

Chinese Labor Unions in America

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WITH INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY HIM MARK LAI

Chinese traditionist organizations were formed based on having one of the following criteria in common: locality of origin, clan identity, fraternal bonds, or common economic interests. The last included organizations formed by merchants, small entrepreneurs, professionals, and craftsmen and artisans as well as workers. They tended to form wherever there were economic activities of some scope that demanded organization to regulate activities and to protect economic interests. Merchant organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, being part of the leadership in the Chinese community, had long been known to the public; however, craft and labor guilds that had been a part of Chinese traditionist society had been little studied.

The following paper by Walter N. Fong (Kuang Huatai; Kum Ngon Fong) on Chinese labor guilds, or as the author preferred to call them, Chinese labor unions, was first published in Chautauquan, vol. 23 (1896), 399–402. It was one of the few contemporary descriptions of these organizations on the American mainland. Fong was a Chinese Christian of Taishan ancestry and one of the earliest Chinese graduates of Stanford University. Later he married a white woman, Emma Ellen House, and took a teaching position at University of California, Berkeley. When Sun Yat-sen arrived on the American mainland in 1904, Fong was among the group of Christian converts who listened to Sun speak at the Presbyterian Church in San Francisco and was first to join Sun's Revive China Society. In 1905 he and his wife departed for Hong Kong where he soon sickened and passed away. His wife returned to America and in 1907 married Yoshio Kuno, Fong's colleague and friend at the university.

Fong also wrote an essay on the Chinese Companies that was published in Overland Monthly and Outwest Magazine, vol. 23, no. 137 (May 1894), 518–526.—HML

The writer will now ask his reader to examine with him the Chinese labor unions on the Pacific coast. Of the unions on this coast the most important are the unions of the laundrymen, the cigar-makers, the shoemakers, the jean-clothes tailors, and the ladies' underwear manufacturers. There are many others of minor importance besides these mentioned here, but it seems unnecessary for us to go into details as to each one of them.

As to the organization of these unions—the Cigar-Makers' Union has a president-secretary-treasurer, an interpreter, an

agent in each cigar factory, and a headquarters keeper, or janitor. Each of the other unions has only a president-secretary-treasurer and a janitor.

The functions of the president-secretary-treasurer are about the same in all unions. He is to preside at all meetings, to keep all money accounts, record important transactions of his union, and collect all dues and fines. He is generally the chairman of the executive committee. The interpreter of the Cigar-Makers' Union is to communicate between the Americans and the union in all transactions. The reason why this union has a permanent interpreter while others have not is because the majority of the cigar-makers work for American employers, while the members of the other unions work for their own countrymen. The agent in each cigar factory is to act as interpreter for the workmen and to superintend them. If any dispute arises either between the employer and workmen or between the workmen themselves, it is the duty of the interpreter to report the exact story to the union. The duty of the janitor of one union is the same as that of another. He takes care of the headquarters and the goods, he notifies the members of meetings, and he must have tea and tobacco ready in the hall while the meeting is in session. The term of each office is one year. All officers are elected by the members at large.

Each union has some wooden slate about eight inches long and two inches wide—as many as there are members in the union. Each slate contains the following words: "A meeting at 8 o'clock P.M. One dollar fine for delinquency or absence." When a meeting is to be called, the janitor distributes these slates to the members, and when the time of the meeting comes they count the slates instead of calling a roll. It is not uncommon for a member who neither wishes to attend the meeting nor pay the fine to ask someone to present his slate for him. Should any person have the idea that the Chinese strictly enforce parliamentary law, especially the rules of order, in their meetings, he will be sadly disappointed when he sees one of them.

It is customary among the Chinese in America to worship their dead at the grave twice or thrice a year, in spring, summer, and autumn. On such occasions each member is expected to contribute a small sum of money for the expenses. They always have one or more whole roasted pigs to feed the

ghosts of their friends, and they apportion the roasted pork among the members afterward. The amount which a member contributes is according to his ability to give. This contribution is compulsory for those who are working at the time when the festival occurs, but is voluntary for those who are not working at the time. Besides these they have other festivals to celebrate, such as New Year's and the days of birth and death of certain gods. To celebrate the day of birth or death of its particular god, each trade union contributes money for a banquet.

