like ironing. These laundry plants picked up soiled laundry by truck on a daily basis from small laundries and washed clothes by machine. Small neighborhood laundries only had to iron, sort, fold, and bundle the clean clothes into packages. This "agency" system among Chinese laundries competed well with better equipped American laundries and the increasing growth of family laundry machines. See Bertha M. Nienburg and Bertha Blair, Department of Labor, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, no. 143, *Factors Affecting Wages in Power Laundries* (Washington, DC, 1936), 17, 18; also see Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York*, 138.

64. Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, New York: Labor and Politics, 1930–1950* (New York, 1979), 61.

65. Several factors led to a decline in Chinese involvement in the laundry trade. One of the most important elements was a shortage of manpower, though the total Chinese population increased in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s. While the practice of passing the laundry business from father to son prevailed before World War II, younger generations increasingly resented laundry work with its long working hours and lower income than, for example, restaurant work. Some Chinese laundries employed black women, which I will discuss later, while others became collection and distribution stations only, without washing and ironing clothes themselves. See Rose Hum Lee, *The Chinese in the United States of America*, 266–7.

66. The invention of the detached collar had to do with women's housework. Mrs. Hannah Montague of Troy, New York, was credited with creating the detached collar. Legend had it that one day in 1827, to reduce the drudgery of producing a fresh shirt every day for her blacksmith husband, Mrs. Montague simply snipped off the collar, usually the only dirty part of the shirt, and washed it. Thus was born the first detachable collar. See Fred DeArmond, *The Laundry Industry* (New York, 1950), 1.

67. Claudia Brush Kidwell and Valerie Steele, eds. *Men and Women: Dressing the Past* (Washington, DC, 1989), 83, 85.

68. O. E. Schoeffler and William Gale, *Esquire's Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Men's Fashion*, 184, 198.

69. Marion M. Mayer, "The Art of Starching," *Good Housekeeping* 73 (September, 1921): 69, 173.

70. Cited from *National Laundry Journal*, 52, no. 11 (1904): 13.
71. Pauline Beery Mack, "Textiles from Test Tubes. IV. Textile Fabrics Maintenance," *Journal of Chemical Education* 6 (April 1929): 757; and Fred DeArmond, *The Laundry Industry*, 1–2.
72. The next important articles sent to commercial laundries were flatwork from ships, hotels, and restaurants, and, in this way, a branch of the power laundry known as the linen-supply division was created. This bachelor bundle was known as "bundle work" in the 1940s and 1950s. It normally consisted of work that was completely finished, starched where necessary, minor mending done, and hand ironed, which was exactly what bachelors needed. Unlike flatworks, which charged by the piece or pound, bachelor bundles were charged by the piece only. See Appendix D, Explanation of Terms, under "Laundries, cleaning and dyeing plants, and related services," the Appendixes of U. S. Census of Business, 1948, Vol. VI, Service Trade-General Statistics, (Washington, DC, 1952).
73. "Rapid Development of the Laundry Industry," *Laundryman's Guide and Dyeing and Cleaning Trades Journal* 2, no. 5 (1909): 16.
74. F. B. Fletcher, "Selling Laundry Service," the yearbook of the Thirty-ninth Annual Convention, Laundryowners National Association of the United States and Canada, held on 2–6 October 1922, 102–3. Indeed, commercial laundries in the United States and in European countries had been chiefly a shirt and collar business before 1915. See Taylor, Hurwitz, and Held, *Survey of the Laundry Industry*, 2.
75. Fred DeArmond, *The Laundry Industry*, 208.
76. Charles A. Boyce, *The Steam Laundry and Its Method: Essays Read at the Convention Held at Buffalo, October, 1889* (Chicago, 1894), 124.
77. Louis Beck, *New York's Chinatown: A Historical Presentation of Its People and Places* (New York, 1898), 59.
78. "Laundry Hazards," *National Laundry Journal* 73, no. 8 (1915): 26.
79. *Ibid.*, 72, no. 10 (1914): 10
80. "Attached Collars and Cuffs," *ibid.*, 51, no. 10 (1904): 38; also "Evolution of the Shirt," *ibid.*, 53, no. 2 (1905): 32.
81. O. E. Schoeffler and William Gale, *Esquire's Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Men's Fashion*, 199–200.
82. *Ibid.*, 201–4.
83. Leonore Dunningan, "Being Your Husband's Valet," *Good Housekeeping* 97 (August, 1933): 87, 169; Helen W. Kendall, "A Man's Shirt is a Woman's Problem," *Good Housekeeping* 125 (September, 1947): 126–7.
84. Althea Lepper, "What Price Washdays?" *Delineator* 128 (April, 1936): 11, 13.
85. For instance, see Nell B. Nichols, "Doing Up His Shirts," *Women's Home Companion* 61 (January, 1934): 78–9; Grace L. Smith and Margaret Hinde, "Ladies Launder," *ibid.* 69 (August, 1940): 48–9; and Margaret Davidson, "Can You Wash and Iron a Shirt?" *Ladies' Home Journal* 60 (October, 1943): 139.
86. Helen F. Clack, "The Chinese of New York," *The Century* 53 (November, 1896–April, 1897): 110.
87. Chien-shiung Wu, "The Chinese in Pittsburgh: A Changing Minority Community in the United States, 1872–1978," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1983), 79–80.
88. Qichao Liang, "Xin da lu youji" [Journey of Travels in the New Continent], *Wan Qing hai wai bi ji xuan*, 196, 202–3.
89. Ming Mars, interviewed by Judith Luk and Tak C. Wong, 19 March and 24 April 1981, the New York Chinatown Historical Project; Shun Huang, "Wo zai Meigou congshi xiyiye de jingguo" [My experience working in the laundry busi-

