

THE UNFINISHED LAUNDRY, FOLDING OUR STORIES:  
ORAL HISTORIES OF A CHINESE AMERICAN LAUNDRY FAMILY

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
San Francisco State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Asian American Studies

by

Jordan Lee Loey

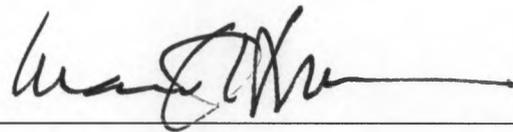
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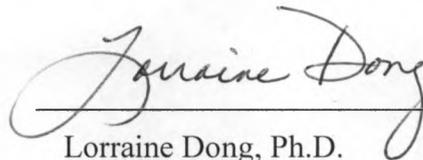
CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *The Unfinished Laundry, Folding Our Stories: Oral Histories of a Chinese American Laundry Family* by Jordan Lee Loey, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University.



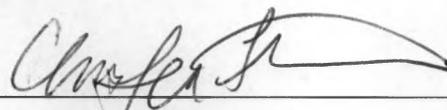
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THE UNFINISHED LAUNDRY, FOLDING OUR STORIES:  
ORAL HISTORIES OF A CHINESE AMERICAN LAUNDRY FAMILY

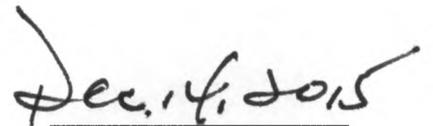
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The Chinese laundry was one of the first and earliest major occupations for Chinese immigrants. Many of the studies on the Chinese laundryman focus on a specific time periods or just one generation. There are limited studies on a multigenerational laundry family. The major questions of this thesis include what are the major generational shifts in a laundry family? How do issues of generational and transitional relationships, gender, and birth order affect a Chinese American laundry family in San Francisco? The key findings are that each generation had a different understanding and experience in the laundry. By putting into a larger context and closely examining the socio-historical shifts of the Chinese American community, the shifts and gains made by the family are analyzed and best represented by the evolution of the meaning of being a laundryman/business in the third, fourth, and fifth generations.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee



Date

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## Introduction: Open for Business

The impact of the postwar baby boom and the emergence of a large middle class created opportunities for the United States and its citizens that previous generations had never experienced in the nation's history. These two occurrences created an interrelated phenomenon that laid the foundation for further discrimination against people of color while encouraging homeownership, mass consumerism, and material wealth for predominantly white Americans. In particular, this interrelated phenomenon established a framework for Chinese American families starting in 1943 until now. With the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, military service of Chinese Americans during World War II, and a wave of Chinese brides entering the country after the war under the federal War Brides Act,<sup>1</sup> Chinese American families were formed and became part of the baby boom generation. This unprecedented growth for the Chinese community after years of discrimination and outright exclusion greatly impacted future generations by being able to enter mainstream society, and finally moving beyond their ethnic enclaves. While later generations of Chinese Americans were free of the cultural and outright discriminatory experiences that previous generations faced, they struggled with their own forms of discrimination and identity issues growing up both Chinese and American.

A large number of second and third generation Chinese Americans belongs to the postwar baby boom generation. In the midst of racial dictatorship, racially based conflicts

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1. War Brides Act of 1946, 79<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 4844, Pub. L. 79-713, 60 Stat. 975 (Aug. 9, 1946).

resulted from the implementation of the racial project, which is simultaneously an interpretation and representation of racial dynamics to reorganize and distribute resources along racial lines.<sup>2</sup> The Great Transformation is a paradigm shift that established a system of racial meanings and identities in the United States.<sup>3</sup> These generations and its relationship with previous generations plays a large role on our understanding of Chinese Americans in contemporary Asian America.

This thesis explores the structural changes of a multigenerational Chinese American laundry family in San Francisco, from the third generation to the fifth. The third and fourth generations continued ties with China and sent remittances through a lineage or village network situated in Hong Kong, maintaining a strong Chinese identity and connection. They kept up with this transnational connection and the lasting legacy of the exclusionary practices and discrimination against the Chinese American community. The third and fourth generations' laundry business helped maintain a transnational connection. For these two generations, the laundry represents past US discrimination and experiences. An analysis of the third generation will focus on the immigrant and immigration experience of the author's maternal great-grandfather and the foundation he laid for the generations to follow. As the head of the family, he implemented several cultural practices and traditions that affected later generations. Although the transfer between different spaces occurs from China to the United States, the cultural practices of

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2. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66.

3. *Ibid.*, 95.

patriarchy, conforming to gender norms, and birth order still play a major role in the future trajectories of the family.

The study of the fourth generation focuses on the son and daughter-in-law, the author's maternal grandparents. During this time, the roles of Chinese American women in the United States shifted in a larger sociocultural context. From the maternal grandmother's experiences of being a wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and a business partner, similarities and differences are revealed in the roles she played between the first and third generations of women in the family. Lastly, the study of the fifth generation focuses on the grandchildren, one daughter and three sons, the author's mom and uncles respectively. For this generation, the laundry is not perceived as a discriminatory way of life, but as a business venture that represents business ownership and an entrepreneurial lifestyle. Their issue concerns gender and birth order. In exploring the laundry business through different generations, the reader will better understand the changing dynamics of a Chinese American family from two different spheres: the business and home, highlighting the interconnectedness of being a family-owned business.

Starting from the third generation in the family, Hung Shoon Lee, successfully immigrated to the United States in 1931, despite the Chinese Exclusion Act. As part of the transnational connection between Taishan and the United States, the Lee family's ties go back six generations. Lee laundrymen braved the United States to improve the livelihood of those left behind. Through his military service during World War II, Hung

Shoon was able to bring his wife and son to America after the war from China through the War Brides Act. From his experience as a laundryman before the war and his GI status after the war, he managed to open laundry businesses in areas of San Francisco that catered to a well-off socioeconomic niche of the city. His savings and his status as a veteran with the GI Bill allowed him to buy properties that were used as home equity, providing a middle class lifestyle foundation for the future generations of his family.

The fourth generation, consisting of the author's maternal grandparents, entered the country as young children: my grandmother before the war in December 1940 as a four-year-old, and my grandfather after the war in March 1948 as an eleven-year-old. As the fourth generation, they grew up in both Chinese and America. Once the grandmother married the grandfather, she became part of his family. In following cultural practices and expectations, she immediately began a new life. Although in the business she held a key management role and served as a business partner, at home, she played a subservient role under her husband.

Growing up in the laundry business, the fifth generation did not experience the previous generations' exclusionary practices or migratory legacy. They understood the laundry business much differently. As they grew up in the business, the normalized behavior and expectations of supporting the family through the family business was integral to their everyday experience. As part of their shifting identity and growing up

during the baby boom, they equated the laundry business to a much more privileged lifestyle. Despite the hard work, they saw a tangible benefit in their material wealth.

The fifth generation did not have the same experiences of identifying strongly with China. With China closed off under Mao Zedong and not opening up until the 1980s, they do not identify with China as strongly as the previous generations. As Chinese Americans born during the baby boom, this particular generation does not have the same connection or a strong understanding of the transnational, migratory legacy. Instead, they experience different types of hardships such as more personal problems exacerbated by the close proximity of home life and the work place. Many of them stood on the boundaries of full assimilation, while still working in the laundry.

The fifth generation of Chinese Americans in this period of United States history experienced new things that Chinese Americans were not accustomed to, such as homeownership, material wealth, and American consumerism, mixed with their Chinese cultural practices and traditions. The current critical analysis shows how the interrelatedness of these experiences greatly shaped each member differently. An examination of these experiences also shows how issues of generational and transnational relationships, the laundry business, gender, and birth order affect a Chinese American laundry family in San Francisco. Across each generation the family business serves as a model for the Chinese American family, through the interrelatedness and connectivity of a family occupying both a business and home life. The relationships between

grandparents, parents, and children were affected differently by the family business. The family business was a means to maintain, support, and hold family ties, but it raised more issues due to the proximity and everyday interactions of home and work.

This thesis offers a wide range of different histories and voices through the study of a multigenerational Chinese American laundry family in San Francisco. The historiography will focus on Chinese American laundries, the different historical narratives of Chinese American history, and the idea of citizenship for baby boomers in the post-World War II era.

The historiography of Chinese America covers three distinct time periods: the Exclusion Era, the period from the repeal of Chinese Exclusion to the 1965 Immigration Act, and the post-immigration period. Each generation of the family fits differently in these three time periods. The distinct periods in Chinese American history overlaps with the family history and provides an overarching timeline for the different family members.

A majority of recent works by Asian American historians focuses on one of the above time periods. In the Exclusion Era, historians Erika Lee, Madeline Hsu, and Yong Chen each focus on a different aspect of this period. Erika Lee explores the Chinese immigrant experience and the American immigrant officials through the use of national archives and arrival files. Madeline Hsu uses this period to explore the transnationalism of the Chinese American community between the United States and Southern China,

specifically Taishan. Yong Chen explores the creation of the Chinese community in San Francisco during Exclusion.

For the World War II period, K. Scott Wong focuses exclusively on World War II as a turning point for the Chinese American community. Xiaojian Zhao examines Chinese American communities in the United States in different time periods, 1940-65 and post-1965, and focuses on family reunification and the shifting Chinese American community. For post-1965, she focuses on the development of the emerging social and economic hierarchy following the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act.

The Exclusion Era for Chinese American history covers the start of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 until the Repeal of Chinese Exclusion in 1943. The above historians focus on different aspects of the Chinese American community in response to the exclusionary practices and discrimination experienced by the Chinese American community. The frameworks used by Lee, Hsu, and Chen provide a foundation for the understanding and beginning stages of the Lee family's immigration to the United States.

In the book *At America's Gates* (2003), Erika Lee uses immigration records to highlight Chinese immigration into the United States. Her work as a historian has been instrumental in using the National Archives as a primary source.<sup>4</sup> By using Chinese immigrant arrival files, Lee contextualizes the Exclusion Period and includes local,

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4. Erika Lee, *At America's Gates* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 14.

national, and transnational frameworks.<sup>5</sup> Her work illustrates the intersections of various subfields in history – social, immigration, Asian American, legal, Chinese, political, and western.<sup>6</sup> By exploring the changes and shift attitudes throughout the Exclusion Period for Chinese immigration, her work is instrumental to understanding immigration patterns.<sup>7</sup> Through the development of these Exclusionary policies, Lee uses the role of race in developing immigration regulation and the shift of the United States into a gatekeeping nation.<sup>8</sup> Although the United States tried to deter and block Chinese immigration, many were still entering the country.

Building off Lee's work, this thesis will expand and explore Chinese American trajectories across multiple generations that resulted from the immigration experience under Chinese Exclusion through the lens of a Chinese American family in the laundry business. As a result of Exclusion, the interrogation of Chinese immigrants at Angel Island continues to affect the family after Exclusion is no longer in existence. Altering family trajectories greatly impacted home and business life for the family. Despite separation from China, the family still maintained a transnational connection to the home country.

In her book *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home* (2000), Madeline Hsu explores the transnational connections between the United States and Southern China.

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5. Ibid., 15.

6. Ibid., 9.

7. Ibid., 7.

8. Ibid.

She provides a new transnational lens to view the Taishanese American community. By using a wide range of primary and secondary sources, Hsu's research provides a multiple perspective of Taishanese immigration and transnationalism.<sup>9</sup> She focuses on primary sources and records from Taishan County and China, as well as English language sources in the United States. The migratory pattern between the two countries greatly impacted the Taishanese community in the United States and Taishan. Hsu argues the necessity to examine the Taishanese in China to build linkages while dealing with the competing political agendas of the United States and China.<sup>10</sup> *Guxiang*, the ties and loyalties to the native place, plays an important role for the Taishanese community in creating kinship bonds and cooperative action among strangers.<sup>11</sup> The importance to native place plays a pivotal role in the understanding of these transnational connections.

Through this constant movement between spaces, Hsu describes the Chinese community as being "neither here nor there; they were not really American and not really Chinese."<sup>12</sup> In addressing this question, Hsu portrays the community as elastic and moving beyond the idea of physical spaces, focusing on the transnational connection that was created and maintained between these spaces. Their experiences and the creation of various kinship networks reinforces the ideas of an elastic community that focus on

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9. Madeline Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 13.

10. *Ibid.*, 11.

11. *Ibid.*, 9.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

mobility and diversification.<sup>13</sup> In the transnational migration patterns that she traces, Hsu argues that many of these mobile Taishanese sojourners still keep ties to their native place.<sup>14</sup> Although it is not a physical tie, many of the Taishanese Americans continue to send money to their villages. The back-and-forth migration pattern was greatly disrupted because of World War II and later, the Communist takeover of mainland China. This thesis is shaped by Hsu's transnational framework on the creation, building, and maintenance of transnational connections across generations in the United States and Taishan. The research will add to her framework of the transnational connection of one family by exploring multiple generations' relationships as they move further away from the ancestral country.

In the book, *Chinese San Francisco 1850-1943*, Yong Chen explores the cultural and social history of the Chinese American community in San Francisco. By focusing on the Chinese American community in San Francisco, Chen examines the development of a Pacific Rim community.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Lee and Hsu, Chen uses only Chinese language sources to study the Chinese American community in San Francisco.<sup>16</sup> With these sources, Chen sees the community adopting into the American Dream and politics, while maintaining some cultural ties. "This study seeks to understand things that motivated them to live, work and preserve...comprehend and articulate the meaning of their American

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13. Ibid., 11.

14. Ibid., 14.

15. Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco 1850-1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000),

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16. Ibid., 4.

experience.”<sup>17</sup> In his decision to use Chinese language sources, Chen tries to keep the interpretation of the Chinese community in San Francisco within the voice of the Chinese themselves.<sup>18</sup> By exploring this idea of Chinatown and the Chinese community, Chen creates and discovers a multilayered identity of the Chinese community in San Francisco.<sup>19</sup> Chen discovers that many Chinese Americans believed that in order to improve their standing in the United States, they needed a strong China and to improve the Chinese American community.<sup>20</sup> By looking at the formation and the transformation of the Chinese American community, Chen breaks away from the binary paradigm of what it means to be Chinese, American, or both. He argues that it is up to the individual and the reflection of shifting social changes over time and space. This thesis expands on this foundation and explores what it means to be Chinese American across a multigenerational Chinese American laundry family.

Lee, Hsu, and Chen agree that the Chinese Exclusion Act and discriminatory practices greatly impacted the Chinese community during the Exclusion Period of Chinese American history. They emphasize on different reactions and how the community adapted to these challenges. The intersections of their works address legal and political areas in Lee’s work that explores immigration arrival files, the sociocultural aspect of community development in Chen’s work which uses Chinese language sources

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17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 3.

19. *Ibid.*, 10.

20. *Ibid.*, 8.

only, and the creation and elasticity of community beyond the nation-state in Hsu's work that uses both Chinese and English sources. Their works are part of the recent historiography of Chinese American and Asian American history that shape the current research and that create linkages across the family history being analyzed.

With the Repeal of Chinese Exclusion, K. Scott Wong and Xiaojian Zhao look at the effects it had on the growing Chinese community in the United States. World War II played a huge role leading to family reunification and the creation of future Chinese American generations. Families were no longer separated by exclusionary practices and discrimination. This period focuses on the Chinese American community from 1943 to 1965.

K. Scott Wong's *Americans Finest: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (2005) explores the impact and shifting changes of the Chinese American community through the lens of World War II before, during, and after. A small number of second and third generation Chinese Americans struggled to find their identity resulting from the discriminatory practices and exclusion prior to World War II. Many were college educated, but stuck with low-paying jobs in a Chinatown that did not reflect their education.<sup>21</sup> Wong focuses on this specific group of Chinese Americans born during the 1910s and 20s who would later become part of the middle class in the 1960s.<sup>22</sup> He argues

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21. K. Scott Wong, *Americans Finest: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 2.

22. *Ibid.*, 3.

that they were truly Chinese American, recognizing both their culture and heritage but having an American outlook and education. Some looked towards China for future employment, while others wanted to be part of white America. Wong uses mostly English language sources and conducted his interviews in English.<sup>23</sup> Many second and third generation Chinese Americans were more comfortable speaking English than Chinese.<sup>24</sup> As he argues, they play a large and important role in our understanding of the Chinese American community and the creation of a Chinese American identity as a result of World War II.

In the book, *Remaking Chinese America: Immigration, Family, and Community 1940-1965* (2002), Xiaojian Zhao focuses on family reunification and the shifting changes that resulted from World War II, versus Wong who focuses on the existing Chinese American community before, during, and after World War II. Families were finally reunited following World War II, after years of separation under Chinese Exclusion. In addition to family reunification, many were able to leave Chinatown for the first time and live elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Zhao studies the Chinese American community beyond the normal boundaries of Chinatown.<sup>26</sup> Using a wide range of primary sources from community newspapers, INS immigration records, community organization publications, oral histories, and genealogical documents, Zhao synthesizes all this information from

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23. Ibid., 4.

24. Ibid.

25. Xiaojian Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America: Immigration, Family, Community, 1940-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 2.

26. Ibid., 3.

1943 to 1965.<sup>27</sup> In addition to focusing on family reunification, she explores the changing political situation between China and the United States.<sup>28</sup> As a result of the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese American community once again became targets of the United States in their hunt for communists.

Zhao and Wong agree on the impact that World War II had on the Chinese American community. The shift of being the “Bad Asian” to the “Good Asian” at the expense of the Japanese American community in the United States during World War II provided Chinese Americans with opportunities to take advantage of their education or work outside their ethnic enclave. By going beyond the borders of their ethnic community, the family was able to begin the trek towards upward social mobility. The changing dynamics of the Chinese American community during this time period fits the research for this paper. With the benefits of World War II, the Lee family began to experience many new things but still stayed true to the laundry business. For them, upward mobility was family reunification and being able to leave Chinatown.

The 1965 Immigration Act abolished racist national quotas and, allowed for a large influx of new immigrants from around the world to enter the United States. For the Chinese American community, the generations before 1965 were able to bring in other relatives and family members who were left in China. The 1965 Immigration Act also allowed for new Chinese immigrants to enter the country as well. Unlike the earlier

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27. *Ibid.*, 4.

28. *Ibid.*, 6.

Chinese immigrants, the new Chinese immigrant community differed greatly. They were no longer the same groups from Southern China. The need for high-skilled workers presented opportunities for a more diverse background of immigrants.

In the book, *The New Chinese America* (2010), Xiaojian Zhao explores the changing demographics and diverse contemporary Chinese American community in the United States. She focuses on class and the social backgrounds of this emerging contemporary community. "It explores the historical, economic and social foundations of the Chinese American community and the ways that ethnicity is reworked in a society undergoing rapid change."<sup>29</sup> By conducting her research with anthropological and sociological approaches, Zhao synthesizes primary and secondary sources. With the influx of the Chinese community as a result of the 1965 Immigration Act, class and social hierarchy began to further develop in the community. Zhao's framework of the new Chinese American community is important to understanding their intra-ethnic relationship to the earlier generations who have established roots in the United States.

In *Ethnic Enterprise in America* (1972), Ivan Light explores ethnic entrepreneurship among Chinese, Japanese, and African American communities in the United States during 1880 to 1940. It is one of the first studies to explore ethnic entrepreneurship. Using a comparative analysis, Light conducted his research to better understand how and why Chinese and Japanese business owners were successful

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29. Xiaojian Zhao, *The New Chinese America: Class, Economy, and Social Hierarchy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 5.

compared to African American businesses. In his findings, Light discovered the importance of social ties and trust building in the Chinese and Japanese communities. This connection is extremely important to the framework of a family business.

