Organizing Against Discrimination: The Chinese Hand Laundrymen Historical Niche and Ethnic Solidarity in America

Johnny Thach
Graduate Center, City University of New York
ORGANIZING AGAINST DISCRIMINATION:
THE CHINESE HAND LAUNDRYMEN HISTORICAL NICHE AND
ETHNIC SOLIDARITY IN AMERICA

by

JOHNNY THACH

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2015
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Mehdi Bozorgmehr

_________________________ __________________________________________
Date  Thesis Advisor

Matthew K. Gold

_________________________ __________________________________________
Date  Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

ORGANIZING AGAINST DISCRIMINATION:
THE CHINESE HAND LAUNDRYMEN HISTORICAL NICHE AND
ETHNIC SOLIDARITY IN AMERICA

by

Johnny Thach

Adviser: Professor Mehdi Bozorgmehr

From the late 1800s to early 1900s, hand laundries developed into the first Chinese historical niche in America in conjunction with Chinese hand laundrymen’s activism, community organization, and ethnic solidarity in response to the proliferation of anti-Chinese discriminatory ordinances and laws instigated by White laundries and government officials. Using primary sources and secondary historical examples, this thesis explores the formation of the niche through the collective actions of two Chinese hand laundrymen organizations: the Tung Hing Tong (同心堂) in California, and the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance in New York. This thesis demonstrates that not only were both organizations founded differently and for varying purposes, but they also managed two polarizing time periods and historical landscapes for Chinese hand laundrymen. Yet, their trailblazing contributions and initiatives to organize the Chinese American community led to a legacy of important developments in civil rights and American history.
Preface

Growing up, I admired my parents and the work they did. Like many Chinese immigrants in New York in the 1990s, my family owned a coin-operated laundromat. The laundromat was called “Lisa’s Laundromat,” a brightly yellow-signed place located in the outer stretches of South Ozone Park, Queens. It was named after my mother, tireless yet extraordinary, who managed the storefront and interacted with all of the customers. Every morning, just before sunrise, my father commuted across the City for more than an hour to open the store up for business. On weekdays, my mother helped to send my older brother and I off to school before going to the laundromat by noon. Meanwhile, in the afternoon, my father left the laundromat to work as a self-employed mechanic and repaired broken washers and dryers at other laundromats throughout the City. At night, he returned and closed the laundromat while my mother went home to care for the family. Managing the 16-hour workday became a daily ritual for my parents for nearly 30 years. My childhood was filled with fond memories of growing up around laundromats, which became a significant part of my own personality and character. Most importantly, the laundromat helped my parents realize their immigrant dreams, and mine’s as well.

My childhood was atypical for many other children my age. My summers and weekends were spent either repairing laundry machines with my father or working at the laundromat with my mother. By the age of 10, I had years of experience removing the front covers of washers, diagnosing jammed coin slots, learning about electrical faults due to old and broken parts, and the names of all the tools, so that I could pass them to my father. He was often working behind the machines, especially when the machine’s motor stopped working. Sometimes, when there was no parking, or when parking fares were too high in Manhattan, I watched the car while it
was double-parked just so that he could quickly make the repairs to save a few quarters.
Meanwhile, at the laundromat, I remember the 1990s radio music, Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive,” and the colorful disco beats of Amber’s “This is your Night.” There were also monotonous daytime television shows, and the many different customers from the neighborhood who toiled their large laundry bag(s) through the door, cleaned, and folded, their clothes each week. Hoping to be helpful around the laundromat, I scrubbed and cleaned the washers with a toothbrush and bleach, removed the lint from the dryers, exchanged bills for quarters and sold detergent, dryer sheets, and laundry bags when I learned how to count. Before I knew it, I had collected a whole assortment of state quarters, a hobby I picked up at the laundromat, and learned how to cleanly fold clothes. I enjoyed folding the towels the most. On days in the laundromat when there was less business, we had foldable lawn chairs, like the ones commonly found on the beach, and a small Panasonic television in the backroom filled with old VCRs.

My parents did not grow up with a background in the laundry business. Like many of the early Chinese hand laundrymen and contemporary ethnic entrepreneurs who invested into laundromats, their involvement with laundry developed after immigration. Laundry simply offered the financial means to support themselves and their family in America, and every coin collected from the machines mattered. Providing a brief context, my parents were second-wave Vietnamese refugees, commonly referred to as “boatpeople” in the 1980s following the end of the Vietnam War. They had risked their lives by fleeing the country and left behind my grandparents, the family, and all their belongings except for a few pieces of gold and jewelry to barter and exchange for a safe passage. They wished for a new home for better opportunities, a brighter future, and a safer place to raise a family. Only after years at sea and then the refugee
viii

camps did they come to the United States and settled down in New York only through sponsorship.

My father started as an automobile repair mechanic at a small gas station. One of his friends in his network, who owned a laundromat, suggested laundry repairs as a promising outlet for self-employment that offered more independence and a higher income. It was through this social tie that he decided that the laundry business offered a more appealing opportunity to support the family. He learned the ins-and-outs of washers and dryers within a few months, mostly on the job while troubleshooting repairs; even today, he continues to dream about opening a laundry-parts store, albeit still a work-in-progress, to continue his business as he has reached an older age. My mother had the most entrepreneurial experience in the family. She had often helped my grandparents with their general store in Vietnam. She also sold fruits and vegetables from street stalls to make a little bit more money. After coming to the United States, she worked as a garment worker and seamstress into the 1990s. She used the sewing machine for hours each day for minimal pay, but learned more about caring for clothes than any other person.

Over time, my family’s experiences in the laundromats grew into a special connection, as many others before and after them. Just as their work became entrenched in the laundromat, I became openly enthused and passionate about understanding the historical development and overall significance behind the occupation, and also its impact on the Chinese American community. Why did they decide to work in laundromats? And what made it special? I took these studies as a personal endeavor that I embarked on to rediscover, and better understand, my ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese identity, my family’s background, and cultural roots; I wanted to learn more about my parents' stories, all of their struggles and hardships, how and why they dedicated each day to the laundry business as they did. As my interests continued to develop
around the role and place that laundries has had on the lives and shared experiences of contemporary Chinese Americans and immigrants, I also started to track and review the historical development of Chinese laundries. To understand the intrinsic value of laundromats, it is imperative to study the context in which laundries had transformed and how they have been transfixed in Chinese American history. Along with this history is a mosaic of profound ethnic solidarity, collective action, and community organizing by Chinese hand laundrymen, which solidified and maintained this early occupational niche with the work and lives of Chinese hand laundrymen in its very epicenter.

This thesis culminated from years of undergraduate and graduate studies that focused on a multidisciplinary study of immigration and social movements. My goal and aspiration was to write about an important divergence between the past and present, bridge together the shared experiences of generations of Chinese immigrants, and explore and illuminate the storied accounts of struggle, and success, by Chinese hand laundrymen and their activism. Extraordinarily, laundry continues to be an alluring occupational niche for many immigrants and racial minority groups today albeit the old hand laundries are now laundromats and super laundries. Their long-term impact on Chinese American communities also continues to be remarkably strong, influential, and relevant for more than two centuries, one of the oldest remaining American occupational niches. Yet, laundries are still greatly unfamiliar to many contemporary scholars and academics.

As I write, there is an extraordinary amount of detail we need to still understand, and learn from the plight of Chinese hand laundrymen who organized in solidarity against significant odds to fight against discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws. Many of their struggles represented the earliest forms of labor disputes, intergroup racial conflicts, and competition. This
thesis will focus primarily on White American laundry workers and discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws in California and New York against the Chinese hand laundrymen. Nonetheless, the heart of the thesis is concentrated on the late 1800s and early 1900s in California and New York, as an exploratory study to examine how Chinese hand laundrymen utilized ethnic solidarity, collective action, and subsequently reinforced their early ethnic niche behavior to strengthen and bring together the Chinese American community against discrimination and racism.
Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to my colleagues at Binghamton University, the State University of New York, who enriched my life with a background in Asian and Asian American Studies. I am also grateful to the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) in New York City's Chinatown, where I worked as a Museum Educator. The museum’s rich history on preserving and retelling the history, heritage, culture, and diverse experiences of Chinese Americans inspired my work to accentuate Chinese hand laundrymen and their activism and ethnic solidarity. In 1984, MOCA’s first exhibition (then the “New York Chinatown History Project”) was called the “Eight Pound Livelihood: History of Chinese Laundry Workers in the United States,” and examined the decline of Chinese hand laundries and their place in community life. Coming from my family background in laundry work, I was fascinated about the enduring legacy of Chinese hand laundries and about contemporary laundromats. I read two pioneering works from tremendously influential scholars: Renqiu Yu’s “To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York” and Paul Siu’s “The Chinese hand laundrymen: A Study of Social Isolation.” Their scholarship and research provided me with the foundational basis and knowledge for this thesis. While I appreciate their ideas and contributions to the field, I believe that this research can still grow and expand. At the Graduate Center, the City University of New York, I was encouraged by Mehdi Bozorgmehr to pursue my interest in laundromats and that I offered a unique perspective. I soon learned through research that laundries held a much greater importance and deeply embedded history than I had imagined. I am very fortunate and happy to have Mehdi as my graduate advisor and to have the privilege to write about the historical trajectory of Chinese laundries.
# Table of Contents

Preface v  
Acknowledgements x  
List of Figures xii  
Introduction: The Plight of Chinese Hand Laundrymen and the Incentives to Organize 1  
Thesis Contribution and Research Questions 10  
Literature Review 14  
A Sojourner’s Dream: Historicizing the Early Chinese Immigrant Experience in America 22  
The Fruits of Labor: The Beginning of Hand Laundries 32  
Contested Grounds: Anti-Chinese Discriminatory Ordinances and the Tung Hing Tong in California 38  
For Economic Survival: Organizing the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance in New York 48  
A Family Business: The Transformation of an Ethnic Niche 60  
Conclusion: The Legacy Left Behind 64  
Bibliography 68
List Of Figures

Figure 1: Chinese Laundry Blues 1
Figure 2: Dothan Steam Laundry Advertisement 4
Figure 3: The Theory of Yee Lee 7
Figure 4: Relationship between Ethnic Niche, Hostility, and Ethnic Solidarity 21
Figure 5: A Chinese Laundry 34
Introduction: The Plight of Chinese Hand Laundrymen and the Incentives to Organize

“Now Mr. Woo was a laundryman,
In a shop with an old green door.
He’d iron all day, your linen away.
He really makes me sore.
He lost his heart to a Chinese girl,
And his laundry’s all gone wrong.
All day he’ll flirt and starch your shirt,
And that’s why I’m singing this song.”

Chinese Laundry Blues (1932)

The 1930s represented a period of tremendous turmoil and responsibility after a long century of American progress and growth. The Great Depression had devastated the American economy and resulted in the loss of millions of jobs. For the first time, the Chinese hand laundrymen in New York feared for their economic survival, and their hand laundries were...
endangered of being closed down. Their fear had stemmed not from the economic downturn, but rather from competing White American laundry workers who challenged the Chinese hand laundrymen’s business, and wanted to drive all of the Chinese hand laundries completely out of business, thereby eliminating their main laundry labor competition in New York. As a result, White American laundry workers advocated for a series of discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws that aimed to restrict and prohibit Chinese hand laundrymen from operating their hand laundries, often using citizenship status or arbitrary price increases to make laundry work disparaging for Chinese hand laundrymen. In addition, technological advances and mechanization, such as the emergence of power laundries and coin-operated launderettes, influenced a significant shift in the trade that offered greater convenience and speed over the manual work of hand laundries; as a result, mechanization heavily favored White American laundry workers who monopolized the power laundry industry and flexed their influence on the Chinese hand laundries.

By 1930, New York had the highest number of Chinese hand laundries in the United States. Out of the 30,000 Chinese Americans and immigrants who lived in New York, one out of three of the working population worked as a laundryman in the boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens (Wong and Chan, 1998). Accordingly, by the 1900s, New York’s Chinese hand laundries operated in diverse communities and did not cluster in Chinatowns. The Chinese hand laundrymen’s business often conflicted with the White Americans’ business, and the two groups frequently clashed politically, economically, and culturally. Through discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws, White American laundry workers sought to undermine the Chinese hand laundrymen’s control, power, and influence in New York, which would also allow them
full control of the prices. Yet, both sides aimed to maximize their own profits, and safeguard their businesses and collective interests.

