

# Guilds, Unions, and Garment Factories

## Notes on Chinese in the Apparel Industry

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This volume of *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* includes several essays on Chinese labor guilds, labor unions, and the apparel industry. The following write-up is intended to provide relevant background information to better help the reader understand how each essay is related to a particular stage in history and how they are interrelated. This write-up is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of the complex issues surrounding the apparel industry.

### CHINESE IN THE APPAREL INDUSTRY

The identity of the first Chinese in California to have sewed apparel for the market is now lost in the historic past, but the shortage of females, who would have normally been hired as workers in the sewing trades in California, created a need that was filled by willing Chinese male “seamstresses,” a phenomenon that distinguished the industry in the San Francisco region from the industry in the rest of the United States. Thus, by the late 1860s the Chinese impact on the industry was already noticeable so that Rev. A. S. Loomis noted that “Pantaloons, vests, shirts, drawers, and overalls are made extensively by Chinamen,” and the 1870 Census counted 110 Chinese in the sewing trades.<sup>1</sup> As Chinese continued to enter the industry, the *San Francisco Morning Call* ran an article reporting the following on May 27, 1873:

Next, if not superior in importance to the Chinese cigar factories, are the Chinese clothing factories of which there are altogether 28, including 3 shirt factories. . . . These factories employ from 50 to 100 men each and their employees number in the aggregate about 2000.

By 1876, Chinese workers had become a considerable percentage of workers in the sewing trades in California, as shown in Table 1.<sup>2</sup>

However, these figures did not include the many Chinese working by the piece outside the factories. Rev. Otis Gibson estimated during the same period that 1,230 Chinese were “sewing on machines” and 168 were “working on clothing for Chinese.”<sup>3</sup>

Four years later the 1880 manuscript population census counted the following numbers in the apparel industry shown in Table 2.

If tailors and seamstresses were included, the total number in the needle trades appeared to be no more than 2,000.<sup>4</sup> By this time Chinese were sewing most of the ready-made clothing and nearly all underwear.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 80 percent of the shirt makers were also Chinese.<sup>6</sup>

The Chinese community in nineteenth-century America was largely concentrated in California and was an overwhelmingly bachelor society with few females. San Francisco with its large Chinese population became the center of Chinese activities in the apparel industry. In 1885 the *San Fran-*

TABLE 1: WORKERS IN THE SEWING TRADES, SAN FRANCISCO, 1876

Employment	Non-Chinese		Chinese Men
	Men	Girls	
Cloak-making		100	
Dress-making		about 1,000	
Embroidering	–	–	28
Glove-making	13	88	
Lace making		32	20
Milliners		about 350	
Neckties		28	
Sail-making	150		
Shirt making	30	246	239
Men’s clothing	558	884	620
Total	751	2728	907

TABLE 2: CHINESE WORKERS IN THE SEWING TRADES, SAN FRANCISCO, 1880

Working for clothing manufacturer	661
Overall makers	156
Underwear makers	67
Shirt makers	580
Sewing machine operators	114
	1578

cisco Municipal Report tabulated 38 tailors, 2 shirt makers, 64 clothing shops, 15 ladies' underwear shops, 30 shirt factories, and 25 overalls factories, with 1,229 employees. Unlike the situation found in the larger society in America, where female laborers were used as sewing machine operators, the Chinese employed in the apparel industry in the San Francisco area was based on an all-male workforce.

However, even while the apparel industry centered in San Francisco was trying to grow, it faced stiff competition from large apparel manufacturers on the Eastern Seaboard, who had a greater and more efficient division of labor as well as newer equipment. Thus the industry was under great pressure to keep costs down to ensure profitability. This pressure served to spur the development of organizations to regulate and protect group economic interests, taking as models the guilds that had existed in China.<sup>7</sup>

In China's preindustrial economy, guilds were formed by merchants, journeymen craftsmen, or artisans in particular economic sectors to perform such functions as regulation of competition as well as resolution of disputes among members. The members were on a more-or-less equal basis, with little differentiation between managers and workers. As the economy expanded and production facilities increased in size and complexity, the different interests of management and workers came to the fore as a factor that required modifications of the guild structure to accommodate this situation. In some cases, two guilds emerged in the same industry, with a *dongjia* ("east house") guild representing the interests of man-

agers and independent operators, and a *xijia* ("west house") or labor guild speaking for the workers.

Due to the presence of a large Chinese population that was involved in a diversity of businesses, professions, and occupations in San Francisco, a well-developed merchant and labor guild system existed in the city. One researcher counted at least twenty guilds from the mid-nineteenth century through the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> A merchants' guild had emerged during the early Gold Rush years, and by the late 1860s, guilds representing laundrymen, shoe makers, and cigar makers had also been formed.<sup>9</sup> Walter N. Fong's "Chinese Labor Unions in America" (this volume) describes the operation of the Chinese labor guilds in San Francisco. In the apparel industry, tailors formed Tongye Tang (Cantonese Tung Yip Tong). Workers in factories manufacturing white shirts, white uniforms, cotton lingerie, bathrobes, smocks, and flannel nightwear formed Jiongyi Hang (Cantonese Gwing Yee Hong), while workers in factories sewing clothing for laborers formed Jinyi Hang (Cantonese Gam Yee Hong). The essay "Chinese Guilds in the Apparel Industry of San Francisco" (by Him Mark Lai, this volume) describes these guilds.

