Work and Its Place in the Lives of Immigrant Women: Garment Workers in New York City’s Chinatown

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Working wives and mothers are traditionally considered secondary wage earners, and employment is not automatically accompanied by occupational attainment of individual workers. For immigrant women, the double burden is compounded by lack of English, transferable education and skills, and knowledge of the larger economy. In this article, we have illustrated the special meanings of immigrant women’s work in the context of ethnic enclave employment and family responsibility. Based on census data and fieldwork in the garment industry in New York’s Chinatown, we have found that the particularly high rate of immigrant Chinese women’s labor market participation is largely accounted for by the availability of jobs provided by the ethnic enclave economy, that those women are overrepresented in low-wage menial jobs, and that they tend to perceive their work as meaningful, despite of low wages, long working hours and poor working conditions. These findings suggest that survival is more important for immigrant Chinese women than their own rights in the workplace, at least in the earlier stages of immigrant adaptation, and that their wage labor is an indispensable part of the collective family effort for social mobility. The results imply that, for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, it is difficult to achieve long-term social mobility merely through individual efforts. Therefore, policies dealing with those groups mired in poverty and confined to survival at the margins of society should put more emphasis on community development in connection to the promotion of individual education and job training.

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Ah Mei, a trans-Pacific bride, was pregnant with her first child. Her husband expected her to rest at home to take care of their unborn baby. She wandered around Chinatown and walked up to a garment shop. She tried for a couple of days and took the job, making $200 the first week. That was a half year’s pay in China! Besides, she had her own money.

* * *

Liu had never touched a sewing machine, nor had she planned to be a “super sewer” before she came to the United States. She had dreams a lot fancier. After seven years in the apparel trade, she became one of the most skilled sewing women in Chinatown, so good that she could even “fire” her boss if she chose to. With substantial savings from her garment work, Liu’s family had just moved from a tiny little apartment in Chinatown to their new home in Flushing, Queens. She continued to work in Chinatown full-time. Her family had a big mortgage note to pay...

* * *

Chen was 16 and had been here for eleven months. She worked in a garment factory because she felt obliged to help her family. Chen worked from three to seven everyday and all day Saturday and Sunday in the same factory as her mother. She didn’t really know how much she made because the boss gave the money to her mother...

In New York City’s Chinatown, three out of five women work in the garment industry, a backbone industry of the growing ethnic enclave economy. Most of these working women are new immigrants, married, and with school-aged and younger children. Day in and day out, they bend over row after row of sewing machines; they are surrounded by piles of fabric scraps; and they are sometimes with children, including toddlers and infants, clustered at their skirts. But the garment factory only reflects one side of their lives. The other side is the home front. They are expected to care for their children, nurture their husbands, and attend to a long list of household chores including cooking, cleaning, laundering, grocery shopping, paying bills and so on.

In this article, we examine how immigrant Chinese women juggle multiple roles as wives, mothers, and wage workers and how their experience between home and the workplace contributes to the survival of their immigrant families.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Women working outside the home is not a phenomenon unique to immigrants in the United States. There has been a dramatic change nationwide in the size and composition of women’s labor force participation (LFP) over the last few decades. Women of all ages, marital and maternal statuses have entered the labor market, seeking paid employment (Stromberg & Harkess 1978, p. 5). Regardless of race/ethnicity and national origins, they share some common labor market experiences.
Garment Workers in New York City’s Chinatown

Working women are generally viewed by our society as supplementary or secondary wage-earners, and hence their newly assumed role as wage workers is not automatically accompanied by changes in household behavior and norms (Huber & Spitze 1981; Morokvasic 1983, p. 13). Their traditional roles as wives and mothers continue to influence their work experience as paid employees, creating pressures as women juggle the workplace and home (Stromberg & Harkess 1978, p. 6; Huber & Spitze 1988). As a result, working women are disproportionately concentrated in low-ranking and low-wage occupations and uniformly receive less earnings than their male counterparts with similar levels of educational and occupational attainments (Becker 1957; England & Norris 1985).