In 1933, as tensions and anxieties intensified due to the Great Depression, the New York Council and the Board of Aldermen, who supported the White American laundries, passed a discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinance that required all self-employed, or one-person, hand laundries to pay a 25 dollars annual registration fee (Lai, McCunn, and Yung, 1988:183). This fee specifically targeted Chinese immigrant owners, mainly self-employed, and the issue would become a rallying point of contention. Moreover, the ordinance required all self-employed laundries applying for licenses to pay a 1,000 dollars bond in order to cover and insure the loss of the customers' property or clothes. It is important to note that this bond had been created in response to the disputed rumors of blatant Chinese mischievousness and deviance, such as spitting water or starch on the clothes as they ironed. When Chinese hand laundrymen ironed the clothes, the process commonly involved washing and starching the clothes. However, rumors started to circulate that Chinese hand laundrymen spit on the clothes while ironing to moisten or wet the clothes (Jung, 2005). This behavior was unhygienic and often related to spreading bacteria and viruses that led to dangerous diseases like syphilis. Accordingly, they blamed the Chinese hand laundrymen for contributing to health hazards and rampant diseases, a common justification for the passage of many discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws.
Figure 2. Dothan Steam Laundry Advertisement. A White American laundry proposed that Chinese hand laundries were unsanitary, unhealthy, and mysterious. One of the pictures above the advertisement also illustrates a Chinese laundryman spitting on the clothes while ironing. Instead of bringing your clothes to a Chinese hand laundry, you should bring your clothes to an “absolutely sanitary laundry” with “healthy American people” (Jung, 2013).

With its passage, the ordinance affected over 3,500 Chinese hand laundries in New York (Lai, McCunn, and Yung, 1988:183). At the time, the Chinese American community functioned as a quintessential bachelor society with a self-sufficient culture and ethnic economy with an immigrant concentration on high ethnic and cultural capital. Until the latter half of the 1900s, when more women and families immigrated to the United States, unmarried men represented the majority of the population in Chinatown. They operated self-employed laundries and businesses (e.g., restaurants and general stores). Due to limited economic capital, almost all of the Chinese
hand laundrymen could not afford to pay the registration fees and would have had to close down their hand laundry, lose their business, and become unable to support themselves and their family financially. In addition, a coalition of White American laundries created and applied a myriad of anti-Chinese propaganda tactics that publicized harmful stereotypes, such as a cartoon poster campaign which caricaturized Chinese hand laundrymen with queues (despite having had to cut their queues through past discriminatory laws, including the Queue Ordinance of 1873), buckteeth, and frequently spitting on clothes while ironing, symbolizing a childish and rebellious act of negligence or abhorrence towards their White American customers. Other racial caricatures like “Fu Manchu,” in 1913, played on these stereotypes to portray all Chinese men as evil, malicious, untrustworthy (Jung, 2007). Racial antipathies like the “Chinese Laundry Blues” in 1932 parodied the plight of Chinese hand laundrymen, their hand laundries, and mocked the bachelor’s way-of-life. The song also reinforced anti-Chinese sentiments and ideals popular in American culture at the time. Many of these same sentiments and ideals continued to persist during the application and defense of discriminatory anti-Chinese legislation.

Anti-Chinese propaganda targeted at Chinese hand laundrymen proliferated throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s during the period of Chinese exclusion, spreading hyper-exaggerated rumors and claims about Chinese hand laundries. The anti-Chinese propaganda was also the product of the xenophobia and racism that surfaced with the influx of the under-regulated Chinese cheap labor to the United States, the subsequent labor competition with White Americans, and the advocacy for exclusion to prevent further immigration. Many opponents of Chinese hand laundrymen argued that their hand laundries were significant health hazards that needed to be regulated and/or closed. As will be elaborated later, since many early Chinese hand laundries operated in wooden buildings, fire hazard claims also sought to derail their business
and establish discriminatory licensing laws. The gender disparity of early Chinese immigrant communities also resulted in wild accusations of sexual misconduct and misbehavior by the men. Even racially charged accounts of “Orientals” beguiling young girls to their hand laundries to commit sexual crimes “too horrible to imagine” were common (Bernstein, 1999:226). As late as 1920, the American Federation of Labor’s leader Samuel Gompers claimed that Chinese hand laundrymen enticed young White boys and girls and turned them into treacherous “opium fiends,” who were kept in the back of laundry rooms and served as the Chinese hand laundrymen’s sex slaves (Bernstein, 1999:226). Additionally, social isolation and the patriarchy (resultant of the male-dominant culture) contributed to these perverse claims of the unknown; many Chinese hand laundrymen suffered from social isolation from working long hours indoors with minor interaction beyond required for work (Siu, 1987). Lastly, stereotypes based on the Orient also symbolized the imagery of exoticism, but uncivilized culture(s).
Violence, acts of vandalism, and crime also affected the Chinese hand laundries. In this newspaper article about a recent incident in New York, it stated: “The hoodlums of the neighborhood are in the habit of vindicating the superiority of a Caucasian civilization by smashing the windows of these laundries...” Yee Lee, the Chinese laundryman who had his laundry's windows smashed reported that the windows “were always smashed at night” and despite his reports, the policemen have been unable to help (Siu, 1987).

According to a Chinese laundryman's account, robberies that threatened Chinese hand laundries and their business:

“Recently some Chinese laundries in town have been robbed. An incident even occurs in daytime! On Sunday, Feb. 16 [1940] this month, Soo Ying Laundry at 146 Leland Street was shoplifted by two Americans at 12:30 p.m., while the workers were eating their lunch. They heard the door open and one of the workers rose to welcome the supposed customers. Suddenly one robber dashed into the inner chamber and drew a pistol, threatening to shoot the workers, who were then forced to go to the toilet. The other robber searched the house and took about 20 dollars. They then fled hastily.

Charles Moy has a laundry at 31 East 57th Street. In the evening of November 21 [1940], five men came to his shop with intent to rob. One of them put his hand into the pocket of his trousers, and it seemed that he was going to fire. They threatened Moy to give them money. Moy took it calmly. But suddenly Moy took a red-hot iron and thrust it at the robber's chest and burned him immediately. It hurt so bad that the robber cried and swiftly ran out of the house.
This same group of robbers had been in another of Lum Hin at Indiana Avenue just a few hours before they went to Mr. Moy's. They tied up Lum Hin with a bed street, and took about 25 dollars and six bundles of laundry” (Siu, 1987:61).

To contest the ordinance’s passage, the Chinese hand laundrymen approached the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), the organization widely considered as the highest representative body of the Chinese American community at the time. The Chinese hand laundrymen pleaded for emergency assistance and aid to protect their collective interests and save their hand laundries. However, the CCBA, still a conservative representative of the Chinese government and by large a political extension, did not want to aggravate the White American populous and municipality who had the most power and influence. The CCBA also started to charge the Chinese hand laundrymen extra fees for legal assistance (in addition to yearly registration fees for membership). Even with the fees, the CCBA never acted against the ordinance and provided insufficient support. As a result, many Chinese hand laundrymen grew increasingly worried and troubled. In April 26, 1933, in response to the CCBA's failure to represent the collective interests of the Chinese hand laundrymen, they decided to unite and band together, and formed an independent organization that eventually surpassed the CCBA in its power and influence in the community called, “Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance,” under a democratic slogan, “A Laundry Alliance for the Laundrymen.” The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance became the first formal organization in New York to represent the Chinese hand laundrymen’s collective interests, and was specifically created to organize them against the discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinance and law that aimed to disparage their business.

As the thesis later explores, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance represented only one side of the story; the Tung Hing Tong already organized the hand laundries only in California in the late 1800s to 1900s and had been a formidable power in the community. While they share
many similarities, both organizations had many differences. Still, the common incentives for Chinese hand laundrymen behind early Chinese activism and community organizing centered on representing a marginalized racial minority group and protecting themselves, their economic interests, and their occupational niche, from discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws.

It is important to understate that Chinese hand laundries and their decision to retaliate against the majority through ethnic solidarity represented the first and earliest form of community organizing and collective action by an Asian American immigrant group, and established important constitutional and legal precedents that would support future causes and social movements. Furthermore, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance was tactfully organized in a way that represented democratic ideals and membership, a new phenomenon and form of organization in the Chinese American community. They also continued to utilize legal discourse in order to contest unfair and racially motivated claims against them, much like the Tung Hing Tung in California, even though Chinese immigrants could not testify in court. The story of Chinese hand laundrymen and their plight against discrimination is adjacent to the narrative of the Chinese American immigrant experience in fighting for a place in the community in which they had been excluded and increasingly unwanted. For the Chinese hand laundrymen, fighting the discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinance not only meant economic survival, but a form of recognition, justice, and civil rights.
Thesis Contribution and Research Questions

This thesis examines the Chinese hand laundrymen’s use of ethnic solidarity and collective action from two Chinese organizations that were formed and led by Chinese hand laundrymen in the late 1800s and early 1900s and operated in California (specifically, Oakland and San Francisco’s Chinatowns) and New York’s Chinatown, respectively: the Tung Hing Tong and the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. While past scholarly research and studies on Chinese hand laundries—although only a handful—have researched these two organizations, my primary contribution with this thesis is that I concurrently examine, compare and contrast both organizations’ unique use of ethnic solidarity and niche behavior. Studying both organizations and their similarities and differences help to create a better understanding about the major conditions and circumstances that spurred their formation. As such, this research also explores the formation of early ethnic niche behavior, community organizing, and activism in the Chinese immigrant community. These discoveries are critical to also understanding contemporary social movements and their organization.

Both the Tung Hing Tong and the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance were unique in being able to bring the Chinese hand laundrymen together, which was an achievement that was not accomplished outside of sprawling urban metropolises like California or New York. This thesis will provide critical insight about how ethnic niches are founded and emerge in America, which is often understated in contemporary research and studies. However, I found that not only were both organizations founded differently and for varying purposes, but they also managed two polarizing time periods and historical landscapes for Chinese hand laundrymen. The Tung Hing Tong, in the late 1800s to early 1900s, was affected by heightened anti-Chinese sentiments and the Chinese hand laundrymen utilized patterns of spatial clustering and the formation of the
ethnic enclave in close-knit Chinatowns for protection and safety. As racial tensions eased in the 1900s, the Chinese hand laundrymen from the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance fulfilled roles more similar to middleman minorities, and their hand laundries did not cluster only in New York's Chinatown. Consequently, a major benefit and difference was that the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance became the unifying factor in leading the Chinese hand laundrymen back to Chinatown as a centralizing hub for community organizing and activism. Social movements then grew out of this newfound ethnic solidarity that was then lacking among New York's Chinese hand laundrymen, while California, during the time, already had a strong sense of ethnic solidarity due to Chinese exclusion and host hostility. However, it is important to note that the both World War II and the Cold War critically affected the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, which aroused first a foremost display of American patriotism and then an array of Communist suspicions.

Nonetheless, both organizations’ legacies are also defined differently. The Tung Hing Tong established the first legal precedents and victories in the Chinese immigrant community, including Yick Wo v. Hopkins (1886) and In re Byron Mark (1935), which empowered many others to pursue the same type of legal discourse. To achieve these accomplishments, it is notable that they also battled being disenfranchised as Chinese immigrants. For instance, People v. Hall (1854), as explained later, barred Chinese immigrants from testifying in court and the Tung Hing Tong started the practice of collecting funds to pay for the legal fees to hire White American lawyers. The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance followed the same practices, but their legacy was marked by their political and social nature, and also the competition between Chinese hand laundries and White American power laundries. While White American laundry workers monopolized the power laundry industry at the time and subsequently dictated laundry prices, the
Chinese hand laundrymen from the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance collectively raised enough economic capital to open the Wah Kieu Wet-Wash Factory, a power laundry that was only created for the Chinese hand laundrymen in New York. Both of their stories are telling of early Chinese activism and community organizing.

Scholars can also appreciate the historical impact of Chinese hand laundries during this important chapter of Chinese American, and Asian American, history. Past research have called Chinese hand laundries as “artifacts of the past” to accentuate the impression that laundries have disappeared and ceased to exist in contemporary societies (Jung, 2005, 2007). I also argue that Chinese laundries have uniquely transformed, and continued to persist through their history of ethnic solidarity and collective action that have continued to maintain the essence of the ethnic niche. Even today, Chinese entrepreneurs continue to be heavily overrepresented in laundromats, albeit predominantly managed by both men and women and families due to the changing waves of immigration since 1965. Still, what is remarkable is that Chinese laundries remains to be very immersed, self-sufficient, have independence, and benefit from an abundance of ethnic and cultural capital within the Chinese American community that helps to maintain and continue the occupational niche. This thesis can continue to fuel future research on contemporary laundromats and stimulate a conversation about the ethnic niche, which remains to be limited.

