

# Sweatshops in Sunset Park: A Variation of the Late 20th Century Chinese Garment Shops in New York City

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## *Abstract*

The analysis in this study is primarily based on the author's research of the Chinese garment industry in New York over the last ten years, her visits to a number of shops in Sunset Park, and her interviews with several dozen workers in the area. By representing a complex picture of the industry, it argues that while labor organizing and law enforcement remain important ways to address labor abuse in the industry, it is imperative for the law enforcement agencies, organized labor and all concerned individuals to understand the complexity embedded in the highly competitive structure of the garment industry, the multi-dimensional impact of labor legislation and law enforcement, and the need to develop new forms of labor organizing informed and responsive to the challenge of the time. Without such an understanding, any effort to curb the sweating phenomenon is likely to be sporadic and have no lasting effect on the industry.

On March 12, 1995, the *New York Times* carried a report on the Chinese garment shops in the Sunset Park area of Brooklyn, a neighborhood that houses the new Chinese garment production center in New York City. Unlike most of the Chinatown garment shops in Manhattan, many of the Chinese shops in Sunset Park are not unionized. The weak influence of organized labor and law enforcement agencies in the area had virtually turned the industry there into a safety valve for some Chinese employers to extract quick profits while not complying with any labor laws. Incidents of exploitation increased with the expansion of the Chinese garment shops in the area.

The report in the *New York Times*, written by reporter Jane H. Lii, largely confirmed the above observation. The vivid description of life in the shops, based on the reporter's first-hand experience, gripped the hearts of its readers. According to Lii, the shop she worked in for an entire week was "typical of the small, new shops outside Manhattan":

The steel doors opened into a dim, dusty warehouse. Red and blue rags covered the four windows, shutting out all natural light. Bundles of cut cloth sat piled in haphazard mounds, some stacked taller than a worker. Under fluorescent lights swinging from chains, rows of mid-aged Chinese women hunched over sewing machines, squinting and silent.

Were the working conditions there as horrific as those that splashed across the headlines in city newspapers? Lii's reply indicated that there was "something

more complex at work.” What, then, was the complexity? Lii reported that the owner of the shop was “actually benevolent, albeit in a harsh way.” “She does not pay minimum wage, but she serves her workers tea. She makes them work until midnight, but she drives them home afterward. She uses child laborers, but she fusses over them, combing their ponytails, admiring their painted fingernails, even hugging them.” According to Lii, the boss had opened the business only to save her family’s honor, for her brother had, among many things, absconded with close to \$80,000 owed to his workers in back wages. The shop also was reopened, according to its present owner, in order to provide jobs for those who came from the same region in China and whom she called “our people.”

As Lii reported, the situation of the workers in the shop was also complicated. They “sewed virtually non-stop” because they wanted to make money and had no other alternatives without speaking English. They brought their children into the shop to care for them while working. Several children, however, toiled by their mothers’ sides to supplement their incomes. It was said that their mothers wanted to instill in them a work ethic by allowing them to do so.

Lii reported that both the employer and her workers considered American labor laws ideal and laudable, but impractical. The workers considered their employer a good boss “precisely because she was willing to violate labor laws and allow their children to work by their sides.” The situation was, therefore, “a miserable complicity born of necessity in an insular, immigrant world” or, simply, “a grim conspiracy of the poor,” as the reporter concluded. No wonder that the result of working at Sunset Park was pitiful:

Seven days later, after 84 hours of work, I got my reward, in the form of a promise that in three weeks I would be paid \$54.24 or 65 cents an hour (minimum wage is \$4.25). I also walked away from the lint-filled factory with aching shoulders, a stiff back, a dry cough and a burning sore throat.

How representative is Lii’s seven-day experience in the shops, and how valid is her analysis? In what ways are the conditions in the Sunset Park Chinese shops similar to the union shops in Manhattan’s Chinatown, the hub of the Chinese industry in New York City? In what ways are they different? To which extent are the conditions in Sunset Park similar to those of the city’s garment shops at the-turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century? What are the factors that have led to these similarities and differences? In the era of globalization, what can the conditions in Sunset Park Chinese garment shops tell us about the impact of globalization in the U.S.? This study attempts to answer these questions.

This article is primarily based on the author’s historical research of the Chinese garment industry in New York City over the last ten years, her visits to a number of shops in Sunset Park in the late 1990s, and her interviews with several dozen workers in the area.<sup>1</sup> It gives a brief account of the working conditions in the shops and discusses several highly controversial issues in the Sunset Park Chinese community that relate to the garment industry. By presenting a more differentiated picture of the industry, it argues that while labor organizing

and law enforcement remain important ways to address labor abuse in the industry, it is imperative for law enforcement agencies, organized labor, and all concerned individuals to understand the complexity embedded in the highly competitive structure of the garment industry, the multi-dimensional impact of labor legislation and law enforcement, and the need to develop new forms of labor organizing that are informed and responsive to the challenges of the time. Without such an understanding any effort to curb the sweating phenomenon is likely to be sporadic and without lasting effect on the industry.

### *Working Environments*

The shop where Jane Lii worked and reported is, in large part, typical of the Chinese garment shops in the Sunset Park area. Many of them are housed in former warehouses or converted garages. Because these shops are often hidden behind a steel door and have no sign on the front, one can hardly tell from the outside the nature of the activities inside the shops or, simply, whether there is any activity at all.

Sunset Park offers the Chinese garment industry many advantages. First, the former warehouses and the converted garages there are spacious. Even though they do not provide comfortable working conditions, they offer much more production space than industrial lofts in Manhattan's Chinatown.<sup>2</sup> The 1983 Chinatown Garment Industry Study reports that in 1981, Chinese shops with about 30 sewing machines occupied an average of 6,070 square feet in Soho. These shops were and are still the largest garment shops in the Chinatown area.<sup>3</sup> However, shops in Sunset Park with a similar number of sewing machines can cover as much as 10,000 square feet.<sup>4</sup> The spacious environment of the shops not only allows an effective flow of production but also provides shop owners with enough space to expand their businesses.

In addition, rents and maintenance fees for buildings in Sunset Park are relatively inexpensive. In the spring of 1998, for example, the owner of a shop, located between Fort Hamilton Parkway and 43rd Street and covering more than 10,000 square feet, told me that she paid only \$2,500 a month for a space that accommodates forty workers. For the same money, she could afford only a 4,000 square feet shop in Manhattan's Chinatown. Maintenance fees are also low. For an additional yearly payment of \$100 to \$200, the gas and other equipment and utility lines would be checked by the building owner.<sup>5</sup>

There are, however, many characteristics that Sunset Park shops share with their counterparts in Manhattan's Chinatown. Besides bundles of cut cloth piled up in haphazard mounds in almost any open floor space, there are severe problems with ventilation. Shops that were converted from former warehouses and garages have very few or virtually no windows at all. Conditions are even worse when the employers cover the few windows with rags or newspapers or simply lock the main entrance to conceal operations. In these shops the air is stifling and filled with lint and dust, while workers sew under fluorescent lights in the daytime.<sup>6</sup>

However, unlike Chinatown shops that generally suffer from space limitations, the physical size and working conditions of Sunset Park shops are not all the same. There are shops that have more than thirty workers and cover a space of over 10,000 square feet. There are also shops packed with a dozen sewing machines and piles of cut garments but covering less than 4,000 square feet. These small and big shops are sometimes located side by side. Regardless of the differences, they have something in common. Like their counterparts in Manhattan's Chinatown, there is virtually no space reserved for workers' activities other than sewing. Even in the relatively spacious shops, workers eat their lunch at their sewing machines or at the desks where they work.