The situation for immigrant women at work is worse than U.S. born working women. Not only are they doubly burdened with household responsibilities and paid work, but they also suffer from additional disadvantages as immigrants. Lack of English language ability, transferable education and skills, and knowledge about the larger economy render them more vulnerable and less competitive in the job market than their U.S. born counterparts. In the face of limited opportunities and discrimination in the larger economy, immigrant women are often confined to their ethnic enclaves, taking jobs that are highly exploitative and offer little social mobility (Bonacich 1992).

To develop our framework of analysis in this study, we draw on three theoretical approaches, which are relevant to the study of labor market experience of immigrant women: the neo-Marxist approach, the sociocultural-context approach, and the reference-group approach.

The Neo-Marxist Approach to Women’s Work

The neo-Marxist approach views the inferior status of working women as intrinsically rooted in capitalist exploitation (Ward 1990; Ollenburg & Moore 1992; Bonacich 1992, 1993). Neo-Marxists argue that women’s work, in both a wage and a nonwage sense, functions to maintain capitalism. In the context of post-industrial capitalism, which is characterized by global economic restructuring, working women have become the world’s new industrial proletariat—a critical element in the global economy and a key resource for expanding multinational corporations (Ehrenreich & Fuentes 1981). Take garment manufacturing in the United States as an example. Industrial globalization has shifted the center of garment manufacturing to less developed countries to take advantage of low-wage female labor and has informalized the production process through subcontracted piecework at home (Tiana 1990). In New York City, apparel employment dropped from 360,000 following World War II to under 150,000 workers in 1975 (Waldinger 1986, p. 56). Paradoxically, while low-wage jobs in garment manufacturing are moved across the southern border to Mexico or cross the Pacific Ocean to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China and other developing nations, the typical Third World informal economy is emerging in immigrant enclaves in America’s major urban centers. During the period of economic restructuring, immigrant entrepreneurs are able to expand sweatshops and other informal or subcontracted operations precisely because they have access to low-cost immigrant labor, especially female labor.
Neo-Marxists maintain that the globalization of manufacturing industries and the increasing use of female immigrant labor is a common strategy employed by the capitalist class against organized domestic workers (Bernard 1987; Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia 1989; Ward 1990). Hence, benefits brought about by international and immigrant workers in the workplace accrue not to all members of the dominant group, but only to the capitalist class. Such benefits are extracted precisely against the interests of the domestic working class (Portes & Bach 1985). As a reserve pool of potential workers, women can be easily manipulated by the capitalist class. In the labor market, immigrant women are in a particularly weak position to resist capitalist exploitation and employer discrimination. This is not only because they are socially, linguistically and culturally separated from the domestic working class, but also because they are subject to legal constraints such as exclusion or deportation. Thus, even though organizational efforts or protests among immigrants are occasionally made, they rarely involve legitimate class reivindications (Castells 1975). Consequently, immigrant working women, as well as their Third World counterparts, remain the most impoverished segment of the working class.

The neo-Marxist approach is generally correct about the possible outcomes of low-wage labor under capitalism and it captures certain economic realities affecting working women. However, it treats all women as members of the exploited or oppressed class and overlooks the differences in employment conditions and sociocultural contexts among working women. In the case of immigrant working women, for example, their low-wage labor may not necessarily lead to working-class impoverishment as expected by neo-Marxists. Although many immigrant workers are being disproportionately absorbed by low-wage, “degraded” industries composed of sweatshops and other informal operations, they do not seem to be unduly disadvantaged and impoverished. Instead, some immigrant groups are found to be able to translate their low-wage work and hard-earned dollars into business ownership, home ownership, and suburban residence within only one generation (Fenandez-Kelly & Garcia 1989; Zhou 1992).

