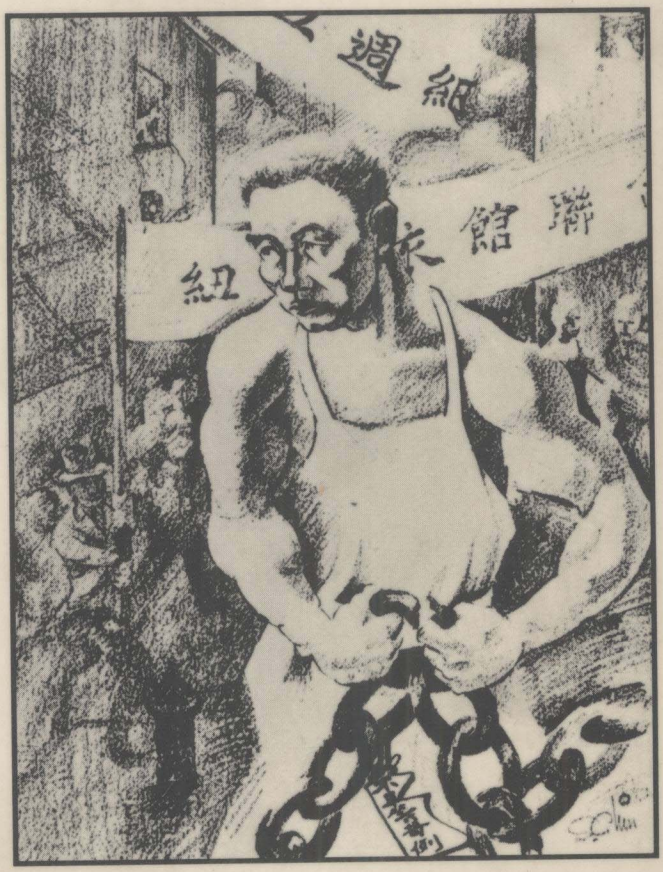
To Save China, To Save Ourselves

THE CHINESE HAND LAUNDRY ALLIANCE OF NEW YORK

RENQIU YU



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I alone am responsible for any shortcomings and errors that remain.

Chinese Names and Transliteration

Chinese names are given in the Chinese order: family name (surname) followed by given name, such as Chen Ke, Tan Lian'ai. The pinyin system is used in transliterations, with the following exceptions: (1) the names of well-known figures, such as Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Mao Tse-tung, for which widely accepted transliterations are commonly used; and (2) the Westernized names of a few Chinese Americans that have been used in English-language documents and newspapers, such as Eugene Moy and Thomas Tang. The English titles of Chinese-language newspapers—the *China Daily News*, *The Chinese Nationalist Daily*, and *The Chinese Vanguard*—are original.

Contents

Introduction

This book documents and analyzes the experiences of a group of Chinese laundrymen and their reflections on these experiences. It focuses on the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York (CHLA), founded in 1933 and still in existence today. In recent years, more and more scholars have examined and presented the voices of people who have been ignored in past historical writings.[1] I chose the CHLA for my study because the organization had published some pamphlets and newsletters as well as a newspaper, the *China Daily News* (*CDN*). In addition to reading *CDN* page by page from its founding in 1940 to 1958, I conducted more than fifty oral history interviews with veteran CHLA members. On Sundays, while enjoying *dim sum* and green tea in Chinese restaurants, these old-timers, now in their sixties or seventies, told me their life stories, their hardships, and their struggles against discrimination and exploitation, as well as anecdotes about and gossip in the Chinese community of New York. Though these interviews helped me to understand better the CHLA and New York's Chinese community, I did not rely totally on them. Frequently, I used them to verify the information I gathered from old newspapers and other historical documents. But I tried to record these laundrymen's own reflections on their lives, and I cite many of their opinions in this study out of respect for their interpretations of their experiences and the belief that their voices should be integrated into historical writings. Like other scholars, I found that the immigrant press is a rich source for historical studies and that ordinary people are often articulate.[2] As Ronald Takaki puts it, the voices of those people who have previously been ignored "contain particular expressions and phrases with their own meanings and nuances, the cuttings from the cloth of languages."[3]