However, guilds were not limited to the city by the Golden Gate. Honolulu, with a Chinese community comparable in size to that in San Francisco, had also developed a diversified economy, and at least eleven labor guilds were active there from the 1890s through the 1930s. In the apparel industry in 1904, dressmakers and makers of white uniforms formed Baiyi Hang (Cantonese Baak Yee Hong). The same year, workers at tailor shops formed Jinyi Hang (Gam Yee Hong).<sup>10</sup> There were fewer guilds in other regions in America. In the Midwest and the Eastern Seaboard, such groups would most likely be in connection with the laundry business. Such was the case in New York at the end of the nineteenth century when the Chop Sing Tong represented laundry operators in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Jersey City, while the Sing Me Hong represented those in Brooklyn and Hoboken.<sup>11</sup>

In San Francisco, most light industries with Chinese work forces had disappeared by the first decades of the twentieth century when implementation of the Chinese Exclusion acts from 1882 on made it increasingly difficult to maintain a Chinese male work force as workers retired or passed on. An additional factor was that these small factories could not compete with products from larger, more efficient plants in other regions. With the disappearance of the industries, the corresponding labor guilds also disappeared. The Chinese apparel industry, however, escaped the fate of these other light industries and managed to survive even though it was greatly reduced in size due to the smaller Chinese population in San Francisco as well as depressed economic conditions. Thus, in spite of the introduction of female workers to augment and ultimately replaced the aging male operators in the factories, by the early 1930s there were only about thirty garment factories in San Francisco Chinatown. Due to the fact that most of the factories were dependent on contract orders from large Chinese and non-Chinese firms, the workload at



Chinese man working as sewing machine operator, late nineteenth century. Chinese workers entered the sewing trades when a growing San Francisco began developing light industries after the Gold Rush. Many factories hired Chinese workers, especially in industries that were labor intensive. Later, Chinese entrepreneurs also opened competing factories. Due to the overwhelming number of men among the Chinese immigrants of the day, Chinese men became sewing machine operators in the developing garment industry, a departure from the practice in the West where women traditionally served as sewing machine operators. (Courtesy California Historical Society)

any one factory was not consistent. Workers would go from one factory to another as work was available. Workers were usually paid a set price per dozen. Hours were long and the pay substandard; however, workers could go and come as they please at the factory. As more female operators entered the work force, this flexibility in work hours became common as housewives had to take time off to do family chores or stop work to care for their children.<sup>12</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION OF FEMALE WORKERS

The bulk of Chinese workers in the apparel industry were employed in the garment factories that emerged in late nineteenth-century California. The Cantonese term for garment factory was derived from *yee-che* (“sewing garments machine”), the term for “sewing machine.” Thus a garment factory became *che-yee chong* (“sewing garments factory”), which is the term commonly used today. Chinese in America, however, also called the sewing machine *jam-gai* (“needle machine”) and took it as the frame of reference to describe the garment factory as *jam-gai chong* (“needle machine factory”).

Many workers, however, noting the operator’s actions as he operated the sewing machine, described it as *chai-gai* (“treading a pedal to operate a machine”). By extension, a garment sewing factory became known as *chai-gai chong* (“factory with machines operated by treading pedals”).

After the Chinese Exclusion laws were implemented in 1882, it became increasingly difficult to find new recruits among immigrants to replace retired or deceased male garment workers. During the early twentieth century, Chinese had won court cases defining the entry rights of merchants’ family members as well as China-born children of U.S. citizens. At the same time, an increasing number of American-born children from Chinese families were also entering the labor market. It was only a matter of time before Chinese owners of garment factories followed the footsteps of non-Chinese employers by seeking workers from the growing female labor pool.

It was alleged that Xiangshan [now Zhongshan] immigrant factory owners were the first to hire female family members and relatives as garment workers, possibly beginning with having them work in their homes around the World War I period. They were soon joined by American-born Chinese



Mrs. Charlotte Chang teaching foreign-born women to sew at the YWCA, 1916. (Courtesy Lily Song Collection)

girls, who were not as encumbered by the traditional Chinese attitude that women should be limited to the traditional gender roles that assigned them to domestic duties. The fact that many Chinese working class families needed the additional income also helped to change attitudes.

#### “MULE CLOTH” GARMENTS

Perhaps as early as the 1880s, Chinese garment factories appear to have begun specializing in one of two general types of apparel. One group made work shirts, overalls, jeans, and children’s playsuits, mostly made from denim, the Cantonese term for which was *lui-tsai bu* or “mule cloth.”<sup>13</sup>

In general, customers of workers’ apparel for laborers looked for durability but were not too demanding about style or fine handiwork. The fabric for making such apparel was also relatively low in cost. Thus emerged Chinese factories that could undertake the entire production process, starting from the purchased materials, cutting the patterns, sewing, finishing, selling, and distributing the products under their own brand names. However, due to the prevailing anti-Chinese sentiments, they had to resort to using Western names so as not to draw attention to the fact that the products were made by Chinese labor.

During the exclusion era, George Brothers & Co. (Chinese name Do Lee), “Manufacturer of ‘Phoenix Brand’ Denim Goods and ‘California’ Flannel Wear, Play Suits, Overalls, Pants, Jumpers, Cotton Shirts, etc.” was one of the largest San Francisco Chinatown manufacturers of apparel for workingmen. It competed with firms like Levi Strauss for a share of the market with commissioned Chinese and Jewish salesmen in California and Pacific Northwest cities marketing its denim goods. The firm also did business in Anchorage, Alaska, and Hawaii.<sup>14</sup>

The company experienced a number of changes in management over its seven decades of existence. It was founded by Lai Git and fellow clansmen as a partnership around 1890. By the early twentieth century Ng Cheuk, a fellow immigrant from Shunde, had become the major partner and manager. Loo Kum Shu, American-born of Panyu ancestry and Chinatown agent of the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, was also a major partner who was acting manager when Ng Cheuk visited China in 1914. Soon after Ng passed away in 1926, his son succeeded him as manager but soon withdrew from the partnership along with his two brothers to concentrate on managing the California Manufacturing Company (Cantonese name Shun Lee) that Ng Cheuk had founded in Oakland around 1915. Afterward Dong Hin, who had joined the partnership around the beginning of World War I, became manager at George Brothers until 1941 when he suffered a stroke. He was succeeded by Lai Shun.<sup>15</sup>