The Sociocultural Context of Work among Immigrant Women

While the neo-Marxist approach emphasizes the exploitative aspect of employment under capitalism, the sociocultural-context approach emphasizes the “embeddedness” of women’s work. The sociocultural-context approach maintains that women's work takes on different meanings in different sociocultural contexts. Central to its argument is the notion of “embeddedness.” Women enter the labor market with expectations and goals different from those of men. These expectations and goals are not only class specific but also cultural specific. In the United States, the norm of female labor force participation is specified on the basis of the middle class. That is, women enter the labor force to help maintain a comfortable standard of living for the family on the one hand, and to gain certain level of economic independence from men on the other hand (Spitze 1988). Their paid work is considered secondary or supplementary in an economic sense. Immigrant women, in contrast, work in a situation unique to immigration. Their primary concern is
survival. They cannot afford to make decisions to work on the basis of rational cost/benefit calculation between home and paid work, nor can they set priority of work for the purpose of establishing economic independence. Many of them simply have to work, while at the same time managing child-care and major household responsibilities, to survive in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment (Perez 1986; Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia 1989; Zhou & Logan 1989; Zhou 1992). They are not unconcerned about their own rights but simply set priorities for their families in the early stages of economic adaptation.

Previous research has found that, in many cases, immigrants are incorporated into a specific social and structural context in which socioeconomic gains for immigrant men are backed by the close association of women (their wives) and kinship ties linking them to the labor market (Ferree 1979; Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia 1989; Perez 1986; Zhou & Logan 1989). Perez (1986) reported results suggesting that economic assimilation of immigrant groups is largely a family phenomenon rather than a process of individualistic status attainment. Zhou and Logan (1989) argued that the primary purpose of work for women is not to develop a working career, but rather to contribute immediately to the household income for the benefit of younger members and for the upward social mobility of the family as a whole. Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia (1989) further contended that while individual characteristics may be important in the status-attainment process, economic adjustment of immigrants is largely a family affair. Female involvement in the labor market, whether as paid or unpaid labor, is a necessary means to protect the living standards of the family. Research on Cuban women in Miami revealed that most of the married Cuban immigrant women entered the labor force out of the economic necessity in a situation of downward mobility upon arrival in the United States. Their employment served as a continuation of cultural patterns—an obligation to the family (Ferree 1979, p. 36). Once their families moved upward, these women tended to withdraw from the labor force (Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia 1989).

The Reference Group for Immigrant Women at Work

The reference-group approach explains how women react to their relatively disadvantaged social and labor market positions. This approach does not contradict in any observable way either the neo-Marxist approach or the sociocultural-context approach. The neo-Marxist discourse often centers around equity and labor rights issues, such as gender discrimination and exploitation (Mincer & Polacheck 1974; Almquist & Wehrle-Einhorn 1978; Bonacich 1980 & 1992; Cooney & Ortiz 1983). In contrast, the sociocultural-context approach puts an individual working woman in a comparative framework with other working women, emphasizing that women usually react to their disadvantages on the basis of their gender-group membership (Form & Geschwender 1962; Loscocco & Spitze 1991). Past studies on pay satisfaction emphasize the importance of comparative context in which job satisfaction is assessed. Women seem satisfied with low pay because they use other women as referents (England, Farkas, Kilbourne & Dou 1988).

However, while making a gender distinction in selection of a reference group, previous studies have often applied an American middle-class standard to women.
at work (see Spitze 1988 for details), and hence have insufficiently explained the subjective responses to work conditions of women from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Relatively little research has directly utilized the reference-group approach to explain the situation of immigrant women. In dealing with their labor market disadvantages, immigrant women also have a reference group. Their choice of reference group, however, is not merely based on the comparison of other women within their own or a different group. Rather, the choice is a result of the specific conditions under which these women form their expectations. Frequently, they compare their current situation with their own past, perceiving immigration into the United States as a process of long-term upward social mobility for their families, children and themselves.

Immigrant minority women suffer from a double disadvantage associated with their status as both women and immigrant minority group members (Almquist & Wehrie-Einhorn 1978, p. 63). The effects of this dual status are reflected in patterns of their labor market incorporation; they are concentrated in worse jobs at lower pay than U.S. born non-Hispanic white women. However, their disadvantaged position does not seem to discourage them from participating in paid work. Immigrant women generally show higher rates of labor force participation (LFP) than do U.S. born non-Hispanic white women, and their LFP is often related strongly to the successful economic adaptation of many immigrant groups (Perez 1986; Stier 1991). For example, close to 60 percent of the Chinese female population in New York were in the labor force as compared to 45 percent for non-Hispanic white women in 1980. Many immigrant women are apparently willing to accept low-pay, menial jobs, not just because other immigrant women have held similar jobs, but because they have a different orientation toward work. When it comes to assessing satisfaction of paid work and wages, they appear to be more concerned with what is best for their families than with what is fair for themselves as individuals, a phenomenon unique to immigrant women at work. In the case of Chinese women, they compare themselves with the reference group from which they have emigrated and consider themselves fortunate to be in the United States (Sung 1987, p. 93).