Using primary sources and historical examples, this thesis examines Chinese hand laundrymen ethnic solidarity and historical niche in America. My research question includes: (1) Why did early Chinese immigrants choose to work in hand laundries? (2) What conditions and circumstances contributed to the establishment of the Chinese laundry ethnic niche in America? And how did host hostility emergence of discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws affect the Chinese hand laundrymen and their hand laundries? (3) What role did ethnic solidarity have
on the ethnic niche in the Chinese hand laundrymen's efforts to protect their collective interests and appeal the ordinances and laws? (4) How did the Tung Ting Tong and the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance differ from each other? (5) What historical impact did the organization of the Tung Hing Tong and Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance have on maintaining the ethnic niche in the Chinese American community?
Literature Review

This thesis focuses on the formation of ethnic niches, which are the occupations and industries in the labor market in which an ethnic or immigrant group is overrepresented. Ethnic groups and immigrants cluster in a limited number of these occupations and industries that subsequently fortify the ethnic niche for one group, while decreasing the influence for other groups. Therefore, it is also important to note that the fortification is a consequence, and in response to, host hostility that increases due to “niching.” Ethnic niche formation requires that an ethnic group account for a greater percentage of persons employed in a line of work than their share of the overall labor force (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996). Niching can then be understood through an ownership basis and ethnic groups are overrepresented mainly as entrepreneurs in self-employed businesses or as co-ethnic employees who collectively own a business. Many ethnic groups continue to cluster in distinct types of occupations that are heavily concentrated by other members of their group, creating a network-based connection that encourages others to also join the ethnic niche (Waldinger, 1994; Light and Gold, 2000). Researchers have also found that niching occurs when the concentration of immigrants of a certain origin in given jobs becomes unusually high (Model, 1993; Waldinger, 1993). Ethnic niches persist through self-employment and co-ethnic ownership, concentration of co-ethnic workers and ethnic entrepreneurs, and job specialization (Logan, Alba, and McNulty, 1994). Typically, ethnic niches utilize the immigrant’s shared group characteristics that help them to specialize in a particular occupation or industry, particularly through entrepreneurship, to create an advantageous position in the labor market and jobs that would normally be neglected or abandoned by other groups of individuals (Waldinger, 1994). Specifically, the growth of ethnic
niches can develop from three sources: ethnic economies, ethnic enclaves, and middleman minorities.

Ethnic economies consist of “the self-employed, their co-ethnic employees, and unpaid family members,” which provide an alternative source of employment separate and independent from the general labor market (Bonacich and Modell, 1980; Light and Gold, 2000). Since a primary characteristic of ethnic economies is the detachment from the general labor market, Light and Gold (2000) proposed to the use of “ethnic ownership economies” to further differentiate between co-ethnic and self-employment and the general labor market. Subsequently, ethnic groups and immigrants use shared commonalities, networks, language, and available resources to gain economic advantages, including income, social mobility, and economic opportunities, through ethnic economies. Co-ethnic concentrations and overrepresentation in clusters of industries also reinforce the ethnic economy model and supports a pattern of prevailing ethnic-controlled businesses and specialized labor (Light and Bonacich, 1988; Zhou and Logan, 1989; Logan, Alba, and McNulty, 1994). Furthermore, these co-ethnic businesses are commonly managed by ethnic entrepreneurs who speak the same minority language and self-sustain their business (Reitz, 1980; Ward, 1987).

Ethnic entrepreneurs are self-employed owners who manage their own business within the boundaries of the ethnic economy. Ethnic groups and immigrants, in particular, have a strong tendency to create their own jobs through specific opportunities in the labor market, especially when opportunities are limited in the general labor market. Opportunity structures, group characteristics, and ethnic strategy are critical factors that help to explain ethnic entrepreneurship (Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, 1990). Opportunity structures are developed from host society and market conditions, the availability of jobs, and resources. Particularly, migratory flows are
highly correlated with conditions in the host society that pulls them to immigrate to a certain destination vis-à-vis factors that push them to leave their native country. As soon as immigrants arrive in the host society, opportunities are evaluated in order to find the best jobs available in the labor market. These market conditions include service-oriented jobs that supply a demand, but also the opportunities available based on resources. More specifically, ethnic groups and immigrants cluster into distinct types of occupations to meet a labor demand from the work that natives reject, as well as fulfilling the supply of goods and services needed by the general population. In addition, groups are forced to accept these jobs when available, particularly in service industries. As a result, they become heavily concentrated in undesirable jobs in the labor market (Waldinger, 1993; Waldinger, 1994; Light and Gold, 2000).

Both disadvantages and contingent circumstances such as discriminatory taxes, laws, and restrictions, play a large role in limiting the number of opportunities available. The disadvantage thesis can help to explain how ethnic groups and immigrants are pushed into ethnic entrepreneurship as a direct result of discrimination, host hostility, and market competition that bars them all other alternatives (Mata and Pendakur, 1999; Fregetto, 2004; Brettell and Alstatt, 2007). Other labor market disadvantages, such as human capital, can further restrict the group’s entrance into the mainstream labor market (Brettell and Alstatt, 2007; Min and Bozorgmehr, 2003). Particularly for ethnic groups and immigrants, ethnic entrepreneurship is a proficient apparatus to create advantageous circumstances to counter disadvantages in human capital. Using a cultural thesis, ethnic groups and immigrants can utilize class or ethnic resources and cultural and social capital to develop business patterns that create advantages through ethnic entrepreneurship. Co-ethnic networks, ethnic solidarity, and mutual aid, such as the traditional credit-rotating system, also play an intricate role in supporting ethnic entrepreneurial behavior.
Family labor is also an increasingly valuable source of capital that benefits ethnic entrepreneurs in maximizing returns for ethnic groups. The ethnic niche is a mechanism for coping as a group with being blocked from the mainstream labor market and the disadvantages in the host society. For instance, ethnic entrepreneurship embodies a culture of human emancipation and independence (Logan, Alba, and Stults, 2003). In order to overcome these disadvantages, foreign-born immigrants are more apt than the native-born to start their own business (Min and Bozorgmehr, 2003). Self-employed businesses reside in ethnic niches and often represent the best option for immigrants isolated from the mainstream labor market (Light and Rosenstein, 1995).

Group characteristics are also important factors in examining ethnic entrepreneurship, specifically in migratory flows. Immigrants do not select host societies at random; in contrast, they are likely to pick a host society based on labor opportunities and networks. Many immigrants cluster into specific occupations based on shared group characteristics: experience, skills, language proficiency, and education (Model, 1993; Morawska, 1990; Lieberson, 1980; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Waldinger, 1996). For example, low skilled, low language proficiency, and uneducated immigrants with the least capital are the most likely to cluster in the least desirable jobs while the latter have better chances immersing into the mainstream labor market. Immigrants, particularly those in the least desirable jobs, tend to adapt to make their conditions better and more beneficial. As more immigrants cluster, their established presence in a given labor market activity results in an occupational specialization, which can then become a group identity or stereotype.

Ethnic strategy influence ethnic groups and immigrants to adjust their entrepreneurial business to accomplish goals and adapt to the environment and around discrimination and other
aversive circumstances for social mobility (Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, 1990). As one general example, early ethnic entrepreneurs were motivated by human emancipation and the ability to be “one’s own boss” that led them to commit to self-employed labor (Logan, Alba, and Stults, 2003). These motivating factors are different from working as a co-ethnic employee as well, as self-employment offers a wide array of responsibilities but also increased control and independence. However, co-ethnic businesses gain advantages that come with shared responsibilities, increased flexibility in schedules, and co-management.

Ethnic enclaves, like Chinatowns, are distinct spatial concentrations of ethnic groups and immigrants. Early researchers described ethnic enclaves using the dual market theory and labor market segmentation (Averitt, 1968; Sanders and Nee, 1987). Subsequently, ethnic groups that live and work in ethnic enclaves fill secondary labor market occupations with low wages and human capital to meet permanent labor demands, chronic needs of modern industrialized societies. Recent studies examined the ethnic enclave economy bounded by both co-ethnicity and location (Wilson and Portes, 1980; Portes and Bach, 1985; Zhou, 2004). The ethnic enclave includes ethnic entrepreneurs that employ co-ethnic workers and a spatial clustering of enterprises in a location (Portes, 1981; Light and Gold, 2000). In sharing the enclave with other ethnic groups, ethnic entrepreneurs have the potential for an alternative form of social mobility and access to economic advantages (Sanders and Nee, 1987; Light and Gold, 2000; Zhou, 2004).

Chinese laundries are not bounded by the ethnic enclave economy and have operated in diverse surrounding neighborhoods and communities, rather than spatial clustering. There are several reasons for this. Spatial clustering conversely affects and therefore harms the business, creates competition with other laundries to attract local customers, and increases disadvantages. A core problem with the enclave economy, however, as expressed by researchers of ethnic
enclaves is that they are “mobility traps” for ethnic groups and immigrants, particularly for co-ethnic employees (Logan, Alba, Stults, 2003). As more ethnic groups funnel into the secondary labor market, they find that their work presents minimal returns. Furthermore, while living in ethnic enclaves, there is little desire to assimilate into the host society, take time to learn the English language, or gain professional skills for social mobility. With this realization, ethnic groups generally live in ethnic enclaves as a stepping-stone to increasingly gain enough resources before moving elsewhere, primarily self-employed in entrepreneurial businesses that can create better financial outcomes and stability than as co-ethnic employees. The unique characteristic of Chinese laundries lies with its ability to thrive even outside of ethnic enclaves yet still continuously using the ethnic enclave as cultural hubs to organize and arrange meetings for the Chinese hand laundrymen.

As Chinese hand laundrymen’s niching typically extended to diverse outside communities rather than spatial clustering and ethnic enclaves, I argue that they should be considered as middleman minorities. Middleman minorities are ethnic groups and immigrants that assume an intermediary position in the labor market between the dominant group of elites and the subordinate masses and in-between the status gap (Bonacich, 1973; Light and Gold, 2000; Zhou, 2004; Min, 2012). Middleman minorities not only encompass group characteristics and networks, but also involve the labor market. Early research has noted that middleman minorities are sojourners that have strong ethnic ties and cultural capital, but low levels of assimilation to the host society (Bonacich, 1973). However, this has been contested recently as more immigrants are not sojourners, but are choosing to permanently stay in the host society. Middleman minorities are economically driven, particularly to take advantage of the opportunity structure and maximize economic profitability. These ethnic groups and immigrants, through
clustering in entrepreneurial and commercial occupations, create an ethnic niche transitioned from deserted mainstream retail or service industries previously managed by the dominant group of elites to service, primarily low-income communities to provide goods and services to members of another ethnic group and away from enclaves (Light and Bonacich, 1988; Light and Gold, 2000; Min 2002; Zhou, 2004). Middleman minorities commonly live in neighborhoods and residential areas outside of their customer base and do not share ethnic ties with their customers. Consequently, as Chinese hand laundries thrived through ethnic economies and ethnic entrepreneurship, many of their customers were White American, which subsequently created angst with the White American laundries.

Middleman minorities form as reactions to host hostility, prejudice, and discrimination encountered in their daily lives (Bonacich and Modell, 1980; Min, 1996, 2012). Forced segregation subject many minorities into middleman occupations as survival mechanisms (Bonacich and Modell, 1980; Turner and Bonacich, 1980; Zenner, 1991). Moreover, ethnic solidarity among the ethnic group is strengthened to create advantages, but in a sense also furthers social isolation. Another subsidiary effect is the reliance on family labor, often working long hours with little to no pay and help to minimize labor costs and increase economic profitability managed through trust. In some cases ethnic solidarity, particularly through commercial occupations, is a direct result from host hostility and structural discrimination (Bonacich and Modell, 1980; Turner and Bonacich, 1980; Zenner, 1991). As such, Hechter (1975) proposed a reactive-solidarity model that could help to better understand that ethnic solidarity occurs in reaction to host hostility and the relative exploitation by the majority. Furthermore, reactive solidarity stems from a cultural division of labor or an apparent pattern of
structural discrimination. The greater the inequality and disadvantage from this discrimination result in a greater level of solidarity.

Figure 4. Relationship between the Ethnic Niche, Hostility, and Ethnic Solidarity.

As illustrated through the course of this thesis, early ethnic niche behavior defined the Chinese immigrant experience. However, as niching occurred, host hostility also increased and specifically targeted Chinese hand laundries through discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws. Then, ethnic solidarity and collective action strengthened the Chinese American community and allowed for organizations to create a framework to defend their business and contest claims to appeal predatory legislation. Ethnic solidarity refers to “the extent to which members of an immigrant-ethnic group use ethnic collective action to protect economic, welfare, and political interests” and is commonly based on “collective or political identity” (Min, 2008:3). Ethnic solidarity is then interconnected with niching as ethnic niches encounter economic competition and intergroup conflicts that threaten their business and rely on collective action in order to protect shared interests.
A Sojourner’s Dream: Historicizing The Early Chinese Immigrant Experience In America

“The Chinese laundryman does not organize himself to select the laundry work as his life-long career, and his sojourn in America is for one single purpose—to make a fortune or to make enough money to improve his economic well-being at home” (Siu, 1987).