### *Division of Labor*

Although the shops in Sunset Park, like those in Manhattan's Chinatown, work on various lines of garments from manufacturers or other contractors, workers mostly produce sportswear and other low-priced women's apparel. The division of labor in the shops varies according to the size of the shop and the line of the garments they produce, but there are, in general, five kinds of workers on the floor: the sorter, the foreperson, machine operators, pressers, and floor workers.

Garment production starts with the sorter, who separates the cut-up fabrics according to the style of the garments and decides where the work should begin. The cut fabrics are then sent to the machine operators for either sewing or hemming. Machine operators include those workers who sew minor parts of the garments, such as zippers, collars, cuffs, and pockets. The garment then passes to the hands of the foreperson, who checks the quality of the sewed or hemmed garments. A quality garment will be sent to buttoners and trimmers who attach buttons, sew buttonholes, and trim extra threads. In its final stage, the garment will be sent to floor workers who hang tags, eliminate irregularities, and put the garments in a transparent plastic bag for shipping.

Like its counterparts elsewhere in the city, the Chinese garment industry in Sunset Park is characterized by its gender hierarchy. The rationale used to justify it is always inconsistent and contradictory. For example, the sorter and pressers, the two highest paid jobs on the shop floor, are almost invariably men. Trimmers, the lowest paid workers, are virtually all women. This arrangement is said to have its basis in women's lack of physical strength to move the bundles of cut-up materials around, and women's intellectual inability to sort the cut-up pieces and to lay out a workable schedule for production. Women are also believed to be too weak to operate the heavy pressing machines and endure the heat generated by them. As a result, they are denied the opportunity to work as a sorter or a presser. What is forgotten in this ungrounded rationale for the gender division of labor on the floor is the duration of strength, which the Chinese call *yin li*, and the extraordinary wisdom to figure out the way to sew the garments with their ever-changing styles. Both of these are necessary qualities of machine operators who are overwhelmingly women.

It is said that women constitute the majority of machine operators in the

shops because the flexible work hours, made possible by the piece rate system and the larger number of operators in the shops, allow them to fulfill their family responsibilities while working in the shops. This justification ignores the highly competitive environment among the large number of machine operators that is generated by the piece rate system. Since garment production is seasonal and work tends to be limited in most of the shops, in order to make ends meet women workers are most likely to utilize every minute available to compete with one another in seizing work and to produce as many garments as they can. This work atmosphere is likely to deprive them of the flexibility that the piece rate system is supposed to offer.

In addition, as known in the shops, workers' earnings depend not only on the piece rates and the speed at which they work but also on the kind of work they do. The more mechanical and simple the work is, the faster they can produce, and the more money they can earn. There is no denying that pressers work under extremely stressful conditions, because there are usually only two or three of them in a shop of thirty or more machines and they have to press all the finished garments within a given time. However, their work is simpler than that of machine operators, so they can easily speed up their work after they become used to the structure of the garments and thus increase their incomes. Because there are only a few pressers in a shop, they are protected from the frenetic competition that is a routine part of the lives of machine operators.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the pressers, machine operators' incomes fluctuate a great deal. Since styles are transient due to the unpredictable nature of fashion, it tends to take much longer for machine operators to get familiar with their work before they can speed up their production. The unpredictable nature of their work also creates more opportunities for their employers to keep wages low by constantly changing their piece rates, which are allegedly based on styles.

Family wages are always invoked to justify not only the higher pay of some traditionally men's work, but also the special payment arrangements in such sections as buttoning and bagging (putting the finished garments into bags). Since piece rates in these two sections are much lower than other sections, employers would subcontract the entire workload to one or two married male workers and allow them to complete the work with the assistance of their families. It used to be said that this arrangement was made to help the men fulfill their traditional gender roles as "rice winners" and to respect Chinese traditional culture. However, this rationale was cast away in the early 1990s when the male workers left for higher paying jobs and women replaced them in these sections.

As Nancy Green and Susan Glenn have cogently argued, the gender division of labor in the garment industry has never been static.<sup>8</sup> Take the operation of sewing machines for example. Although most sewing machine operators are women, an increasing number of undocumented male workers have taken over these positions in Sunset Park over the last few years. Gender remains at work, however. The recently arrived men could easily take over the traditionally female jobs from women, but the gender identity of their jobs continued to subject them to a position inferior to those in the traditionally men's sections. They

are generally believed to be less skilled, physically weak, and hence less manly than the rest of male workers in the shops.

Fluidity between class and gender lines, generated by the structural flexibility of the garment industry, does not preclude opportunities for upward mobility for female as well as male workers, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. Although most Chinese employers are men and had been workers themselves, an increasing number of women workers have become owners of the garment shops in recent years. This was the case in the shop where reporter Lii worked. Many women employers learned English by attending the free language classes offered by their union or other public institutions. Speaking from fair to good English, they operate their businesses successfully, without the assistance of men. Their past experience as workers and their gender identity may enable them to better understand their women employees. However, this does not guarantee that they will be benevolent bosses, as implied in Lii's report. Recent cases of labor law violations in the Chinese garment shops owned by women have demonstrated that, situated in a highly competitive and marginal position in the city's industry, women employers can be as unscrupulous as their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

### *Wages and Hours*

Workers' wages in the Sunset Park garment shops fluctuate greatly, contingent upon the type of work they produce, the level of skill, and the quality and adequacy of work their employer provides. A new hand may earn practically nothing for the first day, while a skilled long-stitch machine operator can earn as much as \$600 a week in the high season. In general, as in the case of most Chinatown shops in Manhattan, the sorter, the foreperson, the cleaner(s), and the floor workers are paid by the hour. My interviews show that in 1998 a full-time foreperson or a sorter earned an average of more than six dollars per hour, and the finished garment checkers and cleaners, about three dollars. The rest of the workers in the shops are paid at piece rates. Their incomes vary greatly, ranging from weekly averages of \$600 to \$700 for a presser; \$400 to \$500 for a hemmer; \$300 to \$400 for a single machine operator and buttoner; \$250 to \$300 for a general machine operator, and \$150–\$200 for a trimmer. Compared with the union's minimum wages, the above wages of the Sunset Park Chinese garment workers may appear desirable. However, most of these weekly wages are in fact the result of workers' working ten to twelve hours a day. Their work hours are even longer during the busy seasons, with competition mounting in recent years.