In sum, immigrant workers often justify their employment from the framework of their original culture. When they evaluate themselves and their labor market behavior, they refer to the standards of the culture from which they emigrate rather than American standards. However, as they become more and more assimilated into American ways, they have a tendency to change their frame of reference.

WORK AND ITS PLACE IN THE LIVES OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Drawing on the neo-Marxist approach, the sociocultural-context approach, and the reference-group approach, we propose a framework for understanding work and its place in the lives of immigrant women and illustrate it through the example of garment workers in New York City's Chinatown. We argue that immigrant women's work is an intrinsic part of a family strategy to survive and eventually adapt to U.S. society, and that the adoption of such a strategy depends on specific
sociocultural contexts from which immigrant women came and into which these women immigrated upon arrival in the United States. Our task is not to refute the neo-Marxist approach, but rather to demonstrate contrasts in the meaning of women's work under unique sociocultural circumstances. We attempt to reconcile seemingly contradictory elements of work and experience of immigrant women and to shed light on how cultural components interplay with economic factors to affect the lives of immigrant women in U.S. society.

Survival versus Career Attainment

Labor force participation of immigrant women generally involves two analytically distinct dimensions: survival and career attainment. Each contains a different set of strategies and goals. Survival refers to settling down and securing from an unfamiliar and often hostile environment the necessary means of livelihood. Career attainment involves the socialization of women into the normative structure of the economy traditionally dominated by men, equal occupational mobility to that of men, and economic independence from men (Mueller & Campbell 1977; Philliber & Hiller 1978; Van Velsor & Beeghley 1979). More often than not, newly arrived immigrants are busy surviving and striving toward economic stability. Certain segments of the immigrant population may quickly bypass mere survival because they bring with them strong human capital and economic resources (Borjas 1990). However, a disproportionate number of immigrants have first to secure a means of livelihood—food, clothing and shelter—in order to proceed to their American dream after arrival in the United States. The survival strategies of many immigrant families entail not only employment of men but also the economic participation of women in paid work. Therefore, the work of immigrant women may not be secondary but necessary in the struggle for survival.

Immigrant Workers versus U.S. Born Workers

Immigrant workers are analytically and socially distinguishable from U.S. born workers. On the one hand, immigrants are often perceived as aliens threatening job securities and labor rights of U.S. workers. Historically and routinely immigrants have been excluded as "the indispensable enemy" from the working class of the host society (Saxton 1971). A 1992 Business Week poll revealed that more than 60 percent of U.S. residents interviewed believed that new immigrants took jobs away from U.S. workers and that immigrants drove wages down. Even descendants of immigrants, who were born in the United States and have been fully assimilated, suffer from certain immigrant disadvantages merely because they look foreign (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1992).

On the other hand, immigrants are handicapped by initial disadvantages associated with immigration. They lack English language ability, economic resources, transferable skills, and legal protection to compete on equal terms with U.S. workers. Moreover, because of their foreign status, immigrant workers lack political muscle and economic resources to consciously fight for labor rights and social equality. They tend to distance themselves from the politics of the American labor force and to focus on their struggle for survival. Thus, they appear to willingly
take “bad” or “abandoned” jobs and accept substandard wages. However, the notion of “willingness” is misleading. Immigrants are not cheap labor by nature. Rather, they see low-wage jobs as the best option to meet their survival needs and to facilitate social mobility.

**Immigrant Enclave Economies versus the Larger Economy**

Finally, we analytically distinguish between the capital/labor relationship in the context of an immigrant enclave economy and such a relationship in the context of the larger political economy of capitalism. Within the Marxist framework, the relationship between labor and capital is inherently conflictual. The employer class exploits the working class. It extracts surplus values from the workers, establishes its dominance over the workers, and consolidates its privileges by politically suppressing the workers.

