

Xiaolan Bao (2003) “Sweatshops in Sunset Park: A Variation of the Late-Twentieth-Century Chinese Garment Shops in New York City”

Main Point: The Chinese garment industry has recently moved from exclusively Manhattan into Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and in the process has lost much of its unionization. This de-unionization has led to more dangerous and difficult working environments as well as increased infighting among the many Chinese immigrant workers. These battles are fought along ethnic lines, as different Chinese regional groups fight for the same jobs and money in the dangerous and ever-changing sweatshop industry. Questions about illegal immigration, ethnic enclave economies and regulation of sweatshops are also now a larger part of the discussion of the New York garment industry. Bao looks at a report by Jane Lii about the dangers and exploitation of Chinese workers and examines the effects of these conditions on relations between the different ethnicities of workers.

Central Idea and Concepts:

- While conditions in these new sweatshops seem harsher and more difficult than those in Manhattan, there is an odd dynamic also at work here. The owners of the shops seem more in touch with their workers and are more eager to offer help.
- There are some similarities with the garment shops of Manhattan, and one is the division of labor on gender lines. Males own the majority of shops, and work the jobs that demand the most pay per hour. Women are still seen as unfit physically for these jobs.
- One reason for the great deal of competition over wages and jobs in the rapid turnover of workers. If a worker does not want to work long hours, they can easily be replaced, so, one must work not only to make money, but also to simply keep a job.
- Another advantage of this situation that is taken advantage of by the employers is the so-called “Co-ethnic conspiracy”. This is the idea that the employer and employee both come from the same ethnic background. Thus, assimilation into the workplace is easier, and the employees feel obligated to work hard for someone who seems to be “accommodating their needs”.
- There have been questions about legislation and regulation in these new shops, as they are non-unionized. The movement for stricter regulation of these shops has both shed light on the terrible conditions and created a panic that the industry may simply leave the city to avoid regulation.
- Much like ethnic battles over labor in the past, a war has broken out between the Cantonese and Fujianese workers, who resent each other. This conflict has grown with the rising numbers of Fujian workers who the Cantonese think will work for less and for longer periods of time, thus making the Cantonese obsolete. This conflict mimics many others seen in the Split-Labor market idea, where competition for jobs has caused violence towards specific, “rival” ethnic groups.

Two Key Quotes:

“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 interdependent relationship between the workers and their employers in the ethnic enclave economy in the United States.” (277)

“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.” (279)

Two Questions:

Despite the fact that we have seen many examples of infighting between different ethnic members of the labor market, is there perhaps something special going on here, as a result of these two groups of the labor market being the same race? Why is this the case?

How can we balance the need for legislation, regulation and policing of shops like these with the reality of illegal immigration, sweatshops and ethnic enclave economies?