Forms of payment are also factors that affect workers' incomes. Like their counterparts in Manhattan's Chinatown, most employers in Sunset Park issue payments in a combination of checks and cash. The portion of the payment received by check is determined by the worker's status or need. For union members, whose number is small in the area, employers tailor the amount of their checks strictly according to the union minimum income requirement for benefit eligibility. However, for non-union workers, who form the overwhelming ma-

jority of the work force in Sunset Park, the amounts of their checks are either kept below the poverty threshold so that they can maintain eligibility for welfare benefits, or kept in line with the US Immigration and Naturalization Service's basic requirement for financial eligibility for sponsoring the immigration of their family members or relatives into the United States. Working underground, undocumented workers are paid invariably by cash.

Chinese employers argue that workers themselves request various forms of payment. However, my interviews reveal that all workers, regardless of their status, are forced to accept a reduction in their wages, because checks are issued with a deduction of a five to seven percent "handling fee." The same is true for cash payments. Furthermore, piece rates are often not announced before the completion of work and in some shops employers reserve their rights to reduce workers' wages if they consider the wages to be too high.

Researcher Mark Levitan reports that in 1990, seventy-two percent of the reported incomes of less-skilled blue-collar workers, apparel workers included, were below the poverty threshold for a family of four (\$12,674).<sup>10</sup> Under-reporting might be a factor in leading to the low-income status of some workers' families. However, what Levitan reported did not appear to be far from reality in the case of Chinese garment workers in New York. My interviews suggest that in the late 1990s the actual average annual income of most Sunset Park Chinese garment workers was only about \$20,000.<sup>11</sup> To sustain their families, many have to work long hours in violation of U.S. labor laws.

In the shops where the employers still bother to concern themselves with the investigations of law enforcement agencies, workers were required to punch their work cards to show that they were working eight hours a day, even before they start their day's work. My interviews, however, reveal that ninety percent of the workers employed in Sunset Park are working ten to twelve hours a day. During the busy seasons or when orders have to be rushed out, it is not unusual for workers to work unusually long hours, or as Lii indicated, even labor around the clock.

Long hours of work, coupled with the hazardous environment of the shops, severely damages workers' health. What happened to Bao Zhi Ni is, indeed, not an isolated case. Her written testimony at a public hearing held by the New York State Assembly Subcommittee on Sweatshops on October 2, 1997, is illustrative of workers' situations:

My name is Bao Zhi Ni. I am a garment worker. I have worked in the garment factories for close to ten years. For many long hours, I work without proper safety equipment, and under filthy conditions. I work at least ten to twelve hours everyday, but because the bosses depress the wages so low we can only make \$20, \$30 a day, even though we're working over ten hours . . .

For many long hours I sit at the sewing machine repeating the same motions. I also have to handle heavy bundles of garments every day. Each day at work is an exhausting day. My eyes are tired, and my vision is blurry. My fingers, wrists, shoulders, neck, back, spine, all these parts of my body are inflicted with pain. I started

feeling the pain in my lower back five years ago, but I continued to work in the sweatshops. I have no medical benefits.

My shoulders and back hurt constantly. Because I have been forced to work for such long hours, the cartilage between the bones in my back has rubbed away, and I have a pinched nerve. With the pain and the numbness in my left leg, I know that I have muscular and nervous problems. My fingers and wrists hurt. Now, even after just one or two hours of work, my back aches so much that I can barely stand straight . . . In order to make a living I have no choice but to force myself to work through this pain. Sometimes I can't do it, but I have no choice but to take one or two days off. Sometimes I have to take one or two weeks off. When I take this time off to heal just a little, my boss gets angry. The boss will call my house to scold me and say that I'm lazy, tell me that I must go back to work as soon as possible.<sup>12</sup>

My interviews reveal that almost all the garment workers who worked in the industry for more than five years have various health problems. Deng Ying Yi, a long-time labor activist at the Workers Center in Brooklyn run by the Union of Needletraders, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE!), is virtually disabled after working in the garment industry for more than ten years, with her nervous system partially damaged. Her case is not unique among workers in Sunset Park. However, most of these ununionized workers are not covered by any form of health insurance.

To survive in their new homeland, ununionized workers have to develop their own system to cope with the situation. Many rely heavily on their family ties and community networks. The experience of a Mr. Zhang, who had been a middle-rank official in Guangzhou but who became a finished garment checker in a Sunset Park Chinese garment shop, is indicative of this phenomenon:

I was already fifty-two when I immigrated to this country. I worked in a garment shop as *cha yi* (Cantonese: a finished garment checker) and my wife *jin sin* (Cantonese: a trimmer). Together, we earned an average of less than \$400 a week and we still had to raise a daughter, our youngest daughter who was in her teens and was eligible to come with us when we immigrated to this country. She had to eat, to dress and to go to school. In addition, we had to save money in order to sponsor our two older children to come to the United States. How did we manage to do all this? Well, we relied on our family . . .

I came with my other five siblings under the sponsorship of a brother. Each of us came with his or her own family. Altogether, it was more than twenty of us who came to New York City on the same day on the same plane. We rented three two-bedroom apartments in this part of Brooklyn because the brother who came earlier told us that rents are much less expensive in this area. Each apartment was shared by two families. My family and my brother's family shared a two-bedroom apartment and we paid a total of \$700 for rent and utilities but we ate separately. My family spent a little more than \$100 each month on groceries. How did we manage to do this? We bought the cheapest possible food at the market, say, the thirty-nine-cent-a-pound chicken on sale at Key Foods and the four-head-for-one-

dollar broccoli at the street stands in this neighborhood. In addition, my wife and I also picked up empty soda cans and other stuff on our way home from work. If we were lucky, the monthly income from that part of our labor could cover our groceries for an entire week.

For eight years after we came to this city, we never ate out and never stopped working, eleven to twelve hours a day and seven days a week. Whenever we did not have work to do in our shop my wife and I went to work in another shop.<sup>13</sup>

While family ties are important resources for immigrant workers who came with their families, community networks are the most important assets for undocumented immigrant workers, most of whom did not come with their families. For example, undocumented workers from Wenzhou have contributed money to establish their own “mutual funds.” These funds can be used by any member in time of need. This practice has proved to be the most effective way for these workers to survive in time of adversity, since they are denied any social services and benefits in the United States.

As elsewhere in the world, the gendered definitions of roles in the Sunset Park Chinese garment shops, their hierarchical order, and the rationale applied to justify them are shaped by the flexible but highly competitive structure of the garment industry, and have been inherently unstable. This fluidity generates dynamics in the industry, but has also taken a toll on those who labor in the industry. It is by exhausting human resources among the workers and in their community that the non-regulated segment of the garment industry has managed to thrive. Sunset Park is a case in point.