In the article, "The Social Costs of Immigrant Entrepreneurship," Edna Bonacich critically examines the social costs of immigrant entrepreneurship through the Korean American experience in Los Angeles. As one of the leading scholars and proponents of the split labor market theory, Bonacich concludes that immigrant entrepreneurs are part of world capitalism.<sup>30</sup> In her examination of immigrant entrepreneurship, the social cost to the immigrants includes longer hours, intergenerational conflict between parents and children, as well as a double workload for women.<sup>31</sup> Her immigrant entrepreneurship framework plays an important role in understanding the laundry business.

In *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, Lisa Sun-Hee Park explores Asian entrepreneurship and how their second generation children demonstrate Americanness through social consumption. "For Asian Americans, consumption is a provocative symbol of social citizenship, familial unity, and community identity. The intense pursuit of upward economic mobility in order to repay parental sacrifices and become a 'normal' American family all contributes to this distinct process

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30. Edna Bonacich, "The Social Costs of Immigrant Entrepreneurship," *Amerasia Journal* 14, no. 1 (1988): 123.

31. *Ibid.*, 125.

of consumption in Asian America.”<sup>32</sup> Through social citizenship, Park argues how consumption ties with economic terms and being a “good” immigrant. Although not directly stating this as similar to the ideas of the American Dream and upward mobility, the sense of belonging and becoming American is through the consumption and possession of material goods.<sup>33</sup> Park focuses on Korean and Chinese second generation children and their entrepreneurial immigrant parents. Through her interviews, she focuses on better understanding the importance of the family business and what it means to be American through social citizenship.<sup>34</sup>

Chinese American laundries have long been seen as part of an ethnic specific occupation set by discriminatory practices against the Chinese when they first came to the United States. These ethnic businesses flourished by occupying a subordinated labor position and by functioning as a necessary service for society. Many of these businesses lasted only for one or two generations. As such, the businesses were not succeeded within the family. The family laundry in San Francisco was able to go beyond the standard one-to-two generational family business model and instead became a long-lasting family legacy. The experiences of the first and second generations in the family business are similar to what scholars have written about regarding the laundry experience. As the

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32. Lisa Sun-Hee Park, *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Immigrant Entrepreneurs* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 2.

33. *Ibid.*, 4.

34. *Ibid.*, 42.

business progressed for later generations, it was in fact not a business but an opportunity to become an entrepreneur and to expand outside the business itself.

Much has been written about Chinese American laundries and ethnic enterprises in the United States. Paul Ong's work, "An Ethnic Trade: The Chinese Laundries in Early California" (1981) and "Chinese Laundries as an Urban Occupation in Nineteenth Century" (1983) provide an economic lens to explore the laundry business. June Mei's article, "Socioeconomic Developments among the Chinese in San Francisco, 1848-1906" (1984), provides a class and social analysis of the Chinese in San Francisco. Subsequent research has slowly shifted from Paul Siu's landmark book and case study *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (1953), to Ren Qi Yu's *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (1990) and John Jung's *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain* (2007). Each offers a different perspective, but nonetheless have limitations for the current study. Parts of their methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and different perspectives will be used to construct the historical narrative of the multigenerational Chinese American laundry family.

Siu's work was one of the first to study the Chinese laundrymen. Originally written as a dissertation in 1953, it was later published in 1987. He focused on the Chinese laundrymen of Chicago in the 1930s. As a student in the Chicago School of Sociology, he had an insider's perspective to the Chinese laundrymen in Chicago. A

former laundryman himself, Siu conducted ethnographic observations and interviews of laundrymen. He studied the social isolation and sojourner mentality of the earliest Chinese laundrymen in Chicago, and argued that this sojourner mentality was the reason why they could not fully assimilate in the United States. For the Chinese laundrymen, Siu argued against Robert Park's assimilation model, and devised his own model for contact, conflict, accommodation, and isolation.<sup>35</sup> This follows his training and background as a Chicago sociologist. The Chinese Exclusion Act was still in place at the time so many of these laundrymen would have ties to the home country.

As one of the first studies about the Chinese laundrymen, Siu's work and research greatly impacted the field of Asian American Studies. Siu explained the homogenous identity of the Chinese laundry by using the sojourner mentality and the inability to assimilate. He provided them with a voice to describe their longing to return to China, and the irony they experienced when they visited the home country. They had to maintain the farce of a successful Gold Mountain man during these returns. These return trips were short, and they would return to the United States to continue their work.<sup>36</sup> By occupying this delicate idea and space between China and the United States, these laundrymen remain symbols of the discriminatory practices of the time. By maintaining traditional ties and the old world kinship system, Chinese laundrymen led a

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35. Paul Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 4.

36. *Ibid.*, 132.

life of social isolation and segregation.<sup>37</sup> Many of them wanted to work as laundrymen to make enough money and return to China to retire.

The topic of generational transition for laundrymen is crucial in Siu's work. As they got older, they would send for a relative in China to eventually take over the business so they could retire.<sup>38</sup> This model explored by Siu does not apply to a multigenerational laundry family. Siu's model reflects of the time period of his interviews and ethnographies. Under Chinese Exclusion, the Chinese laundrymen could not bring their families over. Instead they needed to have split families between China and the United States. However, this drastically changed when Chinese Exclusion ended.

The multigenerational laundry family is much different from Siu's generational transition framework. By building on this model, the multigenerational transition begins much sooner and no longer requires a retiring laundryman to send for a family member in China to succeed him. Now these new family members are already part of and involved in the business. Instead of continuing to lie about the business to their overseas family, family members in a multigenerational business are deeply ingrained and serve key roles. They are being exposed to the laundry business earlier and start their apprenticeship sooner. When the laundryman retires, he does not go back to China. Instead, he still comes to the shop.

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37. *Ibid.*, 2.

38. *Ibid.*, 112.

Ren Qiu Yu's work was the next major study about Chinese laundries; it was published in 1993. His study of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance in New York addresses issues found in Siu's sojourner mentality and static culture of the Chinese laundryman.<sup>39</sup> Yu explores the Sino-American relationship and the affects it had on the Chinese American community.<sup>40</sup> He provides agency and voice for the Chinese American laundrymen through various organizations in New York, but most importantly the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. Instead of accepting their position in society, those laundrymen fought to improve their political and social status in the United States. Using interviews and Chinatown newspapers, Yu's analysis challenges the top-down narrative of the Chinese American community. The experiences of the laundrymen whom Yu interviewed varied greatly from those interviewed and observed by Siu. Instead of longing for their eventual return to China, many of these laundrymen wanted to improve their subject position in the United States. In order to do so, they needed China to be a strong country. In recollecting past events and experiences, the interviewees might have had selective memory, but Yu used primary sources to offset and fact check the interviews.

The grassroots organization, Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (CHLA), challenged the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) on community affairs. Yu examines how rigid cultural traditions were maintained in the United States, but did not

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39. Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 2.

40. *Ibid.*, 5.

continue in China.<sup>41</sup> Through the CHLA, Chinese laundrymen challenged discriminatory practices. Instead of adhering to traditional Chinese culture and traditions, the CHLA became a powerful governing body that fought for the rights of laundrymen. Yu argues that the position of the Chinese American community is relative to the host country, in this case the United States. The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance adopted democratic and organizational practices from the United States and challenged the CCBA. By challenging the CCBA and the rigid cultural traditions they represented, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance began to integrate into American society.

In the book *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain* (2007), John Jung provides a historical narrative and analysis of the Chinese laundrymen. Instead of a narrow focus like Yu or Siu, Jung casts a much wider net and area of study for Chinese laundries. From his experience of growing up in a laundry family in the deep South and as a trained psychologist, Jung provides much details and a psychological approach to the Chinese laundry. Using primary sources and interviews, Jung explores Chinese laundries in other regions throughout the United States. He later expands this on his other book, *Southern Fried Rice: Life in a Chinese Laundry in the Deep South* (2005). Many the laundries and subjects interviewed were located in areas and spaces where they were the only Chinese in town. In his interviews with children of the laundry families, none of them continued with the family business. They all demonstrated upward social mobility and success outside the laundry business.

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41. Ibid., 4.

In his autobiography, “A Laundryman Sings the Blues,” Sin Jang Leung recounts his story of growing up in China as a member of the Gold Mountain family in the village.<sup>42</sup> His family’s history is revealed through his upbringing of being the number one son of a number one son. Leung realizes how spoiled and privileged his life was in China. He was able to get an education, but he was extremely lazy and started to gamble. Eventually, he immigrated to the United States. He was detained in Seattle for three months and would have been deported, if not for his father who paid off the lawyers and immigration officials. Leung moved to Chicago to become a laundryman with his father and village uncles. This was when he realized the hardships of being a laundryman, the Chinese word for “laundry” was literally “clothes shop” and he thought his father worked as a high-end tailor. Leung went to New York where his gambling addiction got the best of him and passed away from tuberculosis. This autobiography is similar to pre-Exclusion hardships of earlier Chinese immigrants and laundrymen. From receiving remittances and the realization of what a laundry shop in the United States really was, Sin Jang Leung’s story is a typical immigrant laundryman story. As a personal laundryman story, his autobiography provides another perspective to the laundry story.

In the articles by Paul Ong, “An Ethnic Trade: The Chinese Laundries in Early California” (1981) and “Chinese Laundries as an Urban Occupation in Nineteenth Century” (1983), Ong’s economist background and training provides a lens to explore the

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42. Sin Jang Leung, “A Laundryman Sings the Blues,” trans. Marlon K Hom, *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (1991): 4.

Chinese laundry business in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the first article, Ong focuses on the segmented labor market that emerges from laundry businesses as a result of an industrializing urban society, the capitalization on social ties that create an ethnic niche, and the rise of institutional racism and discriminatory practices found in a racial division of labor.<sup>43</sup> In the second article, Ong focuses more on the development of the laundry businesses, the economic and ethnic ties, and the use of urban space.<sup>44</sup> Ong's methodology includes the use of primary and secondary sources. His primary sources comprised of census data, labor reports, and congressional records. With his findings and research, Ong's works focus on the residential and business strategy of Chinese laundry locations.<sup>45</sup> This thesis will explore the strategies of Chinese laundry locations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later trajectories of the family business.

In the chapter by June Mei, "Socioeconomic Developments among the Chinese in San Francisco, 1848-1906," that was published in *Labor Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II*, Mei explores new class formation for the Chinese American community and its interactions with white society. Mei contextualizes the social and economic developments of the Chinese community

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43. Paul Ong, "An Ethnic Trade: The Chinese Laundries in Early California," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 8, no. 4 (1981): 95.

44. Paul Ong, "Chinese Laundries as an Urban Occupation in Nineteenth Century California," *The Annals of the Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest* 1, no. 1 (1983): 69.

45. Ong, "Chinese Laundries," 80.

during 1848-1906.<sup>46</sup> The periods Mei uses focus on three different time periods: 1850-1870, 1870-1882, and 1882-1906. The economic developments of these time periods reflect the changing trends in employment and work for the Chinese American community. Mei also provides a class analysis focusing on four broad social classes, capitalists, wage workers, petite bourgeoisie, and lumpen.<sup>47</sup> In her class analysis, the importance of moving up in society was via a petite bourgeoisie. By becoming small business owners, this group of people accumulated more capital instead of wage workers. This shows the continued importance of business ownership in the laundry business.

As the works by the scholars mentioned demonstrates, the Chinese American laundry is part of an ethnic niche and community for new immigrants who first come to the United States. By using different methods and theoretical frameworks, all the interpretations provided focus on a certain aspect of the laundry business and the employment itself. Through June Mei and Paul Ong's works, the reader can better understand the Chinese laundries in California in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The foundation built for a long-term family is shown by looking at the social, economic, and class backgrounds of their location. Paul Siu, Renqiu Yu, and John Jung provide different analyses and interpretations of the laundries through different perspectives. Their works help shape our understanding of Chinese laundries, but leave

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46. June Mei, "Socioeconomic Developments among the Chinese in San Francisco, 1849-1906," in *Labor Immigration under Capitalism in the United States before World War II*, ed. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 370.

47. *Ibid.*, 379.

gaps that this thesis hopes to address and fill. Although society's understanding of the Chinese laundry business has grown, the perspectives of a multigenerational family laundry will provide a new lens, through which parts of previous interpretations and perspectives will be used to work towards a new interpretation of the laundry business. From the previous periods of Chinese American history, the family laundry business across reflects the changing experiences of the Chinese American community and how each generation had a different experience.

The methodology for this thesis will consist of historical research based on archival work and primary sources. Secondary sources supplement this. The National Archives at San Bruno provided immigration files. Archival sources were found in the Assessor's Office for building information and other government documents available under the Freedom of Information Act. Primary sources stem from personal interviews and old photographs. After conducting the personal interviews, the findings were coded and grounded theories were used for the analysis.

Many of the interviewees experience first-hand what it was like to be part of and growing up in a San Francisco laundry family. By emphasizing on one family, this study shows how differently the laundry has impacted the interviewees. Two of the biggest problems with these interviews are the selective memory of the interviewees and that their interpretation of how past events transpired may or may not be true. The latter is based on their personal interpretations and what they perceive to be the truth. In

combining the interviews with other primary and secondary sources, this thesis provides an analysis and interpretation of the interviews.

The focus of the questions is on the Baby Boomer time period in which they grew up. With time for only one interview conducted per subject, ethnographic observations of family events were also a part of the methodology. Using ethnographic observations, the interactions of the interviewees in a family setting shed additional light on their answers. The observations helped with the coding process and the overall focus of the thesis. They revealed an interviewee's interactions with family members at family events such as Chinese New Year, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, as well as at smaller gathering like lunch and dinner with only a few family members.

This thesis does not reflect the experience of a whole community. By exploring American society, Chinese culture, gender, and birth order, each interviewee had varied experiences both at home and in the laundry business. Follow-up interviews with the subjects of this thesis need to be conducted for more clarification and depth. And, interviews with other Chinese Americans who grew up in a laundry family would help to add breadth to the understanding of the Chinese American laundry family.

This thesis is divided into five chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. The chapters explore and analyze a different aspect of the family business. The first chapter focuses on the third generation of the family and the historical context surrounding the Chinese American community. This analysis studies the continuing transnational

connections between the United States and China, plus the importance of the founding of the family laundry business. The second chapter focuses on the fourth generation and the changing dynamics of the business as it begins to expand both in the family and as a business. The third chapter examines the fifth generation and their experiences growing up in the laundry family and the wide range of expectations for each of the subjects. The fourth chapter synthesizes the three generations and their intergenerational relationship with one another in the laundry business. The fifth chapter looks at gender roles and the performance of the subjects. The conclusion is a synthesis of the study, with a commentary on future studies.

## Chapter 1: Out for Pick Up

As the first major Asian immigrant group to enter the United States in large numbers, the Chinese have faced many barriers throughout their time here. From being “welcomed” by anti-Chinese sentiment to outright exclusion, Chinese immigrants faced a lot of different hardships in the country. The first big group of Chinese immigrants came as sojourners after the discovery of gold in California. Sojourners came to the country as temporary visitors.<sup>48</sup> As a predominately forced male labor group, they had hoped to strike it rich before returning home to China. They left their country not only for economic opportunities to help support their families, but also to pave the way for future generations. This form of temporary labor was one of the reasons why many white workers resented Chinese labor. Their belief was the sojourners were undercutting white labor, always returning home to China and never settling in the United States.

Another way for Chinese to come to the United States was as contract laborers. By signing labor contracts they would serve for X amount of years and receive wages before being released from the contract.<sup>49</sup> The focus and need for so-called cheap labor play a large role in the understanding of the Chinese in the United States. As an exploited labor force from cheap labor bosses, the laborers’ wages would undercut those of white workers.<sup>50</sup> Instead of being a class-based conflict, white capitalists in power were able to

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48. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, updated and rev. ed. (New York: Little Brown Company, 1998), 31.

49. *Ibid.*, 35.

50. Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 213.

maintain control using race as a divisive factor. For the Chinese in the United States, the structures of domination were spread in various institutions at the federal, state, and local levels of government.

The Chinese played a large role in various California industries. From mining, agricultural, to manufacturing, the need for labor was widespread in the state. The first immigrants tried their hand during the Gold Rush and worked as miners. Chinese immigrants were not able to come in large numbers until after the early part of the Gold Rush. It made it much harder for poorer miners to find any gold. Big corporations with their vast capital resources made it easier to use deep drill mining to find gold. With the decline in gold to be found, many white miners began to resent the Chinese. The influx of big corporations monopolizing the gold mines made it harder for poor miners to find gold.

With the decline in gold, one of the first racial projects was enacted. A racial project simultaneously interprets or explains racial dynamics, while reorganizing and redistributing resources along racial lines.<sup>51</sup> The use of racial project highlights the race factor in singling out Chinese, compared to whites. One of the earliest anti-Chinese legislation was passed at the state level, the Foreign Miners Tax 1852, which directly targeted Chinese miners. The Foreigner Miners Tax of 1852 was a tax that charged Chinese miners specifically three dollars a month.<sup>52</sup> From the state judicial system, another racist racial project was enacted with the *People v. Hall* decision in 1854 that

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51. *Ibid.*, 56.

52. Takaki, 82.

made it illegal for Chinese to testify against whites. In this case, a white man murdered a Chinese person that was witnessed by three other Chinese. Instead of being convicted, the court added Chinese to the groups that could not testify against whites, which included African Americans, Indians, and Mulattos.<sup>53</sup> With the decline of gold in the mining industry and anti-Chinese legislation, many Chinese left to work in other industries.

The Chinese brought their past experiences as farmers in China, and worked in fertile lands that ended up paying huge dividends. Prior to Chinese farmers, the Central Valley lacked the basic expertise to be a successful agricultural producing area. The Chinese were used on extensive reclamation projects. Using their past knowledge and experience from China, these new farmers successfully constructed irrigation systems up and down Central California, turning it into one of the most fertile areas in the country.

Many Chinese left the agriculture industry and began working on the construction of the railroads. The railroad companies were able to take advantage, recruit, and employ a large number of Chinese laborers from urban centers. They also actively recruited more Chinese to come to the United States.<sup>54</sup> As a result, white workers began to resent the Chinese again. Upon completion of the railroads, many Chinese entered the manufacturing industries as laborers.

Anti-Chinese legislation began at the local levels before culminating in the first anti-immigration law, not only denying Chinese entry into the United States, but also

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53. *Ibid.*, 102.

54. Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 30.

prohibiting Chinese from gaining citizenship.<sup>55</sup> When more Chinese settled in Chinatowns, ordinances were passed, targeting them as well, e.g., the Cubic Air Ordinance (1870), the Queue Ordinance (1873), and the Laundry Ordinance (1879) that were passed in San Francisco. The racist racial projects directed at the Chinese were part of the new racial ideology that became prevalent during what Omi and Winant called the Racial Dictatorship period with racially based conflicts resulting from the implementation of racial projects that created racial divisions.<sup>56</sup> The idea of Chinese as the Yellow Peril was rampant throughout California and the United States. The concept, Yellow Peril, along with orientalism and the yellow horde of China were a way for them to justify racist racial projects: if the federal, state, and local governments did not do anything, more and more Chinese would be able to freely enter the United States. In San Francisco with its very large Chinese population and Chinatown, race relations between Chinese and white groups were very contentious. Labor parties such as the Workingman's Party protested against the Chinese for taking away jobs. As an easily identifiable target, the Chinese became scapegoats as the cause for the economic downturn of the 1870s.

As the Chinese began to come to the United States in increasing numbers, they became a bigger, visible target. The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad on May 10, 1869 enabled more white people from the East Coast to freely move into the West Coast. Stressing the importance of confirming their own whiteness, "American identity"

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55. Neil Gotanda, "Exclusion and Inclusion: Immigration and American Orientalism," in *Across the Pacific: Asian Americans and Globalization*, ed. Evelyn Hu-Dehart (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 138.