The business and factory was located at 642–644 Washington Street on the eastern edge of Chinatown about half

a city block east of the Dollar Store factory. During the late 1920s the factory had about forty sewing machines. In the mid-1930s the factory made a decision to use all female machine operators. Subsequently at its peak during the 1940s and 1950s the factory employed more than a hundred sewing machine operators. During the same period, George Brothers also added to its production by subcontracting to smaller Chinatown factories as well as delivering work bundles for home sewing.<sup>16</sup>

The second largest factory was that of H. William & Company (Cantonese name Wing Yuen Tai). Dong Hin was manager of a factory at 1105 Stockton Street of which he sold the controlling interest to fellow Shunde immigrants led by Leong Moon (Chow King Leong) around 1903. An anecdote alleged that on the eve of World War I, Chow King Leong and his partners elected to gamble and at an auction bought at a cheap price a large lot of denim that had been water-damaged during a fire at a non-Chinese San Francisco factory. Chow and his partners then carefully dried the denim in an empty lot at Stockton and Pacific streets so that the dried cloth looked almost like new. Soon afterward the war broke out, and when the price of denim skyrocketed due to a supply shortage, the original owner of the denim repurchased the entire lot at an inflated price. This windfall profit enabled Chow and his partners to expand their business, and by the 1920s they were able to establish a large factory at 1108–14 Stockton Street on the western part of Chinatown.<sup>17</sup>

Other smaller factories were H. Wing Company (Cantonese name Yu Wing), the result of Hall Wing Kei splitting from H. William in 1926, and Henry Brothers (Cantonese name Hing Lee). These were located within a block of one other with the former at 462 Jackson and the latter at 532 Jackson Street at the eastern fringe of Chinatown. After Henry Brothers closed in the 1930s, Tim Hall and others organized United Manufacturing Company in 1943 at the same address.<sup>18</sup>

After World War II, George Brothers and H. William closed down operations around 1960 when the second generation did not wish to continue the businesses. Earlier Henry Ow, a salesman with H. William, had left the company to become one of the first subcontractors producing denim jeans and workingmen’s clothing for Levi Strauss.<sup>19</sup> Thus Chinatown factories sewing apparel for workingmen ended up producing goods under subcontracts to non-Chinese firms in the larger society.

#### “WHITE” GARMENTS

The other category of garment work in the needle trades initially consisted of those specializing in sewing white shirts (Cantonese *baak-soet-saam*), white uniforms, cotton lingerie, bathrobes, smocks, and flannel nightwear, all of which was collectively termed *baak-yee* (“white garments”). Many of the factory owners were from Xiangshan (now Zhongshan). Over

the years this sector of the industry experienced numerous attempts of workers to organize to protect their interests.

The working conditions in the “white” garment sector in San Francisco, where the workers were unorganized, became a festering issue breeding worker discontent. Thus this sector of the Chinatown economy became the target of a number of organizing efforts during the twentieth century before World War II.<sup>20</sup>

In 1919, workers formed the Unionist Guild to demand better working conditions from the employers. The leadership was anarcho-syndicalist, but not enough research has been done to delineate the group’s ties, if any, to the U.S. anarcho-syndicalist movement. The “History of Meizhou Gongyi Tongmeng Zonghui (Unionist Guild of America)” (by Shuyao, this volume) gives a narrative of the initial success and ultimate failure of this workers’ group to improve working conditions.

The Unionist Guild emerged during a period when “white garments” factories were hiring more female machine operators and the nature of the products being manufactured was changing from only “white garments” to embrace *faa-ye* (“floral garments”), that is, cotton dresses for women and children also. The emergence of the National Dollar Stores (Cantonese *Chung Hing*) chain played an important role in this development, when the corporation established a factory at 720 Washington Street during the 1920s to produce apparel for its stores.

The increasing number of female garment workers breathed new life into the apparel industry, which enabled it to continue to be an important pillar of the San Francisco Chinatown economy. Thus the 1920 census listed only 128 male and 29 female operatives in the apparel industry; however, a subsequent 1922 survey in San Francisco and Oakland revealed an additional 142 female home workers.<sup>21</sup> The home workers also had to split their time with domestic chores and thus probably had much lower productivity than the factory workers. It is also worth noting that by this time the total number of female workers already exceeded the males. The number of female factory workers continued to increase while the number of male operators remained almost static, and by 1930 there were over 300 female workers employed in forty-six factories in San Francisco Chinatown.<sup>22</sup> In the mid-1930s, garment factories comprised almost six-tenths of all Chinatown factories and employed the greater part of the 564 female workers in these factories.<sup>23</sup>

#### THE UNIONS VS. CHINATOWN FACTORY OWNERS

The Great Depression of the 1930s created conditions favoring forces pushing for basic changes in labor-management relations. In 1933, during the first year of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration, the passage of the National

Industrial Recovery Act encouraged workers to organize. Organized labor began exploring avenues to organize the largely unorganized west coast garment workers.

Local Chinese Marxists of the Chinese Workers Center were first to act when they linked up with the Communist-led Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) to form a Chinese branch of TUUL’s Needle Trade Workers Industrial Union that led a series of strikes and work stoppages in Chinatown factories during the early part of 1934, with mixed results.<sup>24</sup> Although the activists were dedicated to their cause, they were young and inexperienced in labor organizing. Hence, even though they instigated work stoppages and strikes, they were unable to follow through in getting concessions from the factory owners to improve working conditions. On the other hand, the employers used time-tested tactics such as mutual support in resisting workers’ demands, blacklisting activists, and using the police to intimidate and arrest workers.