### *“Co-Ethnic Conspiracy?”*

One major aspect of the Chinese garment industry in New York that has generated great interest among some scholars is its co-ethnic nature. Although in recent years more and more garment shops in New York have employers and workers who do not share the same ethnic identity, this is not the case with many of the Chinese garment shops in Manhattan’s Chinatown and Brooklyn’s Sunset Park. Most Chinese employers continue to hire only workers from major Chinese settlements.

As many studies have pointed out, this co-ethnic nature of the industry has benefited both workers and management.<sup>14</sup> Like their Eastern European counterparts at the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese workers do not have to learn to speak or understand English to work in a garment shop. They can also learn the trade on site and from scratch. In truth, without the industry, many working-class Chinese immigrant families may not have been able to survive in the way that they did.

The co-ethnic nature of the industry is also said to have simplified and humanized management of the shops. Many studies have discussed the particular recruitment pattern of the Chinese shops. Although in recent years a growing number of new immigrant workers have begun to seek employment through ad-

vertisements in community newspapers or the help-wanted signs posted in the front of the shops, most employers continue to rely on the recommendations of their work force for new recruits, and most new immigrant workers obtain their first jobs through their families, friends and relatives. Some employers also hire job applicants on the spot, without giving them much of a background check. New recruits, especially those who are employed with the recommendations from workers already in the shop, are allowed to use the facilities in the shop to receive on-site training.

Workers can maintain their cultural practices at their work places. They celebrate major Chinese festivals in the shops. They also share Chinese food and cooking with one another, listen to the blasting of the closed-circuit Chinese radio broadcasts, and share news about their homeland while working. As Lii noted, although employers in most Chinese shops do not offer their employees overtime payments when they expect workers to work long hours or on weekends, they offer them free rice and water, or even tea in some shops, to eat and drink with their lunch. They also provide lunch or afternoon tea to compensate workers' working on weekends. It is also widely known that most employers in Sunset Park will drive their employees home if their work ends after 11:00 PM.

Workers who are unfamiliar with the labor laws and their rights in the United States feel obligated to work hard for their employers if their employers are willing to accommodate their needs. The undocumented workers feel particularly grateful to their employers if their employers have offered them any form of protection during immigration or other law enforcement raids. Employers in Sunset Park are known to cover workers up with piles of cut-garments scattered on the floor, or allow them to use the ladder in the shop to climb to the skylight. These gestures foster gratitude on the workers' part, which they feel obligated to reciprocate.

Many workers find it easy to identify with their employers if they are immigrants and have been workers themselves. Workers who desire upward social mobility look up to their employers as role models, a mirror of their future in the land of opportunity. Workers' empathy with their employers' situation, generated by a mixture of gratitude, fear, and admiration, has often led to their acquiescence to their employers' unscrupulous practices on the shop floor. In some cases this relationship of empathy has become so entrenched that law enforcement agents from outside the Chinese community and Chinese union organizers find it difficult to break. It is no wonder that observers of the industry, like reporter Lii, do not hesitate to call the Sunset Park shop "a miserable complicity born of necessity in an insular, immigrant world." However, this conspiracy theory is too simplistic to explain the complex inter-dependent relationship between the workers and their employers in the ethnic enclave economy of the United States. It also fails to highlight the imbalance of power embedded in this relationship. Failing to locate the ultimate beneficiaries of this relationship, this theory cannot explain fully the causes of sweated labor in the shops.

Clearly, employers' various forms of accommodation benefit themselves rather than the workers. Let's take the special form of recruitment, for example.

Since workers' incomes are based on the work they have accomplished, it will only hurt the new recruits if they are slow to learn their routine of work. However, on-site training allows employers to strengthen their personal ties with the newly hired as well as those who are already in the shop. Paying wages in a mixture of cash and checks or simply by cash also enables the employers to avoid paying taxes, the amounts of which are likely to be much larger than their workers'. A closer investigation of the situation in the industry also reveals that accommodations offered by employers are not unconditional. They are given only to workers who follow the rules they set. Those who refuse to do so are fired, blacklisted, physically assaulted, or subjected to other forms of retaliation.

Most Chinese employers do not force their workers to work long hours. However, production is organized in such a way that workers who do not stay as long as the rest will find themselves in an extremely disadvantageous position. Since there is no limit on work hours in most of the shops and workers who are willing to maximize their work hours can work as long as they wish, those who refuse to do so will end up having only "pork neckbones" (a slang in the Chinatown garment industry, referring to garments difficult to sew), or simply no garments to work on the next morning when they return.

Similar situations occur if a worker is ill and takes sick leave, or refuses to work on Sunday. Employers will hire a replacement worker almost immediately after a laborer fails to show up. Employers will also distribute "chickens in soy sauce" (another slang in the Chinatown garment industry, referring to work easy to sew) or paychecks on Sunday. Under these situations, workers who take a sick day are likely to lose their jobs, and those who do not work on Sunday will miss not only an important opportunity to increase their incomes but also to get paid in a timely manner. Since workers' wages tend to be withheld by their employers for months in Sunset Park, failing to be present on payday will mean another indefinitely long delay in getting paid. It's no wonder that workers in Sunset Park tend to lament, "we have the option to die but we don't have the option to take a sick day or a rest."

Some employers have also blatantly taken advantage of their workers' acquiescence to maximize their profit. Instances of *zhen jia lao ban* (real and fake bosses) and *yi guo liang zhi* (one country, two systems), stories told by labor activist Deng Ying Yi, are indications of how far employers would go.<sup>15</sup> As Deng recalled, one day workers of a shop came to the UNITE Workers' Center to seek assistance in collecting their wages. It turned out that their employer had closed the shop after owing them several hundred thousands of dollars in back wages and had vanished without a trace. However, when the State Department of Labor finally undertook this case, the department found it difficult to file charges against the real owner of the shop. The owner, an undocumented immigrant himself, had registered the shop with the name and social security number of an elderly worker and had been signing all the legal documents under this worker's name without informing him. Filing charges against owner of the shop would mean charges against this worker, who was not the real owner of the shop.<sup>16</sup>

The story of “one country, two systems” is about a peculiar phenomenon in some unionized shops in Sunset Park. According to Deng, although union contracts stipulate that all workers in a union shop are union members and entitled to union benefits, employers of some unionized shops refuse to register their new recruits as union members and keep their wages in the books. Consequently, there are both union and nonunion members in the same shop who are working under very different systems of employment.

