

Xiaolan Bao

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WHEN WOMEN  
ARRIVED*The Transformation  
of New York's  
Chinatown*

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World War II affected the lives of all Americans, but it had a particularly profound impact on Asian Americans. The end of the war marked an especially important turning point in the history of New York's Chinatown. From a relatively homogeneous, highly segregated, and small, service-oriented bachelor society, New York's Chinatown was transformed into a relatively diverse and family-oriented community with manufacturing industries. Although the extent of change was evident only after the passage of the amendment of the U.S. immigration law in 1965, the changes originated in the immediate postwar era.

The entry of Chinese women immigrants into the United States, a key factor in this transformation, resulted from changes in federal law during and after World War II. The 1943 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts made Chinese, but not other Asians, eligible for naturalization and provided Chinese with an immigration quota. Among the new laws that lifted restrictions on Chinese, some specifically fostered the entry of Chinese women: The 1945 War Brides Act allowed men who had served in the U.S. military to bring

spouses to the United States as nonquota immigrants, and the 1946 Alien Fiancees and Fiances Act allowed the Chinese wives of U.S. citizens, both native-born and naturalized, to immigrate on a nonquota basis. The 1953 Refugee Relief Act further provided women with opportunities for immigration by reserving a number of visas for Chinese refugees and their families, including those already "stranded" in the United States, to "escape" from the communist government in China. As a result, Chinese women began to enter the United States in significant numbers,<sup>1</sup> initiating profound changes in family pattern, economic structure, and culture of major Chinese settlements in the United States. Focusing on New York's Chinatown, this essay examines the impact of these changes and traces the important role of women, working-class women in particular, in bringing about the transformation.

### *New York's Chinatown before 1945*

As John Kuo Wei Tchen states, New York's Chinatown was not simply "an extension of San Francisco's and [the] Pacific Coast's," its foundation having "been laid long before the surge of the anti-Chinese sentiment on the West Coast."<sup>2</sup> The regional particularities of the early Chinese population were shaped by the more cosmopolitan nature of New York City as an important national and international port.

With respect to the scarcity of Chinese women, New York was exceptional. Although the sex-ratio imbalance was a common phenomenon among Chinese settlements in this country for most of the nineteenth century, by 1870 the Chinese female population had reached 3,873 in California, but "no Chinese women seemed to have actually settled in New York."<sup>3</sup> The small number of Chinese women who entered the city in the following years were predominantly the wives of Chinese merchants, women who were kept strictly indoors and hardly ventured beyond. The sight of Chinese women was such a rarity that they were said to be treasured as "pearls" in the bachelors' eyes. For a mere glance of a female compatriot, a Chinese man was said to have waited in vain on a corner of Mott Street from morning till night for two days in a row.<sup>4</sup> Even at the end of World War II, when the national sex-ratio imbalance of the Chinese population had dropped significantly, New York City's remained at almost six males to one female.<sup>5</sup>

One obvious consequence of this imbalance was intercultural marriage in New York, which was clearly recorded in state census records of the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1855, of the thirty-eight Chinese men found by the census takers in the third, fourth, and fifth wards of old Lower Manhattan, eleven were married to Irish women.<sup>6</sup> In 1870, the census taken in the fourth and sixth wards of the same area showed that eighteen of the sixty-four

Chinese male residents were married to European American women, with a total of twenty-one bicultural children.<sup>7</sup> The rate of Chinese-Irish intercultural marriage began to decline only when anti-Chinese sentiment began to sweep through the city in the late nineteenth century.

The rate of Chinese intercultural marriage in New York in this era never surpassed one-third of the entire population,<sup>8</sup> largely for financial reasons. Census records show that the Chinese who married Irish women were financially secure; Chinese men without means had little opportunity for intercultural marriage.<sup>9</sup> The ethnocentric nature of traditional Chinese culture probably discouraged many other Chinese men from out-marriage. If the early settlers had few opportunities, forced bachelorhood became nearly universal for Chinese by the end of the nineteenth century, with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which strictly prohibited the immigration of the wives of Chinese laborers, and the mounting anti-Chinese sentiment. Many men were members of what sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn terms the "split household," characterized by the separation of the breadwinner from his family; this family pattern was common in the first seventy years of Chinese settlements in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Family life did not become a dominant living arrangement in New York's Chinatown until the postwar period.