56. Omi and Winant, 66.

often clashed with what white people saw in California. By developing and maintaining what they believed to be white, which was equated to being American, pressure from grassroots labor organizations wanted to keep out the Yellow Peril and Chinese workers. The formation of this racist ideology led to racist racial projects against the Chinese and later, other Asian groups.

Once the Central Pacific Railroad connected with the Union Pacific, there was a new influx of unemployed Chinese workers in the Bay Area, specifically San Francisco, where one of the largest Chinese communities was forming.<sup>57</sup> With the rapid urbanization of major cities along the West Coast, some Chinese were pushed into the cities and started ethnic enclaves, usually in the ghettos of towns. San Francisco's Chinatown at the time had nearly one fourth of California's Chinese.

With the influx of Chinese back into the cities, many began opening their own businesses in these now densely populated urban centers. One of the most prominent occupations for the Chinese community at this time was the laundry business. According to Sucheng Chan, the laundry business both sustained and entrapped Chinese laundrymen. With low capital investment, long business hours, and meager wages, they were able to establish a foothold through business ownership that would sustain their lifestyle in the United States, while at the same time continue to support their family back home in China.<sup>58</sup>

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57. Takaki, 87.

58. Chan, 37.

The cultural background and Confucian roots of China played a large role in the everyday lives of the Chinese community in San Francisco. Following the Confucian tradition of governance, the Chinese Six Companies established roots in Chinatown. They helped Chinese immigrants while providing the community with social, economic, and political services.<sup>59</sup> The Chinese Six Companies were formed from the largest family and village associations in Chinatown. According to Him Mark Lai, the companies established and enrolled members from districts based on Cantonese sub-dialects.<sup>60</sup> As the governing body within the community, they helped Chinese immigrants in the United States. With focus on capital and transnationalism, the merchant class assumed positions of power and maintained social control of the community.<sup>61</sup>

The Chinese who remained in the United States in the 1850s began to form an ethnic community. Normally formed in large metropolitan cities, the largest and oldest Chinatown was in San Francisco. The manufacturing industry, new business opportunities, and community organizations began to form. Some of the more popular business ventures for the Chinese in Chinatowns were restaurants and laundries. By pursuing these specific business ventures normally associated with women's work, Chinese men were being pushed into gender-based labor fields. Both of these business opportunities required very little capital and no strong command of English.<sup>62</sup> If they

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59. Him Mark Lai, *Becoming Chinese American: A History of Communities and Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004), 39.

60. *Ibid.*, 41.

61. *Ibid.*, 46.

62. Takaki, 93.

could not afford to open small businesses, many worked as wage workers in the manufacturing industry.

As the focal point of the ethnic community, Chinatown provides a critical lens to examine the history and culture of the Chinese American community. Using the Chinese population in San Francisco, Chinatown can be used as a start to understand the development of an ethnic community, as well as kinship networks and associations to maintain ties with the home country. For the Chinese community, Chinatown represents the ethnic enclave they made for themselves and the growth of the community in San Francisco.

The first attempt at slowing Chinese immigration came with the passing of the Page Act of 1875.<sup>63</sup> This was also a gender-based act, focusing on the idea that Chinese women were prostitutes. The anti-Chinese sentiment reached its climax with the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act 1882, which banned skilled and unskilled Chinese laborers from entering the country.<sup>64</sup> The exempt classes who were able to enter the United States were the merchants, diplomats, students, teachers, and tourists. It also affected the already settled Chinese, making them permanent aliens and unable to become citizens. The exempt class focused on groups who would not permanently settle in the United States. In addition, another exempt group of Chinese immigrants was allowed to enter the country, children of US citizens. As a result, Chinese community formation in the United States enabled the idea of perpetual foreigners who returned to China. For those who

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63. *Ibid.*, 40.

64. *Ibid.*, 111.

settled, they created a predominantly bachelor society. The act was imposed for ten years, before it was renewed in 1892 and passed indefinitely in 1902.<sup>65</sup>

One of the first constraining factors was the unequal treaties signed by China with the United States. These treaties were signed in 1844, amended in 1858, and again in 1868. The Burlingame Treaty in 1868 focused on the relationship between the two countries, basically to the economic benefit of the United States. It allowed for free migration and emigration of Chinese to the United States. In addition, it protected the Chinese already in the United States, focusing on their most favored nation status.<sup>66</sup> However, the treaty was reversed with the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Under the Chinese Six Companies and other family associations, Chinese in the United States began challenging the racist racial projects of Exclusion. By using the Constitution as a platform, the Chinese community made many gains with the judicial system. One of the first Supreme Court case at the federal level for the Chinese was the *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* case. Based on the Equal Protection Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment, San Francisco's laundry ordinance was discriminatory based on race. In the landmark case *Wong Kim Ark v. the United States*, the Chinese community was able to challenge the citizenship clause in the Fourteenth Amendment. This shows how the Chinese community was able to mobilize against the racist racial projects by going to court and challenging the institution.

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65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 112.

In 1906, San Francisco was struck by a major earthquake and fire, which devastated the city and burned down City Hall and all its records. The loss of these records allowed for the Chinese community and kinships networks to come forward and claim citizenship in the United States. According to Hsu, once the citizenship was established and acknowledged by immigration officials or in the court of law, it would not be challenged again.<sup>67</sup> By claiming citizenship, the Chinese returned to Taishan as citizens of the United States and created “paper son slots.”

As a result, the paper son practice began for a new wave of immigrants trying to circumvent Exclusion laws. By claiming to be sons of the exempt class or children of US citizens from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Acts, these men had both legitimate and illegitimate documents falsifying their identity in hopes of gaining entry into the United States. With more and more paper sons entering the United States, an immigration station on Angel Island was opened. In order to confirm whether or not these paper sons were really whom they claim to be, many were forced to stay on Angel Island and undergo very rigorous questioning. Angel Island was not just a detention center, but also a holding point to make sure people entering the United States were not carrying sickness or tainted by criminal record. It was a prison with terrible living conditions and an unfair selection process designed to discourage Chinese from coming to the United States. This process to facilitate immigration also violates the constitutional rights of children of legitimate US citizens to enter the country.

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67. Hsu, 81.

During World War II, the United States and China were allies which ultimately led to the goodwill gesture of repealing Chinese Exclusion under the 1943 Magnuson Act. As a result, Chinese immigration was no longer excluded, but still fell under the 1924 Immigration Act, which based immigration on a national quota system. For Europeans, it limited immigration to only two percent annually of the foreign-born individuals' nationality according to the US Census of 1890. For Asians, it was another attempt to limit and control their immigration. By selecting the year 1890, the percentage of Asians in the United States was at a minimum, making it a challenge for a large number to enter the country. When World War II ended in 1945, the War Brides Act (1945-1948) was quickly passed. This allowed for Asian wives and children of US servicemen to enter as non-quota immigrants. Although Chinese immigration was still limited, many Chinese wives were able to enter the United States.

The post-World War II experience played a very big role in the development and understanding of the Chinese American community, which underwent a new change during the Great Transformation. With the fall of the Republic of China in 1949, a new ideological shift began to occur within the context of the United States discourse. The focus shifted to the communists led by the Cold War context of the US-USSR relations. Instead of being a visible, racially based threat, China was now an ideological one focused on communism. For the Chinese community in the United States, the fall of the Republic of China meant they became targets as possible sleeper communist agents or

spies. “The new peril was seen as yellow in race and red in ideology.”<sup>68</sup> With the new People’s Republic of China, the Red Scare hit the Chinese community in San Francisco especially hard. The class divisions that permeated throughout Chinatown were now more rampant than before. The Chinese community had to prioritize what should happen next, especially those with business interests in China. “The Chinese Six Companies aligned itself with the Kuomintang and supported the campaign to overthrow Communist rule on mainland China.”<sup>69</sup> According to the Bay Area census, the Chinese population for San Francisco in 1950 jumped from 24,813 to 36,445 in 1960.<sup>70</sup> The increase in the Chinese population in San Francisco can be attributed to a large number of new American-born Chinese, as well as the communist takeover in China. Families of Chinese outside of China were targets of the new Communist regime.

### **First Stop**

The Lee family hails from the Yuen Hen Village in Taishan. Hung Shoon Lee was the youngest of three children from Hong Lee and Shee Fong. He had an older brother and an older sister, and was the last of the siblings to immigrate to the United States. His father, Hong Lee, a second generation Chinese American in 1875 or an alleged paper son who claimed his birth right after the 1906 Earthquake and Fire, was part of the early first wave of Chinese immigration. Hong Lee and his siblings worked in the laundry business in various parts of San Francisco thus making Hung Shoon and his

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68. Takaki, 415.

69. Ibid., 414.

70. Bay Area Census, San Francisco City and County 1960 Census Data, <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/counties/SanFranciscoCounty50.htm>.

siblings third generation Chinese Americans. From his birth in 1875 to 1931, Hong Lee lived and worked in San Francisco before ultimately retiring in China. During the early 1900s he made multiple return visits to Taishan. Hung Shoon and his family were part of the Gold Mountain men and the transnational connection between Taishan and the United States.

When Hung Shoon Lee immigrated to the United States in 1931, he came under his real identity. As the foreign-born son of a native born US citizen, he had proper documentation to facilitate his entry to the United States. In addition to this status, Hung Shoon also entered as a student. Under the Chinese Exclusion Act, only certain temporary classes were allowed to enter the United States, if not as children of US citizens. His father, Hong Lee, was a native-born citizen of the United States having been born and raised in San Francisco. Hong Lee lived in the United States from 1875-1931, with several return trips to China in 1901, 1903, and finally 1912. He eventually returned and retired in China in 1931, shortly after Hung Shoon immigrated, and lived there until he passed away in 1945. The dates of the family immigration fit the paper son period when the Chinese claimed birthright citizenship and exercised their 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment right to bring their foreign-born children to the United States.

Hung Shoon was the youngest of three children. His older brother immigrated in 1921, while his sister immigrated in 1929. According to Siu, only those who have money

and have good personal connections are able to bring relatives over to the United States.<sup>71</sup> From the Lee family migration into the United States, these personal connections and accumulation of wealth from the laundry business helped bring the Lees into the country. Prior to Hung Shoon's immigration in March 1931, Hong Lee petitioned to the US Department of Labor and Immigration Services to make sure they would "facilitate his identification and landing as a citizen upon his arrival in the United States."<sup>72</sup> His paper work was received, filed, and approved in November 1930. In the correspondence, between Hung Shoon and his father Hong, the documents were received in February 1931, and Hung Shoon left Taishan to Hong Kong on his journey to the United States.

Upon his arrival to the United States on April 15, 1931, Hung Shoon was detained on Angel Island. His detention, medical examination, and interrogation on Angel Island lasted a little over two and a half weeks before he was given his certificate of identification and allowed to enter the country. His Alien-File, or A-File, only provided the openings of his Angel Island interrogation. However, it did provide documents to locate earlier records such as his siblings' previous arrival cases and confirming the identity of his father. In cross-checking Hung Shoon's interrogation, his two siblings were the witnesses to his identity.<sup>73</sup> Although he entered as a student, the mailing address

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71. Siu, 108.

72. US Department of Labor Immigration Services, A-File A12 651 031, National Archives and Records Administration, National Records Center, Lee's Summit, MO.

73. Lee, 85.

for Hung Shoon in San Francisco was a laundry.<sup>74</sup> As the son of a Gold Mountain man, the higher prestige must have allowed Hung Shoon to marry at a young age. By creating this link and marrying young, this set the transnational linkage for future return trips to China for Hung Shoon. Although he said he was single, he was married with a baby boy. It may or may not have been Hung Shoon's own decision to withhold his marital status and to enter as a student and son of a native-born US citizen. Entering under this particular status and exemption might have been the only way for him to get into the country at the time. In hindsight, the decision to do so greatly impacted the future trajectories of the family. The Lee family legacy was very much a part of the first wave of Chinese immigration and transnational connection between the United States and Taishan.

Hung Shoon's first return trip was a fifteen-month stay between May 1936 and August 1937. As Siu mentions, "the ideal life work is a scheme of saving money and a trip home every few years."<sup>75</sup> It took Hung Shoon five years to save enough before he could return to China. With his temporary visit abroad form submitted and approved, his status was no longer a student but a laundryman. On his return to the United States in September 1937, he was listed as married with an eight-month pregnant wife. For Hung Shoon, this would be his last return trip to China as a youth. It would not be safe for him to make another trip because of the war raging in the Pacific.

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74. Application and Receipt for Certificate of Identity, A-File A12 651 031, National Archives and Records Administration, National Records Center, Lee's Summit, MO.

75. Siu, 182.

With the onset of the Second Sino-Japanese War and later World War II, the seizure of Hong Kong by the Japanese in December 1941 effectively closed any direct transnational connection and the Gold Mountain firms between China and the United States.<sup>76</sup> As a result, Hung Shoon was unable to return to Taishan until the war ended. If he did send money to his family in China, it was rerouted through other channels and connections but it might not have reached the village home.

During World War II, Hung Shoon enlisted in the military and according to his draft card he was identified as married. Ultimately through his military service in World War II, Hung Shoon was able to bring his wife, Jung Ngut Lee, and his “only” son, Gin Hall Americanized as Gene, under the War Brides Act in March 1948. His first son would later immigrate in 1951, under the paper name of a village cousin.

The split family structure of the Lee family was created by Exclusion and Angel Island. For Hung Shoon, he had to leave behind his family when he first entered the United States at Angel Island. As a foreign-born son of a US citizen, Hung Shoon was able to enter the country and finally reunite with his father, Hong Lee. However, he left behind his wife and first-born son. In his entry, detention, and questioning on Angel Island he did not include his marital status. With his family in Taishan, he maintained the transnational connection to support them while he worked in San Francisco. Family reunification would not have happened without the War Brides Act.

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76. Hsu, 179.

### **Back to the Shop**

The case of Hung Shoon Lee is just a small piece of the long-term effects Chinese Exclusion and Angel Island had on Chinese American families. In continuing the transnational legacy of his father, Hung Shoon followed the migration of laundrymen at the time. As a result of Chinese Exclusion and World War II, the maintenance and transnational connection between spaces greatly affected families in the United States and China. In tracing the immigration and transnational legacy of this Chinese American family through the lens of Hung Shoon Lee, the future trajectories and family dynamics became evident in the future generations of his family. Although Hung Shoon, his wife, and two sons were eventually reunited, the close proximity of the home and work life of a small five-person laundry business greatly strained the relationship of the two children and later their spouses.

As a laundryman, Hung Shoon did deliveries throughout the Marina and Pacific Heights districts. The first laundry that the family operated was on Lombard and Webster. "I would go on deliveries with my grandfather [Hung Shoon]. We used to go on deliveries all over Pacific Heights, private residences, all the private homes. It was interesting because we had to go through the service entrances and stuff."<sup>77</sup> It was a small five-person laundry. The family worked together and gained experience in laundry work. As a small family and business unit, the crew lived and worked at the laundry. Hung Shoon moved the family to a larger laundry on Sacramento Street called Guang Hi.

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77. Subject A, interview by the author, Sept. 12, 2014.

It had a French press and a mangle, which allowed them to expand their customer base. By building a customer base, Hung Shoon used these accounts for future businesses. “Grandfather [Hung Shoon] was the one always managing the business. He was taking care of the payroll, maintaining the books, staying on top of the operations. He was the front man and he would do deliveries, get the accounts. He was the guy really working the business.”<sup>78</sup> By taking his laundry van, Hung Shoon would go to these houses and go through the service entrances to collect and drop off clothes.

With earnings from the laundry business, Hung Shoon was able to buy two real estate properties in the Marina district. The first one was on Union Street, the second on Pierce Street. Both properties were two flats with commercial storefronts. Hung Shoon wanted to provide a place for his two children and himself. Within the cultural practices and traditions of a Confucian household, the patriarch and head of the family is able to provide a house and living space across three generations. In a dispute between his two children, Hung Shoon sold both the properties. He divided the money among the three families, which provided everyone with money to invest and buy new property. Hung Shoon brought another two-unit house on Stanyan where he lived with his wife on the top unit, while his oldest son’s family lived on the bottom unit; Gene and Sharon bought a house on Foerster Street.

Hung Shoon maintained connections with the old country. Through the laundry business, he was able to support three families in the United States and two families in

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78. Ibid.

China. He sent money to a relative in Hong Kong who maintained a village connection to Taishan. When the family left Taishan, the village house remained empty but Hung Shoon let the village relatives live in and maintain the house. Hung Shoon sent money to help support them. After his mother passed away in Hong Kong in 1969, Hung Shoon stopped sending the money. When Gene, now an adult and merchant marine at the time, visited the ancestral home in Taishan, the family who was receiving money from Hung Shoon was not maintaining the ancestral home. Hung Shoon stopped sending money.

Hong Lee's work as a laundryman and the transnational connections between the ancestral village and San Francisco modeled the expected behavior Hung Shoon was going to follow. From Hong Lee's multiple return trips, each reentry into the United States was a new name and child that would later be able to enter the United States. His birthright citizenship in the United States gave him privileges that extended to his children. As foreign-born children of a US citizen, they continued the transnational legacy and connection established by Hong Lee's father. For each of the subsequent generations that followed, these linkages to the ancestral country and laundry experience would be reinterpreted as socio-historical and later economic shifts in the United States.

## Chapter 2: Collecting the Accounts

As part of the lasting vestige of discriminatory practices and Chinese Exclusion, Hung Shoon represents the earlier generation of Chinese Americans in the United States. His days off on Sundays were spent at the family association in Chinatown or hanging out with his friends. Although a laundryman, he was always dressed up and carried himself a certain way. He straddled the line of wanting to maintain his Chinese culture, traditions, and heritage, while attempting to enter mainstream white American society. In occupying the space with his families in the business and at home, the families were experiencing new things while also maintaining some of the discriminatory practices against the Chinese. The importance of gender and birth order played a large role in his interactions with his children, daughters-in-laws, and grandchildren. “He was a gregarious person; I mean he was a gentleman always well-dressed, impeccable manners, well respected. It was cool, it was really good man, very traditional. He was really Westernized.”<sup>79</sup>

Through the transition of his cultural practices passed down to his younger son Gene and his family, Hung Shoon epitomized the cultural mentality of what it meant to be Chinese American. The influence of Hung Shoon and the third generation in laying the foundation for the future generations was quite evident throughout the interviews of the later generations. He tried to project this positive image, which was similar to

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79. Subject A, interview.

laundrymen who dressed their best when not at work. Through his dress and actions, Hung Shoon attempted to enter American society. With homeownership as the crucial step into mainstream society, he mixed that with providing for multiple generations of the family, part of the Chinese cultural tradition.

The grandchildren had a wide range of views and perspectives about their grandfather. For the grandsons, they especially enjoyed going on laundry deliveries while growing up and how a stand-up-guy he was. Unfortunately such sentiments were not always positive. Subject D felt discriminated and understood that gender still played a major role in the family. She noticed how her mother, Sharon, remained in a subservient position because of the cultural and traditional practices that were instilled to her growing up in her family and reinforced as she entered the Lee family.

### **Back of the Shop**

Sharon Yung, was born on December 13, 1937 in Macau while en route to Hong Kong to immigrate to the United States. Her father, Tom Yip Jung, was able to save enough money to pay tickets for his wife and daughter at the time. He was able to enter the country under a paper name Yung Hin Sen. In order to enter the country he had to change his “status” to one of the exempt classes from the Chinese Exclusion Act, such as tourist, merchant, diplomat, or student.<sup>80</sup> By doing so he had to take on a new identity. Sharon and her mother immigrated to the United States in 1941. “The fire closed down

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80. Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 132.

the immigration station on Angel Island and the site reverted to the US Army on February 4, 1941.”<sup>81</sup> Angel Island which was used as the immigration station was already closed. They were housed at a temporary immigration station on Silver Street in San Francisco.<sup>82</sup>

At immigration, Sharon’s mother, Jew Law Ying, was questioned about her papers and relationship with her husband, Tom Yip Jung. One of the first memories she had in her youth in the United States was her father’s job as a houseboy and gardener in Hillsborough, a suburb south of San Francisco. He worked for a Caucasian family that allowed the family to stay in the guest house, while her father worked. Sharon’s first sibling was born at that family’s compound in the barn. They finally moved back to San Francisco when World War II ended.