My interviews further reveal other forms of discrimination on the floor. For example, some employers offer different piece rates to workers of different immigration status and from different regions in China. Cantonese immigrant workers, who form the majority of the workforce, tend to receive higher piece rates and work relatively regular hours, while non-Cantonese or undocumented workers are denied all these “privileges.” Discriminatory treatments have taken a different form in a small number of shops that hire several skilled workers from other ethnic groups. The non-Chinese workers are offered wages and other working conditions that comply with labor laws, while their Chinese fellow workers, who work side by side with them, have to struggle against the grim reality of low pay and long hours of work.<sup>17</sup>

Chinese employers have been so reckless in exploiting workers in their own community that it reinforces the stereotypical image of Chinese workers as the docile “willing slaves” in the Sunset Park area. This image of the workers subjects them to exploitation not only by Chinese employers but also by shop owners of other ethnic groups. In 1997 the *Sing Tao Daily* reported that seven Chinese workers from a Jewish-owned garment shop came to seek help from the UNITE Workers’ Center. They complained that they had been discriminated against by their Jewish employer who had closed the shop and refused to pay them according to labor laws, as he did to his Hispanic workers.<sup>18</sup>

The most common problem workers face, however, is the failure to receive compensation for their work in a timely manner. Employers benefit tremendously from withholding their workers’ wages. Community labor activists estimate that a shop of average size in Sunset Park has thirty-five workers and their lowest wage of garment workers in the area is about \$150 per week. If the owner of a shop withholds his/her employees’ wages for eight weeks, which is not uncommon in the area, the employer will have more than \$40,000 in hand by the end of the eighth week, even if workers in the shop earned the lowest wage in the area. With this \$40,000 an employer can open another shop without having to pay interest as they would do if borrowing money from a bank.

Regrettably, as union organizers and law enforcement agencies have pointed out, workers tend not to take any legal action against their employers until their employers close down the shops. The reasons are varied. One major reason is the workers’ lack of knowledge about their rights and the political operation in their new homeland. With few employment alternatives, many immigrant workers fear that any form of cooperation with law enforcement agencies or organized labor will cost them their jobs. This was particularly the situation before

the signing of the Hot Goods Bill by the New York State governor in 1996.<sup>19</sup> Prior to the adoption of this bill, law enforcement agencies had difficulty in helping workers retrieve their back wages if a shop was closed and the employer was hard to locate. As a result, the longer wages were withheld, the more reluctant workers were to report their cases. They feared that their reporting would lead their employers to close the shop for good.

Workers' reluctance to report labor violations on the floor is also compounded by a lack of understanding about the US income tax system. Many are afraid that the amount of money they receive will be reduced by paying taxes if they seek assistance from law enforcement agencies and have to report their back wages to the Internal Revenue Service. Understandably, undocumented workers have additional concerns. Working underground, they fear that a visit from the Department of Labor to their work place will bring in a raid by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

While workers are often reluctant to take action against their employers, employers are not hesitant to take advantage of workers' fear. According to long-time observers of the community, many employers in the garment industry engage in speculative financial activities with the money they have withheld from their workers, such as gambling or buying high-return but high-risk stocks. Since most of these activities will not lead to their expected outcomes, the employers close down their shops to avoid payments that they owe to their employees.

There are also employers who simply try to extract larger profits by closing down operations, absconding with the money they have withheld from their employees, and re-opening their businesses under a different name. This was the case where reporter Lii worked. Hence, labor violations are widespread and the turnover rate of many Sunset Park Chinese garment shops is at a record high.<sup>20</sup> This highly unstable situation makes it even more difficult to enforce labor laws in the area, especially in recent years when most of these agencies are understaffed.

Tensions and exploitation in many Chinese garment shops in Sunset Park lay bare the limits of ethnic solidarity in the garment industry. Relegated to the same ethnic economic sector, Chinese employers have to rely on workers in their own community to run their businesses and accommodate workers' needs. However, situated in a marginal position of a highly competitive industry, many employers also do not hesitate to exploit their community ties to maintain their competitive edge in the industry. As in the case with their predecessors in the city's industry, the garment industry offers new Chinese immigrant workers many advantages in working among their own, but it also makes them more vulnerable to exploitation by management on all levels. The degree of labor violation in many Chinese garment shops demonstrates not only the limits of ethnic solidarity but also the devastating impact of the frenetic search for cheap labor on the Chinese community. This impact, as well as the limited nature of ethnic solidarity, will be further explored in the following section.

*“The Cantonese vs. The Fujianese?”*

One major issue that surfaced constantly during my interviews with workers is their concern about the increasing number of undocumented workers in the industry, most of whom are believed to be from Fuzhou, a major city in the province of Fujian in southeastern China. These newcomers, who speak their own dialect, are often blamed for worsening labor conditions on the shop floor and deteriorating living standards in Sunset Park. They also are charged with undermining workers’ solidarity in the industry. Many Cantonese workers believe that there is no way for them to get along well with the Fujianese.

In the course of interviewing workers in Sunset Park, however, I came to know many Cantonese and Fujianese workers who are good friends. I also came to see that although a large number of undocumented workers came from Fuzhou, Fuzhou is not the only place that has sent undocumented Chinese immigrants to the United States. Undocumented Chinese workers also come from Wenzhou, Guangdong, and almost all the coastal areas of China. There are also some from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. Nevertheless, there is a pronounced tendency in New York’s Chinese community to identify all undocumented workers as Fujianese. Stories about how fanatically hardworking they are became a recurring theme in the narratives of almost all the non-Fujianese workers. Fujianese workers were said to be so money-crazy that they would bring their rice cookers to the shops, cook and eat there while working, and even spend the night in the shops if they found any work there.

These undocumented workers are also blamed for having eroded the image of the Chinese in the Sunset Park area. It is said that since they spend so many hours at work, they could even do without a place to stay. It is a general belief in the Sunset Park Chinese community that several dozen immigrants from Fuzhou would share a single one-bedroom apartment, either only spending the night there or using it just for bathing and other purposes while spending their nights in the garment shops. I heard little sympathy for their plight in my interviews with non-Fujianese workers.

Anecdotal as these stories are, recycled repeatedly, they have fostered a profound prejudice against workers from Fuzhou. This prejudice is so prevalent that it often blinds non-Fujianese workers to class conflicts on the shop floor. For example, I came across a group of Cantonese workers who had just been fired by their employer for refusing to work as many hours as he wanted. Rather than blaming their unscrupulous employer, they blamed their unemployment on the workers from Fuzhou whom their employer had hired for lower rates and longer hours of work.

Although all prejudices are unjustified, factors that have contributed to the prejudice against Fujianese workers are worth exploring. My conversation with a Mrs. Deng, a Taishanese worker and a staunch opponent of “those hateful Fujianese,” is revealing:<sup>21</sup>

A: As you know, the Chinese garment shops in Sunset Park have a bad name as sweatshops these days. Our lives are miserable. It was all because of those hateful

Fujianese. They have taken our jobs. The bosses love them because they don't have family responsibilities and can work twenty-four hours a day in the shop. They are very greedy. What is in their eyes is only money, money, money. Recently we Cantonese have been losing ground in my shop. The Fujianese are taking over. They are everywhere in my shop.