Many books in Chinese American history present only general information. Perhaps because of a scarcity of historical materials, the Chinese Americans in these books are almost always faceless and nameless.[4] Focusing on one organization and using information from old documents and oral history interviews, I present biographical sketches of some figures who were active in New York's Chinese community half a century ago. For a variety of reasons, many of my interviewees did not want to reveal their identities. Thus, those who have returned to China or died appear here under their real names, while those who are alive in New York remain anonymous. All quotations from the Chinese press and the oral history interviews are my translations from Chinese into English.

The Chinese laundryman is hardly a new subject. Most studies of the Chinese in the United States generally recognize that the hand laundry business was one of the most significant occupations among Chinese Americans for a century. Paul Siu's *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*,[5] a Ph.D. dissertation completed in 1953 and finally published in 1987, is the best book on the subject. Son of a laundryman and himself a Chinese laundry supply agent for two years, Siu was a native Taishanese who had numerous relatives and friends among Chicago's Chinese laundrymen; his "insider's" descriptions of Chinese laundrymen's lives have become invaluable sources for studying Chinese Americans in the United States.

One of Siu's important contributions is the concept of the "sojourner," an immigrant who does not take root. Because of the various restrictions imposed on them, he says, "the Chinese immigrants were driven to make a choice, and they founded the laundry as a form of accommodation to the situation. But, since its establishment [in the 1850s] the laundry has served to isolate the laundryman and, therefore, has created a type of personality which is directly contrary to the expectation of assimilation." Rather than become assimilated, the Chinese laundryman remained a sojourner, who, as Siu puts it, "clings to the culture of his own ethnic group as in contrast to the bicultural complex of the marginal man." A sojourner is "a stranger who spends many years of his lifetime in a foreign country without being assimilated by it."[6] The sojourner thesis assumes that exclusion and discrimination in the host society determined the Chinese laundrymen's sojourner mentality. Siu also assumes, though he does not explicitly state it, that culture is virtually static, unchanging or changing very little. Thus the laundrymen's sojourning behavior persisted in an immigrant society; according to Siu's analysis, the dream of returning to China as wealthy "Guests from Gold Mountain" lasted for more than a

hundred years. As John Tchen argues, Siu presents the Chinese laundryman's experience as a *variant* of the immigrant experience, rather than as a "deviant" type that does not fit the assimilation pattern of European immigrants.[7] The laundry, meanwhile, was an institution within an immigrant economy that both protected and isolated the Chinese.

Though significant and sophisticated, Paul Siu's approach has its limitations. The evidence I have uncovered adds some different dimensions to the laundrymen's experiences and is the basis for the new interpretations I offer in this study. I was very impressed by the CHLA members' own reflections on their experience in their campaign "to save China, to save ourselves." To the CHLA members, helping China resist Japan's invasion was the most important thing in their lives in the 1930s and 1940s, and that campaign also influenced their efforts to change the power structure in the Chinese community, their emotional ties with the homeland, their perception of the host society, and their self-image in American society. My interviewees proudly recalled their patriotic activities in the 1930s—donating money to China and campaigning to win American sympathy and support for China's struggle against Japan. Siu does not discuss this aspect of the Chinese experience.

The CHLA members, who were just as socially isolated as the laundrymen in Siu's study, did not passively accept the conditions that enforced their isolation. Rather, they made persistent efforts to change that situation and to improve their status in American society. At first they organized themselves to fight the city government's discriminatory policies, and later they linked their struggle for survival and basic dignity in American society to the national salvation movement in China.