In May of the same year, the more conservative rival International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) entered the picture. Rose Pesotta and others in the union, after helping Mexican garment workers in Los Angeles to organize a successful strike, came to San Francisco to survey the possibility of organizing its garment factories.<sup>25</sup> The Chinese branch of the TUUL union at first presented a hostile attitude, calling the ILGWU a “yellow” union.<sup>26</sup> However, that year the Communist International made a major change in party tactics. It dissolved the TUUL, which had acted as an alternative to other labor unions, and instead encouraged Communist party members to establish Popular Front cooperative efforts with other labor unions. In the United States, experienced Communist activists assumed key roles in the movements that eventually created the Congress of Industrial Organizations and unionized basic U.S. industries.<sup>27</sup> In San Francisco the Chinese Marxist activists were ready to cooperate with the ILGWU when the latter announced formation of a Chinese branch at the end of November 1934,<sup>28</sup> and Zhang Hentang (Benjamin Fee) of the Chinese Workers Center was hired as union organizer. In 1935 Fee published an essay in the *Chung Sat Yat Po* (that is reprinted as “The Chinese American Garment Industry” in this volume) analyzing issues and problems facing the Chinese apparel industry. Possibly because of his reputation as a radical in Chinatown, Fee was unsuccessful in recruiting many Chinese workers into the union. Thus when the anti-Communist Jennie Matyas assumed responsibility for the Chinatown organizing effort, she let him go.<sup>29</sup>

By this time, the attention of the union was focused on organizing workers in the Dollar Stores factory. During the early 1930s the main factory consisted of a two-story building, with an annex that consisted of the garage in the adjacent apartment building to the west. The entire complex occupied almost half of a city block at the eastern edge of Chinatown opposite Portsmouth Square. This factory, the largest in Chinatown in the early 1930s, had 134 female and 20 male

employees. The sewing machine operators were all female. The factory also subcontracted to smaller shops and delivered work bundles to home workers for sewing. For a while the National Dollar Stores also maintained a smaller branch factory in Oakland.<sup>30</sup>

Workers at the factory had numerous grievances about working conditions, thus providing an opening for the entry of the ILGWU to organize a Chinese branch of the union to negotiate with the factory management. Part way through the negotiations, the National Dollar Stores sold the factory to Golden State Manufacturing Company, thus withdrawing from the manufacturing end of the apparel business. This volume reprints excerpts from an interview with union organizer Jennie Matyas that describe her role in organizing the Chinese Ladies Garment Workers Union and its struggle, including a 105-day strike against the National Dollar Stores and the Golden State Manufacturing Company factory, and the aftermath. The statements of each of the three parties in the labor-management dispute (reprinted as "Labor Strike in Chinatown" in this volume) expressed to the public its side of the issue, or at least the side of the issue the party wished the public to believe.

About a year after the strike, the factory closed and moved its operations to Los Angeles. What was left in Chinatown were factories that sewed garments under subcontracts to large non-Chinese firms. As for the National Dollar Stores factory workers, the union had to work hard to convince white workers to overcome their prejudice against Chinese and accept the now unemployed Chinese strikers as coworkers. Slowly some Chinese workers were able to become part of an integrated factory work force. But it took the labor shortage of World War II to enable Chinese workers to be widely accepted as coworkers in the larger society.

It should be noted that in Honolulu, with a Chinese population comparable to that in San Francisco, the Chinese role in the apparel industry was limited. In San Francisco, racist hostility had forced the Chinese apparel industry to be segregated from that in the dominant white majority society, but in Honolulu the Chinese apparel industry became integrated with that of the Asian majority in the economy. The 1930 census counted only 36 Chinese female operatives in the clothing industry, 13 seamstresses and dressmakers not in factories, and 15 tailors out of 2344 working females in the entire territory.<sup>31</sup> However, Chinese entrepreneurs left their marks on Hawaiian fashion. In 1932 Ti Haw Ho, owner of Surfriders Sportswear Manufacturing, began making and selling "Hawaiian" shirts. In mid-1935 Ellery Chun of King-Smith Clothiers in Honolulu began marketing bright print short-sleeve shirts as "Aloha shirts." The merchandise was so well received that he registered "Aloha shirt" as a trade name on July 15, 1936.<sup>32</sup>

During this pre-World War II period, San Francisco and Honolulu were the only cities where Chinese played roles in the local apparel industry and even then it was only in San

Francisco that the industry was an important part of the Chinatown economy and a source of employment for Chinese workers.

## EXPANSION AFTER WORLD WAR II

During the first half of the twentieth century, the apparel industry was threatened with eventual extinction when the Chinese exclusion acts severely limited the availability of labor to replace retired and deceased workers. However, when Chinese employers followed the lead set in the America apparel industry and began hiring female workers, it enabled the industry to continue to be an important part of the Chinatown economy. However, due to the economic depression through the 1930s, the Chinatown industry showed only modest growth and workers labored under sweatshop conditions. Moreover, even though San Francisco Chinese community demographics show a male/female ratio that was more favorable than other Chinese communities in the United States, it was still greater than 2 to 1 and the limitations to the availability of this labor pool also posed a potential curb to greater growth.<sup>33</sup>

World War II saw repeal of the Chinese exclusion acts, and the post-war years saw a change in the Chinese immigration patterns. With Chinese spouses of Chinese who served in the U.S. armed services (GI brides) leading the way, females began to exceed males among new Chinese immigrants.<sup>34</sup>

As the GI brides settled down and started families, many also became part of the available labor force. In San Francisco this enabled an expansion of the Chinatown apparel industry during the post-war economic boom. The industry still consisted basically of two divisions: workingmen's apparel and women's dresses. In the worker apparel sector the several large independent Chinese manufacturers closed down one after another after the war as the younger generation was disinclined to continue the businesses. Small factories in Chinatown storefronts became the norm. Chinatown factories for all practical purposes became subcontractors of non-Chinese firms.