Q: Could you tell me how many workers from Fuzhou are exactly in your shop?

A: Well, I never counted them, but, never mind, let me try. There are a total of about forty machine operators in my shop, one, two, three, yes, three are Cantonese, three are Mandarin speaking from Shanghai and Wuhan, and . . . [It turned out that only eight out of a total of thirty-five workers in her shop were from Fuzhou and only five out of the nine undocumented workers in her shop came from Fuzhou.]

Q: So the majority in your shop is not Fujianese and the undocumented workers in your shop are not all from Fuzhou.

A: Yes, you are right. My impression was wrong. But still I am nervous about them. Let me tell you something, actually, there are also undocumented workers from Taishan. A village in Taishan is now almost empty, you know, because they had a smuggler in that village and he had connections with those snakeheads in New York City. The conditions of the undocumented workers from that village are deplorable. I always think that my situation is already miserable enough [She was collecting welfare benefits at the time of this interview. Her husband just had a surgery and could not work and she had four schoolchildren to raise.] But theirs are even worse. However, I have been told that compared with those from Fuzhou, they seem to be doing fine because many of them have family members or relatives in New York. Those from Fuzhou don't seem to have this advantage and they owe the sneakheads much more money than those from Taishan. Anyway, I should admit that I don't know very much about them because I don't talk to them and they don't talk to me either.

Q: What then made you so angry with them?

A: They work too hard! Whenever there is some work in the shop, especially the easy jobs, they are there. Very often we don't have any work left when we return in the morning. They have finished all the work at night! But we can't do this. We have to go home at night to take care of our families and to have a little rest. We are human beings, you know. But work is money. They have taken away all our money. They are so hateful!

Q: Did your boss ever close the door of the shop at a time like that?

A: No, how could you expect them to do so? Of course not; for the bosses, the sooner they can get the work done the better. So they love those illegal immigrants from Fuzhou. In the past, many garment shop owners had signs on the gates of their shops, saying "Cantonese only," because they were afraid that they would be harassed by the Fujianese gangsters, who are well known for their fearlessness, if they had Fujianese workers in their shops. But now they don't care. They need workers who can work twenty-four hours a day. So the sign on their gates has also changed. It reads "Fujianese only."

The situation has made me really mad. To be honest, who doesn't need mon-

ey? I too wish that I could work around the clock, if I did not have a family to take care of. I need money too. I don't mind working hard. I was a peasant in China. Rain or shine, I worked outdoors, under conditions much worst than sewing in a garment shop. I wish I could make more money for my family.

But, wait a minute, I sense something wrong with myself in answering your questions. Haven't I somewhat misjudged those undocumented workers from Fuzhou? Yes, I think I have.

Obviously, tension among the workers, ignited by the highly competitive nature of garment organization and accelerated by the manipulation of management, has led to their misjudgment of reality in the shop.

Ungrounded as the stories about undocumented workers from Fuzhou are, generated by a mixture of myth and reality, they take a toll on all workers from the same place. This can be seen in the response of a Ms. Wong:

I think we immigrants from Fuzhou have been treated very unfairly by our own Chinese community. I am not an illegal immigrant. I came with all the papers as a legal immigrant. In addition, unlike the majority of illegal immigrants from the Fuzhou area, I came from the city and with my family. But still, I am looked at as an illegal immigrant because I came from Fuzhou.

I don't speak Cantonese, so I could not find a job in a restaurant or other place. That's how I ended up working in a garment shop.

My husband and I had a hard time looking for a place for our family to stay when we first came. Landlords from other parts of China refused to rent to us, because we are from Fuzhou. People in the community said we lived like pigs, with several dozen people usually packed in one apartment but registered under only one or two names. So the landlords were scared. Landlords from Fuzhou did not treat us well either. They charged us much higher rents because they knew that we had no choice.

My husband and I finally got to rent this place because we decided to speak Mandarin and pretended to be from other parts of China when we first met our landlady, who is Cantonese. Yes, now, she knows that we are from Fuzhou but she doesn't care anymore because we have become very good friends, and she says we are the best tenants she has ever had.<sup>22</sup>

Many immigrant workers from Fuzhou whom I interviewed shared her experience. Although almost all immigrant workers from Fuzhou have been affected by the prejudice against them, the undocumented ones among them are the most victimized. A Mr. Dong's response was typical:

I don't understand why we should be treated like this! We are human beings too! Yes, we work very hard, because we need money to pay back our debts! Yes, many of us share an apartment, because we want to save money. Do we enjoy our lives in this country? Of course not. We are separated from our families and working underground. We are bullied by our bosses, even including those from Fuzhou.

They make us work long hours but pay us much less than other workers in the shops. I don't think anyone would like to live a life like ours! But, still, we are not going to give up because we are working for a better life for our families.

My family lives in a village along the Ming River and I was a fisherman in the village before I came to the United States. I left my home village because the water there was so seriously polluted that there were no edible fish left. I could not make a living for my family by fishing.

Some people ask, "Why don't you go home if life is so hard for you?" But can we? My family has borrowed a lot of money to send me here. My wife and my kids have pinned their hopes on me, yearning for me to bring them to *meiguo* (the beautiful land, which refers to the United States).

In addition, what will folks in my village say if I return home penniless? I remember when I was in the village, I envied those who returned home from the United States. They looked so successful, squandering money like dirt. I wished I could be like them one day. Of course, after I came to the United States, I got to know that many of them too had been working in a sweatshop, as I do now. If they can make it, I can make it too. So, I work hard. It is none of anyone's business if I don't eat, don't sleep, and work non-stop.<sup>23</sup>

The strong desire to improve the well-being of their families, reinforced by a degree of vanity for a glamorous return, led the undocumented workers to leave their native land and fall prey to the sweating system in the United States. Although the living conditions of their native land have "pushed" them out of China, it was the underground economy in the United States that has "pulled" them in and lured them to violate US immigration laws.

The experience of the Fujianese garment workers in Sunset Park reminds one of what has happened to each group of newcomers in New York's garment industry. While the constant search for cheap labor brings in different groups of ethnic workers at different points in history, newcomers are always blamed for the cutthroat competition in the industry. This "finger pointing" takes place even within the same ethnic group. As national characteristics were used in the past as a convenient way of explaining the deterioration of working conditions, today regional and dialectal differences, immigration status, and even the location of one's family have become indexes in the Chinese garment industry for differentiating the old from the new, the "human" from the "inhuman," and thereby the excusers from the excused.<sup>24</sup> Labor solidarity in the community is thus undermined by conflicts of interest among workers, as well as elements in the cultural repertoire of the community.