Back in San Francisco, the readjustment for Sharon and her family was extremely tough. Both her parents were struggling to find work and constantly bounced around various odd jobs looking for employment. In addition to their employment situation, the living situation was also difficult on the growing family. They first rented a single room apartment on Stockton Street. The cramped living space was especially hard. There was no bathroom or hot water, just a small sink. The apartment had communal toilets and kitchen facilities shared among the tenants and occupants. Sharon remembers having to boil water to wash clothes, and her parents buying a small stove and icebox. Living in a

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81. Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 301.

82. *Ibid.*, 300.

cramped single room apartment in Chinatown was very similar to newly arrived immigrants to the United States. They could not afford to live anywhere else and had to stay in their own ethnic enclave. By living in single room apartments, Chinatown families did not have any real privacy among their housemates or in the community. After Sharon's other siblings were born, the family rented an adjacent single room apartment. When the youngest sibling was born, the family of eight was sharing two units. Her parents were able to find steady jobs and soon enough the family saved enough so they could move out. Although still located in Chinatown, they were able to move into a more comfortable apartment on Union Street between Powell and Mason streets.

While growing up in Chinatown and attending all the neighborhood schools in the San Francisco Unified School District, Sharon and her siblings walked everywhere. They went to the same schools: first at Commodore Stockton (now Gordon J. Lau), then Francisco Junior High School, and then Galileo High School. As the oldest of six siblings, there was an expectation of her to help out and work to support the family. One of her first jobs in Chinatown was peeling shrimp for three cents a pound. Not only was this for the family, it was also her allowance. During the summer Sharon worked at a cousin's restaurant in Gilroy. She worked throughout her high school years at Galileo, as a housekeeper and cooked for a wealthy Caucasian family on Octavia and California

streets. Seeing how hard her parents worked and how much they saved had a lasting impression on Sharon. She refers to it as her “Chinatown mentality.”<sup>83</sup>

During junior high and high school, one of the things Sharon remembered about Chinatown in the early 50s was the communist scare. With the end of the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese Communist Party became the dominant political party in China, now known as the People’s Republic of China. The Republic of China fled Mainland China to Taiwan. Many of the Chinese would wear pins supporting Chiang Kai-Shek’s KMT (Kuomintang), while others would wear pins supporting Mao Tse-Tung.<sup>84</sup> The divide in the community was especially hard on the family. “Whenever we signed up for anything they would always ask us if we’re communist or not; are you a citizen, things like that. They would look at you differently if they heard communist.”<sup>85</sup> Because they were a paper family, the United States tried to get them to confess about their real identities. Sharon and her family tried very hard to keep to themselves and not get into any trouble. Her parents never confessed to their paper identity. She continued to support the family until she got married. Traditionally, Chinese men continue the family name, while Chinese women marry into the family of the husband. For Sharon, this meant she became a Lee.

When she married at the age of eighteen, and following the Chinese tradition, Sharon Yung became part of her husband’s Lee family. She was pregnant out of wedlock.

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83. Sharon Lee, interview by the author, Mar. 27, 2014.

84. Chang, 245.

85. Lee, interview.

However with five other siblings, Sharon's parents were relieved that they had one less mouth to feed and how she married into a good Chinese family. "We really struggled while Grandpa and Great-Grandpa [Bak Gung] were a lot more active and spent more money doing activities. It was such a different lifestyle for me."<sup>86</sup> This new life was really different when compared to Sharon's Chinatown upbringing. It laid the foundation for her children. Combining her "Chinatown mentality" with Gene's background of growing up in a laundry family, their children were able to live a much more privileged lifestyle. The family greatly benefited from her father-in-law Hung Shoon's service in the military during World War II. It was rare for a Chinese American laundryman to be able to afford property, let alone multiple properties. Sharon believes it was mainly due to his hard work and his lack of vices normally associated with Chinese men such as gambling, drinking, or opium smoking.

Sharon and Gene were married in 1955. After marriage, she began working in the laundry. The first laundry she worked at with the family was at Guang Hi on Sacramento and Webster streets. It was a small family-run business and it allowed them to build a solid customer base for the future. Guang Hi was run by Hung Shoon and Jung Ngut (great grandparents), Sharon and Gene (grandparents), Jin Hall and Shang Goon, the author's granduncle and aunt, and Hung Kee Lee, a village cousin. At the time it was one of the few laundries that made deliveries in the area.

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86. Ibid.

According to Sharon, Hung Shoon managed customer accounts for both Marina and Pacific Heights. Not only did they work together, but they also shared a building. Hung Shoon wanted to make things easier on his children and their families, so he bought them two properties in the Marina district, one on Pierce Street, and the other on Union Street. Both properties were two-unit flats with street level commercial fronts. By living and working together, Sharon felt she was being controlled and manipulated by her father-in-law Hung Shoon. The lack of space from working in the laundry, and then having to go back home to deal with the extended family was especially hard.

Sharon and Gene married young. When their first child was a son, there was immediate resentment between Sharon and her brother- and sister-in-law. The birth of the first grandson to Hung Shoon exacerbated the problems between the families. Sharon's brother-in-law and sister-in-law already had four children, all girls. It did not help that Gene, being the younger of the two sons was the first son to have a boy.

According to Sharon, she never got along with sister-in-law Shang Goon. Their relationship was always strained from being in close quarters at work and then later at home. They worked there until 1962. That same year the family business moved to Son Loy Laundry on Stanyan Street. It was a much larger laundry and it was the first time they had to hire outside workers.

The Lee family problems can be traced to their immigration to the United States. Older brother, Jin Hall, was too old to immigrate into the country under the War Brides

Act. Instead, he came in with a family friend as a paper son. This will be covered in more detail in later chapters.

Hung Shoon and Jung Ngut were upset when Sharon and Gene decided to move out. “Oh, we were having family problems with the in-laws especially grandpa’s older brother and his wife. Bak Gung [great grandfather] was disappointed we moved out. Bak Pao [great grandmother] was upset and decided to sell those two properties.”<sup>87</sup> Hung Shoon sold both his Marina District properties and split the money between himself and his two sons. Gene and Sharon got twenty-five thousand dollars for themselves. The importance of property ownership would later play a large role in laying the foundation that provided upward mobility and wealth.

The first house Gene and Sharon bought in 1962 was on Foerster Street, right by Monterey Boulevard. When they were shopping for houses the real estate agent did not take them to the Richmond or Sunset districts; instead they only saw the Noe Valley, Glenn Park, and Excelsior districts. Despite limited options and some underlying housing discrimination, this did not deter Gene and Sharon from purchasing a home. The decision to buy the house and move into Foerster as told by Sharon was a logical one. It was close to the newly constructed Interstate 280 Highway and had schools in the area. “I liked it because right across the street was a playground, down the block was a grammar school, Safeway Supermarket is down the street. It was really easy to get on the freeway.”<sup>88</sup> The

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87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*

house was also far enough from her in-laws but close enough to work. When the family moved in, they were the only Chinese American family on the block. They bought the house for twenty-six thousand dollars. "When we moved in, there wasn't too many Chinese. It was mostly white. A few years later more Chinese started to move in. On our block we were the only Chinese." Without the money from her father-in-law, they would not have been able to afford a house. "Mortgage was \$180 a month. Everyone always asked how we were able to afford it."<sup>89</sup> Being able to purchase and own a home for her family was one of Sharon's biggest accomplishments. She grew up in SROs and watched how much her family struggled to support her siblings; they never owned their own house. Now with a home to call their own, Gene and Sharon purchased their first cars as well, an Oldsmobile Cutlass and an Oldsmobile Starfire.<sup>90</sup> Through both home and car ownership Sharon was able to expand outside the normal boundaries previous generations of Chinese American women faced. In having her own car, Sharon had some autonomy but still stayed in a subservient position to Gene and her father-in-law. Although she was no outside the control of her father-in-law and sister-in-law at their old home, she still had to deal with Gene at home plus continue working and contributing to the family business.

Sharon remembers working at Son Loy during the first few years. It was 1962, the year before the Kennedy assassination and something she would never forget. At Son

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89. Ibid.

90. Ibid.

Loy, they had two vans for pick-ups and deliveries. When they left Guang Hi, the family managed to bring their existing accounts from both the Marina and Pacific Heights districts. In the laundry business, they had the front accounts which were for regular drop-ins and back accounts which were pick-ups/deliveries from smaller laundries that could not handle the workload. Although drop-ins were for the neighborhoods, it was the delivery accounts that supported the business. By partnering with smaller laundries that did not have the necessary equipment or manpower to do big loads, Son Loy was able to expand and collect commission from these accounts. Although Sharon believes it was a midsized laundry, being able to do pickups in the morning, run the mangle in the afternoon, and then drop off clean laundry at the end of the day was no small feat.

After working and managing at Son Loy, the owners of the business were divorcing. “When we bought the laundry, Beulah [Sharon and Gene’s residence] was just an empty lot that was attached to the laundry. If we didn’t buy it, we would’ve lost the business. They were selling the laundry property and the empty lot for eighty thousand dollars. We bought it for fifty thousand dollars.”<sup>91</sup> Sharon and Gene bought Son Loy and its adjacent back lot. (Before the San Francisco 49ers football team moved to Candlestick Park, the owner used this vacant lot for parking when the football team played their games at Kezar Stadium across the street.) As Subject D said “The smartest thing they

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91. Ibid.

ever did was to buy the property of 784 Stanyan; it secured more of their financial and gave them more ownership so they felt safer and more secure.”<sup>92</sup>

Gene was involved in a lot of other business ventures. One of the most notable was his time as a merchant marine from 1968 to 1972; he later ran an import/export business in Spofford Alley in Chinatown from 1972 to 1973. “He met some friends in Chinatown and they thought grandpa would be a good mechanic to be on the ship. So he worked in the engine room and traveled around.”<sup>93</sup> Although it was beneficial to the family, this took him away from the laundry as well as his family. “My mom was the one who had to juggle raising us, and keeping the laundry running, and watching over my grandparents.”<sup>94</sup> Sharon took on a more active role both in business and at home.

Sharon found support for her sisters and father-in-law Hung Shoon. He father-in-law, in particular, was unhappy that his son took a break from the family business to become a merchant marine. “Bak Gung wasn’t happy at all. You have a family and four kids to take care of. I remember a big argument happening; it was the only time I ever saw them [Gene and Hung Shoon] fight.”<sup>95</sup> Although it was hard on Sharon, Gene’s business ventures allowed them to provide opportunities for their children that they never had for themselves. “My mom [Sharon] tried to do the best she could, I remember my dad [Gene] coming home one day from a cab. He just came back and he said he was

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92. Subject D, interview by the author, Oct. 5, 2014.

93. Lee, interview

94. Subject A, interview.

95. Lee, Interview.

never going out again and back into the family business. I remember my uncle was gambling so much money at the time that my grandfather [Hung Shoon] had no control anymore.”<sup>96</sup> “My mother [Sharon] was the anchor of the family. She was the one that held it together. My mother wasn’t... She basically did whatever she needed to keep the family together and to work at the same time. It was expected of her.”<sup>97</sup> “My mother was subservient. My mother was an oppressed subservient female who would, whatever the patriarch husband would say she would just repeat. Because in her eyes, the man is always right. Because in her eyes, her being married and her getting pregnant before she got married, she felt that she owes it to them to always serve her in-laws.”<sup>98</sup>

Race, class, and gender on intersectionality and subject positions for Asian American women focus on the social construction of gender inequality across the typical domains of everyday life. Using personal observations, this paper is an ethnography of Sharon in these positions. Across these three domains, Sharon has experienced her share of gender inequality and equality. Exploring these positions will provide a better understanding of the multiple versions of race, ethnicity, and gender that Asian American women experience.

The cultural background and Confucian roots of China continue to play a large role in the everyday lives of Chinese American women. This social construction focuses

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96. Subject B, interview by the author, Sept. 17, 2014.

97. Subject D, interview.

98. Ibid.

on women being subservient and docile by subordinating themselves to a lesser position from their husband. The Confucian tradition was still very much a part of the everyday lives of the earlier generation, especially that of Hung Shoon's generation, where the Confucian ideals of a woman's role in relation to husband and family were still evident.

Across home, work, and racial/ethnic community, social construction within the ethnic community for Asian American immigrant women is one of the few domains Sharon had relative autonomy. Chinese culture and Confucianism maintain that women should be subservient and are in subordinate positions in relation to their fathers, husbands, and sons. However, in the Chinese American ethnic community, and when compared to home and the workplace, Sharon had the most freedom which was limited and only temporary. This was the only time she was away from her husband. In this domain, she hung out with her friends, played mahjong, or went to the beauty salons. All her female friends were in a similar situation. The multiplicity within the ethnic community changed very quickly and had many different layers of organization.

For Sharon and the other elderly women in the ethnic community, at times they fell to a subordinate position in the family association. Their husbands were part of the family association and when they were there, the women must serve their husbands hand and foot. For Anthea's model and the principles of difference, the ethnic community of Sharon and this case, other Chinese American women, share collective attributions. These collective attributions share the we-ness based on their experiences and how they

construct themselves.<sup>99</sup> As a result, we-ness is undercut by otherness within the group.<sup>100</sup> For Sharon and her group, having been established much earlier, the newer immigrant couples from the village were the others. Even when these new immigrants go to the family associations for help, it would take them a while before becoming a part of the shared collective identity. When a new person tries to get into a community, the principle of hierarchism comes into place and the group creates a social construction in the social order of things.<sup>101</sup>

In the work domain, the author's grandmother worked at the family-owned laundry. Instead of enjoying a retired life with her husband, she made the decision to continue working with the sons who managed the business for the father. In this ethnic workplace, the wife did not have as much freedom as she hoped. She was able to get out of the house and stay busy, but deferred to her sons at work; while her husband was still the boss and owner of the business. The cultural practice of the wife taking sides with her sons instead of her husband is common. As a result, the wife was still within the principle of relationality and dichotomy between her and her husband and her and her sons.<sup>102</sup> The organization of an ethnic workplace never truly allowed the wife autonomy; she was still in a subordinated position between immediate families.

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99. Floya Anthias, "Rethinking Social Divisions: Some Notes towards a Theoretical Framework," *The Editorial Board of the Sociological Review* (1998) 517.

100. *Ibid.*, 519.

101. *Ibid.*, 520.

102. *Ibid.*, 516.

In the multigenerational family business, Hung Shoon was the first owner and operator; by marrying into the family Sharon worked under both her father-in-law and husband. After Hung Shoon retired, Gene and his sons took over. Although Sharon worked there most of her life, she was always in a subordinated position under whoever was in charge. The importance of males in the family plays a large role in how Sharon interacted with her father-in-law, husband, and sons at the workplace. In home and the workplace, the intersectionality and naturalization of being in a subordinated position focused on her gender, ethnicity, as well as cultural practices.<sup>103</sup> As a result, Sharon internalized the natural assumptions and boundaries placed on her as a Chinese American woman.

For the family and home domain, Sharon took care of everything for her husband and does everything for him. From the cultural practices of being a Chinese woman, when she married, she left her family to marry into her husband's family, which means she had to take up all the responsibilities that were required of her. If she did not marry, being the oldest sibling, she would have remained in her family to take care of her parents. As a result, she had no autonomy at home. She played a subordinate role amongst the male members of the family.

At a large family dinner, Sharon questioned her husband's order, who lashed out verbally at her, saying he sits at the head of the table and is the boss. This happened

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103. *Ibid.*, 517.

before the whole family. Although she was doing her best to help, her husband still put her down. From Anthias' theory, both hierarchisation and inferiorisation can be seen from these social constructions. The husband represents the head of the family by sitting at the head of the table. The expectations of Sharon from her husband's perspective are primarily to take care of the domestic aspects of the household, like cooking, cleaning, and reproduction. Although she still works, the husband still believes that she must maintain her role within the household.

The interactions and impact across the three domains play a large role in the everyday life of Sharon and other Asian American women. At home and work, the intersectionality of an ethnic workplace where the husband still serves as the boss and owner gives very little room for the wife to experience any real difference in her social construction. The wife naturalized the position and never had a real chance to know anything else. Within the ethnic community, from Sharon's shared experience with other women in her generation, women were able to explore more freedom and space for themselves away from home and work. All three domains interact with one another and have a large impact on Sharon's viewpoints and experiences. From work and home, there is not much of a difference because of the occupation and employment being an ethnic workplace.

The new generation of Chinese Americans in this period of United States history experienced new things that they were not accustomed to, such as homeownership,

material wealth, and American consumerism, mixed with their Chinese cultural practices and traditions. Sharon and Gene came to the United States through different circumstances. From entering the country at a young age while still under Chinese Exclusion, to entering to the country under the War Brides Act. They were part of an important time in American history. Their different experiences of growing up in two different socioeconomic classes of the Chinese community after the war greatly affected their children growing up. Sharon was extremely frugal and always wanted to save, while Gene fully immersed himself into American culture. As a Chinese woman, Sharon had to defer to her husband and his family. At the same time, she was able to experience new things like owning a home, a car, and being relatively free and independent compared to earlier Chinese woman. During this time period, the interactions within the family across the generations laid the foundation for future generations and the formation of a Chinese American identity.

### **Front of the Shop**

The author's grandfather, Gene Hall Lee, was born October 23, 1937, in Taishan, China, when his father, Hung Shoon Lee, was in the United States. As part of the transnational connection between Southern China and the United States, Gene did not meet his father until he was eleven years old. Hung Shoon enlisted in the Army in World War II and served in the military barracks in the mess hall. Jung Ngut and her son Gene

were able to immigrate to the United States as a War Bride and son, respectively, in 1948.

Gene's experiences of growing up were very similar to a laundryman and his apprentice. The family's first laundry was on Lombard and Webster in San Francisco. It was a small five-person laundry operated by Hung Shoon, Jung Ngut, Gene, Gene's brother, and a village uncle. The village uncle and brother came under paper names in 1950. The family lived and worked in the small laundry until 1954-5. They moved to a slightly bigger laundry on Sacramento and Divisadero streets. By moving to a larger laundry, they were able to use more machinery to make the job easier.

The locations of the laundry played a very big role in the family trajectories. The first two laundries were in predominantly white neighborhoods, the Marina and Pacific Heights districts. Gene married Sharon in 1954. Although he worked as a laundryman with his family, he longed for something more. With the Confucian cultural practices of housing multiple generations under one roof, Hung Shoon provided his families with a place to live and work together. In other words, by maintaining these traditional ties, the families lived and worked together.

Finally, the family moved to their last laundry in 1962, which remained open until 2013. It was a midsized laundry with a ten to twelve-person crew. With two generations working there: Sharon and Gene's family, their brother and sister-in-law, and their parents. Gene was able to gain a lot of experience working at the laundry, but also as a

self-taught mechanic fixing machines. In the beginning, he hired a mechanic or repairman to fix the machines. Later he learned how to do it himself. By doing so, he managed and maintained the machines, and saved money. "Grandpa would hire a mechanic to come and fix the machine. Dad would watch them and say it was so simple. But they would charge him so much. So he started watching and then just took it upon himself to try and learned by trial and error."<sup>104</sup> This was his experience as a laundryman and mechanic in the family business. Gene's Chinatown contacts and friends suggested he sign up as a merchant marine because of how well it paid and to see the world. He became a merchant marine.