ness in the U. S.], in *Huaqiao shi lunwen ji* [Essays on Overseas Chinese History], (Guangzhou: Ji'nan Dazue Huaqiao Yanjiusuo) 2:319.

90. Tin-chiu Fan, "Chinese Residents in Chicago," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1926), 41, Table XIV.

91. Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago, 1967), 157

92. Win Hay Louis, no interviewers and interview dates, the New York Chinatown Historical Project.

93. *China Daily News*, 16 October 1941, 6.

94. The money sent back to Chinese were used to not only raise families but also upgraded the general welfare of the hometowns. For instance, in 1912, the immigrants from Taishan financed construction of the Xin-ning Railway, as well as other public works like building modern roads. In addition, remittances were invested in various business lines, such as establishing stores in old market towns and founding new market towns. Other investments were made in municipal development projects like electric lighting works, telephone companies, bus companies, and steamboat services. See Yuen-Fong Woon, *Social Organization in South China, 1911–1949: The Case of The Kuan Lineage in Kai-Ping County* (Ann Arbor, 1984), 59, 65–7.

95. Portions of the following sections were published, in slightly different form, as "The missing chapter of racism: The gender aspects in the lives of Chinese laundrymen in the United States before WW II," *EurAmerica*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 801–49 (in Chinese).

96. Ronald M. James, Richard D. Adkins, and Rachel J. Hartigan, "Competition and Coexistence in the Laundry: A View of the Comstock," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, (Summer 1994): 164–84. The quotation is in 181.

97. For a general view of the issue of the competition between Chinese laundries and American power laundries, see Joan Wang, "Gender, Race, and Civilization: the Competition Between American Power Laundries and Chinese Hand Laundries, 1870s–1920s," *American Studies International*, Vol. 40, No. 1: 52–73; also see Arwen P. Mohan, *Steam Laundries: Gender, Technology, and Work in the United States and Great Britain, 1880–1940* (Baltimore, 1999), 58, 67–8; and Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves*, 141.

98. Paul A. Frisch, "'Gibraltar of Unionism': Women, Blacks and the Anti-Chinese Movement in Butte, Montana, 1880–1900," *Southwest Economy and Society* 6: 3 (1984): 3–13.

99. "War Declared By Soldier Wife Laundresses," *Laundryman's Guide*, 1, no. 2 (1909): 16.

100. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (together with a Special Report on Domestic Service by Isabel Eaton)* (Philadelphia, 1996), 102–3.

101. "Wanted—Washing, etc.," *National Laundry Journal* 53, no. 2 (1905): 14.