While Siu's understanding of the Chinese laundrymen's isolated situation and their sojourner mentality was largely conditioned by the persistent exclusionary and discriminatory policies of the host society is an important insight into the Chinese laundrymen's experience, it also narrows his view. He fails to take into consideration how changes in the homeland affected the Chinese laundrymen's sojourner mentality. My study suggests that changes in U.S. policies regarding the Chinese in the United States, in the political and social conditions in China, and in Sino-American relations all had an impact on Chinese immigrants, but reactions to these changes varied considerably among individuals. Rather than treat the Chinese immigrants as a homogeneous group whose members all behaved in the same way, I emphasize the concrete conditions they faced and how different individuals responded to such changes. These historical factors sometimes strengthened and at other times modi-

fied the sojourner's homeland orientation, even though a sojourning mentality may have been the dominant tendency among first-generation Chinese in the United States.

In sociological studies of the Chinese in the United States, sweeping generalizations based on abstract assumptions are often used in place of careful analyses of historical evidence. While describing the Chinese laundryman as a sojourner who "clings to the culture of his own ethnic group," Paul Siu does not define that "culture." Indeed, such terms as "Chinese culture" or "Chinese tradition," which are complex and multidimensional, resist definition. While the dominant Confucian tradition emphasized authority, loyalty, and total obedience, numerous peasant uprisings in Chinese history represented an opposite tradition of struggling against repression and exploitation. The latter was as deeply rooted in Chinese society as was orthodox Confucianism. Moreover, in the twentieth century, foreign incursions led to the rise of nationalism and antitraditional sentiments. After the May Fourth Movement of 1919, anti-Confucianism itself became an integral part of the multiple traditions of twentieth-century China. In other words, seen in a proper historical context, "Chinese culture" is neither static nor singular; it defies a simplistic definition and requires careful analysis.

Rose Hum Lee, an acknowledged authority on Chinese Americans, recognizes this problem. Adopting Siu's sojourner thesis as an analytical framework for her work, she correctly points out that the Chinese in the United States were a heterogeneous group, and she attempts to identify the aspects of Chinese tradition that had been brought over and retained.[8] Though Lee urges scholars to study "Chinese civilization" carefully, however, she herself provides answers based on general impressions rather than solid empirical studies.[9]

Based on the CHLA's experiences in fighting the elite-dominated organizations in New York's Chinese community, I examine the conditions under which some outdated traits of Chinese tradition were retained in the United States. The patriarchal and authoritarian rule embodied in the power structure of the Chinese immigrant community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, had been rejected by reform-minded Chinese in China itself but survived in the United States, a society upholding democratic principles in conflict with authoritarian values. I argue that while Chinese immigrants generally shared a common culture, certain individuals in the twentieth century were strongly influenced by revolutionary ideology, or at least the revolutionary terminology that had developed in China, and by particular American democratic

ideas. Their efforts to improve their political and economic status in American society as well as to affect China's politics and Sino-American relations represent a different type of behavior. I further argue that conditions in the host society were determining factors in perpetuating authoritarian rule within the Chinese immigrant community, and that for first-generation Chinese immigrants, breaking the authoritarian rule in their own community was a first step in their efforts to integrate themselves into the larger society. Since the CHLA failed to change the power structure in the Chinese immigrant community, I also discuss factors in both the larger society and in the Chinese community that blocked and paralyzed those efforts.

Among the works dealing with New York's Chinese community, Peter Kwong's *Chinatown, New York*[10] is a groundbreaking study. Using a national approach to analyze the politics of and labor movement in New York's Chinatown between 1930 and 1950, Kwong suggests that Chinatowns in the United States have not been immune to changes in the larger society and that "the history of New York's Chinatown is one of ongoing class conflict between organizations representing the merchant elite and those serving the working class."[11] The so-called national approach, according to Kwong, assumes that there is a close correspondence between an ethnic group's treatment in the United States and the international standing of that group's homeland. While Siu reveals the sad and helpless isolation of the Chinese laundrymen, Kwong indicates that the U.S. government–sanctioned exclusionary policy did not guarantee any excluded ethnic group total immunity from the influences of the larger society. Nevertheless, in this exploratory work, Kwong discusses more scenes than actors and gives few solid details. We learn more about the historical background than the Chinese Americans themselves.[12] In contrast, I make a special effort to present the Chinese laundrymen's own perspectives and to place them at center stage.