### *Will Too Much Law Enforcement Kill the Chinese Garment Industry in New York City?*

In the late 1990s a number of Chinese employers in Sunset Park began to react strongly when the New York State Apparel Industry Task Force carried out its mission to enforce labor laws in the city's garment industry. In October 1996, af-

ter the task force completed its investigation and charged many Chinese garment shops with labor violations, Chinese employers in Sunset Park launched a massive demonstration to protest the state operation. They called it “adding salt to the wound.” Claiming that the law enforcement agency had unjustly labeled all Chinese shops as “sweatshops,” Chinese employers held the state investigation accountable for causing the further decline of Chinese garment industry in the city by providing manufacturers with the justification for withdrawing their work from the Chinese community.

According to the Chinese employers, manufacturers should be blamed for the deteriorating working conditions in the Chinese shops. Since they suppressed piece rates to such an intolerable degree and demanded such quick production and delivery of finished garments, Chinese employers were forced to reduce the piece rates they offered to their workers and expect them to work longer hours in order to remain competitive. In addition, since manufacturers frequently delayed payments for finished work, Chinese employers had to withhold wages to their own workers. Labor law enforcement will kill the Chinese garment industry, they asserted, because only by reducing wages and extending work hours could the industry survive in the highly competitive environment of garment production in New York.<sup>25</sup>

The Chinese employers’ accusation against manufacturers is not entirely groundless, given manufacturers’ frantic efforts to reduce the costs of labor in recent years. However, as many concerned individuals in the community have rightly pointed out, even though the Chinese garment industry has been hit hard by the outflow of garment production from the city, the sweatshop conditions in the industry are what allow the manufacturers to put a human face on their move from the city.<sup>26</sup>

What has happened since the State Department of Labor established its Apparel Industry Task Force in 1987? Did the efforts of the Task Force lead to the decline of the Chinese garment industry in New York City? Did the industry really decline?

Statistics show that despite the shrinking of the city’s share in the US garment industry, the absolute numbers of Chinese shops and their workforce in the past decade or more did not suggest any sign of decline, indeed they grew. In the early 1980s, there were approximately 500 Chinese shops in the city, largely concentrated in Manhattan’s Chinatown and employing an estimated 25,000 Chinese workers. In 1998, there was an estimate of more than 800 Chinese shops, scattered in various parts of the city and employing more than 30,000 Chinese workers.<sup>27</sup>

One specific segment of the Chinese garment industry has declined significantly in recent years, however. It is the number of the unionized shops in Manhattan’s Chinatown. Between 1992 and 1997 the number of garment shops in Manhattan’s Chinatown dropped from 608 to 555 and employment declined from 21,015 to 14,887, a loss of more than 6,000 jobs.<sup>28</sup> The decline in the Manhattan’s Chinatown garment industry coincided with the rapid growth of the Chi-

nese garment shops in other parts of the city, in particular, Sunset Park in Brooklyn. Although Manhattan's Chinatown remains the center of the Chinese garment industry in New York, with about 500 Chinese shops still clustered in this area, its importance has been significantly reduced by the rapid growth of the Chinese garment industry in other boroughs.

The decline of Manhattan's Chinatown shops has also led to the weakening of union influence on the entire Chinese garment industry in New York City. In the early 1980s, when shops in Chinatown represented an overwhelming majority of the Chinese garment shops in New York City, more than ninety percent of them were unionized. By the end of the 1990s it is estimated that the UNITE Local 23–25 represented only half of the Chinese garment shops in the city.<sup>29</sup> The union's influence has declined even in Manhattan's Chinatown, with the percentage of Chinese union shops dropping from more than ninety percent in the early 1980s to fewer than eighty percent by 1997.<sup>30</sup> As a result, membership of the UNITE Local 23–25, which is the largest local of the union and has an eighty-five percent Chinese membership, dropped from 28,083 in 1992 to 22,995 in 1996, a loss of more than 5,000 members.<sup>31</sup>

Despite problems embedded in the unionization of the Chinatown garment industry in earlier years, there are still many significant differences in working conditions between union and nonunion shops. The shrinking percentage of union shops in the Chinese garment industry indicates that more and more Chinese garment workers have been deprived of the benefits and protection to which union members are entitled. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that labor violations are rampant in many nonunion Chinese shops, which have, in turn, undercut working conditions in the union shops.

There is little doubt that manufacturers and retailers should be held accountable for the deteriorating working conditions in the city's garment industry. However, many individuals in the community are also correct in pointing out that it is the sweating system in some Chinese garment shops that has provided them with the most convenient excuse to pull production out of New York City. This is particularly true when politicians of all stripes have recognized a political advantage in promoting the elimination of sweatshops in the US, and manufacturers and retailers have also been pressured by consumer groups as well as labor to distance themselves from contract shops labeled as sweatshops.

The Chinese employers' argument that "too much law enforcement will kill the Chinese garment industry in New York City" reminds one of the situations at the turn of the twentieth century. As Nancy Green has noted, during that time when progressive reformers, labor leaders and state legislators endeavored to improve labor conditions by passing new legislation and enforcing laws, manufacturers also argued that too many constraints would make the landscape of the garment industry disappear altogether from the city.<sup>32</sup> However, the garment industry remains in New York City, and so will the Chinese garment industry, at least for the decade to come.

*Some Reflections*

Driven by the search for cheap nonunion labor, runaway shops and sweated labor are not unique to the Chinese garment industry, nor are they new in the history of the city's industry. As early as the 1920s the dispersion of garment shops from Manhattan into various parts of the city already became a peculiar aspect in the landscape of New York's garment industry.<sup>33</sup> The Chinese garment industry, as a major part of the city's industry, is no exception in these regards.

The experience of Chinese workers is in many ways similar to that of their predecessors in the city's garment industry, but there are also differences. Particularly in the 1980s and 1990s these differences were caused by the challenge of the times, rather than simply by the cultural characteristics of the Chinese workers. Garment workers in the first half of the twentieth century were able to enjoy improved working conditions, thanks to the strong influence of labor unions and the continuous growth of the city's garment industry. However, Chinese workers in the late twentieth century were increasingly subjected to abusive labor conditions as the city's industry declined rapidly. Their union, plagued by its entrenched bureaucratic culture, could hardly respond to their needs.

As in the case of the city's garment industry in the early twentieth century, law enforcement and labor organizing remain the two most powerful ways to address the problems in the Chinese garment industry. Both law enforcement agents and labor organizers face the challenge of how to understand the complex reality of the garment industry beyond the highly politicized representations of it in political arenas. However, they also have to address different issues in their own realms.

As Mark Levitan has aptly put it, one of the major factors that has undermined significantly the efforts to eliminate sweated labor in the city is that "there are not enough cops on the beat." Despite the growth of sweated labor in the city's garment industry and the politicians' highly emotional pledges to eliminate it, both New York State and federal investigation teams are severely understaffed. According to Levitan, in 1998 there were only twenty-three investigators in the federal office of the Wage and Hour Division that had responsibility for the entire New York City metropolitan area, and only twenty-three out of thirty-four positions in New York City's Apparel Industry Task Force were filled.<sup>34</sup> As a result, in addition to improving their understanding of the dynamics generated by the highly competitive structure of the garment industry, the history and culture of each ethnic group, and the multifaceted impact of their operations, law enforcement agents still have to battle the shortage of hands in carrying out their tasks, a difficult situation that is indeed not of their own making.