This pattern of "split households" and forced bachelorhood tended to undermine the patriarchal nature of traditional Chinese culture and its family system. Traditional Chinese culture emphasized the importance of family-line continuity, with its ideal of extended multigenerational family. Centering on the male's role as *wai zi*, the only breadwinner of the family and the sole dealer with the outside world,<sup>11</sup> Chinese tradition invested the male patriarch with absolute authority over women and the younger generation in the family.

The immigration experience deprived Chinese male laborers of their male prerogatives in several spheres. From the beginning of their experience in this country, most Chinese laborers were forced to resign themselves to a life of bachelorhood. Although it was the common assumption that married and single Chinese men would go back to China, to visit their families or to marry, few could afford to do so. Consequently, most married men were severed from their families, the traditional domain of their power, and bachelors with no options for marriage were unable to carry on their family lines.

In this period, married Chinese men did try to maintain their traditional position in the family by sending remittances to their male kin and relying on them to oversee their wives; but they had little control over their families. Their absence particularly affected their roles as fathers. In traditional Chinese families, children tended to have a formal and distant relationship with their fathers, which was, for the most part, due to the culturally constructed *yan fu*, or stern image of the father.<sup>12</sup> It was from this awesome image as discipliners

that men derived their authority over their children. In the Chinese American "split household," the *yan fu* image was undermined by the father's lack of daily contact with his children because of his prolonged absence from the family. Children's strong sense of alienation from their father was so intense that a family reunion in later years could hardly heal the wound and bridge the gap.<sup>13</sup>

A strengthened mother-child relationship filled the vacuum in the Chinese American "split household." As the anthropologist Margery Wolf aptly pointed out, an informal mother-centered, or "uterine" family operates in the formally male-dominated Chinese extended family. Since the mothers conducted the sons' early socialization in the traditional Chinese family, close emotional ties could be formed between them; this bond was reinforced by filial piety, a central value of Confucianism, and in many cases led the son to act as the mother's spokesman in domestic and public affairs. Thus married women were able to wield a degree of power in the male-dominated world,<sup>14</sup> and women whose husbands were in America had fewer obstacles to acquiring such power.

Moreover, the prolonged absence undermined the Chinese fathers' dominant position in the family, and their traditional masculine roles were further reduced by the feminization of their occupations in this country after anti-Chinese agitation began to grow. By the 1870s, Chinese men in New York City no longer engaged in the wide range of occupations they had previously held.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese laborers who had come to this country in search of gold found jobs on railroads, mines, and farms; when anti-Chinese sentiment mounted across the nation, they were relegated to the service sector, especially in small ethnic enterprises. The hand laundry business, along with restaurants, grocery stores, and gift shops, became major occupations in New York's Chinatown.<sup>16</sup> Unlike trades that required a large amount of capital, a familiarity with tradesmen elsewhere, and a degree of English-language skill, the laundry business originally required only soap, scrubbing boards, and physical labor.<sup>17</sup> Limited by their capital, many former laborers went into this trade in partnership. One- or two-man Chinese hand laundries proliferated; by the 1930s, an estimated seven to eight thousand Chinese hand laundry shops involved almost half of the adult population in New York's Chinese community.<sup>18</sup> Commonly working from twelve to sixteen (and some reported twenty) hours a day, wielding an eight-pound iron in a hot, cramped environment, the Chinese men called their work "the blood and tears eight-pound livelihood."<sup>19</sup>

In China, as in other parts of the world, women traditionally did laundry.<sup>20</sup> "The Chinese laundryman [did not] learn his trade in China, . . . they were taught in the first place by American women."<sup>21</sup> Driven into a labor sector that they would have shunned in China "for fear of losing their social stand-

ing," the Chinese laundry men probably experienced profound psychological injury as a result of this restriction to what they regarded as women's work.<sup>22</sup> Holding on to their dream of returning to China (which had already changed in their absence), some men in New York's Chinese enclave sought emotional escapes in gambling, opium, tong wars, and prostitution, outlets common to many male-dominated societies. What made the vice-plagued bachelor society of New York's Chinatown unique among the major Chinese settlements in the United States was the presence of prostitutes from many ethnic groups, another consequence of the scarcity of Chinese women in the community.<sup>23</sup>