Early Chinese immigration to the United States initiated through a series of events in the 1800s. The Chinese were the first Asian group to immigrate in significant numbers to the United States (Min, 2006:110). Early Chinese immigrants were predominantly sojourners, who never intended to stay and believed their time was temporary, and had planned to return home to China after they made enough money and savings from their hard work. Consequently, most of their income was sent back home as remittances to support their family and provide financial assistance. In the mid-1800s, the first Chinese emigrated from the Guangdong province and villages from the Pearl River Delta in southern China, traveling miles across the Pacific Ocean in pursuit of dreams. It is also important to understand that they left China as a result of a myriad of extenuating push factors that included political, economic, and social strife. Push and pull factors are commonly used in international migration to illustrate the extenuating factors that cause immigrants to leave their native country (or “push”) such as disadvantages and problems, and the factors that cause immigrants to come to a new country (or “pull”) that includes advantages and opportunities.

The Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), and other forms of European and American imperialism and Western intervention at the time, were critical push factors that contributed to a collapsing Qing Dynasty and a weakened state that struggled to adapt, and overcome the abrupt changes through Westernization. The First Opium War (1839-1842) was fought between Great Britain and China over conflicts with trade and the sale of opium, which Qing Chinese officials aimed to regulate. China overwhelming lost the war and was forced into
free trade and had to open its markets to imbalanced and virulent trade agreements and Western products, such as textiles that devalued silk and other Chinese industries. The Treaty of Nanjing led to the succession of Hong Kong, treaty ports, war reparations, and the creation of spheres of influence. Capitalist interests predominantly drove the developments arising from the Opium War. The Second Opium War (1856-1860) involved European and American agents, including Great Britain, France, Russia, and the United States, and worked to expand policies implemented by the first war such as legalizing opium trade, expanding coolies, and increasing unilateral trade agreements. Ultimately, China’s economy was significantly destabilized through Western interventionism. These wars resulted in China's defeat to Great Britain and other Western powers (e.g., France, Russia, and the United States), which culminated to China signing the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842.

The treaty led to the succession of Hong Kong, a city ripe with ports and markets, and the loss of China’s control of maritime trade and commerce, the emergence of unilateral trade agreements that favored Western traders and commerce, new treaty ports, an array of economically-crippling Chinese war reparations, and the creation of the titular “spheres of influence” that greatly divided and destabilized China. As China's state grew increasingly unstable, raised taxes and land appropriations directed at Chinese peasants and farmers created widespread agitation and uneasiness. Furthermore, the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) that ensued contributed to further conflict and the loss of millions of lives, one of the deadliest civil wars recorded in history. Furthermore, jobs were scarce, and people could not earn nearly enough to support their family and kin. Even worst, famine and droughts had devastated the land, destroyed crops and agriculture, created pervasive hysteria, starvation and hunger, and
significantly deteriorated living conditions in China. For example, the Cholera Epidemic (1821), Hebei Province Earthquake (1830), the Great Famine (1876-1879).

Glimmering from the depths of the water basins in California, gold was discovered in 1848. The discovery of gold prompted the Chinese immigration to the United States from the mid-1800s to the end of the Nineteenth Century. The news of gold first surfaced in the Hong Kong ports from sailors who told lavish tales of fortune and “streets paved with gold” and called California in Cantonese, “Gam Saan” or Gold Mountain. The tales quickly spread throughout China, giving a sense of hope for people affected by war and strife. Soon, Chinese immigrants perceived the United States as a great land of opportunity. Western recruitment agencies created a lucrative business to lure and entice Chinese laborers to migrate and work in the United States as contract laborers. Though cheap and exploitable labor and had drawn comparisons with “coolie labor,” many researchers and academics argue that these Chinese migrants were free to make this decision to go to the United States and should not be treated as coolie labor, separate from coolies and indentured servants used in Cuba. However, the stereotype of Chinese migrants and laborers as coolie labor would subsequently influence their systematic exclusion. Christian missionaries also convinced many Chinese immigrants to come to the United States and immerse themselves in Western culture and ideals, which were thought to be superior at the time. Most importantly, the money advertised was adequate enough to help feed or even save their families amid a destabilized China. Consequently, in the next three decades, over 225,000 Chinese immigrants came to the United States in search for opportunity, jobs, and survival (Min, 2006:110).

Early Chinese immigrants were primarily laborers. Around 90 percent of all immigrants were men, mainly because of enduring cultural norms and Confucian principles that mandated
women to stay with their husband’s family to care for them and maintain the household until the men return (Min, 2006:110). In addition, gold mining was perceived as a masculine form of labor that required brute strength and ultimately discriminated women’s utility. Crossing the Pacific Ocean was also believed to be potentially dangerous for women and required endurance and tenacity to survive the voyage. Chinese women did come to the United States, but in very low numbers. During the California Gold Rush, Chinese immigrants worked as miners in search for gold although many failed to find gold and were subject to economic exploitation. Simultaneously, the term, “bachelor societies,” was also used to describe early Chinese immigrants and referred to the overwhelmingly high number of men who came to the United States in relation to the low number of women. Subsequently, the apparent gender disparity resulted in a male-dominant culture.

As early as 1850, discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws aimed to discourage competition with White Americans and were imposed on Chinese laborers, such as the Foreign Miners Tax of 1850 and 1852. These laws originated from incidents with Irish and German miners treating their Latino and Chinese counterparts as foreigners and wanted to dissuade them from coming to the United States. The tax imposed aimed at demolishing the economic benefits received by the two immigrant groups from mining and widely affected Latino miners who were forced out of the mines. The 1852 law directly affected Chinese miners who subsequently became the largest non-White group of miners and the direct competition to the White majority. The tax required a payment of three dollars each month, at a time when Chinese miners made approximately six dollars a month. Consequently, Chinese miners struggled to pay the tax and were persecuted as a result of the law as well as victimized by fake tax collectors who sought to
terrorize the immigrant community. By 1860, the mining industry became less profitable or rewarding, particularly for Chinese immigrants.

As gold also slowed down and dried up, many turned to the railroad industry to help build the Transcontinental Railroad and were recruited by the Central Pacific Railroad. At the height of the railroad's construction in 1868, over 12,000 Chinese immigrants worked on the railroad and represented 80 percent of the workforce. However, working on the railroads presented dangerous working and living conditions for Chinese laborers. Many lost their lives working in hazardous and fragile terrain as they used dynamite and explosives to blast holes through the mountains before laying down the tracks. Chinese laborers also worked through high temperatures and unbearable heat during the summer season, and the blistering cold during the winter, especially through snowstorms, torrential rain, deep in caverns. Often, they were covered in tar, black from the top to bottom, including their face and body. Lastly, when the railroad was completed in the West, Golden Spike Day of 1869, which celebrated the last spike to connect the railroad, excluded all Chinese laborers who were immediately discharged, never recognized, and sent home.

While early Chinese immigrants were initially welcomed to the United States, the 1870s and 1880s embodied a period of escalated host hostility and racism that ultimately contributed to the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. A long wave of deadly massacres, lynch mobs, and riots intensified towards Chinese laborers and immigrants shortly after 1865. These acts of violence led to a great deal of casualties and instability through the United States. During the fragile period of time after the American Civil War, racially motivated incidents involving Chinese immigrants represented unfavorable cases that endangered the United States’ stability and newfound government. For example, in 1862, the Joint Select Committee of the California
Legislature found that White American tax collectors murdered 88 Chinese miners. In 1865, Montana and Idaho barred Chinese laborers and immigrants from coming into the states. The Chinese Massacre of 1871 in Los Angeles, California involved more than 500 men who attacked, robbed, lynched, and murdered Chinese laborers and immigrants. In 1873, White American labor unions drove Chinese laborers and immigrants out of Silver City, Idaho. In 1877, Chico, California also experienced anti-Chinese violence. In 1880, 25 Chinese miners were massacred in Roslyn, Washington. Although Chinese exclusion aimed to deter further violence against Chinese laborers and immigrants, the number of incidents increased after 1882.

Chinese immigrants severely lacked constitutional and legal rights and protections. The 1790 Naturalization Act prevented all non-Whites (or non-free Whites), including Chinese laborers and immigrants, from naturalizing and becoming a United States citizen. Ratified in 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment only granted birthright citizenship for “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” but continued to leave out naturalization rights for immigrants until the 1900s. The applicability of the Equal Protection Clause will continue to be fiercely contested as inapplicable to the Chinese. Additionally, an early form of judicial expression of racial nativism occurred with California Supreme Court’s 1854 decision in People v. Hall (1854) and the court ruled that Chinese testimony was inadmissible as evidence against all Whites, and therefore unfit for American citizenship because the Chinese race are “people whom nature has marked as inferior, and who are incapable of progress or intellectual development beyond a certain point (Torok, 1996).” With In re Ah Yup (1878), a lower federal court ruled that Chinese immigrants were not eligible for naturalization, because they were “neither White nor of African descent.” The decision was further codified in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, and thereafter applied to the entire United States (Torok, 1996). As a result of their lack of constitutional and
legal rights, Chinese immigrants represented easy targets for continued discrimination and were
tremendously disadvantaged throughout the 1800s and early 1900s.

Two major stereotypes also prevailed during the early Chinese American immigrant
experience and continued to affect Chinese hand laundrymen until the latter 1900s. The “Yellow
Peril” stereotype started in the 1870s when White Americans in California called for the end of
“filthy yellow hordes” or Orientals from China although the term would not be coined until the
end of the 1800s. This stereotype over-exaggerated that the in-migration of Chinese laborers and
migrants overshadowed the White American population in the United States and would
eventually seize the land and all the jobs for themselves. The anti-American nature of this
stereotype was also driven by conceptions of Chinese laborers and immigrants as criminals,
deceptive, filthy, and backwards or savage. For example, during the 1900s, the “Anti-Disease”
campaign by a White American laundry trade journal warned about the “disease of the 'Yellow
Peril” and advertised racist caricatures against Chinese hand laundrymen (and black
washerwomen) (Wang, 2002:65). The American public continued to depict Chinese hand
laundrymen as cultural threats and deviants, cheap labor, and job competitors who could not
assimilate in the United States. The extreme fear and anxiety about the loss of White purity and a
White American majority caused a lot of nativist tensions to surface in 1865-1882. Many White
Americans saw the rise of hordes of Chinese laborers and immigrants as the opportunity to
defend the United States against dangerous non-Whites. The “Perpetual Foreigner” stereotype
was another racially motivated depiction of Chinese laborers and migrants that categorized them
as inassimilable and could never become American. The other half of this illustration was the
assumption that Chinese laborers and immigrants were only in the United States to reap financial
gains and profits, opportunistic and homogeneous, and did not care about the United States or
working equally with White Americans. Animosity-driven relations between White Americans and Chinese laborers and immigrants accentuated a polarizing relationship between the two groups that often led to conflicts.

“Mongolians, no matter how long they may stay in the United States, will never lose their identity as a peculiar and separate people. They will never amalgamate with persons of European descent; and so, as they multiple, as thousands are added to thousands, until they may be counted by millions, we shall have in the United States a separate and distinct people, an empire of China within the North American Republic” (Gold, 2012:17).

Ronald Takaki (1989) defined a terminology referred to as “racial uniform.” Racial uniform underlines that many assumptions by White Americans utilized a racial typecast based on exterior characteristics, such as skin color, tone of their voice and accent, hairstyle, and clothing attire. These exterior characteristics made it difficult, especially for Chinese laborers and immigrants, to assimilate into American society in contrast to their European immigrant counterparts.

By the 1800s, the Irish and Chinese remained the two major immigrant groups in the United States. When economic and industrial developments completed in the American West, labor competition intensified between the two groups as well as racial tensions (Wang, 2004:60). With the railroads completed, many Irish immigrants who once settled in the East Coast started to migrate to the West and settle in major states like California. Many became politically active and aimed to solidify their political power and status, especially during Reconstruction after the American Civil War. Some Irish immigrants looked to attack Chinese laborers and immigrants and largely advocated for the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. While the Irish populated the east coast, they started to also migrate west after the railroad’s construction, and were more politically active. The Workingmen’s Party of California was established in the late
1870s by Dennis Kearney, who was an Irish immigrant appealed to anti-Chinese sentiments and produced and popularized the slogan, “The Chinese Must Go!” and advocated for Chinese exclusion by electing candidates to state office. In Thomas Nast’s cartoon, a famous depiction involved an armed Irish mob rallying behind the anti-Chinese message of “The Chinese Question” involving what to do with Chinese immigrants. Ironically, the Workingmen's Party would be one of the first labor political organizations in America. High unemployment rates and economic recession devastated working-class White Americans. Anti-Chinese meetings, town halls, and lynch mobs drove many Chinese immigrants away from their homes and communities. Attempting to produce a view that Chinese were employed over White Americans, and that Chinese laborers and migrants were harmful to the United States economy and job prospects, Kearney promised to rid California of its Chinese laborers and migrants through his hate-filled speech.