102. See Appendix.

103. Nancy Farrar, *The Chinese in El Paso* (Southwestern Studies, Monograph No. 33, The University of Texas at El Paso, 1972), 3; Florence C. Lister and Robert H. Lister, *The Chinese of Early Tucson: Historic Archaeology from the Tucson Urban Renewal Project* (Tucson, 1989), 1.

104. See Tera Hunter, *"To Joy My Freedom": Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 78–9, 80. The Chinese in Galveston presumably were part of the group working on the Louisiana and Texas Railroad in 1870, see Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850–1870* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 196.

105. "Washerwoman's Union," *National Laundry Journal* 53 (January 15, 1905): 40.

Black washerwomen turned out to be a major deterrent to the development of not only Chinese laundries but American power laundries in the following years. In the late 1900s, a number of American power laundries in Chattanooga, Tennessee and Atlanta launched an anti-disease advertising campaign against black washerwomen as well as Chinese. See "Spreading Disease Through Unsanitary Laundering," *Laundryman's Guide* 1 (January, 1909): 5. Nevertheless, black washerwomen remained the foremost competition to power laundries. Even in the 1920s, big power laundries in the South expressed their annoyance at the traditional practice of black women. See "Washerwoman Only Real Competitor," *Laundry Age* 1 (September, 1921): 56; and "Rub-A-Dub-Dub Is Passing in South," *ibid.*, 1 (January, 1922): 10.

106. "The Steam Laundry Versus The Chinaman and Negro Washerwomen," *Laundryman's Guide* 1 (May, 1909): 6.

107. See "Situation At Newberne, N. C.," *ibid.*, 1 (April, 1909): 13.

108. *National Laundry Journal* 53, no. 10 (1905): 54.

109. David M. Katzman, *Seven Days A Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York, 1978), 85–6.

The dominance of black women as laundresses reached a peak during the black migration northward of the 1910s. Laundry work was considered by black women to be a job which offered higher wages and yet allowed them to spend more time with their own families, rather than living in the master's house. See Archives of Industrial Society, Urban League 81:11, File Folder 137, Women's Service, reports of women's employment from secretary, January-April 1919.

110. See James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge, MA, 1971); Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson, Miss., 1982); Shi-Shan Henry Tsai, "The Chinese in Arkansas," *Amerasia Journal* 8 (Spring-Summer, 1981): 1–18.

111. Katzman, *Seven Days A Week*, 60.

112. "Brief On Household Employment In Relation To Trade Union Organization," material prepared by Mrs. Jean Brown of the Women's Bureau, U. S. Department of Labor, Washington, D. C., (Published by Leadership Division, National Board, Y.W.C.A., New York, N. Y.), 1938. Archives of Industrial Society, Urban League (81:11), File Folder 349.

113. Bertha M. Nienburg and Bertha Blair, *Factors Affecting Wages in Power Laundries*, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, # 143, (Washington, DC, 1936), p. 17.

114. *National Laundry Journal* 52, no. (1904): 2, 56.

115. One incident took place in Pittsfield, MA, in 1905. The laundry workers' union surrendered its charter and claimed that it preferred to patronize Chinese laundries rather than union laundries. See *National Laundry Journal* 53, no. (1905): 2. American power laundryowners often argued that labor union members would rather patronize Chinese laundries than American laundries. In the fall of 1905, one local labor organization in Maryland urged the Frazee-Potomac Laundry Co. to employ union labor for its plant erection, implying that otherwise there would be trouble. In a meeting with three representatives of the union, Mr. Broadbent, the company's manager, "sized them up and observed that each one wore a collar laundered by a Chinaman." *Ibid.*, 54, no. 6 (1905): 18; *ibid.*, 54, no. 9 (1905): 2. Apparently, patronizing Chinese laundries became a counter argument for the power laundry industry to deny the demands of labor organizations. The most ironic statement was heard during a laundry workers' strike in Carbondale, PA. The town's labor unions threatened to open a laundry agency for sending the work out of town. To counter this intimidation, the employers advocated the abolishment of the Chinese Exclusion Act and letting in cheap labor to solve the industrial problem. See *ibid.*, 54, no. (1905): 2.