If the wives left behind in China were (as we have said) able to gain some additional influence, they paid a high price.<sup>24</sup> Toiling day and night for the families left behind by their husbands, taking care not only of their children but also members of their husbands' families, they shouldered tasks that were culturally allocated both to themselves and to their husbands.<sup>25</sup> Aunt Yueng, a Chinese woman who was married to a young Chinese man from the United States in the mid-1940s and was left behind, recalled her life after marriage: "The Yueng's family was not rich enough to buy a slave, but they got the labor of a slave by letting their son marry me. . . . Who cared about me at that time? No one. Really, no one."<sup>26</sup>

Their drudgery was not appreciated. While they labored for their husbands' families, their conduct and chastity were constantly under the strict surveillance of their husbands' kin. The suffering of Chinese women during this period was enormous. The loneliness, frustration, and unfairness could hardly be compensated for by the possible strengthening of their relations with their children as a result of their husbands' prolonged absence. Their anger and resentment are conveyed in the following lines:

Right after we were wed, Husband, you set out on a journey.  
How was I to tell you how I felt?  
Wandering around a foreign country, when will you  
ever come home?  
You are wasting many joyous years of our precious youth.  
My spring heart has turned to ashes.  
Poverty does not allow me the luxury of a choice.  
But let it be known to all my sisters:  
Don't ever marry a young man going overseas!<sup>27</sup>

### *The Postwar Transformation*

Not until the end of World War II did family life become the norm in New York's Chinatown. As immigration restrictions were lifted, Chinese women



came to the United States in large numbers. In fact, women constituted almost 90 percent of the Chinese immigrants between 1947 and 1952. The national sex ratio of the Chinese population nearly balanced in forty years, dropping from 285:100 in 1940 to 110:100 in 1979.<sup>28</sup>

This influx of women in the postwar era significantly changed the Chinese community in New York City. Of the 7,956 Chinese women who entered the United States between 1945 and the end of 1950, it is estimated that half settled in New York's Chinatown.<sup>29</sup> The sex-ratio imbalance in the city dropped from almost 6:1 in 1940 to 3:1 in 1950.<sup>30</sup> As many families entered small-capital and labor-intensive trades—grocery and restaurant and, mainly, the laundry business—a new form of family economy emerged, the “small producer household.” Glenn has asserted that this pattern had become dominant in other major Chinese settlements by the 1920s,<sup>31</sup> but it appeared in New York City almost three decades later.

In New York City and elsewhere in the country, the Chinese “small producer household” blurred the demarcation between family and work life. This was especially true in the Chinese laundry enterprise.<sup>32</sup> The family living quarters, situated behind or above the shop for reasons of “thrift, convenience, or lack of options,”<sup>33</sup> were where women and children worked, providing house-keeping and other kinds of assistance to the family business. Men worked in the shop, taking care of customers and dealing with the outside world. By pooling together the labor of all members of the family, Chinese working-class families in New York City managed to survive. As families entered the laundry business, most laundry shops were transformed from male partnerships to family ownership.

During this period of family reunion or formation, traditional Chinese family values seemed to be reasserted in the Chinese American family in New York City. The former Chinese laborers had their family business entirely under their control and the free labor of their wives and children at their disposal. They resumed their traditional status and regained their power in the family. Yet, a careful analysis shows that this was not exactly the case. While women's and children's labor became indispensable to the family business, few Chinese men could confidently deal with the outside world because they lacked facility in the English language and knowledge of the larger American society. They could no longer independently play their traditional role of the family's sole provider and public representative.

Compared with their status in the extended family in China, women fared better in the “small producer family.” Constrained by the family's economic situation, the Chinese American “small producer household” in New York City, as elsewhere, tended to be nuclear. Younger women in extended families in China had to operate under the stern supervision of their mothers-in-law, a