Many White Americans saw that the continued immigration of Chinese laborers presented an intergroup racial conflict with the same magnitude and severity as African slaves and Native Americans. With the conclusion of the American Civil War, the United States was still a fragile country. Violent outbreaks had the potential of descending the United States back into war and conflict. Consequently, 1865-1882 was also a testing time for the United States government and its expanded federalist and centralized powers to be able to demonstrate decisive power, leadership, and authority to quell the challenges, which correlated with anti-Chinese sentiments and xenophobia. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act significantly limited immigration for the next 60 years until the passage of the Magnuson Act of 1942 and closed the doors for laborers, preventing them from entering into the country. The Act was also the first and only restrictive immigration law passed by the United States that specifically barred Chinese
immigration into the country. During this exclusionary period, Chinese laborers settled into ethnic enclaves, such as the establishment of Chinatowns in centers of immigration, and created self-sustaining entrepreneurial and ethnic businesses although many were heavily involved in emasculate forms of labor such as hand laundries and general stores. For the Chinese hand laundrymen, this would also represent the beginning of establishing the ethnic niche. The passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act led to an unprecedented level of collective action in the form of legal battles and court cases through political and social organization.
The Fruits of Labor: The Beginning of Hand Laundries

Hand laundries emerged as a major occupation for the Chinese immigrant community and symbolized early ethnic niche behavior (Jung, 2007). As early as 1850 in California, Chinese immigrants began to replace Native American or Mexican women (as well as indentured servants and African slaves) in the laundry business. In 1851, the first Chinese hand laundry in San Francisco opened for business. Compared to other economic opportunities at the time, self-employed wages were not higher, hours were longer, and hand laundries were seen as feminine or emasculate labor. Rapidly expanding cities provided a critical need for cheap labor for the least desirable and unskilled jobs, such as laundry work, creating an opportunity for Chinese immigrants, who were excluded from the general labor market. Furthermore, working in hand laundries still provided enough funds to support themselves and even their family back home. Most importantly, hand laundries grew as a Chinese-American phenomenon. With no evidence of the Chinese hand laundrymen having experience in washing or laundering clothes in China, hand laundries became their first long-term occupation in the United States.

Early Chinese hand laundries also emerged in common occupations for Chinese immigrants at the time, including the mining and railroad industries. As Chinese, European, and White American miners sought for gold, their clothes were often dirtied from the Western frontier’s rocky and mountainous terrain. Consequently, many of the earliest Chinese hand laundries were established in mining sites to meet the high demand for clean clothes (Wang, 2004). As such, miners were willing to pay relatively high prices for washing and drying since many were not willing to do the work themselves due to the gendered and cultural stereotypes. Although not exactly a lucrative business at the time, since Chinese immigrants had many other opportunities for work, they learned the skills and trade that would soon become imperative in
the future as jobs became scarce and economic alternatives decreased once the railroad was completed and the mining industry was no longer profitable or dried up.

Starting a hand laundry did not take substantial capital. Chinese immigrants needed a stove, a trough for washing, and drying, sleeping space, and a store sign. As one Chinese laundryman described his work:

“A lifetime spent sorting, soaking, boiling, washing, scrubbing, rinsing, rubbing, starching, drying, ironing, pressing, folding, packaging, collecting and delivering could break the health of even the strongest laundry worker. There was an established process for all laundry. Soiled clothes were marked to identify individual customers. Next, everything was sorted into piles of linens, cottons, whites and coloured fabrics. The laundry was soaked to soften fabrics and loosen dirt. Many items would then be boiled to remove ground-in dirt and stubborn stains. Next came scrubbing, brushing and rubbing to remove grease; rinsing to remove impurities and soap; blueing to whiten garments; and spraying to dampen the dry clothing before it was ironed. Year-in and year-out, day-in and day-out, from dawn to dusk, this repetitive work continued. It required tremendous mental endurance and extreme patience” (Jung, 2009:125-126).

Laundry work also did not require high-skilled labor or language proficiency; only a basic understanding of the English language was needed to communicate with customers. Chinese hand laundrymen often used cultural institutions, such as rotating credit associations, to raise enough economic capital to start a hand laundry, which were either individual-owned or a partnership between a few individuals. Hand laundries were especially popular with laborers, and needed the least capital to start relative to restaurants and general stores, which were predominantly owned by Chinese merchants.
Another crucial factor that led many Chinese immigrants to the hand laundry business was their limited-English proficiency and poor language skills, and cultural capabilities to interact with White Americans. Even though many of the customers, or the regulars, of Chinese hand laundries were White American, the benefit of working at a hand laundry was that the work did not require a high degree of interaction with their customers. Consequently, Chinese hand laundrymen were able to work with ease and comfort, and invest fully in the trade without feeling too disadvantaged. Chinese immigrants also believed that self-employment in small
businesses or ethnic entrepreneurship avoided direct confrontation and competition with Americans. In other words, hand laundries provided greater independence through self-employment rather than working as laborers under American employers who were prejudiced against the Chinese. For many Chinese immigrants who could not find jobs because of racial prejudice and discrimination, hand laundries also represented economic survival.

Chinese laundries were labor-intensive and rigorous jobs, physically demanding and required strength and endurance. Chinese hand laundrymen worked and slept in the hand laundries. Typically, they worked 18 hours each day from early in the morning to late at night with minimum breaks in-between. Others worked 24 hours and exchanged shifts with other Chinese hand laundrymen and rotated days for break. Labor laws at the time also prevented workers from working on Sundays. In one account:

“Work in a laundry started early on Monday morning. One partner washed while the other did the ironing. The man who ironed did not start until Tuesday, as the clothes were not ready for him to begin until then so he had Sundays and Mondays off. The man who did the washing finished Friday night, and so he was off on Saturday and Sunday. Each man worked only five days a week, but from seven in the morning till midnight” (Jung, 2007).

By sharing the facility, many Chinese hand laundrymen were able to collectively divide the work and split the expensive costs of rent. Since the work required handling 8-pound steel irons and standing up long hours to iron shirts, Chinese hand laundrymen suffered arm, leg, and back pains and all types of health-related problems while working inside tiny spaces in basements of old buildings. Irons were first heated on a hot charcoal furnace, and then the laundryman would grab a hold of the iron and use it on clothes until it cooled. Eventually, blisters from handling the irons became permanent calluses on the palms of their hands. Packaged clothes could have also been heavy and difficult to transport in large numbers. They also worked in high temperatures, dense
air and a lack of ventilation, wet floors, and with dirty clothes. As a New York laundryman recorded in the 1900s:

“When I first handled the dirty clothes, I could not take the smell. I almost threw up. Father saw my reaction and comforted me, “Take your time. You know, picking up these clothes is even worst than moving corpses back in China. I never mentioned the unhealthy conditions of the laundry in my letters to China. Knowing those things would not do the family any good back home. Frankly, I was busy from dawn to dusk. How could I find time to write about all these things? I always wrote ‘I am well and healthy here. No need to worry.’ It didn’t matter whether I was well or sick. Being here, you had to endure.

The irons weighted eight pounds each. When the iron was hot enough, you took it off the stove where it was heated and ironed until it cooled down. Then you heated it up again. After ironing all day, marks would appear on your palm. Blisters would turn to calluses so thick that even if you cut them open with a knife would not bleed… Many Chinese had health problems after only three years of laundry work. Some caught TB while others had ulcers, internal bleeding, or swollen feet. My father never wrote about his bad health to his wife back in China. Laundry work was a difficult life but the Chinese endured it because they wanted to send money back to their homeland” (Jung, 2007).

For many Chinese hand laundrymen, they suffered from social isolation, loneliness, and separated from their family back home in China (Siu, 1987). Consequently, many suffered from physical, mental, and emotional health concerns.

Despite all the disadvantages, hand laundries remained one of the few available occupations for Chinese immigrants and quickly grew into an early ethnic niche in the community. The quick establishment of the ethnic economy in early Chinatowns in which Chinese hand laundrymen centralized and concentrated their work in hand laundries helped to establish this early ethnic niche behavior. Their association through the hand laundries also reinforced shared ethnic characteristics and collective interests. Since many of the early Chinese immigrants came from the same region of China, they shared the common dialectical and linguistic tongue and cultural beliefs. While many Chinese hand laundrymen were self-employed, they were also immensely entrepreneurial and invested in co-ethnic labor and
collaborative work, shared ethnic networks, in order to increase economic advantages and survival.
Contested Grounds: Anti-Chinese Discriminatory Ordinances and the Tung Hing Tong in California

Inside the confines of Chinatowns, many Chinese immigrants relied on ethnic associations for ethnic solidarity and collective support, strength, and social capital, including crafts and labor guilds that consolidated common-interest groups like shoemakers or cigarmakers (Mancall and Johnson, 2007:172). These associations became community anchors and brought together members with shared characteristics. Starting in the 1860s, the Tung Hing Tong, the Chinese hand laundrymen’s guild, was the most effective, organized, and had grown to become the most powerful and influential in California. Their origins stemmed from San Francisco and Oakland’s Chinese immigrant community in budding Chinatowns.

The Tung Hing Tong was formed to create a sense of order and collaboration among the Chinese hand laundrymen—who often worked independently—by decreasing co-ethnic competition, standardizing prices, and raising funds by collecting membership dues. For example, the Tung Hing Tong helped to increase each Chinese hand laundry’s chances of success by dividing up the neighborhoods between its members. In San Francisco, Chinese hand laundrymen from the Tung Hing Tong did not open their business closer than ten doors to another neighboring laundry to avoid co-ethnic competition with another Chinese hand laundry business, and therefore maintained a mutual trust and understanding in the community (Praetzellis, 2004:245). However, Chinese hand laundrymen also could not go into business with a White American partner, highlighting the tensions that subsisted during the Chinese exclusionary era (Praetzellis, 2004:245). These tactics demonstrated early forms of ethnic solidarity that would be highlighted in the social and cultural history of Chinese laundries. By
In 1870, there were an estimated 3,000 Chinese hand laundrymen in California and increased to 5,000 in 1880, creating a significant ethnic niche in the laundry business (Zhao, 2009).

In the late 1800s to early 1900s, the Tung Hing Tong significantly transformed in response to discriminatory ordinances and laws, which endangered Chinese hand laundries in California. The first anti-Chinese laundry ordinance was enacted in 1873 amid high unemployment rates and fierce hostility towards the Chinese hand laundrymen. San Francisco’s municipal government passed a discriminatory ordinance that penalized Chinese hand laundrymen 15 dollars, or 60 dollars a year, for not using horses or horse-drawn delivery vehicles. Instead of using horses, Chinese hand laundrymen typically followed and used traditional practices from China where delivering laundry occurred mostly on foot, carrying the batches of clothes in two baskets attached to the different ends of a single pole evenly balanced on their shoulders. The highest penalties directly affected Chinese hand laundrymen who employed no horse-drawn laundry vehicles, or could not afford a horse, and aimed to stop the practice and close Chinese hand laundries not abiding by this law. In response, the Tung Hing Tong organized the Chinese hand laundrymen to raise enough money to afford a White American lawyer to launch an appropriate legal response since, at the time, the United States Supreme Court’s in People v. Hall (1854) continued to limit Chinese immigrants' ability to argue claims in court. The judge ruled that the law was clearly written to illegally discriminate against Chinese hand laundries and overturned the discriminatory ordinance, presenting the Tung Hing Tong with its first victory (Praetzellis, 2004:245).

In 1870, another discriminatory law, the Cubic Air Ordinance, required that all living quarters must provide 500 cubic feet of air for each inhabitant. The ordinance was targeted at Chinese hand laundrymen who often shared sleeping quarters together and slept in the same
dwelling as their business in order to conserve money and protect their laundry from harm at night (Spickard, 2007:162). The ordinance particularly criticized and then criminalized Chinese hand laundrymen for engaging in activity that purportedly symbolized health hazards in the community. As a result of the ordinance, hundreds of Chinese hand laundrymen were arrested and imprisoned for violating this law, which represented an extremely disproportionate number compared to their White counterparts. The ordinance was only enforced in San Francisco’s Chinatown (Spickard, 2007:162). Eventually, the ordinance was overturned only due to life-threatening overcrowding in prisons, but continued to instigate an effectual pattern of discriminatory ordinances and laws that persecuted and criminalized Chinese hand laundrymen. In fact, the prisons were so filled with Chinese hand laundrymen that each person, ironically, only had 100 cubic feet of air until their release (Spickard, 2007:162). Through the late 1800s, prisons overpopulated with Chinese immigrants often had poor conditions. Particularly after the 1875 Page Act, which allowed the United States to prohibit, limit, and criminalize entry to specific classes of immigrants, Chinese immigrant in San Francisco who were deemed “unlawful” were placed into prisons often called “sheds” or “iron cage” and “Chinese jail” that was located next to the outflow of the city sewer into the San Francisco Bay and had an unbearable stench and unsanitary living quarters. Ira Condit, a missionary, described the conditions for Chinese migrants in the shed in 1900:

“…merchants, laborers, are all alike penned up [in the shed], like a flock of sheep, in a wharf-shed, for many days, and often weeks, at their own expense, and are denied all communication with their own people, while the investigation of their cases moves its slow length along. The right of bail is denied. A man is imprisoned as a criminal who has committed no crime, but has merely failed to find a White man to prove his right to be here” (Okihiro, 2015:268).
Continuing to force Chinese hand laundrymen out of business, in the 1880s, California enacted a series of discriminatory licensing laws. On February 5, 1880, a Chinese hand laundry in San Francisco caught on fire and killed 10 Chinese hand laundrymen. Using this incident as an opportunity to disparage Chinese hand laundries, California legislators introduced Order 1559 that required all laundries to be constructed of either brick or stone. 310 out of 320 laundries in San Francisco had been constructed of wood and three-fourth, or 240 of them, was Chinese-owned.

