

The Missing Chapter of Racism—The Gender Aspects in the Lives of Chinese Laundrymen in the United States before World War II

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Abstract

The paper examines the roles of race and gender in the lives of Chinese laundrymen in the United States before World War II. Focused on laundry work, the study investigates first the development of Chinese laundries, along with the changes of work and family among American women; and secondly how these changes affected the work experiences and lives of Chinese laundrymen. As the study indicated, articulated by systems of race and gender, laundry work was organized to produce and reproduce the social relations of power. Depending on their race, men in the United States experience gender in different ways. Chinese laundrymen were regarded as substitutes for American women doing domestic work, and thus became outcaste from the power politics. Under the mechanism of patriarchy and racial hegemony, American white society integrated complicatedly the gender issue with its racial relations. Yet, with the establishment of commercial laundries and the stress on professionally laundering men's shirts, Chinese laundrymen employed various ways to reduce gender implications of laundry work and eventually to struggle against the racism and economic restrictions.

Key Words: racism, gender, Chinese laundrymen