While working as a merchant marine, Gene worked in the engine room and made contacts around the world. "I was too young. I do remember my dad wasn't home as often when I was younger."<sup>105</sup> It was especially hard on Sharon trying to manage everything without her husband. She had to deal with the family dynamics by herself. Although she had a really good relationship with her mother- and father-in-law, her brother- and sister-in-law were a different story. Without Gene present, Sharon was a target for them. They did not treat her with respect and were upset with Gene and Sharon's upbringing in the United States. "I think my father [Gene] is very selfish, I think even though he says it's for the family there was no income that was generated from them. It was mainly his own personal opportunities to do the traveling and to see the

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104. Subject C, interview by the author, Sept. 24, 2014.

105. Ibid.

world a little bit.”<sup>106</sup> For Gene, the freedom of leaving the laundry and traveling really opened his eyes. He went out for several contracts at a time, ranging from three, six, nine, and twelve months.

Finally Gene’s father told him to come home and take care of the family. Hung Shoon needed someone to come back and take care of the family business. He could not rely on his other son. The details are unclear, but it was implied that Hung Shoon threatened to sell the business again. Gene returned in 1973, but continue to have several small business ventures. “He was hoping to seek other opportunities; if it had gone well then maybe there was a slight possibility he would not have been part of the laundry.”<sup>107</sup> He opened an import/export business in Chinatown, while also scrapping and recycling metal. “My dad [Gene] decided to come back on the condition he has full control of the business. That’s all I remember, then my dad took over. My dad was smart. He knew how to handle money, he knew how to invest money, and he made some bad investments, some good investments.”<sup>108</sup>

On the other hand, my grandmother learned how to make lychee rice wine from her mother-in-law. With the boilers and machinery in the laundry, they had a small distillery operation. They were able to make some money on the side for themselves by selling to Chinese sewing factory workers in Chinatown on important cultural events and

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106. Subject D, interview.

107. Ibid.

108. Subject B, interview.

birthdays. The growing family entrepreneurship started to go beyond just the laundry business itself. It provided the family a solid foundation to try other ventures.

The class locations of Chinese labor played a large role on the identity of the Chinese community. Chinese laborers were placed within the dominant and subordinate class positions in relation to white laborers. Using a Marxist class analysis, there are four categories: capitalist, professional, petit bourgeois, and workers. With the different class locations of the Chinese community in San Francisco and Chinatown, each group would focus on their own class interest.

Racial segmentation within the dominant and subordinate class also represented the general and restricted labor market.<sup>109</sup> The primary class location for Chinese is in the working class. By being in the subordinate position within the class segments, the hopes of upward social mobility were extremely limited. Under the subordinate labor class, many capitalists were able to hire Chinese workers to undercut the white laborers. By being workers in the capitalist society, many of the Chinese wage workers in Chinatown worked less desirable jobs. They were employed by white capitalists as well as Chinese capitalists working in factories in Chinatown. The Chinese capitalists had different interests compared to their white counterparts. By expanding their capital into the United States, many wanted to make enough money before retiring in China. As a result, the capitalist classes in power were able to maintain the dominate structure in place. This

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109. Barrera, 211.

segmented labor market divided the workforce and allowed both groups to undercut one another in wages. According to Barrera, the primary labor market were jobs that offered security and stability, good pay and working conditions, and the possibility for advancement; while the secondary market would be dead-end jobs with no real job security.<sup>110</sup> Another sizeable class location for Chinese was as petit bourgeois. The petit bourgeois were the small business owners and had a more general market. The Chinese laundryman in particular was one of the more popular occupations. “The characteristics of the different social classes also affected their ability to assimilate, culturally and economically into American society.”<sup>111</sup>

In specifically looking at class trajectories, this depends on their class location within the dominant and subordinate class segments during the Racial Dictatorship. Already occupying a place in the subordinate class segment and in the worker class location, it was hard for them to have any upward social mobility. From their labor background and the wages they were receiving, the hopes of upward mobility would be placed on their children. Although the petit bourgeois of the Chinese had limited social mobility, they still had more opportunities compared to the average Chinese worker. “The most likely classes to assimilate were the petit bourgeoisie especially those in the laundry

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110. Barrera, 209.

111. Mei, 393.

trade and domestic servants. Their businesses were dispersed around the city and depended on white patronage.”<sup>112</sup>

Class location also plays a large role within the Chinese community, from the dominant and subordinate class segments, to the type of general market they represent. Class along with race and has the most concepts as well as the most important theoretical framework needed for the foundation of this topic.

The intersectionality of the Chinese in San Francisco focuses along class inequality. Class differences had a big effect on the children and on a large part of the everyday lives of the earlier generation, especially that of Hung Shoon and Gene. In relation to class location, it was not surprising to see the Chinese community looking at class backgrounds. The subject position of this topic and class differences highlight the Chinese workers and their proximity to Chinatown compared to the petit bourgeois, specifically the Chinese laundryman.

Gene assumed many of the familial responsibilities normally associated with the oldest son of the family. Although he was the second son, his father relied on him more to maintain the transnational ties to the home country and to eventually succeed him in the laundry business. Through these ties, Gene held on to a very rigid and traditional cultural framework for his four children. “So I would say growing up in the laundry situation with a father who really hated the laundry business and wanted to do things he

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112. *Ibid.*, 393.

would take his frustrations out on us.”<sup>113</sup> Although he encouraged them to try new things, the expectation was for the children to help out in the laundry. With three sons and one daughter, intergenerational relationships played a very big role on the children. From gender and birth order, to culture and society, the interrelatedness across these domains affected the children growing up and to this day.

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113. Subject A, interview.

### Chapter 3: Sorting the Accounts

Social changes to the fabric of the American landscape after World War II greatly impacted the American family. Through federal policies, communities were both negatively and positively affected by the development of postwar American society. In new domestic and foreign policies, outright discrimination against the Chinese American community soon became a thing of the past. In these policies, a new class and race consciousness began to form.

Suburbanization and the federal policies allowed, for the first time, equitable wealth and homeownership for many families. With marriage rates at its highest and the accumulated wealth of postwar American society, the need for inexpensive homes outside of the cities became paramount. Federal mortgage guarantees stimulated an unprecedented boom for developers.<sup>114</sup> The creation of the new middle class through these policies was a perfect fit for privatized land development in the surrounding areas of major metropolitan centers. One of the most important private developers for this new suburban dwelling was the Levitt family. With previous experience in constructing temporary housing for the government, they soon learned quick, effective ways of construction.<sup>115</sup> These new suburban areas created new low density living spaces as well as new communities away from urban areas. For the previous generations of the Chinese

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114. Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 233.

115. *Ibid.*, 234.

American community, they were finally able to afford homes and live beyond the ethnic enclave of Chinatown. Unfortunately the isolation and detached communities placed a new emphasis on traditional gender roles and on the expectations of American society.

With the development of the suburbs, strict gender roles and societal expectations began to rise. For these new families, the husband or male was seen as the primary breadwinner while the wife or female was seen as being in charge of the household. The new middle class family had earlier marriage rates and earlier childbearing years with multiple children. By adapting and adhering to these roles, families were conforming to societal pressures as well as the Cold War situation. Despite the practicality of the suburban home design, subtle changes such as moving the kitchen to the entrance allowed mothers to watch their children and do their chores with minimum movement.<sup>116</sup> By no longer living in crowded urban areas, the suburbs soon became more monotonous, homogenized groups. The suburbs forced these homogenized groups to the community and groupthink, which crushed privacy and undermined individualism.<sup>117</sup>

These close-knit homogenous communities comprised predominantly of white families. Although restrictive covenants were deemed unconstitutional in 1948, this did not stop discriminatory practices against people of color. This is best reflected by new powerful homeowner associations in the suburbs that wanted to maintain their property

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116. *Ibid.*, 235.

117. William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 114.

value, which they believed was attributed to maintaining an economic and homogenous community. One example of how an African American family was treated when they moved into suburbia was the when Myers moved into Levitt Town. Despite being a veteran and recipient of the GI Bill, the Myers family faced a lot of racially charged and white supremacist ideas when they moved in.

The move to the suburbs led to a boom for another industry. In order to facilitate the move from the suburbs to cities, the federal government passed more policies that allowed for the construction of the interstate highway. The Federal Highway Act 1956 allowed for 25 billion dollars from the federal government to improve commuting. In addition to homeownership in suburbia, many of these families owned cars. General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler automobiles were now more popular than ever. The growing dependency on automobiles went hand in hand with the development of suburban homes.<sup>118</sup> Every family in the suburbs owned one to two cars. For men, it was needed to transport to work, while women needed it to transport the children and to run errands for the family. It is with the automobiles and suburbia that large shopping centers become the norm. High purchasing power and a new American culture focused on materialism and consumerism.

With white flight to the suburbs, California and later the United States needed to recoup lost tax dollars from the loss of white homeowners. During the Civil Rights

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118. *Ibid.*, 113.

Movement, several important domestic policies allowed people of color to purchase homes with the creation of the California Fair Housing and Employment Act in 1959. Originally just focusing on employment, the Rumford Act of 1963 outlawed housing discrimination.

Within this context, the Lee family fifth generation, comprised of Gene and Sharon's children, was born of the baby boom generation in the United States from 1946 to 1964. Each of the four children had a different experience across culture, society, gender, and birth order as members of the laundry family, which also greatly shaped their actions to move forward. They were no longer victims of outright discriminatory practices in the era they grew up. Their experiences are affected by the context of living and working as part of a Chinese laundry family, combined with the external context of the baby boom generation in the United States.

For this particular generation, the individuals were exposed to the family/domestic and business spheres of their everyday interactions. No longer living in Chinatown or in a family laundry proved to be a crucial and necessary step for them to enter mainstream America. They took the bus and got rides from their parents to school. With the added responsibility of not having to go to the laundry immediately after school, they took the bus as a group with their cousins. However, despite these newfound "freedoms" the family, namely the third and fourth generation, still maintained the importance of contributing and working in the family laundry. As a family business, the

more expendable and exploitable family labor pool they could use in the business, the more profits the family would gain.

Besides the Chinese in San Francisco, two other major groups that played a large role in the development of San Francisco are the Japanese and Filipino communities. With the different ethnic groups spread out in San Francisco in their own ethnic enclaves, it was hard for them to interact with one another on a daily basis. In school and growing up, all of the different Asian ethnics groups never learned much about their personal history. With each ethnicity still harboring unfair prejudices, it was common for this to be passed onto their children. As a result, many of the older generation did not want their children to interact with people who did not come from the same background.

In *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe argues from the perspectives of Asians Americans being extremely different and diverse among themselves.<sup>119</sup> Although there is a clash of ideologies from being a pan-ethnic coalition of Asian Americans, it is important to also show the ethnic diversity of the group. The differences in ethnic identity for Asian Americans can be anything from culture, immigration experience, or even race and class backgrounds from the ancestral country. Prior to the 1965 Immigration Act, the predominant Asian groups in the United States were the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos. Many of these first wave Asian immigrants came from the rural areas of their countries.

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119. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 66.

Although there are a number of issues from outside the Asian American community, issues within the community play a large role as well. The heterogeneity and homogeneity of Asian Americans affect the smaller groups, while often benefitting the larger groups. One of the biggest issues is Asian Americans and the model minority myth. Taken out of context, this myth shows how Asian Americans have become the ideal minority group and are the closest to being similar to whites. With this unfair grouping of all Asians under one umbrella, people are unable to see the different experiences or backgrounds of the individual.

The 1965 Immigration Act abolished the national origins quota system and allowed for a yearly quota for the Western and Eastern Hemispheres.<sup>120</sup> For Asian Americans, the focus was on family reunification that allowed for immediate family members such as spouses, children, and parents to enter the United States.<sup>121</sup> The idea of a homogenous Asian American community discredits the more recent Asian immigrants and refugees coming to the United States. With the rising conflict in Southeast Asia and the fall of Saigon in 1975, Southeast Asian refugees were displaced from their homes. The first wave of Southeast refugees came from urban areas, was more westernized, and had an education. They were able to leave as families and had some English background from working with Americans and French in Saigon. The second wave refugees left

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120. Takaki, 419.

121. *Ibid.*

Vietnam in 1978-79 on boats and were attacked by pirates.<sup>122</sup> They lived in refugee camps for months, sometimes years before going to the United States or another country.<sup>123</sup> The homogenization of Asian Americans unfairly lumps the different experiences of these groups into one collective identity or face.

Race and class issues facing Asian Americans in the contemporary post-Civil Rights period led to the rise of the new right and silent majority. With the gains made by racial minorities from the Civil Rights Movement, race was rearticulated and challenged by conservatives.<sup>124</sup> The reactionary period that followed the Great Transformation brought the shift of racial discrimination from racial minorities to white males.<sup>125</sup> The 1970s and 80s for the United States greatly changed the context of racial ideologies after the Civil Rights Movement.

With Asian American heterogeneity, the different experiences of Asian Americans are differentiated and better understood. There is always a scapegoat during economic downturns. Many Asian groups are negatively affected by people who perceive them as foreigners taking away their jobs. The backlash that these groups face is very dangerous. When anti-Asian violence comes to play, anyone who looks “Asian” can

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122. *Ibid.*, 452.

123. *Ibid.*

124. Omi and Winant, 117.

125. *Ibid.*

become a target. Anti-Asian violence draws the largest support across all Asian groups, best representing the single Asian American panethnicity.<sup>126</sup>

The four subjects interviewed shared how they felt about the business and the family itself. Each of them had different opinions from their relationship with their parents and/or grandparents and how they felt they were treated in the laundry. Two of the subjects ultimately continued the business, while the others went on to do other things. With the issue of Asian American panethnicity, the subjects all clearly identified as Chinese Americans. While growing up, they tried to distance themselves as far as possible from the recent immigrants following the 1965 Immigration Act and refugees. With the laundry's close proximity to Haight Ashbury and Golden Gate Park, they had a wide range of perspectives on other marginalized communities. As the family improved their own social status and accumulated wealth and privilege relative to their peers, all the subjects received opportunities to demonstrate their entry into mainstream American culture through their consumerism.

### **The First Account**

During the interview, Subject A did not have fond memories of the laundry or their childhood.

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126. Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 134.

When I was growing up in the laundry I thought it was normal for people to work twelve hours a day, six days a week. It was just like a little village in China. All my “uncles” and “aunties” and all the village cousins. They just took the village and transplanted it into the family business.<sup>127</sup>

Subject A’s link with the laundry and his family was shaped by the relationship with his father, Gene. As the oldest, Subject A did not have the best rapport with his father. Part of this was during his formative years, when his father was not at home.

It sucked. Anything goes wrong it was my fault. First of all I had no mentor. No one really told me how to do things. It was really like oh shit let’s see what happens. Ooops fucked that one up. That type of thing. Didn’t really have a sense of direction with a father figure. He was always gone. My father figure growing up had to be my mother and grandfather.<sup>128</sup>

This was from 1968 to 1973 when Gene was a merchant marine. The impact this had on Subject A was profound. For him, Gene was a nightmare. He was never home and placed unfair expectations on him: “My father was never around.”<sup>129</sup> This strained relationship is best exhibited in his educational trajectories. When he finished middle school, Gene wanted him to go to Lowell High School. After he graduated from Lowell, Subject A did

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127. Subject A, interview.

128. Ibid.

129. Ibid.

not know what he wanted to do so he went to City College of San Francisco before ultimately going to San Jose State University.

This lack of guidance and direction was evident throughout the interview:

As the oldest, I had a lot of growing up to do. I made a lot of mistakes and as I look back on it now, I guess I could have done things differently; it would've been nice to have someone guiding you know.<sup>130</sup>

When Subject A finally went to college, he experienced freedom for the first time. However, with the laundry's location in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco, he had already observed many of the radical movements in the 60s and 70s growing up. Through his lack of guidance from his father growing up, Subject A had an affinity to absorb and observe those around him. College led him to experience an ideological awakening. As part of the larger movements, Subject A was greatly inspired by Mao Tse Tung (Mao Zedong). During his early college years, he would carry Mao's *Little Red Book*, a book with Mao quotes and speeches, and pass out pamphlets in Chinatown. Separated from the laundry and after talking to different people, he was awoken to rebellion. He was able to participate in a variety of movements. One of the ironies of his activism is that his family was one of many families persecuted during the Land Reform and Great Leap Forward under Mao in China because of their status as a family with members living outside of China.

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130. Ibid.

Among the interview subjects, Subject A was given every opportunity to succeed while never held accountable to the family business. Much like his parents, Subject A tried to enter different ventures. As an entrepreneur, Subject A was everything, a laundry owner, a restaurant manager, and a Nintendo distributor, before ultimately falling on hard times. As the oldest, the other siblings, namely Subjects C and D, deferred to Subject A and his parents always bailed him out of trouble. One of the biggest examples was when his maternal grandmother passed away. Subject A was able to convince Gene and Sharon to purchase his maternal grandmother's property because he had no place to stay, and that they needed to do it for the grandchildren.

Although Subject A was never close to his father; he had a really good relationship with his mother. He was the oldest son of Gene and Sharon, as well as the oldest grandson of Hung Shoon and Jung Ngut. As the oldest son and grandson, Subject A was extremely close to his mother. The race between Hung Shoon's two sons to have a grandson was evident. It was extremely important for both families to have the first grandson. In order for the family name to continue, there needed to be a son. At the time of Subject A's birth, there were only four girls. However, he did not see birth order or gender as significant in the filial piety structure of a Chinese or Chinese American family. His ignorance to his status within the family structure is evident; he was oblivious when asked about birth order or gender favoritism among his siblings.

Although Subject A claims ignorance, his experiences in the family as the oldest son and grandson son reflect his position. Among the interview subjects, he went to China the most. These trips were meant to maintain the family's transnational connection to the ancestral country. From his status as the oldest son and grandson, the earlier generations wanted him to reestablish the linkage between the ancestral village relatives and the family in San Francisco. When Subject A left home for college, it greatly strained the laundry business. With no intentions of going back to the family business, he occupied a fine line in the family. He could pick and choose what suited him best. In examining Subject A's performance and interpretation of being Chinese American, he was in a subordinate position as a member of both a laundry family and other movements happening across the United States.

### **The Second Account**

Subject B has a much different view of the laundry and family. Although he saw the laundry as a prison, it also became a normalizing aspect in his everyday life.<sup>131</sup> As the second son and middle of three, he did not have the best relationship with either parents. Instead, Subject B was much closer to his grandparents:

I took care of them and they always told me always stay with the family business because you will never go wrong. It will always put food on your table and money in your pocket. It will give you a good life, but not a fabulous life. It was hard

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131. Subject B, interview.

work, but save your money, make the right investments, and you would be okay.<sup>132</sup>

This relationship is one of the reasons why Subject B stayed in the laundry business. He wanted to follow his grandfather's footsteps. Although he knew the laundry was going to be hard work, it always provided for the family. By working hard in the family business and making smart investments, Subject B was happy as a laundryman.

Subject B's relationship with his grandparents was the driving force in his decision to stay in the family business:

The laundry, it gave me opportunities I should have left. But at the time I felt obligated to stay. My oldest brother [Subject A] left first for college. My sister [Subject D] left for college. It was just me and my youngest brother [Subject C]. As you know it was a family-run business and whatever the employees couldn't finish, we as a family stayed and helped them. The next day was a new day and a new load of laundry would come in."<sup>133</sup>

With Subject A (older brother) and Subject D (older sister) out of the family business after graduating from high school, those remaining picked up the responsibilities.

Without the help of his older siblings, the family business began to take its toll on both his grandparents and parents. "We couldn't really stray too far because the family needed

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132. Ibid.