In May 1880, Order 156 prohibited owning or maintaining wooden laundries in San Francisco without permission from the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Only White American laundries, however, received permission to continue business and not a single Chinese laundryman was granted a license. The Board of Supervisors had full discretion and control of who could or could not receive a license, and discriminated against Chinese hand laundrymen’s requests for licenses. The law specified:

“SEC. 1. It shall be unlawful, from and after the passage of this order, for any person or persons to establish, maintain, or carry on a laundry within the corporate limits of the city and county of San Francisco without having first obtained the consent of the board of supervisors, except the same be located in a building constructed either of brick or stone.”

“SEC. 2. It shall be unlawful for any person to erect, build, or maintain, or cause to be erected, built, or maintained, over or upon the roof of any building now erected or which may hereafter be erected within the limits of said city and county, any scaffolding without first obtaining the written permission of the board of supervisors, which permit shall state fully for what purpose said scaffolding is to be erected and used, and such scaffolding shall not be used for any other purpose than that designated in such permit.”

“SEC. 3. Any person who shall violate any of the provisions of this order shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof shall be punished by a fine of not more than one thousand dollars, or by imprisonment in the county jail not more than six months, or by both such fine and imprisonment” (Yick Wo v. Hopkins 118 U.S. 356).

Order 1587, which passed the following month, added:
“SEC. 68. It shall be unlawful, from and after the passage of this order, for any person or persons to establish, maintain, or carry on a laundry within the corporate limits of the city and county of San Francisco without having first obtained the consent of the board of supervisors, except the same be located in a building constructed either of brick or stone.” (Yick Wo v. Hopkins 118 U.S. 356).

In explaining the fraught effort to limit Chinese hand laundries, one board member openly expressed his frustration, supported anti-Chinese agendas, and said, “The General Government has so tied our hands by the treaty with China, that we must depend entirely upon local legislation to discourage the immigration of Chinese, who are coming here now at the rate of two thousand a month” (Healy and Ng, 1905:47). He also subsequently advocated for Chinese exclusion.

In 1886, the series of discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws in California culminated into a critical court case, Yick Wo v. Hopkins, which emerged as one of the most important court decisions in Asian American history and also American legal jurisprudence. The court case also represented one of the few victories for Chinese immigrants at the time. In response to the discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws, the Tung Hing Tong organized over 200 Chinese hand laundrymen to protest against the discriminatory licensing laws enforced in 1880. The Tung Hing Tong advocated for non-compliance to ignore the law and Chinese hand laundrymen ignored the licensing laws and continued to operate their laundry business. More than 150 Chinese hand laundrymen would be indicted for violating the law. Yick Wo was the name of a hand laundry business owned that was owned by Sang Lee for over 20 years, a Chinese immigrant who came to the United States in 1861. When the licensing laws were introduced in California, Lee advocated for non-compliance and continued his laundry business. Although he never failed a health or safety inspection and had also properly passed inspection by
fire wardens, he was convicted and fined 10 dollars and imprisoned for violating the law. He refused to pay the fine and decided to undertake legal action.

The Tung Hing Tong rallied behind Yick Wo and “developed a legal fund to pay attorneys’ fees and court costs in a class action suit against the city of San Francisco” (Lien, 2001:28). Consequently, the Tung Hing Tong was able to hire a renowned American trial lawyer, Hall McAllister, to represent them and appeal their case all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which otherwise known as Yick Wo v. Hopkins. McAllister argued in the petition that the law encouraged “hurtful and unfair discrimination” and had Chinese hand laundries had been “greatly impaired, and in many cases, practically ruined by this system of oppression to one kind of men and favoritism to all others” (Yick Wo v. Hopkins 118 U.S. 356). The United States Supreme Court ruled in the Chinese hand laundrymen’s favor, citing the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause, and said that the California law was administered by public authority with an evil eye and an unequal hand.” That, said the justices, was wrong. Notably, Justice Matthews, who delivered the court’s opinion, emphasized this fact:

“The rights of the petitioners, as affected by the proceedings of which they complain, are not less, because they are aliens and subjects of the Emperor of China. The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution is not confined to the protection of citizens. It says: “Nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” These provisions are universal in their application, to all persons within the territorial jurisdiction, without regard to any differences of race, of color, or of nationality; and the equal protection of the laws is a pledge of the protection of equal laws” (Yick Wo v. Hopkins).

Matthews continued to charge that the law was discriminatory in nature and, therefore, illegal. He also invalidates the imprisonment of all Chinese hand laundrymen who violated the law in the past and discharged them from prison. He added:
“No reason whatever, except the will of the supervisors, is assigned why they should not be permitted to carry on, in the accustomed manner, their harmless and useful occupation, on which they depend for a livelihood. And while this consent of the supervisors is withheld from them and from two hundred others who have also petitioned, all of whom happen to be Chinese subjects, eighty others, not Chinese subjects, are permitted to carry on the same business under similar conditions. The fact of this discrimination is admitted. No reason for it is shown, and the conclusion cannot be resisted, that no reason for it exists except hostility to the race and nationality to which the petitioners belong, and which in the eye of the law is not justified. The discrimination is, therefore, illegal, and the public administration, which enforces it, is a denial of the equal protection of the laws and a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. The imprisonment of the petitioners is, therefore, illegal, and they must be discharged” (Yick Wo v. Hopkins).

Yick Wo v. Hopkins was the first case in the United States Supreme Court that linked the Fourteenth Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause to Chinese immigrants and disallowed laws that appeared race-neutral to discriminate and prejudice against other groups of people. The case became a notable precedent for other important cases that also stemmed from civil disobedience and non-compliance, such as Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) which established the contested “separate but equal” and would subsequently be repealed by laws prohibiting racial segregation and Hirabayashi v. United States (1943) which sought equal protection rights to Gordon Hirabayashi, who ignored the mandated relocation to internment camps during World War II. Over 150 Supreme Court cases have cited Yick Wo v. Hopkins.

In 1882, San Francisco continued to enforce discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws to deter Chinese hand laundrymen from continuing their business. City officials established limits on the hours of operation for Chinese hand laundrymen through an ordinance that prohibited the laundering of clothes between the hours of 10:00pm and 6:00am. This change was critical to Chinese hand laundrymen because in the 1880s, a modest amount of Chinese hand laundrymen typically worked around 18 hours each day, or operated 24 hours and shared the burden of the workload between other men. However, the courts found that the laws were “an
unreasonable interference with the liberty of the citizen in the prosecution of his occupation” and laundries were “a perfectly legitimate, harmless, and necessary business” and not a danger to public health or safety (Jung, 2007:78). In addition, restricting the hours of only Chinese hand laundrymen meant an “unreasonable restriction upon the rights of laundry owners” (Jung, 2007:78). The order continued to be upheld by California, and resulted in unfair and difficult hours for Chinese hand laundrymen to complete their work orders and maximize their business and profits until 1935. The order also required Chinese hand laundrymen to apply for certifications and gain approval from a health officer and fire warden in order to obtain and maintain a laundry license to continue to operate their business.

In 1935, the Tung Hing Tong finally made a breakthrough in contesting the restrictions on their working hours and also similarly found profound legal success that started when Yee Quon Wah (commonly referred to as Byron Mark and In re Byron Mark) and Wong Way violated the 1935 Oakland Laundry Ordinance. The ordinance required Chinese hand laundries to stop their work in an Oakland laundry after 6:00pm until 7:00am (Bernstein, 1999:242). To place the severity of the ordinance in context, after World War I, Chinese hand laundries faced intense competition from more technologically-advanced White American-owned laundries. Many of the Chinese hand laundrymen stayed competitive only by working longer hours and days than White American laundries (Bernstein, 1999:242). However, in the months after the ordinance was passed, 38 Chinese hand laundrymen were arrested for working over the appropriate hours. While many other Chinese hand laundrymen pleaded guilty, Yee contested the ordinance's legal credibility and believed that he did nothing wrong. He argued that the ordinance was racially motivated and “not fair” for the Chinese hand laundries (Bernstein, 1999:243).
The Tung Hing Tong also protested the 1935 Oakland Laundry Ordinance and helped Yee to appeal his case to the Supreme Court of the State of California. Collectively, the organization raised enough funds to hire White American attorneys John L. McNab and Leo Sullivan to defend the Chinese hand laundrymen’s collective interests. With legal counsel and support from the Tung Hing Tong, the court ordered Bodie Wallman, the Oakland Chief of Police, to release Yee upon deposit of 100 dollars to the Clerk of the Supreme Court (Lai, McCunn, and Yung, 1988:69). In court, McNab and Sullivan argued that the ordinance violated constitutional rights by placing specific restrictions only on Chinese hand laundrymen and denied individual liberty and property without due process of law and equal protection. The court supported McNab and Sullivan’s claims and ruled that the ordinance regulating the laundry business was unconstitutional and confirmed Yee's writ of habeas corpus. Among other disapproving comments, the Oakland City Council and the police departments were criticized for their misuse of their power and the denial of Yee's rights to due process under the law (Lai, McCunn, and Yung, 1988:72). Additionally, the court found that Yee and other Chinese hand laundrymen were not treated the same as the White American laundries with an absence of equal protection under the law.

The Tung Hing Tong's support network was instrumental in the court's decision. 3 days after the ordinance was struck down, the “Young China” and the “Chinese World,” two locally based San Francisco Chinese language newspapers reported:

“The Oakland City Ordinance was established last year which limited the hours for laundries was defeated. The Chinese thought the statute to be unjust and Tung Hing Gung Wei (Tong), the Chinese laundry owner association, hired McNab and Sullivan to take it to State Court to appeal the law. After a long time, yesterday at 10:00am, the Court announced that the Chinese won and there are no limitations on working hours” (Lai, McCunn, and Yung, 1988:74).
Most importantly, the legal protest of the 1935 Oakland Laundry Ordinance demonstrated that Chinese hand laundrymen were more than capable of coming together and defending themselves against discriminatory ordinances and laws that presented instances of social injustice.

After the 1935 victory, the Tung Hing Tong started to separate and had lost its major purpose for existence with a decline in both the number of Chinese hand laundries as well as discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws that sought to disparage their business. The community power that the Tung Hing Tong possessed transferred to other laundry organizations, such as the Chinese hand laundrymen’s Association, which continues to exist today. The Tung Hing Tong would continue to be recognized for their trailblazing efforts to protect the Chinese hand laundrymen’s collective interests and rights and preserve the survival of the Chinese laundry businesses in California through their legal victories and community organizing efforts.
For Economic Survival: Organizing the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance in New York

While the Tung Hing Tong started predominantly as a labor guild and association, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance was created as a direct response to protect their collective interests and fight against discriminatory ordinances and laws in New York that predatorily targeted Chinese hand laundrymen and the hand laundry business. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the 1933 ordinance that required all self-employed, or one-person, hand laundries to pay registration and licensing fees instigated the emergence of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance's first mass meeting was held at a Catholic church and attracted several thousands of Chinese hand laundrymen and other community members who supported them on and waited on the long lines. The only qualification needed to join the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance was that they needed to be “engaging in hand laundry trade, regardless of political persuasion and sex.” (Yu, 1992:40). At the meeting, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance issued its official declaration signed by 254 Chinese hand laundrymen, and called for the immediate need for ethnic solidarity and collective action:

“Recently the New York Council of Aldermen proposed a discriminatory ordinance against hand laundries. If the ordinance is unfortunately passed and becomes effective on July 1, tens of thousands of Chinese hand laundrymen would be stranded in this country and our wives and children back home would be starved to death... That’s why we have to fight against it with every effort. However, we Chinese hand laundrymen in New York never had a formal organization of our own. The organization that existed in the past exploited us in disguised names. It failed to protect our interests and, worse, it damaged our business. This has been proved by our experiences in the past. Therefore we have to organize a formal organization that truly represents our own interest in this campaign to fight the discriminatory ordinance. Without such an organization, there is no hope to abolish the discriminatory ordinance. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) and the organizations under its control cannot represent our case to the City government. They are but taking this chance selfishly to serve their interests. Because of these reasons, we set up the preparatory committee of the New York Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, expecting to establish as early as possible an organization that truly represents the interests of the Chinese hand laundries. [With such an organization] we cannot only unit ourselves to fight the City government collectively so as to abolish the
discriminatory ordinance, but also prevent such discrimination from occurring in the future. Moreover, our own organization will be able to solve the problem of the rapid decline of service charges as a result of competition among hand laundries. Collective efforts will make the service charges rise again. In short, to establish a collective organization is indeed an urgent task for us.