Chapter One traces the early history of the Chinese hand laundries in New York City, discusses the larger social environment in which the laundrymen lived, and analyzes the internal structure of the Chinese community and the relationship between the laundrymen and traditional community organizations. It suggests that while the clan/family associations provided some basic services and protection for the Chinese in a hostile environment, such associations also had a patriarchal and authoritarian structure inherited from China, dominated by wealthy and conservative figures. Because Chinese immigrants were forced to fall back on their ethnic community, institutionalized racism helped to perpetuate the

most repressive Chinese traditions on American soil; it also allowed the dominant elite to exploit ordinary Chinese.

Chapter Two describes in detail the beginnings of the CHLA and discusses its significance in the context of Chinese American history. It examines the background of the Chinese laundrymen who founded the organization and describes the CHLA's victory in a legal battle against a discriminatory city ordinance. That success helped the organization establish itself in the Chinese community.

Chapter Three discusses the CHLA's efforts to make itself a democratic organization and the complex relationship between the laundrymen and the Chinese American left in the 1930s. It suggests that although the CHLA did not accept the left's Marxist ideology, it was influenced by the revolutionary ideas developed in China. Its members communicated with the left through a shared political language.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the CHLA's "to save China, to save ourselves" campaign and its "people's diplomacy" movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter Four examines the idea of "to save China, to save ourselves" in detail and discusses the role of the CHLA in establishing the New York Overseas Chinese United Front to support China's resistance against Japan's invasion. The experiences of the Chinese in New York indicate that a new kind of nationalism had developed among overseas Chinese by the 1930s and 1940s: overseas Chinese began to see themselves more as participants in saving China and in building a democratic new China than as passive monetary donors. One section of this chapter documents the founding of the CHLA's newspaper, the *China Daily News*.

Chapter Five shows that the slogan "to save China, to save ourselves" clearly related Chinese Americans' nationalistic campaigns to their struggle for survival in American society and explores the meaning and accomplishments of the CHLA's "people's diplomacy." It argues that the CHLA tried to present a new image of the Chinese to the American public. This chapter also reveals that the people's diplomacy movement expanded the scope of the Chinese laundrymen's concerns. They began to relate their experiences to those of African Americans and called for solidarity with African Americans in a common struggle for equality. Meanwhile, the group identity of the CHLA members was enhanced. The final section in this chapter discusses the CHLA's appeal and its response to the repeal of all the Chinese exclusion acts in 1943.[13]

Chapter Six deals with a complex struggle between the hand laundrymen and the Chinese power laundry owners in the late 1940s. This chap-

ter examines in detail the class relations and class struggle between the hand laundries and the power laundries within the Chinese laundry business; the function and application of the concept of ethnic solidarity in the Chinese community; the interplay of internal class struggle and external racial discrimination and its impact on Chinese Americans; and why the CHLA, a self-styled "progressive" organization that tried to integrate itself into the larger society, rejected the white labor unions.

Chapter Seven analyzes the nature of the CHLA's criticism of the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist) government in the 1940s, the factors that affected the CHLA members' plans whether to return to China or to settle in the United States, the various forms of Federal Bureau of Investigation harassment and persecution that CHLA members endured in the 1950s, and how these events led to a change in the CHLA's conception of American democracy and a strengthening of its emotional attachment to the People's Republic of China. The theoretical implications of this study for Chinese American history are presented in the Conclusion.

