

Holding Up More Than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948–92. By Xiaolan Bao. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xvi + 330 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, tables, illustrations. Cloth, \$44.95; paper, \$22.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-252-02631-4; paper, 0-252-07350-9.

Reviewed by Yong Chen

Xiaolan Bao's *Holding Up More Than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948–92* represents a valuable addition to the scholarship of Chinese American history. The story is situated in New York City, which since 1970 has been home to the largest Chinese community in the nation. And the focus of the study is on a sizable group within that community, one that has not received sufficient scholarly attention: women garment workers. Since the early 1970s, as the garment industry became an important source of income for Chinese New Yorkers, they have emerged as “the largest group of organized Chinese women workers in the United States” (p. 153). Thus, a comprehensive study is long overdue. Theoretically informed and thoroughly well researched, this multilayered study demonstrates the author's grasp of the complex experiences of the Chinese garment workers and their place within the larger historical context.

The first three chapters, which are drawn primarily from secondary sources, fill in the background. In chapter one, Bao succinctly chronicles the history of New York City's garment industry, describing how its growth during the nineteenth century, its post–World War II decline, and its subsequent revitalization late in the 1970s were affected by the availability of immigrant labor. In chapter two, Bao discusses the industry's stratification along gender, race, and class lines, describing at some length how the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) treated African American and Puerto Rican women as they entered the industry in large numbers during the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter three traces the demographic changes, explaining why Chinese entry into the industry is a postwar, especially a post-1965, phenomenon.

In part two, chapters four and five supply more background about changing Chinese American family experiences. Bao introduces an important feature of the Chinese American family, namely, its transnational dimensions. She describes, albeit unsystematically, family life in the emigrant communities in China during the exclusion era (from 1882 to World War II). Changes in the late 1960s that affected Chinese American family life, such as the arrival of new immigrants (mostly women) and the decline of the laundry business, help to explain the growing importance of the garment industry for the community

In chapter six, the author offers a fascinating and detailed portrait of the “sweatshop,” revealing her intimate knowledge of the workplace, including the physical conditions of the shop and the relations between the workers and their employers and among the workers themselves. For many, especially those who had young children but no help with child care, their homes became an extension of the workplace. In chapter seven, Bao analyzes the relations between Chinese workers and the ILGWU. She points out that although scholars have studied the ILGWU’s relations with various minority groups, few have systematically explored the union’s treatment of the Chinese. The ILGWU’s recruitment efforts in New York City were far more successful than its attempts to unionize Chinese workers in San Francisco, starting in the 1930s. As early as 1974, Bao notes, the ILGWU’s Local 23-25 in New York had “a total of six thousand Chinese members” (p. 153), but she cautions against attributing this success simply to the recruitment and integration efforts of the ILGWU. In her interviews with workers, she records instances of unhappiness with, and even resentment of, the union, and she suggests that many people joined the organization only in order take advantage of the health benefits it offers.

Part three, the final section, is devoted to the 1982 strike, covering in three chapters the events leading up to the strike, the strike itself, and its subsequent impact. Bao asserts that this was the “largest labor strike to take place in New York’s Chinatown to date. It was a pivotal event, not only in the history of Chinese women garment workers but also in the Chinatown community as a whole” (p. 171).

Bao relies heavily on primary sources, ranging from local newspapers to U.S. census data. Perhaps, the most valuable insights came from the 176 people who were

interviewed, mostly by the author herself. Most were garment workers whose experiences were personally familiar to the author, as she had worked in a garment shop and lived with worker families. However, the accounts would have been more informative and interesting had the personal stories and experiences of individual Chinese workers and activists been reported as well. First-hand accounts would have supplemented the author's interpretations, which are sometimes incomplete. For example, in challenging ILGWU's explanation of the 1982 strike, she asks, "What were the real causes of the strike?" but fails to supply a convincing answer. Moreover, she repeatedly states that the short-lived strike was "an important event in the history of New York's Chinatown" (p. 213) but does not explain why it was so important.

In general, however, Bao's study, with its fruitful research and helpful insights, advances scholarship in several fields, such as Chinese American history, labor history and immigration studies. Her book will enable readers to learn far more about "sweatshops" than can be gleaned from sensational media headlines.

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