- Signed Two Hundred Fifty-four Hand Laundrymen”

With the declaration signed, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance utilized the press and media and formed its strongest ally in “The Chinese Journal,” the mainstream newspaper in the Chinese American community, which encouraged Chinese hand laundrymen from all across New York to join and contribute to the cause (Yu, 1992:41). After a month of its founding, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance already had more than 2,000 members and offered legal assistance to its members without charge. They also hired a Polish-Jewish progressive lawyer, Julius Louis Bezozo, as well as English language assistance to support its members with comprehensive services for the first time (Yu, 1992:44).

A month after its establishment, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance started to challenge the ordinance. They sent two representatives and collectively funded enough money to hire William M. Chadbourne, a White American lawyer, to appeal the New York's municipal government at a public hearing on the ordinance hosted by the Public Welfare Committee of the Board of Aldermen. Both sides, the White American laundry workers and the Chinese hand laundrymen, spoke vehemently about the ordinance. Chadbourne spoke in opposition to the ordinance and highlighted that the registration and licensing fees created outstanding hardships and financial difficulties for the Chinese hand laundrymen. Additionally, Chadbourne maintained that if the ordinance were passed, most Chinese hand laundries would be forced to close their business. Consequently, thousands of Chinese hand laundrymen would become unemployed and result in a substantial crisis as jobs were already limited and scarce during the Great Depression.
After hearing the Chinese hand laundrymen’s arguments, the Public Welfare Committee still passed the ordinance, but with significant reductions. Notably, the registration fee was significantly reduced from 25 dollars to 10 dollars, and the security bond from 1,000 dollars to 100 dollars. The reduced costs signified the Chinese hand laundrymen’s first victory in New York, which was subsequently called the “Victory of May,” for the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, since many of the Chinese hand laundrymen had long been discriminated and felt helpless to contend with their White American competitors, unlike in California with the Tung Hing Tong. The outcome also meant that thousands of Chinese hand laundrymen's voices were finally heard, and they were able to keep their hand laundries and way-of-life. Now inspired by the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance's victory, hundreds to thousands of Chinese hand laundrymen signed up for the organization. After only a few months, the membership increased to 3,000 members (Yung, Chang, and Lai, 2006:183).

The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance’s rise directly conflicted with the CCBA. Since Chinese hand laundrymen now received collective action and legal assistance from the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, many stopped paying membership fees to the CCBA. Membership fees consisted of a majority of CCBA's income. Angered at the lack of support from the Chinese hand laundrymen, in 1934, the CCBA created the Chinese Hand Laundry Association to directly compete with the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, and also accused them of being unsupportive and unpatriotic to China. However, the CCBA’s Chinese Hand Laundry Association was short-lived, as the organization could not effectively provide services and support to its members. For instance, in a controversial article in the Chinese American community, community members caught a group of Chinese Hand Laundry Association members trying to sneak into the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance to receive legal assistance with obtaining a license for their hand
laundry. The incident not only created negative press for the Chinese Hand Laundry Association, but also embarrassed the CCBA. Much of the Chinese Hand Laundry Association’s success stemmed from its rare democratic nature, unity, and self-sacrifice for the greater good. Almost entirely grassroots, a fundamental difference and important distinction was that the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance was created to take care of other laundrymen and maintain the trade.

By the end of 1934, another contentious issue arose when the Public Welfare Committee advocated for a laundry ordinance. The ordinance discriminated against Chinese hand laundrymen by requiring a United States citizenship to apply for a laundry license (Yu, 1992). Since the majority of Chinese hand laundrymen was foreign-born and not able to become naturalized citizens and therefore unable to apply for the license, thousands of Chinese hand laundries were in danger of having to close down if the ordinance passed. They raised their concerns to the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance who took immediate action to oppose the new ordinance. They demanded a public hearing, which was granted by the License Department, and organized the community. Chinese hand laundrymen also began a publicity campaign and circulated petitions that received signatures from both New York’s Chinese and White American community, many of whom were also ethnic entrepreneurs who struggled against other ordinances. The Chinese hand laundrymen pooled funds together through ethnic solidarity and collective action, hiring an American lawyer to convince the committee to remove the naturalization clause for “Orientals” or Chinese to be exempt from obtaining a laundry license (Yu, 1992). The ordinance was withdrawn shortly afterwards. This incident continued to pull Chinese hand laundrymen closer and symbolized not only determination, but also a strengthened sense of ethnic solidarity and collaboration.
Ethnic solidarity has been a common theme in the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. By the late 1930s, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance emerged as a new leader in New York’s Chinatown (Yu, 1992:77). With its success in independent grassroots and community organizing, Chinese hand laundrymen also sought to support the war efforts overseas, which had also impacted many of their family members left behind in China. As a result, this became a patriotic apparatus for Chinese Americans and immigrants to demonstrate their favoritism towards the United States and fight against the Japanese invasion during World War II. Furthermore, from their own experiences in fighting discrimination and threats to their own livelihood, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance recognized the importance of unity and collective action. They asked all Chinese Americans and immigrants to participate in its anti-Japanese campaign “to save China, to save ourselves” to illuminate the need to organize to support China (Yu, 1992:83).

The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance was extremely successful in changing the perception of Chinese Americans and immigrants in the United States through their collective support of the United States and Allied forces in China and World War II. Through their efforts, Chinese Americans and immigrants improved their image and status in American society (Yu, 1992:83). The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance’s patriotic activities in the 1930s and 1940s was typically perceived in a positive nature through their patriotic support of China’s national salvation movement. One of their greatest accomplishments occurred in 1938 when the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance solicited enough donations from the community and bought ambulances that read “The Heroic Defenders of China From the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. NY” to send to China. The show of patriotism helped to advocate for the end of the Chinese exclusion and a more welcoming society for Chinese Americans and immigrants. The Chinese Hand
Laundry Alliance continued to have a large role after World War II, supported civil rights, and normalized U.S.-China relations to repeal the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

Towards the 1940s, Chinese hand laundries in New York faced new challenges with the dramatically changing times. Starting in the 1920s, Chinese hand laundrymen started to send clothes to power laundries (also called “wet-washes” or “steam laundries” or commercial laundries) in large steam plants where they would be washed and cleaned at a high quantity inside modern machines, and sent back to Chinese hand laundrymen to iron and fold. After neatly packaged, the customers would then come and pick up the clothes. While this relationship represented less labor and work for the Chinese hand laundrymen, it created an important interdependency on power laundries, which were predominantly owned by large White American companies, since Chinese hand laundrymen did not have their own power laundry at the time and required significantly more capital to open and manage. In fact, White American power laundries often conspired to prevent Chinese hand laundrymen from obtaining a power laundry. As one newspaper article reported:

“Many people believe that the Chinaman does not believe in machinery; that he scorns its use. But such is not the case. Chinese hand laundrymen cannot her laundry machinery for either love or money. Each piece sold is with the solemn promise that it shall never fall into the hands of the Chinese competitor” (Fort Worth Gazette, 1982).

Leveraging this advantage, White American laundry workers used better equipment and advanced technology in order to wash clothes with convenience and speed, abandoning the age-old manual labor and ironing still employed by many of the Chinese hand laundrymen. Wang (2002) described the racial tensions between White American power laundries and Chinese hand laundries as a matter of masculinity, gender, and culture. Furthermore, power laundries
represented the height of American superiority and dominance over primitive age-old manual labor. One power laundry described the impact of power laundries:

“With a 60-horse power engine supplying motive for the great revolving wash tubs which will perform more work in an hour than the washer-women could do in a week, and do it better, than by the same power, ‘wringing’ and drying the articles, it sends them to the ironing machines” (Wang, 2002: 60).

While White American laundries also dried the clothes, they still relied heavily on their machinery. Consequently, many customers preferred the work of the Chinese hand laundries and believed that Chinese hand laundrymen produced a higher quality outcome through the manual ironing and folding that machinery could not produce (Yu, 1992:139). Furthermore, self-service launderettes started to surface and represented prototype businesses for contemporary laundromats. These launderettes introduced a new kind of service that greatly differed from traditional hand laundering. They provided customers with the freedom and convenience of both washing and drying their clothes themselves. Launderettes would later also include coin-operated washing and drying machines. Simultaneously, newly manufactured machines allowed families to efficiently wash and dry their clothes at home.

Not only were Chinese hand laundrymen technologically disadvantaged, but they also faced structural challenges that threatened their ethnic niche in the laundry business. Since the late 1800s, Chinese hand laundries had largely depended on its ethnic economy and co-ethnic labor, which was self-sustaining, in order to be successful in their trade. Hand laundries allowed Chinese Americans and immigrants to work independently and also did not require significant capital to open and manage in order to stay competitive with other laundries. However, with the advent of power laundries, Chinese hand laundrymen felt particularly disadvantaged since they were required to depend largely on contracting and outsourcing their work to power launderers.
Power laundries contributed to a growing class difference and earned significantly more than hand laundries each week, which only increased their power and influence in the trade. Chinese hand laundries also depended on being able to offer cheap labor and service to their customers. With each increase in service charges by the power laundries, Chinese hand laundrymen suffered from lower returns, angst from their customers who depended on their affordable fees, and a decreased ability to compete with other White American laundries. As the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance struggled to respond to the changing landscape of the laundry business and their conventions, Chinese hand laundrymen found it increasingly difficult to rely on ethnic solidarity and collective action to increase their opportunities in the trade.

*Figure 6.* Simultaneously, White American power laundries continued to attack Chinese hand laundries to deter customers. For example, the Master Laundrymen’s Association, a trade group of White American power laundry workers, posted a newspaper advertisement that advocated for a systematic “anti-Chinese crusade” to “remove every laundry operated by Mongolians [Chinese] in New York, Brooklyn, and New Jersey” (Jung, 2009:85).
Between 1946 and 1947, Chinese hand laundrymen retaliated and started to separate themselves from the power laundries. To end their interdependency on power launderers and their arbitrary prices, Chinese hand laundrymen called on the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance to create their own power laundry. As one Chinese laundryman stated: “We are facing an imminent disaster. In order to release ourselves from the oppression and to protect our freedom of wash, we must found our own wet-wash factory. This is the only solution.” (Yu, 1992:142). As a result, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance held a meeting and passed a measure to collectively raise funds to open a power laundry called, “Wah Kiu Wet-Wash Factory,” that directly serviced Chinese hand laundrymen. As Yu (1992) accentuated, the most striking characteristic about Wah Kiu was that it was a collective effort by the Chinese hand laundrymen in an effort to preserve their business, retain their freedom to wash and self-sufficiency, and respond to oppressive service charges and other measures that restricted their work. Yu (1992) continued to add that the Chinese hand laundrymen were not even concerned about whether or not Wah Kiu would be a profit-making venture. This was powerful, since they cared more about the maintenance of the ethnic economic and banding together to resolve an issue that overshadowed all concerns about money (Yu, 1992:142). Since wet-washes required a high amount of capital, many never expected Chinese hand laundrymen to be able to organize effectively to open one. As another Chinese laundryman stated:

“[the Chinese hand laundrymen] are fed up with the power laundries’ oppression in recent years. We often said that we should open a wet-wash factory to win credit for us poor laundrymen, and we were willing to run it even at a loss. Unfortunately, we did not have the money to do it. Now our dream is coming true, thanks to the effort of the CHLA” (Yu, 1992).

In the 1950s, White American laundries conspired with unionization efforts by the American labor movement to disparage the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. The Laundry
Workers Union was subsequently created and started to recruit Chinese hand laundrymen to join the union. However, many leading Chinese laundry advocates issued reports that the union should not be trusted, highlighting that White laundry companies are the real enemies and “the trade union is but the tool of the White laundry companies” (Yu, 1992:153). Frustrated by the slow efforts by the union to recruit Chinese hand laundrymen, the union contracted with the power laundries in 1950 and issued Article 33. The provision limited the power laundries from accepting jobs from non-unionized Chinese hand laundries. To continue to defend and preserve the Chinese hand laundries, the Chinese American community united to fight against Article 33 rather than accept the conditions. One editorial urged that Chinese hand laundries “must not turn to the White laundry companies to do wet-wash; otherwise we will just fall into the trap set by the White laundry companies and the yellow union” (Yu, 1992:155). The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance negotiated with the union with the help of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union (ACWU) and agreed to postpone efforts to unionize the Chinese hand laundries (Yu, 1992:156). This time, ACWU recognized that Chinese hand laundrymen suffered from a history of discrimination, disadvantages in language and cultural customs, and the union’s actions resembled the same sentiments and ideals.