Organized labor faces another type of challenge. Never before has UNITE, the major labor union of the U.S. garment industry, been under so much pressure to reform itself. The parochialism and the culture of business unionism that UNITE shares with other traditional trade unions have proved to be impotent in this new age of global economy. Today, with the impressive growth of the community-based

labor organizations in New York's Chinatown and other ethnic communities, the question UNITE faces is no longer whether it is willing to change but whether the change is adequate to maintain its legitimacy as a labor union in the industry.<sup>35</sup> In this era when capital has already globalized its search for inexpensive labor, how can we develop effective organizing strategies that are not only responsive to the needs of US workers but also allow them to join forces with workers in other parts of the world? This is a question very much on the agendas of trade unions as well as concerned individuals in the Chinese community and the city.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, the following discussion is primarily based on these sources and the information provided by Liang Huan Ru, the former veteran union organizer in Brooklyn.

2. I use "Manhattan's Chinatown" because new Chinatowns have recently emerged in other boroughs of New York City, such as Queens and Brooklyn.

3. Abeles, Schwartz, Haechel & Silverblatt, Inc., *The Chinatown Garment Industry Study* (hereafter *Study*) (New York: International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Local 23-5 and the New York Skirt and Sportswear Association, 1983), 55. For the sizes of the shops in Manhattan's Chinatown, see *Study*, 49-59.

4. See for example, the weekly special issue of the *Sing Tao Daily* (hereafter *STD*), March 8, 1998, 7.

5. My visit to the shop and interview with the shop owner.

6. One woman worker told me in an interview that it was so hot inside her shop in summer that sometimes she simply could not help crying while trying to rush out her work.

7. Experienced pressers began to lose this advantage in more and more Chinese garment shops in recent years, largely due to the increased competition from undocumented male workers. Unable to compete with the low wages accepted by the latter, they too had to face economic insecurity in the industry. I am indebted to a reminder from Liang Huan Ru, an organizer of UNITE Local 23-25, and May Ying Chen, Vice President of UNITE, for this piece of information. What, however, must be kept in mind is that while competition has mounted among pressers in recent years, women machine operators also faced competition from undocumented workers.

8. See Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 90-131, and Nancy Green, *Ready-to-Wear, Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 161-87.

9. The most recent case was the one at 446 Broadway in November 1997, in which a young woman employer closed her shop after withholding a large sum of money in back wages from her employees. The case was covered by most major newspapers inside and outside the Chinese community. See, for example, *New York Times*, December 14, 1997.

10. See "Opportunity at Work: The New York City Garment Industry" (New York: Community Service Society of New York, 1998), 39.

11. This observation has been supported by recent coverage in Chinese community newspapers. For example, as covered in *World Journal* (hereafter *WJ*) in 1996, the monthly income of an elderly couple who worked in a Chinese garment shop was \$1,800 and \$2,200, respectively. Given the depressed piece rates in the last two years and the seasonal nature of the industry, this observation, based on interviews with workers in Sunset Park, does not seem to be far away from reality.

12. Directly quoted from "Behind Closed Doors: A Look into the Underground Sweatshop Industry," a report by the New York State Assembly Sub-Committee on Sweatshops (New York, November 1997), 59-61.

13. Interview by the author on April 13, 1998.

14. See, for example, Bernard Wong, "The Role of Ethnicity in Enclave Enterprises: A Study of the Chinese Garment Factories in New York City." *Human Organization* 46. 2 (1987): 120-9.

15. "One country, two systems" is the Chinese state policy in Hong Kong after the former British colony was returned to China in 1997.

16. Cases like this are not unheard of in the Chinese garment industry in Manhattan's Chinatown as well as other boroughs of the city. See, for example, The Chinese Workers and Staff Association, *Zhi Gong Zhi Sheng* (January 1994).

17. I was told that this small number of workers from other ethnic groups were likely to have worked for the former owner of the shop and the Chinese employer employed them as part of the deal when he/she purchased the business. I was also told that some Chinese employers deliberately kept these workers to protect their businesses from harassment by Chinese gangsters, who tended not to attack shops with non-Chinese workers for fear that their illicit activities would be known beyond the Chinese community.

18. December 19, 1997.

19. The "Hot Goods Bill" was signed into law on July 2, 1996. This bill has established "additional methods of obtaining restitution for unpaid apparel industry workers from contractors, manufacturers, and retailers." For a further discussion of this bill, see "Behinds Closed Doors," 4.

20. The *Study* has reported that as the end of 1981, 28 percent of all Chinese shops in Chinatown had been in business for less than one year and close to half of them had been in operation for less than two years. (p. 68) However, in the late 1990s, as many workers have pointed out, the Chinese garment shops in Sunset Park are often opened and closed down within months.

21. Taishan is a county in Guangdong Province. Immigrants from this county are also generally called "Cantonese."

22. Interview by the author on July 2, 1998.

23. Interview by the author on June 21, 1998.

24. Immigration status and whether one is living with their family have become important indexes because much of the Chinese community has chosen to believe that legal immigration and family life are the norms throughout the history of the community, however invalid this belief is.

25. For a summary of their arguments, see *STD*, April 22, 1998.

26. For different voices in the community, see, for example, the weekly special issues of *STD* May 17, 1998 and June 28, 1998.

27. The estimate of 800 Chinese shops is based on an adding of the approximate 500 shops in Manhattan and the more than 300 shops in Brooklyn and other boroughs. More than 30,000 workers were estimated by the community press in the end of 1997. See *STD*, December 22, 1997.

28. These statistics are provided by the Research Department of the New York State Department of Labor.

29. In 1997, when the union signed a new contract with Chinese employers, the three Chinese contractors' associations represented only 406 shops in the city. This was later reported in most Chinese community newspapers. See, for example, *STD*, February 23, 1998.

30. This percentage of Chinatown union shops in 1997 is based on a comparison of the number of garment shops in the Chinatown area provided by the state labor department, which is not classified according to ethnicity, and the estimate of Chinatown union organizers and the Chinese newspapers. See, for example, *STD*, December 22, 1997, April 29, 1998 and *WJ*, February 28, 1998.

31. These statistics are provided by the UNITE Research Department. The estimated percentage of the local's Chinese membership in this study is consistent with the numbers provided by the local.

32. Green, *Ready-To-Wear*, 50.

33. See Nancy Green, "Sweatshop Migrations: The Garment Industry between Home and Shop," in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940*, eds. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 213-32.

34. Mark Levitan, *Opportunity at Work: the New York City Garment Industry* (New York: Community Service Society of New York, 1998), 59.

35. One of the most active community-based labor organizations in New York's Chinatown in the last two decades is the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association.