The unions require every apprentice to become a member of the union for that particular trade. The Cigar-Makers Union charges five dollars as the admission fee of membership. The Laundrymen Union formerly charged thirty dollars, but lowered this afterward to ten. Before the restriction of Chinese immigration, more Chinese wished to enter this union than any other, and there was no "white" laundry to compete with them. But since the Chinese Exclusion Bill of 1882 passed, fewer Chinamen have come from China, therefore fewer have wished to enter into the trade of washing. Soon after this period, "white" laundries came into existence everywhere in California and the Chinese could no longer have the monopoly of the trade.

As to the objects of the Chinese-American unions, one of the most important is to protect their members from being wronged by the white people. Indeed, many of the "so-called" Americans took advantage of the fact that the Chinese were ignorant of the laws, customs, and the language of this country, and cheated them in every possible way. The Chinese must therefore have some organization to bring suits at law against these wrongdoers. The next important object is to unite in a body against other Chinese who may take away their work. In regard to this object, they do about the same as the European or American labor unions; they go on a strike against the employer who employs nonunion men to work with them, and resist the nonunionists with physical force, if necessary, while a strike is going on. A third object is to settle disputes among their own members. They sometimes have quarrels over the customs or rules of their union or over the question of wages. In such cases the disagreements are to be settled by the union at a meeting, or if the matter is too trivial for calling a meeting, then the president may settle it for them. The fourth and last object is to keep up wages.

The administration of each of the unions differs from that of others, because each union has its own peculiar business intercourse with "white" people, and they must adopt their methods to suit their purpose. The method which the Cigar-Makers' Union uses to carry on a strike is typical. When there is any controversy between the employer (white) and the employees (Chinese), in any manufactory, the agent in that establishment will report the controversy to the headquarters of the union. Then the union will call a meeting to appoint a committee to investigate the case. If the committee

find that the employer is in the wrong and will not recognize it, a strike will be declared. But if the case be otherwise, the dispute will be settled without unnecessary trouble. While a strike is going on, no member should go back to work before the controversy is settled. If the workmen in any factory go on a strike without reporting it to the union, they go at their own risk. The agent must report the true facts to the union according to his best knowledge of the case at the time of his report. And if it be proved to the contrary afterward, he will be punished accordingly.

Whenever there is a nonunionist working with the members of the union, the union men must leave their places until the nonunionist is expelled. If any member tries to conceal a nonunionist among the unionists on account of friendship or family ties, and if he be caught, he is to be fined ten dollars. Of the ten dollars, five go to the treasury of the union and five go to the one who caught him, as reward.

A member should not himself go around to the factories and ask for work. He must report to the union the fact that he is out of work and depend on members who are working to bring intelligence from the factories where workmen are needed. Thus the headquarters of the union is also an employment office for its members. If the employer of a factory wants those who are working there to get more men for him, the workmen must report this fact at the union's office before they introduce the new men. When an employer discharges any one, he must pay him for his work even on the day of discharge if he has made as many as fifty cigars. In short, all actions must be reported at the headquarters of the union before they are taken,

The members of the Laundrymen's Union arrange so as to divide the territory for location of their laundries and for business. In San Francisco the laundries in that part of the city which the Chinese call "Spanish town" will not come into the city proper to get customers, nor those in the city proper go to "Spanish town" for their business. Thus they divide the territory for business.

The division of territory for the location of their shops is the most curious thing to one who is unaccustomed to the Chinese way of conducting business. The rules by which locations are made lawful in the eyes of the union are elaborately written in the constitution and bylaws. A laundry must be situated so that there shall be ten doors between it and any other laundry. When there is more than one house in the same yard and there is but one gate leading from the street into the yard, only one door is counted; but if there are two gates leading from the street into the yard, two doors are reckoned. A stable whose door faces the street and whose roof is gabled will be counted as one door or house, or if it has a swinging door and a level roof it is a door, but if it has a "shed-roof" and no swinging door, it counts nothing. There are many more such rules as these, but the space is too limited to write them all.

When a man wants to open a laundry and does not wish to join the union, because if he does join he cannot find a suitable location according to its rules, the unionists will combine to crush the new man out. There are instances of this description within the writer's knowledge. When the union men find out that a nonunion laundry has been started (they call it an unlawful laundry), they first tell the owner to close up his laundry. If he does not listen to them, then they meet and arrange that each union laundry is to take the clothes of one of the new laundry's customers for half price or even for nothing for a month or so. By this method they often force the new laundryman to give up his business. Of course each of the old laundries can afford to take one customer for nothing for a time, while the new one cannot afford to work for all his customers for nothing for any length of time.