133. Ibid.

help in the business. If you don't help the business, you're hurting the family. That's what brings in the money. That's my parents' [Gene and Sharon] main source of income."<sup>134</sup>

Subject B tried to get out of the family business, but came up just short of finishing his degree at California State University at East Bay. He tried to become a policeman but ultimately could not complete the necessary coursework. "I was going to school and I just felt obligated to stay. My grandfather was still around and he started the business. He asked me to stay."<sup>135</sup> The reason Subject B eventually returned to the laundry was because his grandparents [Hung Shoon and Jung Ngut] asked him to come back. According to Subject B, he took care of them and his grandparents told him to always stay with the family business because you will never go wrong: It will always put food on your table and money in your pocket. It will give you a good life, but not a fabulous life. It was hard work, but save your money, make the right investments and you would be okay.<sup>136</sup>

Subject B's relationship with his parents was extremely strained. As the middle child, he saw a lot of favoritism towards his siblings:

I didn't really give much credit to my own parents because...they more or less told me you don't need this, or when I do need help they kinda shrugged it off.

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134. Ibid.

135. Ibid.

136. Ibid.

But whenever the other two boys needed something they always pretty much got what they wanted. My parents had their favorites and I wasn't one of them.<sup>137</sup>

Throughout the interview, Subject B looked visibly upset and disappointed with how things turned out. He was burned so many times by his family, that he no longer has a relationship with any of his brothers or parents. The lack of help from his parents can stem from Subject B as the most capable of his brothers. Despite never receiving any help, he did very well for himself. He was able to buy and build his own dream house in San Francisco's Inner Sunset district. Because of his relationship with his grandparents, Subject B is the most traditional and in tune with Chinese culture. Of all the interview subjects, he was the most filial in maintaining cultural traditions. Subject B visits his ancestors at Woodlawn Cemetery every other week, and has a shrine for his grandparents and wife's parents in his home.

When Subject B and the youngest son Subject C took over the laundry, his parents felt the former was the least responsible to maintain the accounts because of his lack of children. As Subject B shared his story, he was near tears discussing this. Although he was the first of the sons to get married, he and his wife were unable to have children because his wife's medical condition prevented them from ever having children. With his father being a stern, traditionalist to Chinese culture and tradition, this lack of

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137. Ibid.

legacy to continue the family name could be one of the reasons why Subject B was always marginalized.

Subject B worked in the back portion of the laundry, where the finished laundry was located. He oversaw the quality control of the end product. When asked about the laundry, Subject B revealed a sense of pride in the quality of their work. He felt the laundry should never have closed. Despite having accounts with smaller laundries, Subject B thought the laundry was doing well and making ends meet. Following his grandfather's advice, the laundry always provided for the family.

Ultimately, generational differences began to show. Unlike Subject B's childhood, the laundry did not have enough family labor to offset costs. The need for workers and employees took away from the bottom line and profit. With the laundry functioning like a daycare for Subject C's children, Subject B wanted to put them to work. He remembers what it was like for him as a child growing up in the laundry. His parents and grandparents used every family member to help.

Subject B needed to be away from the family business. Although he had ties to the business through his grandparents, the setting and space of the laundry did not improve his relationships with his parents and siblings. He thought it would be similar to his grandparents' situation where honest, hard work would pay the bills. He had to deal with his siblings and parents at work more often. As he got older and before the laundry

closure, the relationship among family members slowly deteriorated. It was not a healthy environment.

This passing of one generation to the next was one of the reasons why the business ultimately failed. The lack of help and disinterest in the later generations hurt the business. For the grandparents and parents, the laundry was predominantly a Chinese immigrant operation. By the time it got to the next generation, it was very rare for a laundry business to be multigenerational. The later generation was also undergoing upward social mobility. Instead of continuing the family business, they left it and engaged in other ventures, such as pursuing a higher education and entering a professional field. Not only did the laundry lose accounts when the older generation began to retire, competition for finished laundries began increasing as well. With new laundries like dry cleaning and wash-and-folds, the business became even more unsustainable. Business shrank and slowly declined. It was only a matter of time before the laundry closed.

### **The Third Account**

Subject C understood the family dynamics and laundry much differently. Unlike Subjects A and B, he had a great relationship with his father. As the youngest, he did not remember what it was like with Gene absent. By the time Gene returned to the laundry, Subject C was in junior high school. The relationship really grew between father and son. According to Subject C, whenever he asked his father for anything would say “yes.” He

did describe the one time Gene told him “no.” Subject C wanted a new car, even though Gene and Sharon just purchased him a car. Although Gene said “no,” a few months later he relented and purchased the car for Subject C.

With Gene back in the laundry, Subject C became his grease monkey. He learned how to fix machines and would go with his father to all the shops. “I just remember whenever the machine breaks, I would be there helping him get the tools. He would ask to wipe the tools down to put things away. We would, he would take me to go to the part store for something. I would go with him.”<sup>138</sup> Subject C was able to spend quality time with his father that the other siblings did not have when growing up. For Subject C, this interest in learning about machines and bonding with his father was one of the reasons he eventually continued the laundry business. At one family gathering, one of the siblings asked Subject C what he wanted to do when he grew up:

My mom wanted us out of the business. My dad kinda well I would not say he never asked if we wanted to take over the laundry. I told him I want to take over the laundry. I want to do the laundry. I forget how old I was back then probably in junior high. I remember my siblings laughed. My dad was upset; he said it’s not funny. There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s hard work but it’s an honest living.<sup>139</sup>

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138. Subject C, interview.

139. Ibid.

By observing his father, Subject C learned how race relations were still a little “dicey” and that as laundrymen they occupied a subordinate position in society. On the trips to the parts store with Gene, the store owners were predominantly white. He mentioned always being taught to be respectful of everyone. By going on these trips and acting as a grease monkey for his father, he became an extremely handy mechanic.

I took it upon myself to learn to start pressing probably my junior year of high school. When I was sixteen/seventeen I was actually the only one who wanted to learn how to press and finish the product or anything like that. I wanted to learn.<sup>140</sup>

When Subject C finished high school, he had an opportunity to go to the Maritime Academy and become an engineer. He decided against it and tried going to a junior college. Ultimately Subject C came to the realization that school was not for him. He wanted to become a mechanic and got a job through a cousin as a repair man for a phone company. While there, he worked the graveyard shift, and still helped at the laundry.

Gene was a man of few words and Subject C’s schedule began to take a toll on their relationship. However Gene would never admit or ask Subject C to come back to the laundry, but Subject C knew something was up. Subject C asked Sharon what was going on and she told him they were short staffed and needed more help.

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140. Ibid.

I ran into my dad downstairs in the hallway; he was putting on his shoes. I said good morning to him and he didn't respond. So I felt that vibe he was upset at me. I asked my mom what was going on and why was he upset. She just told me he wants you to be at the laundry. He needs your help.<sup>141</sup>

Subject C had to go back to the laundry full-time. With his experience as a mechanic and growing up in the business, Subject C formed a partnership with Subject B and took over the family business. Subject C ran the front of the laundry, where all the machines were located. He knew the machines like the back of his hand and was able to repair and maintain them to last for over thirty years.

When Subject B and C finally took over the laundry, Subject C was given all the accounts and was the primary owner of the business. It happened almost immediately after Gene's brother passed away. The two sons still paid rent to Gene and Sharon because their parents owned the property. Immediately, Subject C wanted to clean house and bring in his own crew. Prior to the takeover, his aunt worked at the laundry and cooked lunch for the employees. However, after the two sons bought their shares in the ownership, Subject C forced his aunt out. The timing of the takeover could not have been more questionable. When the two men took over the business, Gene finally retired. Although Sharon could have also retired, she decided to stay and work at the laundry with her two sons.

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141. Ibid.

The partnership between Subjects B and C played a large role on family dynamics and the family business. They each worked different sections of the laundry, one organizing the finished product while the other was running the machines. Each position was extremely important and required a lot of teamwork. The laundry business caused the slow deterioration of a once close relationship. This will be addressed in later chapters.

Subject C's laundry experience was much different compared to that of his other siblings. He expressed a sense of pride in his work and in the relationship he had with both his parents as the youngest son. Subject C maintained and continued the familial lineage by having four children, and the laundry was used much like a pit stop and daycare center for his children.

#### **The Fourth Account**

Subject D was the only girl in the family and saw the laundry much differently from her siblings. Although she had a similar experience of working in the laundry like her brothers, she felt oppressed both at home and in the laundry because she was the only girl of four children, where she felt the gender bias from her parents and grandparents. According to Subject D, if one of her brother's birthdays came up there would be a dinner and a big celebration, but they never had the time to have one for her.<sup>142</sup> These experiences pushed her away from the business as she grew up. "The boys [Subjects A,

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142. Subject D, interview.

B, and C] would be rewarded if they succeed or not while it was an expectation I do well.”<sup>143</sup> Although she felt a close relationship with her father, it was not visible or reciprocated. Subject D expressed that both her grandparents and parents relied on her other siblings. It was especially hard being the only girl when the importance of gender was stressed. “I was never considered the heir apparent for the laundry and they [Gene and Sharon] knew that. I preferred to continue my education.”<sup>144</sup> This will be covered in greater detail in the next chapters.

Throughout the interview, Subject D tried to show indifference to the topic and what was going on. This feign of indifference did not work. Although not as longwinded as the other subjects, her answers had the similar rantings of a Chinese American women. Subject D’s gender in the family structure played a large role on her future trajectories. She needed to be away from the family. Unlike her brothers, she saw the subordination and oppression of her mother in the laundry and at home. In the laundry, her aunt and cousins were extremely mean to her and her mother. In order to avoid the laundry everyday after school, Subject D involved herself in school politics and other extracurricular activities. “Once I turned of age, I got into a work-study program and I stopped working at the laundry by the age of 16.”<sup>145</sup> She saw how much her parents and grandparents worked and did not want to continue in the family business. “I knew how

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143. Ibid.

144. Ibid.

145. Ibid.

hard they worked in the laundry; I saw how subservient and oppressed my mother was. I made a point I would never be like her.”<sup>146</sup>

Although Subject D was able to physically leave the laundry, her emotional and psychological connection stayed. By becoming a medical social worker, she still continues to do everything she can to help her family. “For me, the only way out was to be independent and stubborn, and walk away from the laundry and work on my own.”<sup>147</sup> With the social environment and gender bias of the parents/grandparents, Subject D felt like she never truly fit into the laundry space no matter what she did. They reinforced her social position as the only girl with three brothers. She took it upon herself to improve on herself and to have true upward social mobility by focusing on her education.

### **The New Account**

From the children’s experiences, they all viewed and had their own ideas of what the laundry business meant to them and how that affected their everyday interactions with one another, both at home and at the workplace. For the three boys, the importance of receiving a quality education may or may not have been important. The only way for them to keep the family together and whole was to continue the family business. As for their upbringing and how they were raised, the expectations of continuing the laundry were fairly subtle. Their lifestyle of growing up during this time period consisted of having cars, going on deliveries with their grandpa, and later doing deliveries themselves.

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146. Ibid.

147. Ibid.

The importance of school and receiving an education was never mentioned; the expectation was to help out in the laundry business. For Subject D, she knew her only avenue of success was to focus on school and get a quality education. Much like the shift and word choice of being a tailor back in China, they never self-identified as being a laundryman. The focus was on being a business owner and manager of a family business. It was only when they were pressed did they say the family business is in fact a laundry business.

For Subjects A, B, and C, gender was never an issue. Instead, they dealt with birth order and their own perceptions of favoritism on top of their own interactions with one another and their parents. However, Subject D dealt with gender bias. The interpersonal, gendered, and cultural/societal expectations for the family played an extremely important role. Within the sociocultural context of their experiences growing up in a laundry family, the fifth generation of the Lee family began to distance themselves from the experiences of the earlier generations. At the same time, they were extremely proud of their Chinese American identity and did not want to be classified in the same category as new immigrants from the 1965 Immigration Act. By critically examining the generations and contextualizing their experiences, the generations began to develop their own identity within the context of growing up in, around, and as a part of a Chinese American laundry family.

## Chapter 4: Cleaning the Product

The various spheres of influence continue to alter and affect intergenerational relationships among the three generations of the Lee family. From Karl Manheim's generational theory, in the intersectionality of race x class x gender, and the family's own positionality in the larger schema of Chinese America, the expectations were for each of the succeeding generation to exceed that of the previous generations' experiences in the United States. By critically examining the situation of this multigenerational Chinese American laundry family in San Francisco, interpersonal, gendered, and cultural-societal expectations are seen to shape the intergenerational relationships.

By using the laundry and the experiences of each generation, it is possible to contextualize generational issues and changes from their own historical and social experiences. Karl Mannheim argues that youth and social change serve as the catalyst to how generations intersect with various historical and social structures. In his essay, "The Problems of Generation" (1952), we must observe the generational units in the framework of the historical and social system from which they receive their shape. There are three important factors constructing the generation: location, actuality, and units. Generational location refers to the common location in the historical dimension of the social process, the main structure within which groups emerge in a historical-social

reality.<sup>148</sup> Generational actuality focuses on participating in the common destiny of the historical and social unit, whereas a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of destabilization.<sup>149</sup> The generational unit develops its own newer form as a result of social and cultural changes.<sup>150</sup> By applying Mannheim's generational theory to each of the three generations, the future trajectories and interpretation of what it means to be a part of a Chinese American laundry family is constantly being revised and reworked.

### **Going through the Mangle**

The laundry, operating as a structure of domination, influenced power and culture across the family unit, but the intergenerational relationships affected each generation differently. For the third generation, Hung Shoon Lee perpetuates the idolized version of what it means to be a gentleman laundryman. Despite his status in the eyes of American society, he held a position of relative prominence among his circle of friends and associates in the San Francisco Chinese community and China. Hung Shoon was part of the generational location as described by Mannheim. From historical dimensions and social process, using this position and his own immigrant experiences under Chinese Exclusion, Hung Shoon maintained ties and cultural expectations of what it meant to be Chinese during a period of discrimination and exclusion for the Chinese American

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148. Karl Mannheim, "The Problems of Generations," in *Karl Mannheim: Essays*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (New York: Routledge, 1952), 290.

149. *Ibid.*, 303.

150. *Ibid.*, 310.

community. He participated in the kinship network immigration of the Lee family and entered the country to replace his father's share in the laundry business. For Hung Shoon, the generational actuality occurs following the end of Exclusion. In this case, it was family reunification. This experience greatly shaped and altered the family's future moving forward.

Due to Hung Shoon's own immigration status, his oldest son entered the country as a paper son, with the youngest son, Gin Hall (Gene), as his only child on record. Several conflicts from this intergenerational relationship affected future generations.

Hung Shoon was the owner and manager of the laundry, and he was training Gene and Jin Hall to become the new business owners. While Hung Shoon was the main owner, Gene and Jin Hall were sibling partners/owners of the family business. Much like the earlier generation of Chinese laundrymen, there was no separation from the work place and home life because of exclusionary practices during this time period. With Gene always gone working on his other ventures, Jin Hall did not work well without someone keeping his gambling addiction in check. Finally, after several years of Gene working as a merchant marine, Hung Shoon had enough of Jin Hall's antics and threatened to sell the business. This move ultimately led to the passing of the ownership to his sons, each splitting the business fifty-fifty, with Gene being the main owner in charge of business decisions. However, Hung Shoon and his wife Jung Ngut continued to show up and work in the laundry through their old age.

By magnifying the close proximity of working and living in the same space as described in Chapter 4, the conflict between the generations affected the family business. This intergenerational relationship also goes across gender lines, where Chinese culture places importance on men. While the sons follow the patriarchy of the family name, Lee, through the birth of sons, the daughter of the Lee family marries out of her family and into another. Over conflicting styles and experiences as sons of a Chinese laundryman, Gene and Jin Hall help contextualize issues faced by laundrymen in the United States.

Gene was able to participate in the laundry apprenticeship since his youth as a recent immigrant in the United States, whereas Jin Hall was the oldest birth son of Hung Shoon, but had to enter the country as a paper son. Much like their entry into the United States, Gene and Jin Hall were of different generations. The latter faced issues similar to those of a young adult who came to the United States after a long separation from the family in China. Upon his arrival, he had to put in long hours and work as a laundryman. Jin Hall resented the hard work and took a turn to gambling, much like the earlier Chinese laundrymen who turned to gambling as their main form of socialization, which is part of the socio-historical generational location of the Chinese Exclusion experience. Family reunification served as his destabilizing process from his generational location into generational actuality. Jin Hall had hopes to make enough money to get away from the business. For him, the laundry was a contentious space for himself, his wife, and his own children. Despite being Hung Shoon's oldest son, the family trajectories were altered because of his father's immigration and records. His only chance and hope of elevating

his own position in the family were to have the first grandson in the family. As the number one son, having the number one grandson would have placed Jin Hall in a much more comfortable position between generations.

When the Lee family finally purchased a business from the previous owners, they had enough capital to spread their wealth into other ventures. The family was no longer laundry workers, and became the active owners and managers of a laundry business. The laundry business model was supported by the three branches of the Lee family through the work of the first two generations. Although Hung Shoon and Jung Ngut laid the foundation, it was Gene who purchased the business from the previous owners. When the fifth generation grew up in the laundry, they also assumed their own responsibilities. For this fifth generation, the experiences of their different jobs and tasks in the laundry help to show the development and apprenticeship that a laundry worker underwent before moving into more prominent managerial and ownership position in the family business. As managers and owners, they needed to be well rounded and able to work at every machine. According to Subject B, they started in the back of the laundry bagging shirts and sheets, if they weren't doing that then they were helping after the shirts got pressed.<sup>151</sup> It was not until the fifth generation was older when they learned how to use the machines and finish the product.<sup>152</sup>

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151. Subject B, interview.

152. Subject C, interview.

For the two sons of Hung Shoon Lee, the unspoken competition to have the first grandson in the family began to erode an already strained relationship. At the time of the first grandson's birth, hereafter identified as Subject A, there were already three granddaughters but no grandson (later in the same year a fourth granddaughter would be born). The importance placed on having a son to continue the family name elevated the status of Gene and Sharon in the eyes of Hung Shoon. This led to more issues and jealousy from Jin Hall and his wife.

Both families had a large number of children to support the family laundry business. In total, Jin Hall and his wife Shang Goon had eight children, five girls and three boys, while Gene and Sharon had four children, three boys and one girl. In the Confucian cultural ideal of multiple generations living under one roof, Hung Shoon stressed the importance of taking care of the family.<sup>153</sup> The laundry was the one constant of cohesive family maintenance. Family and laundry became synonymous with one another. With the multiple generations, family and business merged with one another. For the business to succeed and continue for future generations, the older generations relied heavily on the labor of the next generation. The reliance on family labor in order to offset the cost of hiring outside workers allowed them to save money. When the children and grandchildren got older, there was always a Lee managing the business.

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153. Hsu, 110.

For Gene, the relationship between his older brother and the cultural expectations of filial piety growing up in the laundry business were extremely difficult. From his own early childhood, Gene's generational location was part of the early Chinese experience under Exclusion. However, family reunification was the destabilization process. Moving forward, his previous understanding from growing up in China would change as he entered the United States. In the United States, he became part of a new generational unit of other Chinese Americans during the time period. As the youngest son, he had to respect his elders, namely his parents and older brother. However, he had more expectations since he was the only son on paper and his older brother was unreliable in the business. Without Gene, there needed to be another pillar to help the family run the laundry business although Sharon filled that role admirably. She was not given the credit due to her gender.

The laundry represented steady income to support the family, unlike the earlier laundrymen who could not afford to try new ventures outside of the business. With his family and his brother's family being involved in the business, there was enough capital that allowed Gene to try other ventures. Without the family labor supporting the business, he would not have had the time or capital to attempt his other ventures. Gene used his laundry experience and capital to become an entrepreneur, but he was unable to fully make a clean break. Whenever he branched out of the business, he was pulled back by his older brother and father.