Chapter One

Chinese Laundrymen in New York City

Chinese Laundrymen and New York's Chinatown

Historians are still trying to answer the questions of who were the first Chinese to live in New York and how New York's Chinatown started.[1] More research is needed to determine whether the sailors or cigar vendors listed in the 1855 New York municipal census were the first group of Chinese settlers in the city of New York. The available materials tell us only that when the New York Chinese community began to take shape in the 1870s, the majority of the Chinese inhabitants in New York City were laundrymen. Here I use the term "community" instead of "Chinatown," because although Chinatown was the headquarters for Chinese of all sorts, the laundrymen lived not in Chinatown itself but in their hand laundry shops, which were "scattered over an area of about thirty miles in all directions from that center [Chinatown]."[2] According to an 1888 article, there were about ten thousand Chinese living in metropolitan New York, "probably a little over two thousand" Chinese "laundries in the city of New York alone, some eight hundred or nine hundred in Brooklyn, and about one hundred and fifty in Jersey City. . . . Each laundry has from one to five men working in it, and they all make money."[3] The thirteenth census of the United States of 1910 counted 4,614 Chinese (3,904 foreign-born) in New York City, and suggested that a majority of them was engaged in the laundry business. In this census, 8,573 male and 103 female "Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and all other [nonwhite and nonblack]" were classified as "laundresses and laundrymen" in the country as a whole. In New York alone, 3,175 such males and 45 such females

were found in the categories of "launderers," "laundry operatives," and "laundry owners, officials, and managers." Most of them can be assumed to be Chinese since the Chinese population (4,614) constituted 77 percent of the total number (6,012) of these people who were put into the category (there were 1,037 Japanese and 343 Indians).[4] Although we shall never find accurate statistics of the Chinese in general and Chinese laundrymen in particular from the late 1880s to the 1930s, most observers of New York's Chinese community recorded seven thousand to eight thousand Chinese laundrymen in New York City.[5]

Though people generally acknowledge that the hand laundry business was one of the most important economic "lifelines" of the Chinese community in the United States, no one is absolutely certain of its origin. A widely accepted version of the story is that the Chinese hand laundry started in San Francisco. It is believed that Wah Lee, an unsuccessful gold miner, was the first Chinese to open a "wash-house establishment" in San Francisco in the spring of 1851.[6] But scholars cannot elaborate on the story because of a paucity of historical materials.

As in the case of San Francisco, a similar lack of materials makes it difficult to reconstruct the story of the early Chinese hand laundry in New York City. According to some records, a decision to use Chinese laborers to replace the militant Irish female workers in the Passaic Steam Laundry led to the spread of Chinese hand laundry shops in the metropolitan area. In the early 1870s James B. Harvey, owner of the Passaic Steam Laundry, which had been established in 1856 on the east bank of the Passaic River, in Belleville, New Jersey, shipped one hundred fifty Chinese from San Francisco to replace his plant's Irish female workers, whose frequent strikes disrupted business. To Harvey's dismay, the Chinese turned out to be just as independent and militant as the Irish women: "After a time, as the Chinese laundry workers learned how white employees gained financial advantage by striking, there was a series of walkouts and labor disputes."[7] "The Chinese even went to strike, and [were] beginning to become more and more like their white neighbors."[8]

Following Harvey's example, other plant owners on the East Coast began to talk of shipping gangs of Chinese workers to their plants. "One shipment was sent to a shoe factory in North Adams, Mass., but plans for others fell through" because the surprising lack of docility on the part of the Chinese at the Belleville plant made other plant owners lose their enthusiasm. Many Chinese left the Belleville laundry plant a few years after they got there, and all Chinese were discharged in 1885. "Some came to Newark, some drifted to New York. Having been trained as laundry

workers, it was natural that most of them turned to this trade for a living."[9] This group of Chinese has been regarded as the pioneers of the Chinese laundrymen in the New York area. Wong Chin Foo observed that these Chinese wrote to their cousins, and "their cousins and other relatives came so rapidly that in a few years nearly every street and avenue in New York became filled with Chinese laundries, and the flaming red signs of Wah Sing, One Lung, and Goon Hi Fa Toy dangled gloriously in great numbers."[10] By 1879 the number of Chinese hand laundries in New York City was large enough to alarm the white power laundry owners. The first issue of their trade journal discussed the "menace" of this Chinese competition in the industry in a long editorial.[11]