The rules of the union do not permit the laundries to keep nonunionists to work, except in cases where a permanent employee leaves his work for sickness or other causes, when a nonunionist can take his place for a short time. If any member is, without his knowledge, working for a laundry which does not belong to the union, he must leave the place by giving the employer a week's notice, as soon as he is informed of the fact that he is working for a nonunionist. Only the wives of the laundry-owners can help about mending, cooking, etc., in the laundry.

The unemployed unionists can always have their board and sometimes their lodging at any laundry. But whenever they do get their board and lodging from a laundry they generally help that laundry a little. Thus they sometimes actually earn what they receive from the laundry in which they live.

When the Chinese could come into the United States at will, many joined this laundry-worker's union annually, and the union's income was so great from admission fees that each member received a dividend at the end of each year.

Furthermore the constitution and bylaws of this union provide that among the members no one shall underbid another's business; if one laundry does a family's washing for three dollars, another cannot come and do the work for two dollars and a half. The time of apprenticeship is three months, at the end of which period the apprentice receives thirty dollars from the laundry in which he serves his apprenticeship. And during these months the laundry also furnishes him board and lodging.

The Shoemakers' Union also aims to keep nonunion men from working with its members in the factories. Since a few years ago, when a factory has no work for any of its employees, it must supply them board without charge until it has work for them to do.

The Jean-Clothes Makers' Union, whose members worked somewhat on the tenement plan, that is, each doing the work in his own room, aims to keep the nonunionists from being able to get any work. Their wages are generally very high but so very irregular that their average is quite low.

Now we may sum up the subject by noting a few important points as follows: The origin of the unions in China seems to have been strongly influenced by the clan system and the ever-present strife between labor and capital. The objects of their organization are to defend labor from imposition and competition and to render mutual aid among the members of the unions by giving each other intelligence of employment and material assistance. The most interesting characteristics of these unions are their extremely specialized nature and their cooperative plan of life, wages, and work. The methods by which the unions defend their interests are, to employ force to fight against other unions, to strike against employers, and to regulate the apprenticeship system. In summing up the subject of the Chinese labor unions in America, we are to note the differences and the resemblances between the unions in China and those in America. In the United States they do not fight as they do in China. Of course, the vigilance of the American law has everything to do with this. The modification of the apprenticeship is, without doubt, influenced by the fact that most of the Chinese coming to this country do not intend to live here permanently, and by the atmosphere of American individual independence. The union members in this country endeavor to compete under American laws, and they do not specialize so much as they do in China. The resemblances are to be found in the origins, objects, and cooperative nature of the unions in this country.

It is perhaps interesting to note how some points of the unions in America differ from those in China. The reason that they do not fight so much in this country as they do in China is because the Chinese notion of law and justice and their method of enforcing the law of the land are so radically different from those of the Anglo-Saxon race. In China, to go to law is looked upon with dread, and anything that reaches the court of a magistrate is considered as a very important matter. But in this country, if they have a loud quarrel in the street they will be arrested for disturbing the peace, while in China no one thinks anything of it. Having been, perhaps, arrested and fined for some of their doings which would have been regarded with indifference by the law and custom of China, they not only refrain from fighting so much, but also endeavor to compete in the industrial arena under the American law.

In this country the shortening of the term of apprenticeship, the modification of its whole system, and the small specialization of the unions, are due first to the fact that most of the Chinese expect to go back to China as soon as they can accumulate a small fortune, and, next, to the fact that they have gained the new idea from the Americans that each individual is only responsible to himself. If a Chinaman can find regular employment he can accumulate a small fortune of a few hundred dollars in a few years, so to require him to serve a three-year term of apprenticeship is out of the question. In

China they literally compel an apprentice to do this and to do that, but in America, if they do not treat the apprentice well the latter will leave then, saying: "We are in a country where each individual is supposed to look after his own interest: even the parents have no control over their grown sons and daughters."

In closing, we might mention the fact that organization among the employers exists in China as well as in this country, though there are many employers belonging to the same union as their employees among the Chinese population in the United States.