When Gene was able to leave the laundry for brief periods of time, Sharon and his children were left working in the family business. Sharon picked up the workload and responsibilities caused by his departure. As a family business, all family members were needed to serve as workers in order to maximize profit. Although Gene had his family's best interest at heart, it was hurting his extended family. His own children were still too young to be involved in the business, other than sorting and organizing clothes, or running sheets through the mangle. In addition to the basics of the business itself, without Gene's skill as a self-taught mechanic, more money was required for the outside to maintain the laundry machines when they broke down.

The lifestyle that Gene projected publicly was not just as a successful laundry entrepreneur and business partner, but as an all-around stand-up guy. When Sundays served as the only days off in the laundry business, he would take Sharon and the children to family picnics with his friends and relatives. "We did family picnics every weekend and stuff."<sup>154</sup> In the interviews, each subject highlighted the attempts at normalcy through "family" picnics. The picnics were with Gene's friends and other families in San Francisco who worked in the service industry. In addition to the picnics, they went on family bike rides, another status symbol of the family. "We all got bikes and not every family could afford to have bikes."<sup>155</sup> As the children grew up, they slowly stopped going to the weekly picnics and hung out with their friends instead. When the

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154. Lee, interview.

155. Subject B, interview.

children were all old enough to get their driver's licenses, Gene and Sharon purchased Camaros for them while Subject D, highlighting the gender bias, received the family car.<sup>156</sup>

Gene projected an image of being a successful laundryman and family man. By providing this lifestyle for himself and his family, the children began to experience what it was like living in the American Dream. By living in a home, having their own bikes, and later American muscle cars, the subjects were participating in a new American lifestyle. Although ingrained and part of the fabric of what it means to be American and the American consciousness, they had issues with their Chineseness, namely having to go to Chinese School after regular school and the laundry. The dualities of these so called American and Chinese roles were revealed by their interactions with classmates. All of the subjects were fortunate enough to have their own car and spend money, however this was a direct result of having to work in the laundry.<sup>157</sup> By creating this reward system, the children had material wealth and social capital. They had their own varied perceptions of the type of work they were doing, and their own understanding of the business itself. As Subject B states, "It was a family run business and whatever the employees couldn't finish, we as a family stayed and helped them. They needed our help, that was one of the things we needed to do at the laundry."<sup>158</sup>

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156. Lee, interview.

157. Subject B, interview.

158. Ibid.

As the children straddled towards assimilating to American culture and society, they still had the home and business life of the family that slowed their own status. Their experience, mixed with the socio-historical changes at the macro level, helped the generational location. Despite Gene's facade, the family felt he was still reinforcing the cultural norms and expectations instilled to him by the previous generation, some of which was the type of work he was doing and the types of people his children were hanging out with and even married. According to Subject A, he was almost disinherited for marrying his current wife who was not Chinese, but Filipino.<sup>159</sup> One of the most important examples of this behavior is the bitterness and resentment of having to go back to the laundry after years of working as a merchant marine. His worldly experience of visiting new locales and his network of overseas friendships that lasted a lifetime, abruptly ended with Hung Shoon's ultimatum. In turn, Gene gave free reign to his children growing up with the understanding that they would end up in the laundry helping the family.

For the fifth generation, intergenerational upward mobility was not through education. Subjects A, B, and C saw the importance of material wealth via the laundry business as a means of demonstrating and performing their Americanness. By continuing the family business, each of the subjects' different relationships across the generations and with each other internalized and prompted the normalization of not being a laundry worker, but as manager and owner of a small family business. Growing up, they resented

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159. Subject A, interview.

and disliked the laundry business for causing a lack of social life, the treatment of being stuck in a “prison,” and even jokingly the number of child labor laws they were probably breaking. Despite, their relationships with the laundry business itself or how they really felt, all the subjects ultimately returned to the laundry in some capacity. “For some reason we always ended up at the laundry, that was the norm.”<sup>160</sup> In addition to the projection of a successful family instilled upon them by Gene, the work always had a tangible gain such as their American muscle cars and spending money at the end of the week. In taking an ownership and management stake, this distinction elevates the subject’s perception and helps demonstrate upward mobility in the eyes of the public and for themselves. The shift and understanding of what it means to be a laundry worker from the third generation to the fifth is a profound one.

As the only girl in the family with three brothers, Subject D had a strict gendered outcome. “They really wanted the boys there more than they needed me there. They represented the Lees.”<sup>161</sup> Unlike the other subjects who would continue the family name, Subject D married out of the family and into another one. The cultural expectations and gendered outcomes of the various subjects were perpetuated and enabled from the various intergenerational relationships between the grandparents and parents. Subject D mentioned a few instances where her gender affected her growing up negatively, such as not going on deliveries with Hung Shoon while her brothers did. In stressing the

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160. Subject B, interview.

161. Subject D, Interview.

importance of gender, she mentioned how Gene had a double standard when her brothers were able to join the YMCA and try extracurricular activities. One particular highlight from the interview was how Gene took her brothers on different trips to reinforce their masculinity, such as going to the gun range, fishing, hunting, and camping. As she described it, “he wanted to make sure his boys were introduced to all the manly man things.”<sup>162</sup>

Gene finally retired after the untimely passing of his older brother Jin Hall in 1993. Subjects B and C became the new owners and operators of the family business. According to Subject B, they needed to buy out Gene and Jin Hall’s business shares before becoming owners.<sup>163</sup> However, Subject C said he had no idea they were getting the business and Gene passed it down to them.<sup>164</sup> The two sons offered conflicting views of the change in ownership. Everything was fifty-fifty between the two sons, but one of the most important things was the responsibility of the accounts and finances, which was given to Subject C. Much like the earlier generation, the favorite son received the main responsibility of the business. According to Subject B, Gene decided it was best that Subject C assumed these responsibilities because the latter had children. This fifth generation sibling partnership had a similar model to that of the original Chinese laundrymen. From the foundation and strong business built by Hung Shoon, through the sibling partnerships of the fourth generation and finally to the fifth generation, the Lee

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162. *Ibid.*

163. Subject B, interview.

164. Subject C, interview.

family business truly became an intergenerational family affair. The sibling partnership proved to be a sound decision made by Gene and Sharon. Owning various properties in San Francisco, Gene was able to retire, go to the Lee Association, and spend time with his friends. Sharon, however, decided it was best to continue working in the laundry supporting her sons.

Subjects B and C stayed in the laundry business for different reasons. Each highlighted their relationships with the different generations. Subject B's relationship with his grandparents was the reason why he made the decision to fully buy in and continue with the laundry. Because his older sibling did not want to be a part of the family business he took it upon himself to continue. Subject C was much closer with his father and the fourth generation. He decided to stay in the laundry business. According to his interview, he was the one who truly wanted to continue.

As young adults, Subjects B and C had opportunities to leave the family business. However, the combination of material wealth and capital as well as working as one's own boss helped to steer them back to the laundry. From Sharon's interview, Subject B and C's lack of receiving a higher education prevented them from attaining upward mobility and entering the white collar work force.

The mother and daughter-in-law relationship between Jung Ngut and Sharon was particularly interesting when Sharon married into the Lee family. Jung Ngut also married into the Lee family. As the subservient daughter-in-law, unofficial business partner, and

wife, Sharon occupied many different spheres in the relationship between the laundry business and the family. Although she remained in a subservient position, Sharon had her own agency. From her mother-in-law Jung Ngut, Sharon learned how to distill and make her own lychee rice wine at the laundry. For Sharon, this was her own supplemental income that was separate from everything else.

Although Gene was supporting the family, Sharon's side income allowed her to have her own freedom that was away from the domains of the workplace and home life. Gene was able to use his own money without providing real financial support to Sharon because she created, made, and saved her own disposable income. "He saved so much money from all his business ventures."<sup>165</sup> This best represents and encapsulates the duality and multifaceted roles undertaken by Chinese American women. Sharon deflected credit from her own money and created ways to highlight and defer the success of the family and business to Gene. Another important asset for Sharon was her car. Unlike growing up and being confined in Chinatown, the car provided Sharon an accessible means of transportation. Both the car and the lychee rice wine reinforced the cultural and gender norms on her. With the children, three boys and one girl, the societal and cultural expectations placed on them from the previous generations plus being around the laundry business continued to affect them.

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165. Lee, interview.

### **The Folding Station**

The generations incurred some normalcy in upward mobility through social capital and material wealth. Instead of struggling to make ends meet or living from paycheck to paycheck, the strong foundation of the business built by the third generation enabled a generational transfer of wealth. The expectation to achieve upward mobility through their educational outcome was nonexistent. As the children were part of a specific generational location from being born during the baby boom period in the United States, they formed their own generational actuality and unit from being part of a laundry family.

As baby boomers, the experiences of the fifth generation combined with the hard working family unit of a Chinese American laundry created some mixed results. Unlike the fourth generation with immigrant parents, Subjects A, B, and C did not internalize the hard work of their parents and grandparents. According to Sharon, “I didn’t want them to work in the laundry. I wanted them to do something else, get real jobs, and get an education. Do something they can be proud of.”<sup>166</sup> She wanted them to focus on their education. She also mentioned her husband said it was up to them. However, she wanted to “make sure the family stayed together.”<sup>167</sup> In contrast, the previous generations encouraged and enabled the fifth generation because they would represent the lasting legacy of the Lee family. For Subjects A, B, and C, the hard work of the previous

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166. *Ibid.*

167. *Ibid.*

generations had a tangible benefit. By supporting a material and social capital through the hard work of the previous generations, they did not see the laundry as an everlasting discrimination of their people. They only saw the cash and material wealth that the laundry was able to provide for their lifestyle and the lifestyle of the in-laws.

Maintaining cultural ties to the ancestral country did not play an important or large role for the fifth generation. The transnational tie between the ancestral country and the Chinese American community, especially the family, slowly diminished as each generation passed and assimilated into the United States. For the transnational linkages, the maintenance and connection to the home country is best reflected by the first and second generation. However, the importance of maintaining these ties sharply declined and has become nearly nonexistent by the fifth generation who have been disconnected from China. The transnational connection was inadvertently severed when China was closed off during their childhood years and not opened until they were adults. From growing up as minorities living in a Eurocentric majority, the fifth generation did not identify with the ancestral country. From China's own political history and international relations to the world, the ideological shift of being Communist during the Cold War context also plays a contributing factor. With their relative social capital and material wealth, the fifth generation never had a need to visit the ancestral village. They eventually went to China and the village; by that time it was too late to reestablish the transnational connection. While the third and fourth generations had experience with and in China, they could only influence the fifth generation with Chinese cultural practices,

such as observing major Chinese holidays, Chinese New Year, Qing Ming, and the Moon Festival.

The generational experiences based here on historical dimensions and socialization process have several instances of destabilization. The second generation highlights the split family house under the context of Chinese Exclusion and the sojourner mentality of the laundry business. With World War II serving as destabilization, Hung Shoon Lee had to reaffirm and undergo small shifts from everything he knew traditionally about growing up. This is the lasting transnational legacy of being a Chinese laundryman. The third generation experience greatly affected fourth generation Gene and Sharon, when the family dynamic trajectories began to change as the Chinese American community shifted following World War II. For the fifth generation, their generational actuality is based on growing up in a specific time period marked by their own personal experiences in a much larger macro context, while experiencing the laundry/home life as its own structure. As Mannheim argues, the situation changed and the younger generation was able to reconstitute the tradition from which it derived to produce its own generation-entelechy. Despite the changes and different experiences of each generation, the one constant in their life was the laundry business. The various changes across the generations shaped by the changing historical and sociocultural processes of the time period are reflected in how their own perceptions of being a part of the laundry family drives them forward.

## Chapter 5: Delivering the Product

From the previous chapter, which focuses on the generational shifts of the laundry, another important transfer occurred between the generations. In the traditional cultural practices of a Chinese American family in the laundry business, there were several domains of sustained gendered performance. Changes and transformations took place as a result of the sociocultural and historical shifts between the third, fourth, and fifth generations. Gender and what it entailed became a highly contested, internalized, and normalized vehicle of outward expression.

From the interviews of the family members serving as key informants, contextualized within the historical and sociocultural changes resulting from generational shifts, the fifth generation did their own highly sustained gender performance. By applying Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory (2006), the highly socialized outcome of gender identity is evident in all facets of the generational breakdown in the family. "The gender reality is created through sustained social performance."<sup>168</sup> Through the sustained social performance of laundry work, the outside mechanisms of what society normally associates with laundry work, and the cultural/traditional practices/expectations of a Chinese family, the different generations involved in the family business inhibited, internalized, and normalized parts of the sustained social performance.

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168. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 192.

The cultural and traditional transfer that took place across generations normalized behavior and social performance. With Mannheim's generational theory and the destabilization undergone between the generations, the importance of gender performance in a social setting created a binary of picking and choosing between acting out from both a cultural and social aspect. In the laundry business, the work socialized women's work. By functioning in a family business, both men and women had to deal with the outside perceptions of what it meant to be laundry workers. This experience was internalized by the family members. At the same time, men and women had to adhere to strict cultural and societal norms. The third generation modeled the type of expected behavior, while reinforcing them in their everyday interactions caused by both living and working in the same space and time. These highly specific cultural traditions were met with socio-historical changes throughout the generational shifts as each of the generations grew older. They all adapted, for better or worse, with what this meant and identified with being Chinese American with the changing socio-historical shifts plus the dominant institution in their life which was the laundry business.

With the laundry serving as the focal point for the family both as a business and in the household, the traditional gender roles in both spaces serve as a parallel to the hierarchal relationship between men and women in the family. The expectations placed on both men and women are similar and fairly universal to the male and female gender roles of other groups: the male role is the primary breadwinner and provider for the family, while the female's roles are childrearing and subservience to the male.

In pre-Civil War America, laundry work was normally associated with being women's work. The first Chinese laundries in the United States needed to adapt and have some measure of sustainability. With low capital investment, long hours, and stable work, the Chinese were able to develop a niche market and work in the service industry throughout America.

Despite the highly gendered performance related to their occupation, the Lee generations still performed their own perceived understanding of gender and projected outwards what it meant to be a Chinese American male/female. Using Judith Butler's gender performativity, race, and class, Mannheim's generational theory, and finally the interviews of the fifth generation serving as key informants, this chapter will use these specific lenses and critically examine the Chinese American laundry family. In the shifts of their own gendered experiences and participating in the laundry business, cultural-societal traditions were passed down, transformed, and inhabited across the generations.

### **Finishing the Product**

Hung Shoon's early experiences of growing up under Chinese Exclusion separated him from his family in China. As a partner in a small family-run business, he had limited interaction outside the business and was around mostly men. Later, when he was reunited with his wife Jung Ngut, he needed another partner to work in the laundry. After the groundwork and foundation were set by the experiences of the third generation, the importance of maintaining strict traditional and cultural gendered roles for the family

business continued, and is evident with the succeeding generations. Hung Shoon took it upon himself to adhere to these strict gender, cultural, and societal norms with his son, wife, and village relative.

By dressing well to project a positive image in American society and to show his assimilation, and by providing laundry delivery services to highly specialized well-to-do neighborhoods, Hung Shoon helped his own gender performance of a successful businessman. By maintaining and projecting this position to his wife, who was also his partner, his sons, and grandchildren, on the importance of identifying with being the cultural and traditional Chinese while taking the necessary steps towards assimilation, acceptance, and Americanization, Hung Shoon wanted to provide for his family's future generations. This set the precedent and led the subsequent future generations into laundry life in order to continue the family business. More important, the future generations to continue the family business were male. Through a patrilineal line, the generational transfer of the business practice would further ensure the Lee family. By placing more importance and emphasis on the male line, this allowed and normalized expected behavior and preference.

Jung Ngut occupied the space of multiple domains in the business, as a partner, bookkeeper, and accountant, while still under the subservient position of "wife" and responsible for childrearing in the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, she subverted the traditional gender practices of the time, both in American and Chinese societies. Jung

Ngut had some decision-making power in the family's business and financial matters, and she generated her own supplemental income. She was able to exert some control by brewing lychee rice wine which became a family recipe that was later passed down to Sharon. The passing of this family recipe allowed for the female line in the family to have their own spending money, free from that of the primary breadwinner. As a result, the women in the Lee family business were able to provide for themselves and take up an ownership stake of not just being a wife, but also of being a business/managing partner.

The lychee rice wine enterprise models the importance and ingenuity of the Chinese women working in the laundry business. Taking advantage of the machinery, they made their own makeshift distillery behind the machines. The importance of Jung Ngut in the laundry proved to be absolutely invaluable. According to the interviewees, Hung Shoon might have been the business owner in the front managing and interacting with customers, but in reality it was Jung Ngut who maintained quality control and kept a watchful eye on the workers and family members. Sharon also served as a rock in the family by occupying and performing multiple roles at home and in the business.

The experiences of Gene and Sharon as the fourth generation serve their own gender performance as well. In leaving the confines of the laundry business to serve as a merchant marine, small business owner, and entrepreneur, Gene was able to perform occupations that served his own masculinity and went out of the realm of "women's work" that was associated with laundry work. Meanwhile, Sharon subverted gender

expectations by assuming Gene's role in the laundry business when he went away. It was quite hard on Sharon to also maintain her influence in the house and the domestic sphere of childrearing and to manage the basic necessities for four children. The children, who at this time were a wide range of ages from four to twelve, underwent their own social learning by modeling after Sharon as well as Hung Shoon and Jung Ngut. From their own observations growing up, in addition to cultural and societal norms, this would serve as important keystones for their future interactions with the earlier generations. Sharon performed both the roles of the male and female when Gene was not in the picture, but in the long run was still in a subordinate position. Despite her performances, the need for a strong male presence in the family was one of the reasons Gene ultimately came back from the merchant marines.

The fourth generation gender performance and the importance of generational transfer continued to affect the fifth generation growing up. As the family business transferred between the first and second generations, the third generation was also expected to continue the business while maintaining their own identity of being Chinese laundrymen. This behavior and specific performance became internalized and normalized for the fifth generation.

The experiences and sustained gendered performance of each of the subjects in the laundry and at home, and much later in their lives, continue to reinterpret and play a delicate game of trying to do what they perceive to be correct. As part of the baby

boomers, their experiences are shaped by the outward growth of American society and the changing American fabric. With the gains made by the Chinese American community, prior to and after the 1965 Immigration Act, this generation experienced new things from that of their parents and grandparents. As previously mentioned with the Racial Formation Theory and the racial paradigm that causes a shift on the importance of being Chinese American in relation to the newer immigrants, racial heterogeneity and “ABC” masculine performance sped up the assimilation process and created a new racial hierarchy in the Chinese American community. This is best exhibited by the fifth generation’s experience and demonstration of their Americanness through social consumption of material goods. The lifestyle created from the hard work of the third and fourth generations and the laundry work done as young adults in school allowed them to normalize these experiences.

As these experiences shaped their own future trajectories to move forward, the fifth generation had the family business which served as a stabilizing foundation for the family. The subjects were still part of the laundry, the family business, and in an environment that insulated them to internalize/normalize certain expectations. From these interactions, each of the interviewees developed a close relationship/mentorship with someone in the previous generation. Instead of being explicitly told it was favoritism, the four subjects had varying relationships with their parents or grandparents that continued well into their adult lives. Among these relationships and their own perceived importance

with the older generations, the fifth generation's own sustained social performance allowed them to benefit from someone in the older generation.