By 1950 there were more than a hundred Chinatown factory owners, mostly small business people with limited capital, competing for subcontracts. This situation enabled the contract-letting firms to drive hard bargains to set low contract prices. The only recourse of the Chinese factory owners was to operate factories at long hours, with low pay for the workers. Factory sanitary and safety standards were often minimal. This led to media exposés charging sweatshop exploitation and investigations by government regulatory agencies. In order to deal with this situation the sub-contractors formed the Chinese Garment Contractors Association on September 9, 1951, to improve the bargaining position of association members with the firms letting subcontracts, and to negotiate and discuss issues concerning working con-

ditions and pay with government regulatory agencies. However, these continued to be nagging issues in the industry in Chinatown.<sup>35</sup>

By 1965 there were approximately 3,500 women working at more than 150 factories producing approximately one-half of San Francisco's apparel.<sup>36</sup> Due to the ILGWU's sporadic organizing efforts, about 1,200 became union members, with 700 working in Chinatown. The unionization process, however, was from the top down such that all workers at a factory became members all at once.<sup>37</sup>

Excerpts reprinted from the *San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey & Fact Finding Committee Report* ("Female Workers," this volume) summarize some of the issues faced by the workers and the garment factory owners. Soon after the issuance of this report, the *San Francisco Examiner* ran a series of articles in 1968 about Chinatown's poor economic and social conditions that exposed the public to these long-festered issues.<sup>38</sup>

## EXPANSION AND GLOBALIZATION

The Immigration Act of 1965 removed the restrictive features of U.S. immigration policy and put immigrants from all countries on an equal basis. The influx of ethnic Chinese increased. They came not only from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the China mainland but also other localities worldwide such as Cuba and Latin America, Korea, Japan, and countries of Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe, thus leading to a great diversification of the Chinese population in America as to place of origin and social class. The Chinese population doubled every decade as existing Chinatowns became more bustling and crowded and new concentrations sprang up where no Chinese communities had existed previously. With the continuing influx of more female than male immigrants, the national Chinese male/female sex ratio reached parity some time during the 1980s. The availability of a larger Chinese labor pool enabled expansion of the apparel industry to become the third largest employer for Chinese in America.<sup>39</sup>

Chinese garment workers and Chinese-owned factories were no longer limited to the San Francisco Bay Area but also sprang up in other Chinese communities in the United States. The second largest Chinese community in continental America was in New York. The city was the largest center of America's apparel industry. Yet it did not have much of a Chinese role in the apparel industry before World War II. Contributing factors were probably the limited female labor pool due to an abnormally high Chinese male/female ratio exceeding 6:1. After the war, immigration brought down the male/female ratio to a little more than 2:1 in 1950, when three or four Chinese-owned garment factories emerged in the Chinatown area. The number increased to 15 by the end of the decade. However, it was the large influx of immigrants after implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act that led

to a rapid increase in the number of Chinese-owned factories, which at its peak during the mid-1980s was about 600, employing more than 27,000 workers. During this same period there were similar developments in other cities with about 600 Chinese-owned factories in the Los Angeles area and the San Francisco Bay area. The total exceeded 2,000 when Chicago, Seattle, and Honolulu were included. Only about one-third of this work force was Chinese, with Hispanics and other Asians making up the remainder.<sup>40</sup>

During this period Chinese also expanded their roles in other sectors of the apparel industry. One was the entry of foreign capital, which in the case of the Chinese came mostly from Hong Kong, that established factories in America. One of the earliest was John Lam from a family already well-established in the apparel industry in Hong Kong. Establishing his first factory in New York in 1971, by 1986 the Fashion Group that he headed operated 15 factories employing 1,200 workers producing moderate- and higher-priced garments for the market. During the early 1990s Taiwanese immigrants invested at least \$12,000,000 in twenty factories in Southern California. During the same period Chinese also invested \$5 million in four factories in Hawaii.<sup>41</sup>

Another change that drew attention by the 1990s was the rise to prominence of Chinese designers in the fashion sector that played an important role in the apparel industry. Apparel by designers such as Vera Wang, Vivienne Tam, Anna Sui, and Derek Lim became merchandise targeting the upscale market.<sup>42</sup>

Even while all these developments were occurring in the U.S. apparel industry, U.S. manufacturers were seeking means to cut production costs from this labor-intensive process. In the mid-1950s some cheap suits began to be made in Japan. This was followed by the growth of textile and garment industries in localities in Asia such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea, with financial and technical assistance from the U.S. AID program. By the end of the 1970s nearly three quarters of U.S. apparel imports came from East Asia. In the 1980s offshore sourcing of apparel accelerated greatly when U.S. manufacturers and retailers began to move their manufacturing facilities offshore. By 1987 the United States had become the world's leading apparel importer.

Beginning with the 1980s, a billion-dollar apparel industry with about 15,000 workers was built in the Marianas, centering on Saipan. This included \$50 million invested by Chinese entrepreneurs to build seven large garment manufacturing facilities. These factories imported mostly workers from the People's Republic of China to manufacture garments that were imported to the United States duty-free. With implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, by 1997 Mexico surpassed Hong Kong and approached China in terms of dollar value as the leading supplier of textiles and apparel to the United States. The imposition of quotas on Chinese textile products in 2005 only shifted a greater share of the apparel traffic to Mexico.<sup>43</sup>

The effect of free trade policies and globalization of the apparel industry on most regions of the United States was decidedly negative. Take San Francisco as an example. Free trade policies and globalization of the apparel industry have decimated the local industry. Clothing manufacturers took advantage of the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and shifted textile and apparel manufacturing to Mexico's maquiladoras (duty-free companies capitalized by foreign investment). In the following decade, San Francisco lost two-thirds of its industry, or 20,000 garment industry jobs.<sup>44</sup> For example Levi-Strauss, headquartered in San Francisco, once operated 63 plants in the United States. By 2004, it had moved all of its production outside of the United States. Adachi and Lo's "Made in Chinatown" (this volume) explains the causes for these job losses, as well as the dire consequences on San Francisco's Chinese American community. Also included are interviews of the working experiences of two contemporary garment workers.