116. Also see Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943: A Trans-Pacific Community* (Stanford, 2000), 191.

117. L. Toddy, "Solidarity of Negro and Chinese Workers Against U. S. Imperialism," *The Liberator* (by American Negro Labor Congress), (March 22, 1930), 3.

118. Nienburg and Blair, *Factors Affecting Wages in Power Laundries*, 18–9. Such accusations of prejudice against white laborers appeared as early as the 1900s, also see *Laundryman's Guide*, 1, no. 3 (1909): 10.

119. Fu'er Fang and Manli Zhang, *Guangzhou wenshi ziliao (xuanji)*, 188–9. However, Chinese usually relied on family and clan authority to prevent dishonest employees, hiring persons outside one's own group brought disturbances. As Fang stated, while most Chinese laundries maintained good relationships with their black female employees, some were bothered by thefts from their black employees, since the latter might know where the Chinese employers hid their savings. On another occasion, a black employee set up a fraud scheme by tricking her Chinese employer with a telegram. Since the Chinese owner could not read, the black woman translated the telegram as a request from the city government asking him come to the police station immediately. The black employee then stole money from the cash drawer. See *China Daily News*, 11 November 1940, 7.

120. For the case of Chinese women in San Francisco working in laundries, see Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 43.

121. Qicho Liang, "Xin da lu you-ji" [Journey in the New Continent], *Wan Qing hai wai bi ji xuan*, 194.

122. *San-min Morning Paper*, 22 February 1935, 5. In 1931, the Chinese population in Toronto was 2,635, of which 153 were female. In 1941, the number declined to 2,326, of which 253 were female. See Edgar Wickberg, ed., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: 1982), 303, Table 7: Chinese Population of Some Major Cities, 1911–1941; 306–7, Table 10: Male/Female Population and Sex Ratio of Specific Communities.

123. Siu, *the Chinese Laundryman*, 286.

124. Nyok Zoe Dong, "Chinese Family Life in Philadelphia and New York," (Master's thesis, Columbia University, 1923), 17.

125. If wives were not in the business, household chores would occupy their time. They made Chinese jackets and trousers for their husbands to wear in the workplace, and clothes for younger children to wear at home. *Ibid.*

126. Yutang Lin, *Chinatown Family* (New York, 1948), 73.

127. Dong, "Chinese Family Life in Philadelphia and New York," 8.

128. *Chinese Nationalist Daily*, 21 February 1928, 8. It was not clearly stated whether the wife was Chinese or not. Yet, Chinese newspapers usually identified women as either whites or blacks; if they were Chinese, no special statement was made. Thus, it is likely that the woman was Chinese.

129. In her study, Dong found that many Chinese wives did not read or write English, and some could not even read Chinese. Dong, "Chinese Family Life in Philadelphia and New York," 12, 20.

130. Daniel Chu, Interview by John Tchen, 18 February, 1982, the New York Chinatown Historical Project.

130 Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 276.

132. John Stewart Burgess, "A Study of the Characteristics of the Cantonese Merchants in Chinatown, New York, as Shown by Their Use of Leisure Time," (Master thesis, Columbia University, 1909), 27.

133. Georgina G. Negley, *East Liberty Presbyterian Church, With Historical Setting and A Narrative of the Centennial Celebration* (Pittsburgh: 1919), 28. *Pittsburgh Bulletin*, 5 August 1899, 6.

134. Fu'er Fang and Manli Zhang, "Niuyue Huaqiao xiuiguan de bianqian" [Changes of the Chinese hand laundries in New York City], *Guangzhou wenshi ziliao (xuanji)*, 195.

135. For Chinese prostitutes, see Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 267,270; prostitutes of other nationalities and races, *ibid.*, 252, 254–6, 263, and 267.

136. Since many Chinese laundrymen planned to retire in China, such conjugal or family relations with American women might hinder their plans. For instance, an old laundryman in Chicago regretted his marriage to a black woman. The feeling was particularly strong when his children were clinging to the side of their mother and did not marry Chinese. The alienation from his family caused the old laundryman to lament that he did not save enough money for himself to retire in China and thus was trapped in Chinatown in his old age. See Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*, 280.

137. *Ibid.*, 263–4; Fu'er Fang and Manli Zhang, *Guangzhou wenshi ziliao (xuanji)*, 189.