During the Cold War, Communist persecution and hysteria marked the decline of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance in the 1950s and into the 1960s. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had driven the Kuomintang (KMT) government out of China after a 10-year Civil War. Many Chinese hand laundrymen, who were traditional and nationalistic, celebrated the conclusion of the war, a united China, and initially believed that the CCP would apply pressure to the United States and advocate for legal rights and economic aid for Chinese Americans and immigrants (Yu, 1992:175). Through this context, the Chinese Hand Laundry
Alliance became the first Chinese American organization to celebrate the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s founding. However, starting in 1949, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) suspected the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance as a “Communist infiltrated” organization, the “largest single Chinese Communist group in New York” that was “potentially dangerous to the internal security” and issued an investigation of all its members (Yu, 1992:176). Amidst this fear of persecution, a notice was plastered in Chinatown warning the Chinese hand laundrymen who portrayed signs of Communist support:

“The United States government has ordered the arrest of the Communists for national security reasons. All Chinese who are members of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance and the Huizhou Association should withdraw at once so as not to be sent to concentration camps (Yu, 1992:177).”

In the following years, many Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance members reported being severely harassed and persecuted under suspicion of being affiliated as Communists. Many decided to distance themselves and withdraw from the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. As one veteran Chinese laundryman stated:

“The FBI harassed us for more than 20 years. They could not find anything to indict us, but they kept harassing us. In those years, every week I received two calls from FBI agents. What did they say on the phone? Nothing. They just checked whether you were there. They wanted to cause fear among our members. Also, they harassed us so much that they hoped we would lose our jobs and the organization would be dissolved (Yu, 1992:179).”

Although Chinese hand laundrymen had faced political persecution before, the Communist hysteria frightened many who found it daunting to press legal charges against the federal government and were also dissuaded from collective action and ethnic solidarity, which would have associated them, and their friends, family, and kin, of being Communists. While many
Chinese hand laundrymen left the United States to either finally return home or to escape political persecution, those who stayed continued to struggle with possible Communist association and mere survival. In the conclusion, two important Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance members and figures committed suicide in the 1950s. Tan Yumin, the manager of the Wah Kieu Wet-Wash Factory, jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge and claimed that he could no longer endure the FBI harassment. Tan Lian’ai, who helped Chinese hand laundrymen with English, returned to China. After advocating for democratic values and anti-right ideals, he was persecuted by Chinese officials, excluded from the Communist society, and also committed suicide. The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance remains a shadow of its historic past. The organization’s headquarters still remain in New York’s Chinatown, but have all but lost its influence in Chinatown in the 1960s and onwards.
A Family Business: The Transformation of an Ethnic Niche

Significant changes affected the Chinese hand laundrymen during the post-exclusion era. In 1943, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed by the Magnuson Act, largely a result of China’s involvement in World War II and America’s attempt to win their favor over Japan. As a result, all foreign-born Chinese immigrants living in the United States were also able to now naturalize and obtain a United States citizenship. Additionally, the War Brides Act (1946) allowed thousands of Chinese American World War II veterans to finally bring their wives and children to the United States. Since then, the bachelor society days had ended. Between 1947 and 1953, 90 percent of Chinese immigrants admitted were women and children (Chang, 2003). While the Immigration Act of 1924 had established a quota system that limited Chinese immigration by only allowing a marginal amount of slots for Asia while providing more for European immigrants, the 1965 Immigration Act abolished the quota system and increased Chinese immigration to the United States. Through these developments, Chinese laundries no longer only involved men, but also women and children as unpaid family and co-ethnic labor. Chinese hand laundrymen started to become part of the past.

Changing demographics and landscapes also influenced a transformation of the ethnic niche and Chinese laundries. By the 1960s, Chinese communities had expanded outside of the Chinatowns, which was normally the traditional starting point for many early Chinese immigrants. The reason for this change was that many Chinese Americans expanded into traditionally middle class neighborhoods, displaying social mobility into the middle class (Yung, Chang, and Lai, 2006). In addition, many others moved to the suburbs and into new planned communities created after World War II. Additionally, starting in the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement led to a series of civil rights legislation and contributed to the abolition of laws
that historically discriminated and segregated ethnic groups and immigrants, creating more opportunities for historically disenfranchised Chinese immigrants. Children of first-generation Chinese immigrants, particularly those with a college education, found social, economic, and residential mobility through access to jobs in the mainstream labor market. Some moved from Chinatown to settle in affluent neighborhoods in pursuit of the suburban lifestyle as perceived by the American dream (Yung, Chang, and Lai, 2006). Chinese immigration have also become more diversified: some come to Chinatown as their first stop, but others can bypass the traditional staging process and move directly into outer-borough neighborhoods (Foner, 2013). Labor markets continued to expand on par with the economic boom, increased capital, language proficiency, education, which then discouraged entry into the laundry business since opportunities were no longer limited to a specific number of occupations (Yu, 1992).

Also in the 1960s, a new wave of Chinese immigrants started to arrive, considerably changing the Chinese American community. The Immigration and Nationality Act or commonly known as the Hart-Cellar Act (1965) concentrated on family reunification and committing to a “braindrain” to entice professionals to come to the United States (Takaki, 1989). While early Chinese immigration consisted of Chinese immigrants from a very specific region of southern China, the new wave includes Chinese immigrants from all parts of Asia bringing in many different dialects and cultures. The late 1970s and 1980s represented the height of Taiwanese immigration, and since 1979, immigrants from Mainland China have surfaced in high numbers. Students also started to migrate in records numbers to obtain a Western education. Beginning in 1975 and into the 1980s, refugees have also come from parts of Indochina, including Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, also consisting of ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese refugees. Most recently, Fujianese immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s have come to the United States in large numbers,
although many of them have come as undocumented immigrants through smugglers (Zhao, 2010). For example, immigrants from Fujian and Wenzhou have particularly come from China’s most business-active regions and have concentrated their resources in entrepreneurship; since then, they have grown to become a dominant force in New York’s ethnic economy (Zhao, 2010).

With the new diversity in the Chinese American community, the ethnic economy is now much more diluted, yet rich in culture and sophistication. New Chinese restaurants sprouted up during the mid 1900s and emerged as a major industry through the influx of the new Chinese immigration. Popular fast food culture also advertised Americanized Chinese dishes and cuisine like “chop suey” or “General Tso’s chicken” on the menus of restaurants throughout the United States. Laundries developed into laundromats and dry cleaners, and the garment industry boomed up until the Twenty-First Century albeit continue to still attract many female immigrant workers. Through higher education and other opportunities, many Chinese Americans also started to work in government and non-profit sectors, as doctors, lawyers, information technology experts, and other positions of high skilled labor. New opportunities are also continuing to open up for minorities in sports, popular culture and media, and American politics.

Growing concerns about the uncertainty of the laundry business has been raised by recent academic literature. Many have cited that the end of the Chinese hand laundries symbolized a conclusion to its contemporary impact on the Chinese American community. Similarly, it has been noted that significant changes have occurred. For example, in 1949, there were around 10,232 Chinese laundries in the United States; a decade later, more than 30,000 Chinese entrepreneurs, about one-third, were still managing laundries (Zhao, 2010). By 1970, about half of the laundries had closed and the business rapidly declined. However, contrary to the decline of hand laundries, laundromats continued to grow starting from the 1950s. Today, laundromats
remain to be overrepresented by Chinese entrepreneurs, and still remain a highly concentrated ethnic niche in the Chinese American community, even though the number of traditional hand laundries has subsided. Accordingly, Korean and Latino entrepreneurs also continue to share the majority of the laundromats in America.
Conclusion: The Legacy Left Behind

Both the Tung Hing Tong and the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance represented many similarities and differences in organizing against discrimination and reinforcing the ethnic niche. Both organizations utilized ethnic solidarity and collective action to create an organization essentially to bring Chinese hand laundrymen closer together and collectively support the survival of hand laundries. They understood that against discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws, it was necessary to abandon their differences and use their shared interests and group characteristics to promote a sense of brotherhood and activism and advocate for their civil rights and independence. Their story resembled that of an American story and a novel immigrant narrative that should continue to be appreciated in history.

Of course, the innumerous landmarks and watershed accomplishments also defined their legacy. Both organizations utilized legal action and resolutions by hiring White American lawyers to defend their cases in court or hearings, an innovative form of collecting funds and utilizing collective action to increase their economic and political capital and influence in a then-hostile environment. Their actions set legal precedents and modeled early activism that would eventually pave the path for other causes and social movements. It is also important to emphasize that the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance was more political and defined by its progressive democratic nature, and often made decisions based on votes casted by its own members. Notably, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance was also symbolic of its times and embodied characteristics from World War II and the subsequent Cold War. Ironically, the World War II period represented the height of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance’s success and influence, meanwhile the Cold War was largely responsible for the organization’s decline. While the Tung Hing Tong was the first to successfully utilize legal action and left behind a legacy of important
legal victories and decisions, their political power was limited due to the Chinese exclusion era, xenophobia, and nativism. Many Chinese hand laundrymen also never expected to stay in the United States, since many were sojourners who longed to return home after raising enough money to send to their family and kin. Financially, both organizations raised money through its membership and combined resources and capital to increase power and standing in the community. As previously pointed out, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance used their collective funds to open a power laundry for only Chinese hand laundrymen after years of discriminatory service charge increases by other power laundries that preyed on the hand laundries. The Wah Kieu Wet-Wash Factory allowed the Chinese hand laundrymen to circumvent host hostility and their uncharacteristic reliance on White American power laundries and reinforce the symbolic self-sustainability of their ethnic niche.

Ethnic solidarity and collective action evidently coincided with the presence of early ethnic niche behavior in the hand laundry business. Both Chinese hand laundrymen’s organizations were defined by their motivation, courage, and willingness to fight for economic survival and defend their ethnic niche and using their numbers in ethnic entrepreneurship as an advantage. Their success would have been significantly reduced if the Chinese hand laundrymen worked alone. The Tung Hing Tong and the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance also embodied the shared group characteristics of early Chinese immigrants and its membership persisted as a result of their many similarities: they were sojourners, bachelors, predominantly men, and had limited resources and capital, low education, and poor English-language proficiency. Consequently, these characteristics encouraged the Chinese hand laundrymen to work together and invest in ethnic solidarity and collective action so that they could maximize their gain and maintain their livelihoods. In 1965 and onwards, the significant increase in Chinese immigration and influx of
women, children, and families permanently changed the Chinese American population. Chinatowns were no longer titular bachelor societies and predominantly Chinese immigrants from the South, but now filled with new immigrants from all over China who spoke many different cultures and dialects. Opportunity structures also limited other jobs for many of the Chinese hand laundrymen, especially during Chinese exclusion and until the 1960s where there was a boom in Chinese restaurants and also the garment industry that catered to new immigrants. Co-ethnic labor was also evident in many of the Chinese hand laundrymen’s ability to work together and some hand laundries utilized 24-hour schedules with rotating shifts for the laborers.

Moreover, ethnic strategy continued to be the most important asset for the Chinese hand laundrymen to alleviate their perceptible disadvantages. While both organizations eventually struggled with adapting to the changing times, they were able to defend their hand laundries from discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws by utilizing innovative techniques and ways to protect themselves and their businesses. Through legal action and combining resources and capital, they were able to achieve victories that many people did not think was possible at the time. Their achievements created lasting effects on the Chinese American community and in history. Without banding together and maximizing their ethnic and cultural capital and networks, it is very arguable that the Chinese hand laundrymen would not have had the same success as they did.

The legacy left behind continues to be an important piece of history to analyze and understand. Laundromats continue to maintain this ethnic niche and Chinese immigrants still manage and open these laundries in both California and New York. While hand laundries have declined, laundromats have risen in Chinese communities and also in minority neighborhoods where Chinese laundry workers therefore serve as middleman minorities. Still, laundromats
continue to be a source of self-employment for many entrepreneurs, offering independence and flexibility of hours, and a pathway to the middle-class. Family labor continues to be extremely important in maintaining the success of the laundromats and maintaining the ethnic niche. However, the same group characteristics, opportunity structures, and ethnic solidarity continue to persist in Chinese laundromats.

Finally, in the face of adversity and discriminatory anti-Chinese ordinances and laws, Chinese hand laundrymen were able to effectively organize through ethnic solidarity and collective action. By maintaining the ethnic niche, they were able to leave behind an effective legacy and helped to maintain the ethnic niche, which continues to grow with Chinese laundromats. For many Chinese Americans and immigrants who invested their lives and time in the Chinese laundry business, their work contributed to an important part of Chinese American history that must be researched and examined for years and generations to come.
Bibliography


York’s Chinese hand laundrymen in Practicing Democracy.” Pp. 64-94 in *Claiming 
America: Constructing Chinese American Identities During the Exclusion Era*. 

*Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics*, edited by V. Yans-


University of New York Press.

Zhao, Xiaojian. 2009. *Asian American Chronology*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press/ABC-
CLIO.