Later that year, on December 31, 2004, the World Trade Organization's (WTO) free trade policy eliminated all textile and apparel quotas for its 148 countries. As a result, United States corporations could even more easily move their production overseas for lower wages and higher profits. This agreement accelerated the closure of American plants, as an estimated one half of the garment industry jobs were projected to be lost.<sup>45</sup> The outsourcing of San Francisco's garment industry has had an alarming impact on the Chinese American community, as ten percent of its female workers were employed by this industry in 2000. According to San Francisco's Chinese Progressive Association, over 900 laid-off garment workers sought their services in 2004.<sup>46</sup> The Free Trade Adjustment Act was to provide unemployment and benefits job training to dislocated workers due to outsourcing. However, these predominantly low-skilled, non-English speaking workers found finding new work difficult and most resorted to low-wage work in the hotel or home-care industries. Only one out of five eligible workers applied for these benefits. Worse yet, those who completed training only earned 72 percent of their previous earnings, which were already below minimum wage.<sup>47</sup>

All regions in the United States took similar blows. The sole major exception was the Los Angeles area, which appeared to have succeeded in meeting these challenges successfully. Employment in the apparel industry in the region actually increased from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, a period during which overall employment in the industry in America was declining with the result that Los Angeles has overtaken New York City as the apparel center in America. This apparent bucking of the general trend in the industry in America was possible only because of the large immigrant influx to the region, many of whom had only limited English skills that prevented them from competing effectively on the job market. A large number were also undocumented aliens. This coupled with the fact that these workers were unorganized, created conditions not unlike that which manufacturers sought by

going abroad—a large pool of unorganized workers willing to work under exploitive conditions for low wages in sweatshops. Thus it would seem that the industry in Los Angeles was successful only because conditions there enabled manufacturers to take steps backward in labor relations and working conditions, the long-range effects of which on American society have yet to be analyzed and evaluated.<sup>48</sup> Whether this will prove to be a permanent solution, however, depends a lot on political and economic developments in the region.

## NOTES

1. Rev. A. S. Loomis, "How Our Chinamen Are Employed," *Overland Monthly* 2 (1869): 231–240.
2. George F. Seward, *Chinese Immigration, Its Social and Economic Aspects* (New York, 1881), 109–110.
3. Rev. Otis Gibson, *The Chinese in America* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1877).
4. Ping Chiu, *Chinese Labor in California, 1850–1880, An Economic Study* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), 98.
5. John S. Hittell, *The Commerce and Industries of Pacific Coast of North America* (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft, 1882).
6. Ping Chiu, *Chinese Labor in California, 1850–1880, An Economic Study* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), 98–99.
7. Li Hua, "Zhongguo hanghui de chansheng ji qi lishi zuoyong" [Guilds in China, their formation and their role in history], retrieved Apr. 2, 2007 from website [bbs.guoxue.com/viewtopic.php?z=396683](http://bbs.guoxue.com/viewtopic.php?z=396683); Fan Wenlan, Cai Meibiao deng, *Zhongguo tongshi*, v. 10, Part 5 "Ming Qing fengjianzhi shiqi" [The feudal system during the Ming and Qing], Chap. 6 "Fengjian jingji de shuailuo" [Decline of the feudal economy], Sect. 3. "Gong-shangye" [Industries and commerce], retrieved Mar. 31, 2007 from website [www.white-collar.net/02-lib/01-zg/03-guoxue/%C6%E4%CB%FB%C0%FA%CA%B7%CA%E9%BC%AE/%D7%A8%CC%E2%CE0/%C0%FA%CA%B7/%D6%D0%B9%FA%CD%A8%CA%B7/Resource/Book/Edu/JXCKS/TS011078/0011\\_ts011078.htm](http://www.white-collar.net/02-lib/01-zg/03-guoxue/%C6%E4%CB%FB%C0%FA%CA%B7%CA%E9%BC%AE/%D7%A8%CC%E2%CE0/%C0%FA%CA%B7/%D6%D0%B9%FA%CD%A8%CA%B7/Resource/Book/Edu/JXCKS/TS011078/0011_ts011078.htm).
8. Guild-like organizations emerged among craftsmen and artisans in preindustrial China as early as the Tang dynasty. Production at the time was dominated by small cottage industries, and there was no sharp distinction between managers and journeymen workers. Both were eligible to be guild members. As commerce and production grew, workers found themselves working with others in workshops and factories owned by managers who became responsible for marketing the products. The group interests of managers and workmen became more divergent and even antagonistic.
9. Listing by Yuk Ow based on information from San Francisco Chinese language publications, Yuk Ow Collection, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California at Berkeley.
10. In the laundries two guilds eventually emerged: the *dongjia* Dongqing Tang (Cantonese Tung Hing Tong) for the laundry owners, and *xijia* Xifu Tang (Cantonese Sai Fook Tong) for the workers. The Sai Fook Tong was well-known for a successful strike against laundry owners in early 1929 (*Chinese World*, Jan. 30, Feb. 2, 4, 1929). After the post-World War II decline of the laundry business, Tung Hing Tong continued as a social club into the final years of the twentieth century. Its address listed in the 1997–1998 *Chinese Business Directory* was 883 Sacramento Street.
11. Clarence E. Glick, *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu: Hawaii Chinese History Center and Univer-



sity Press of Hawaii, 1980), 260–265; Dormant C. Chang, ed., Part 2, “Tanshan Huaqiao,” *Chinese of Hawaii* (Honolulu: Chinese Penman Club, 1929), 76–77, 79.