The Chinese chose to engage in the hand laundry business because they were excluded from most desirable occupations, and many rapidly expanding cities needed their cheap labor to fill the least desirable unskilled jobs. As Wong Chin Foo observed in 1888:

> They [the Chinese] become laundrymen here simply because there is no other occupation by which they can make money as surely and quickly. The prejudice against the race has much to do with it. They are fine cooks, neat and faithful servants, and above all, very skillful mechanics at any trade they have a mind to try. In the Western States, they are used in as many different positions as any other foreigners, and the laundry business is occupied only by those who fail to find other employment.
>
> But here in New York as yet there is no other alternative. Many an able-minded man as well as skillful mechanic who came to America to better his condition may be found wielding the polishing-irons in a New York Chinese laundry.[12]

To open a hand laundry shop did not require substantial capital or skill. In the 1880s it took "from seventy-five dollars to two hundred dollars to start one of these Chinese wash-houses," as "the main expenditure in a Chinese laundry is a stove and a trough for washing, and partitions for dry-room and sleeping apartment, and a sign."[13] In the nineteenth-century hand laundry the laundrymen did the washing, ironing, and folding. After the 1920s most hand laundrymen, Chinese or non-Chinese, in New York City did not do the washing themselves. In 1950 a hand laundry was defined as "a small establishment that receives bachelor and family bundles, sends them out to be washed and extracted by a wholesale power laundry, and then does the finishing itself."[14] To get the two hundred dollars to start a hand laundry, the Chinese often turned to a "whey" (*hui*), defined by sociologist Paul Siu as "a sort of collective loan fund administered by a small group of persons usually affiliated with the

clan or with a store in Chinatown."[15] Wong Chin Foo described how a "whey" functioned in the nineteenth century:

> Suppose I have an established laundry, and want to borrow two hundred dollars at a certain percent premium, but I cannot find any one Chinaman who is able to loan me the amount. I put up a notice in Mott Street that upon such and such a day I wish to make a "whey" of twenty men, who all are supposed to be situated like myself, each wanting to borrow two hundred dollars. When we twenty borrowers all come together, we each put down ten dollars. Then each one secretly writes upon a slip of paper the amount of interest he is willing to give to get the two hundred dollars. These slips are carefully sealed and thrown into a bowl. At a given time they are opened, and to the highest bidder goes the two hundred dollars, less the interest, which is invariably deducted immediately from the principal. Frequently as high as four dollars is offered for the use of ten dollars for a single month. In such cases each of the nineteen other borrowers gives to the lucky one only six dollars apiece for the ten dollars apiece which they make him pay next month. Then the next highest bidder gets the two hundred dollars, less the interest he offered, and so on, until the entire twenty, at twenty different times, have obtained the use of this two hundred dollars; but the one that comes the last, having offered the least interest of them all, reaps the harvest of the "whey." This method is adopted by most Chinese laundrymen, in New York and other large cities, to open new laundries.[16]

A hand laundry started by a capital of one hundred dollars or so was usually small, owned by one person. Before the 1940s most Chinese hand laundries in the metropolitan New York area were one-man businesses. After the repeal of the Chinese exclusion acts and relaxation of the restriction on Chinese immigration in the 1940s, some Chinese women came to join their husbands. Subsequently, many hand laundries were operated by families, but the size of the typical hand laundry remained pretty much the same, though the volume of its business may have increased.[17] Some hand laundries were owned and conducted by two proprietors who contributed equal shares of the capital. The two partners were usually "cousins"—immigrants from the same clan or village. "They work together, eat together, and sleep together, and at the end of the year divide the earnings equally."[18]

At the turn of the century the Chinese hand laundry's charge for laundering shirts was 10 cents apiece; for handkerchiefs, 2 cents each; for cuffs and collars, also 2 cents each; and so on.[19] Comparatively, these prices were not lower than those of other ethnic laundries, as Helen F. Clark observed: "Today it is evident to all who have studied the question that there is no such thing as 'Chinese cheap labor.' Chinese laundries