Coupled with the importance of their own gender performance, cultural and traditional practices, and socio-historical shifts, the fifth generation embodied, internalized, and maintained generational and gender standards of becoming either male or female. The subjects continued to adhere and perform based off these expectations. As part of their own social gendered performance that was modeled from observing Gene and Sharon's interactions with the older generation, the intergenerational relationships and transfer of the businesses would be revealed in the interviews and observations of family functions.

The sons' relationships with parents and grandparents plus the cultural-societal expectations placed on them in the laundry business and at home, help to translate into their everyday performance. They went in-depth and in details about their experiences and interactions in the laundry business. Their own perception and performance were interactively linked to the business, the family at home, and the changing socio-historical trends of the time during their childhood, early adult hood, and later adult years. As they moved further away generationally from the ancestral country and developed their own Chinese American identity, the subjects performed parts of both male/female constructs of gender.

Despite being in a laundry family and the negative connotations of doing women's work, the fifth generation men were able to perform their own masculine/male identity through their consumption of American muscle cars and material wealth. The laundry business supported their lifestyle to project their Americanness and consumption. However, they were still a part of the laundry mentorship experience under the third and fourth generations.

Their male privilege in a Chinese American family plus the family's socioeconomic status during this time period brought about their own perception of the family wealth and being constantly provided for by their parents. Being involved in the laundry at such a young age and taking the mentor-mentee relationship, the third generation men began participating in simple tasks at the laundry that demonstrated their privilege. According to Subject D, the sister, "it was only the boys who went on deliveries."<sup>169</sup> Even though she was a part of the family and was helping out in the laundry at a young age, it was very clear to Subject D that she was "not really feeling appreciated by the grandparents because of my gender."<sup>170</sup> One comment from Subject A in particular was quite telling "I know my sister was more sensitive with that aspect of it. I never took it either way. You know because she was a girl and I was a guy. I had certain roles to perform never even crossed my mind."<sup>171</sup> He feigned ignorance of the whole

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169. Subject D, interview.

170. Ibid.

171. Subject A, interview.

situation, when in reality he probably benefited the most from his own subject position as Gene and Sharon's oldest child, first son, and the first grandson to the first generation.

The importance of the male line, especially birth order, and the procreation of the sixth generation put the fifth generation in a higher subject position for the third and fourth generations. Subject D was the first to marry in the family, but she was not carrying the family name because she was leaving the Lee family into another. "My grandparents [Hung Shoon and Jung Ngut] and parents [Gene and Sharon] made it very clear when I got married I am no longer a Lee."<sup>172</sup> According to Subject A, the grandparents showed her subservient position as a female when she only received a cheap pendant, while her brothers received something of higher value. The three male subjects were all in serious relationships at the time. However, Subjects B and C wanted to be the first son or grandson in the family to marry. The three subjects ended up marrying in consecutive years in 1984, 1985, and 1986. Subject A ended up being the last of the four subjects to get married and was the only one to not marry Chinese, which was another site of contention. Their own Chinese American male privilege and performance compared to Subject D was evident. The most telling was a quote from Sharon "I told the other two boys one of you can move there [the family house on Foerster] after you marry. So whoever wanted to live there can move in."<sup>173</sup> Although Subject B was the first son to marry, he turned down the offer to live in the family house. He and his wife

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172. Subject D, interview.

173. Lee, Interview.

wanted to find their own home without help from Gene and Sharon. Subject C graciously accepted the home with no mortgage and continues to live there currently. A member of the fifth generation would be given a house from the fourth generation for being the “first” to marry and continue the family lineage. As these experiences and expectations shaped them, there was a constant reminder of the importance of the male line not only in the laundry but also in their everyday interactions across generations.

As the fifth generation got older and into their adulthood, Subjects A and C were always bailed out by their parents which slowly strained the relationship among the siblings, especially in one particular situation that took place, shortly after Sharon’s mother passed away. The timing could not be more perfect for Subject A and his family. Due to financial hardships, he lost his house and went into debt. While Sharon and her sisters were trying to figure out what to do, Subject A and his wife went to the laundry everyday to perform and demonstrate their filial piety to the third and fourth generations. Subject A was able to perform to his parents’ sensibilities by using his own children and guilt tripping his parents. Gene and Sharon decided it was best to purchase the home for Subject A and his family. They were able to purchase it under market value with Subject A and his family moving in. Subject A and his family paid way below market rent to Gene and Sharon. Since Gene and Sharon “owned” the home, Subject A deflected responsibilities of the house onto the home “owner,” such as the maintenance bills, property tax, and any renovations to the house. The below market rent is not even enough to pay the property tax bill.

Subject B was never helped in the same way as the other two subjects. The long hours working at the laundry had put his marriage in jeopardy. In his interview, he mentioned how his wife gave him an ultimatum of leave the laundry or she would divorce him.<sup>174</sup> His response highlighted his filial piety and the types of sacrifices he made for the family: "I told her I'm not cheating on you; it's just how the family business is."<sup>175</sup> Although he chose the family business, she never left him and they are currently happily married.

By using the fourth generation, Subjects A and C were able to play up their gendered performance, Chinese male privilege, and experiences growing up in American society. The generational transfer allowed the fifth generation to continue a life supported by the laundry business and their parents. However, their own gendered performance is subverted in the domestic sphere and at home. By continuing in the family business, they became emasculated at home by their wives. Although they projected and hyped up their own masculinity, they were brought down by their wives who served as the primary breadwinners in the family. Subject A only went to the laundry to use it as a transitional place of employment until he moved on to something else. Instead of staying at the laundry, he now works as a driver, houseboy, and cook to a wealthy family. In addition to their own material consumption and performance as successful business entrepreneurs, the other subjects relied on the previous generation's wealth to make ends meet. As the

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174. Subject B, interview.

175. Ibid.

fourth generation continued to bail out and provide for Subjects A and C in the fifth generation, the overreliance and constant giving would eventually lead to the closing of the business. Since Subject A and C are the only ones to continue the Lee family name, they are both placed in an elevated position in the eyes of their parents.

For Sharon, the “immigrant” mother, and Subject D, the American born daughter, they each coped and dealt with the sustained gendered performance differently. When Sharon and Subject D got older, they inhabited a precarious position based on the gendered expectations and performance of the time period. Through the generational transfer between Sharon and Subject D, the latter took upon the same position of Sharon albeit in a much different way. “My mother always did whatever my father said since in her eyes, he is always right.”<sup>176</sup> Even though Sharon was a provider of the family with the lychee rice wine side business and by helping out in the laundry, she continued to perform from a subservient position to her husband and in laws. Subject D saw how oppressed and subservient her mother was to her grandparents and husband. She also played the same expected role of her. In one particular situation, “they had depended on me to take care a lot of their paperwork because of my job as a social worker.”<sup>177</sup> Despite her negative experiences, Subject D still supported and helped the family in her own way.

The educational outcome and experiences of the fifth generation with three sons and one daughter affected the future trajectories of each individual as well as caused a

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176. Subject D, interview.

177. Ibid.

great strain in the family. This severely fractured both the business and familial relationships. The popular tiger mom and model minority myth of an Asian American family are not evident from the interviews and observations of this study. The importance of receiving an education for upward mobility was also not at all emphasized from the key informant interviews. Subject A got a BA in Recreational Studies and it took him seven years to complete. During the same time period, Subject D was able to get her undergrad degree and a Master's in Social Work. The other subjects had opportunities to receive a higher education as well, but never finished their respective degree programs; Subject B fell short of graduating with an accounting degree, while Subject C never finished his general education requirements at a Junior College. It can be assumed that both the parents and grandparents did not see value in higher education for fear that three men might make use of their higher education as a means to upward mobility and ultimately to leave the family laundry.

The three men attempted to work other jobs before settling in the laundry business. With his recreation degree, Subject A worked at the Parks and Recreation Department. He wanted to be an entrepreneur. From working at Parks and Recreation, to managing a restaurant, and even working as an import/export of Nintendo consoles, he experienced the most success in business. However, Subject A knew his role of being the oldest son and grandson, and performed the cultural-societal expectations. Subject B returned to the laundry because of his relationship to the grandparents. But he still tried to work other jobs. Subject C wanted to be a mechanic and returned to the laundry because

of his relationship with the father. No matter what these men did and how they tried something new, something would always draw them back to the laundry business. In reality, because the laundry and family were synonymous with one another, they actually were coming back to the family

“She [Sharon] was the one who always stayed home to take care of the kids, clean the house, whatever it takes to keep the family together.”<sup>178</sup> Although she tried hard to keep the family, her children, and the laundry together, it became overbearing and trying to keep everyone happy eventually became too much for everyone. Because of her subservient status to Gene, and her preference to Subjects A and C as evident from the babying and bailing out, the close relationship of Subjects B and C as business partners and owners of the business slowly declined.

### **Out for Delivery**

The grandparents and parents always provided for their grandsons and sons respectively. The third and fourth generation needed and wanted the fifth generation to continue the business. The latter never had any real challenges because the previous generations and laundry business bailed them out. Additionally, with their Chinese American male privilege growing up in San Francisco, they had the resources to go beyond the laundry. Their upward social mobility was not educational attainment. It was via the inheritance of being their boss and the resulting material consumption.

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178. Ibid.

What can be more American than being a successful small business owner? As small business owners, the fifth generation had a successful multigenerational laundry business that was able to provide for their everyday needs. Despite, the negative perceptions of laundry work, the Lee family elevated the business and the earlier generations' own material wealth and success. And, despite the interviewees' negative talk about the laundry, the laundry was the stable driving force in their lives.

The foundational and generational exchange of wealth, privilege, and prestige allowed the fifth generation men to perform a certain way. They had American muscle cars before their friends, spent money, and even had a house and a place to stay from their parents. The only real responsibilities they had was the laundry and to maintain the family business.

The importance of the male line was highlighted, but that was not necessarily always the case. While Subject B had male privilege, he did not have children to continue the family name, like Subjects A and C. The only female in the fifth generation was "pushed" to focusing on a quality education. In order to be a more viable candidate for other families, she needed a quality education. This push was constantly reminding Subject D of her status in the family as a girl and daughter.

Gender performance and generational transfer of the Lee family's multiple generations and the laundry business reflect the socio-historical shifts undergone by the Chinese American community. With the third generation, by taking on and founding the

laundry business normally associated with women's work, Hung Shoon projected and performed his own Chinese American masculinity. Despite negative public perceptions, he maintained his own standing within the family and among his friends in the Chinese American community. The fourth generation performed their own generational transition of exclusionary politics to assimilation into mainstream society. From Gene and Sharon's experiences, the transition period of the laundry business highlighted the generational transfer and performance expected of the strong cultural background and maintenance of the third generation, while trying to have a sense of normalcy and assimilation for the fifth generation. The performance of the fifth generation and their socio-historical shifts had the biggest change. With their assimilation and experiences of American consumerism, and their involvement in the laundry business, the socio-historical and cultural shift for a Chinese American family can be viewed through their experiences.

## Conclusion: Closing Shop, The Unfinished Laundry

In exploring the structural changes of a multigenerational Chinese American laundry family, the generational shifts from the third, fourth, and fifth generations of the laundry business, the purpose of the laundry was always about the family. As the laundry and the family were symbiotic with each other, the close proximity of business and home soon led to more issues for the family. Through the Exclusionary and discriminatory practices endured by the third generation, the transitional period of the fourth anniversary, and finally the drastic shifts of the fifth generation, the family business always served as the constant in their lives despite the shifts. Ultimately, the laundry was used to keep the family together.

With the multigenerational socio-historical and economic shifts of the family, the laundry business proved to be an invaluable and undeniable aspect of family maintenance. As these shifts occurred, the laundry was meant to ensure that the family would always stay together. From the intergenerational relationships and gender performance resulting from these shifts, the laundry business and family were the only constants. The shifts from the various generations, mixed with the changing structural and macro factors of a larger society, greatly contributed to the business aspects of the family. Although it represented some normalcy and provided a solid foundation for the family, it would ultimately become more problematic for later generations. As the

interactions in the laundry within the larger shifts occurred for the family in the laundry, the members turned to reflect upon their own different experiences.

From the third generation, Hung Shoon endured discriminatory practices from his own immigration to the founding of the laundry. By entering the country as a foreign-born child of a US citizen, Hung Shoon had some privileges with his immigration status. As part of the lasting legacy of the earliest Chinese immigrants, his experiences are a part of the long-term transnational connection and split family household. In the era of Exclusion, he was following and modeling the previous experiences of the first and second generation of the Lee laundrymen family who left their families behind in China to work in San Francisco. Although he represents the old school laundryman, he stressed the importance of his own Chinese masculinity and gender bias, and he modeled how future generations should perform within this context. However, the shifting socio-historical and economic landscape could not take into account how the future generations' own understanding would change from the macro context despite being so ingrained with the micro level institution of the laundry and family. The maintenance and creation of the cultural practices and the tradition from these practices would lay the foundation for future generational interactions in the laundry and family.

For Gene and Sharon belonged to a part of the fourth generation of transition from having parents who experienced outright discrimination and exclusionary practices to the gains made by the Chinese American community during World War II, only to have it

taken away as a result of the new Red Scare. The fourth generation of the family and laundry business maintained their own ethnic identity and stressed the importance of cultural traditions and practices. They benefitted from the foundation of the laundry as a base of operations in expanding and experiencing new things. Unlike the previous generation, they did not have the same language barriers. However, Gene and Sharon were never able to secure a clean break from the business. They were still stuck in the lower social class barrier that was associated with laundry work. For Sharon as well as the other women involved in the business, as an equal partner in the business she still had a subservient role to Gene at home. With the women's own experiences and filial piety responsibilities to the family, they always supported and stressed the importance of family. From this position they played a large role in the business and in the family. Once Gene and Sharon took the ownership role of the business, the shift for them occurred in having disposable income to demonstrate their material wealth and upward mobility. These changes were most evident with the experiences of their children.

The biggest shift was in the experiences of the fifth generation. From their own privilege of being a part of a successful laundry family, they had a base of operations and foundation that provided them with a lifestyle that was unlike the earlier generations of the family. Although the four subjects complained about the hard work, their work in the family business soon provided them with material wealth that demonstrated their own Americanness and entry into mainstream American society. Their experiences allowed them to evolve from the previous generations' understanding of the laundry business. The

three fifth generation male subjects continued the family business and benefitted from the gender bias and cultural traditions of the previous generations. However, the Great Transformation and Civil Rights movements allowed this generation to step up and out of the laundry class. By becoming new business owners and active managers, they did not identify as laundrymen, but instead self-identified as small business owners and entrepreneurs. Meanwhile the only female subject of the fifth generation achieved upward mobility through her own educational attainment. The experiences of the laundry for the four subjects plus the outside macro context from which they grew up greatly shaped their own perceived importance within the family. These outside forces and the inner workings of the laundry itself placed an importance on the gender and birth order of the third generation.

The fifth generation, namely Subjects A and C, was insulated and infatuated with the lifestyle they and their in-laws became accustomed to from the support of the laundry. There were warning signs to the eventual downfall and ending of the business. Logistically, the numbers did not add up and arouse suspicion at least from Subject B. Subject C served as the primary partner who dealt with the financial matters of the business; he was in charge of the accounts and making sure all the bills were paid. He claimed that there was no more money in the business and the accounts were shrinking. He could not pay the rent to Gene or afford to pay Sharon's salary. Subject B was in charge of the walk-in accounts. From the interviews with him, the laundry was still a viable and sustainable business. Although it was a midsized laundry, they just needed to

downsize and become a smaller operation. One important point in particular was the shift in the family aspect of the business. Although some of the fourth generation were at the laundry, they were not expected nor did they help out as much as the earlier generations. Without the extra help of the next generation as workers, they needed to hire more non-family members to work in the business. While family members supporting the business predominantly ran the earlier generations' laundry, the expectations were different for the fourth generation. As a family business, it is mostly profitable with the use of other family members.

As the subjects and the family business continued, many cracks and faults in the business structure plus family issues began to arise. Although the laundry was meant to keep the family together, it soon led to the eventual fracturing of the family unit. All the signs were there for Gene in early 2013. Instead of taking the tests to confirm his cancer, he brushed it aside. From a lifetime of heavy smoking and drinking, his lifestyle would eventually kill him sooner than later. As Gene dealt with his own medical issues, his children, Subjects B and C, were having issues in the laundry.

With the older generation retiring and their children not interested in continuing the family laundry, the business began losing many accounts. In order to make up for the lack of business, they began downsizing their workers. As the business shrank, they did not solicit more work. Subject C remains adamant that closure was to be expected because the overall loss of business began hurting the bottom line financially. The closure

had auspicious timing – when his business partner and brother, Subject B, was out of the country. When Subject B came back from his vacation, he was informed of the business decision to close. Instead of selling the business, the shop was completely closed. Despite the years of hard work and feeling comfortable with the amount of work from the walk-ins to the smaller accounts, Subject B was blindsided by the decision to close the business. Without support from Sharon and his father, he was essentially thrown out and left to fend on his own. From his own buildup, to his observations and the explicit favoritism shown towards Subjects A and C, Subject B had enough and left the family. Subject B would not come home until Gene's health began to fail considerably in early December 2013, but before he finally passed away in the end of December 2013.

With Gene's health in decline, Subjects A and C began focusing on the bigger picture, their inheritance and what they believed was entitled to them. As the proverbial favorites and the only subjects with grandchildren to continue the Lee legacy, their attention focused on what they perceived to be theirs. With Gene's declining health, the issues of the will and trust began to surface in all facets of the family. Subjects B and D knew very well they would be taking care of Sharon and were more focused on helping Gene. In his remaining few months, Gene needed to divide his assets any which way he wanted. As Subjects A and C already expected something, they made constant visits to the house to continue and exert pressure on Gene. By proving how filial they were, each got what they wanted.

This thesis explores the multigenerational family laundry business in San Francisco. Based on the findings, the generations each had a different understanding and experience of the laundry. By putting into a larger context and closely examining the socio-historical shifts of the Chinese American community, the shifts and gains made by the family are best represented by the evolution of the meaning of being a laundryman/business between the third, fourth, and fifth generations. For the third and fourth generations, they were still dealing with exclusionary and discriminatory practices while also living in a transitional period for Chinese America. For the fifth generation, they interpreted the laundry business differently. From their interviews and observations, they no longer associated the business with discriminatory practices but instead as a means to support a lifestyle of upward mobility, consumerism, and masculinity/Americanness.

The current thesis can be expanded for future studies. For example, as a follow-up, the participants interviewed in this study could be interviewed now that it has been over two years since the laundry's closure. It would also be interesting to hear and interview the sixth generation to see how they view the laundry business.

There needs to be an emphasis on continuing family oral histories of multigenerational family businesses. Instead of just tracking one family's laundry experience in the United States, a future study could branch out to include the other Lee family laundries in San Francisco. Hung Shoon's family had several village uncles who

participated in the laundry business. It is just as important for these stories to be recorded and analyzed. In exploring other multigenerational family businesses, a pattern of commonalities experienced by other families might surface.

The type of laundry that the family of this study ran was a finished laundry. Unlike dry cleaning that uses chemicals and steaming, a finished laundry involves any material that can be machine washed with soap and water, before being pressed with a hot iron to create a smooth finish. In Chinese, it was referred to as “wet laundry” or “wet shop.”

As unfinished laundry, the stories of past, present, and future generations of the family need to be recorded. The interviews, observations, and research of this project reveal the “dirty laundry” aspects of one family’s dynamics. The coding, the research, and the materials were washed in order to create a finished product. Much like the laundry, the product could be pressed and given a smooth finish, hung up on hangars, or just washed and folded. In order to include many perspectives in this story, the different options to the finished product require more laundry. As of now, the location of the laundry is being turned into a fitness studio. Soon the red neon sign will be taken down and no one will know what used to be there. It is a closed shop. The laundry business that was provided produced a product that is complete. However, it remains unfinished.

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