In 1904 80 to 90 workers formed a labor guild Jinyi Hang (Cantonese Gam Yee Hong) to demand shorter work hours. The same year more than eighty workers formed the labor guild Baiyi Hang (Cantonese Baak Yee Hong), demanding that employers reduce daily working hours from fourteen to twelve. Reference Dormant C. Chang, ed., Part 2, “Tanshan Huaqiao,” 78–79 in *Chinese of Hawaii* (Honolulu: The Overseas Penman Club, 1929). Note that the name is identical to the guild in San Francisco that was organized by workers in factories sewing workers clothing.

11. Louis J. Beck, *New York's Chinatown* (New York: Bohemia Publishing Co., 1898), 58.
12. Helen V. Cather, *The History of San Francisco's Chinatown* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1974 reprint of 1932 University of California thesis), 54–55.
13. Li Min, “Huabu cheyi gongye fazhan guocheng” [Development of the Chinatown garment industry], 24–25, in *Historical Records of the San Francisco Chinese Garment Contractors Association, 1953–1987* (San Francisco: San Francisco Chinese Garment Contractors Association, 1995).  
Cantonese immigrants referred to denim as *lui-tsai bu* (“mule cloth”). The origin of this term is uncertain. Cantonese immigrants in America often used the term *ngai lui-tsai* (“enduring like a mule”) when referring to the hard work making a living. It may be that when Chinese saw denim, which was used for worker’s apparel, they associated it with the mule and hard work. Reference to the mule inferring endurance was also in general consonance with the spirit depicted in the “Two Horse Brand” tag introduced in 1886 on Levi Strauss denim pants showing a team of horses trying to pull apart a pair of pants.
14. Letterhead on company stationery, 1924; author’s interview with Ronald Dong, son of George Brothers partner Dong Hin, May 19, 2007; email from Ronald Dong, May 22, 2007.  
Dong stated that George Brothers commissioned salesmen were stationed in San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, Stockton, Tracy, Lodi, Los Angeles, San Diego, Seattle, and Portland.
15. Partnership lists of George Brothers & Co. Feb. 15, 1898; Jan. 17, 1903; Feb. 19, 1909; Aug. 29, 1914.
16. Testimony of Ng Sun Jung and Dong Hin to Inspector C. M. Wurm re Dong Hin, departing merchant, June 19, 1926; author’s interview with Ronald Dong, son of one of the major partners, Dong Hin, May 19, 2007; Partnership lists: Oct. 30, 1923; Oct. 8, 1924; Jan. 17, 1927; Dec. 6, 1929.
17. Deposition of Dong Hin that he was member of H. William & Co., Feb. 8, 1903; author’s interview with Ronald Dong, May 19, 2007; Yuk Ow, ed., *A History of the Sam Yup Benevolent Association in the United States, 1850–1974* (San Francisco: Sam Yup Association, 1975), 171; Partnership lists for H. William & Co.: Jun. 14, 1904; Aug. 24, 1907; Sep. 11, 1916; Jul. 22, 1926; Aug. 26, 1929.
18. Yuk Ow, ed., *A History of the Sam Yup Benevolent Association in the United States, 1850–1974*, 166; *Chinese Telephone Directory, San Francisco and Oakland* (San Francisco: Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Co.), published Nov. 1926, Mar. 1935, Jun. 1945, Feb. 1949.
19. Author’s interview with Ann Leong, daughter of Chow King Leong, May 19, 2007; author’s interview with Ronald Dong, May 19, 2007.
20. Corinne Gelb, interviewer, *Jennie Matyas and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union* (University of California Institute of Industrial Relations Oral History Project, Berkeley 1957); “Labor Strike in Chinatown, Official Statements of Parties Involved,” 10–11 in *Chinese Digest*, April 1938.
21. Eliot Grinnell Mears, *Resident Orientals on the American Pacific Coast: Their Legal and Economic Status* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1927), 263, 264.
22. Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 88, quoting statistic from *Community Chest 1930 Survey*, 8
23. T. Y. Chen, Supervisor, *Survey of Social Work Needs of the Chinese Population of San Francisco* (San Francisco: California State Relief Administration, 1935), 31.  
The following factories existed in Chinatown in 1935: 49 garment factories, 7 shrimp companies, 3 cigar factories, and 26 others such as broom factories, noodle factories, etc.
24. *Chinese Vanguard*, February 1, 15, April 1, July 15, 1934.  
Workers called a strike at the Hing Wah factory on January 8, 1934, demanding (1) abolition of the 25 cents per two-week–pay-period rent, paid by each operator for use of a sewing machine, and responsibility of the factory owner for maintenance and repairs on each machine, and (2) increase of the piecework wages for sewing woolen dresses from 50 cents to 75 cents per dozen, and wages for sewing black twill trousers from one dollar to a dollar-and-a-half per dozen. The strikes failed after nineteen days when the factory owner refused to accede to the demands, and the strike committee had to call off the strike. During the strike some workers in other factories supported the strikers by such actions as donating to a strike fund and refusing to work on garments delivered from the struck factory. Three or four days after the Hing Wah strike began, Shiu Shut factory workers demanded and received an increase of 40 cents per dozen in the piecework rate. On January 18th workers at the Gwong Lung factory called a work stoppage after the owner had delayed paying the workers for more than a month. They also demanded (1) that all workers be allowed to sew entire garments instead of each worker sewing only parts of each garment, (2) abolition of the \$5 deposit required of newly hired workers, and to return immediately deposits already collected, and (3) guarantee that workers be paid on time on the first and fifteenth of each month. Although the workers successfully received their back wages, the factory owner procrastinated on the other demands. On June 11 workers at the Fook Hing factory stopped work to protest being forced by the employer to falsify working hour and pay records that were required by federal law.
25. Rose Pesotta, *Bread upon the Water* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1946), Ch. 6, Ch. 7, retrieved April 22, 2007 from website [dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bright/pesotta/contents.htm](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/pesotta/contents.htm).
26. *Chinese Vanguard*, June 15, 1934.
27. Mari Joe Buhle, Paul Buhle, Dan Georgakas, *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), s.v. “Trade Union Unity League.”
28. *Chinese Vanguard*, January 1, 29, 1935.
29. Corinne L. Gilb, interviewer, “Jennie Matyas and the I.L.G.W.U.” (Berkeley: University of California Institute of Industrial Relations Oral History Project, 1957), 127–128.  
Benjamin Fee (1909–1978?) was the eldest son of American-born interpreter J. B. Fee. Fee senior was of Xinhui ancestry and went to China to get married. After Benjamin Fee was born in Guangzhou on Aug. 31, 1909, he immigrated to the United States at age 16 and became active in the radical movement. Fee joined the Communist Party in 1929 and was active in the student and labor movements. In the late 1930s Fee had marital problems and left for New York where he was for a short time editor at *China Salvation Times* and *Chinese American Weekly*. Later he was partner in a printing shop for almost two decades and then became business agent for ILGWU Local 23–25.

30. T. Y. Chen, *Survey of Social Work Needs of the Chinese Population of San Francisco*, 33; Helen V. Cather, *The History of San Francisco's Chinatown* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1974; reprint of 1932 University of California thesis), 54–55.
- Chinese entrepreneurs led by Joe Shoong founded China Toggery on San Francisco's Fillmore Street in 1911. It soon expanded to a location on Market Street in downtown San Francisco. In 1920 the firm was incorporated and in 1924 it was reorganized and renamed National Dollar Stores. By the 1930s, 26 branches of the National Dollar Stores had been established all over the western United States. The National Dollar Stores established a factory in San Francisco, and for a time, another in Oakland, to supply the garments sold in these stores.
31. Paul Kimm-Chow Goo, "Chinese Economic Activities in Hawaii," in *Chinese of Hawaii*, vol. 2, ed. Chun Kwong Lau and Kum Pui Lai (Honolulu: Oversea Penman Club, 1936), 1–15.
32. "Aloha shirt," retrieved April 30, 2007, from website [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aloha\\_shirt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aloha_shirt).
33. Statistics from the 1940 Census shows the following male/female ratios for various Chinese communities:  
 San Francisco: 2.223:1  
 Oakland: 1.468:1  
 Los Angeles: 2.324:1  
 New York City: 6.141:1
34. About 6,000 Chinese women were admitted under the War Brides Act (59 Stat. 659) passed on Dec. 18, 1945. An additional 5,000 aliens, including Chinese fiancées of members of the armed forces, also immigrated under the provisions of the G.I. Fiancées Act (60 Stat. 339) passed June 26, 1946. See Thomas W. Chinn, H. Mark Lai, and Philip P. Choy, eds., *A History of Chinese in California* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1969), 28.
35. May Lum Tom, "Forward" and "Reminiscences," in *Historical Records of the San Francisco Chinese Garment Contractors Association, 1951–1987* (San Francisco: San Francisco Chinese Garment Contractors Association, 1987), i–iii.
- The association membership included owners of both unionized and nonunionized factories. The organization dissolved on March 3, 1987, when the garment industry in San Francisco was already on the decline. Some factory owners of nonunionized factories later established a separate group, Chinese Bay Area Apparel Contractors Association.
36. Alesandro Baccari, Coordinator, *San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey & Fact Finding Committee Report* (abridged version) (San Francisco: Bank of Canton, 1969), 66.
37. Alesandro Baccari, Coord., *San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey & Fact Finding Committee Report*, 67.
38. Jane E. Conant, "The Other Face of Chinatown," "Chinatown Tragedy, Widespread TB," "Unrest Stirs Chinatown Sweatshops," "The Seaming Side of Chinatown," "Coolie Labor Pours From Hong Kong," *San Francisco Examiner*, August 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 1969.
39. Chen Huaidong, *Meiguo Huaren jingji xiankuang yu zhanwang* [The present status and prospects of the Chinese economy in America] (Taipei: Shihua jingji chubanshe, 1991), 432. Cited hereafter as Chen Huaidong, *Present Status and Prospects of the Chinese Economy in America*.
40. Chen Huaidong, *Present Status and Prospects of the Chinese Economy in America*, 350.
41. N. R. Kleinfeld, "Mining Chinatown's 'Mountain of Gold,'" *New York Times*, June 1, 1986; *Overseas Chinese Economy Yearbook, 1993* (Taipei: Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, 1994), 476.
42. *The China Press*, Feb. 17, 2006.
43. Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 54–55; *Overseas Chinese Economy Yearbook, 1993* (Taipei: Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, 1994), 476; Margot Patterson, "American Dream Lures Saipan Workers—Sweatshops," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 7, 2001.
44. See Sweatshop Watch. 2004, "Free Trade's Threat to California's Garment Workers Fact Sheet A," <http://www.sweatshopwatch.org/media/pdf/SWfactsheets.pdf> and California Employment Development Department, April 1993 – April 2003.
45. American Textile Manufacturers Institute. "The China Threat to the Textile and Apparel Trade Report." July 2, 2003.
46. Kristina Peterson, "Our Fraying Garment Industry," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 30, 2005.
47. Vanessa Hua, "Lifting of import quotas a blow to garment factories: Bay Area apparel industry tattered by overseas competition—immigrant workers try to start over after layoffs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 18, 2005.
48. Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry*, 16–19, 174–175.