However, this line of argument does not seem to hold well within the context of an immigrant enclave economy. In ethnic enclaves, ethnic entrepreneurs enter self-employment as an alternative way to low-wage menial work or unemployment. They are workers themselves. They routinely work in their own shops over ten hours a day and at least six days a week. Moreover, they depend their business operation on the availability of reliable family labor and the ethnically committed labor force whose human capital characteristics are lower than the minimum requirements for entry to the larger labor market (Zhou & Bankston 1993).

From the point of view of ethnic workers, enclave economies offer material and symbolic compensations, such as a familiar cultural environment in which workers can interact in their own language, flexible work hours, and training, that escape a gross accounting of benefits based exclusively on wages. More important, ethnic culture creates a common bond between employers and workers, making for a more personalized work environment than the highly alienating working conditions in comparable employment in the larger economy (Portes & Zhou 1992). Therefore, the close association between class status and ethnicity within a unique cultural context make possible an alternative path to social mobility, one that effectively shields immigrant workers from initial immigrant disadvantages and racial discrimination.

In the following section, we present a case study on Chinatown's garment workers, which is based on the 1980 census data and field observations in Chinatown. The census data provide detailed demographic and socioeconomic information about immigrant Chinese women in the garment trade and allow for a refined analysis of patterns and determinants of labor market participation and poverty to produce more generalizable and more representative results (U.S. Bureau of the Census). The analysis of the census data will be supplemented with fieldwork data collected by the authors through personal interviews and participant observations in New York City's Chinatown from 1988 to 1990 and a follow-up field study between spring of 1991 and spring of 1992.
CHINATOWN'S GARMENT WORKERS: AN EXAMPLE

The Impact of Female Immigration on Chinatown's Garment Industry

New York City's garment industry has been an immigrant trade since the early 1800s. The earliest garment workers were German and Irish immigrants, followed by Polish and Russian Jews, Italians and Eastern European Jews. The garment industry was able to grow because of the availability of a large pool of low-wage and mostly female immigrant labor. After World War II, however, New York lost its place of predominance in garment manufacturing due to standardization for economies of scale and the internationalization of capital and labor. Only a small portion of the industry has remained to respond to a fluctuating demands susceptible to non-standardized and quickly changing fashion/style garments, which has created a niche for small garment shops.

Despite overall industry decline, where growth exists in New York City's garment industry, it continues to be predicated on low-cost immigrant labor. Between 1975 and 1980, the number of Chinese-owned garment factories grew by an average of 36 a year, reaching a peak of 430 in 1980. In 1980, Chinatown contained one-third of all the jobs in Manhattan's women's outerwear industry (ILGWU 1983, p. 44).

The most important factor in the growth of Chinatown's garment industry has been the surge of female Chinese immigration, a recent phenomenon. During the period of Chinese exclusion in the late 19th century and the first half of this century, few Chinese women were allowed to enter the country, not even to join their families. Reflecting earlier migration patterns, New York’s Chinatown was a bachelor's society for many years. In the 1940s, there were six times as many Chinese men as women in New York. Even after the passage of the War Brides Act in 1945, which allowed Chinese women to join their husbands in the United States, Chinese men still outnumbered women by nearly 300 percent in New York City. It was not until after 1965, when U.S. immigration policies were revised to favor family reunification, that Chinese women began to pour into New York City. By 1970, the sex ratio for New York City's Chinese population decreased to 117 men per 100 women; and a decade later, this ratio was further reduced to 106 men per 100 women (Sung 1987; Zhou 1992).

Recent immigration of Chinese women reflects a predominant pattern of family migration. The primary motive has been family reunification. Immigrants from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have fully utilized their quotas (Sung 1987, pp. 15-22). In fact, migration from each area has been greater than that allowed by the quota, indicating that many arrived as non-quota immigrants (i.e., immediate family members of U.S. citizens). According to immigration statistics, Chinese women have outnumbered men entering the U.S. every year since the mid-1970s. In 1980, family unification was responsible for 85 percent of all Chinese immigration (Sung 1987, p. 20). Immigrant Chinese women have constituted more than half of the total Chinese influx in recent years, and this trend will continue in the near future. Not only have women dominated the immigration trend, they were disproportionately (65%) in working ages between 20 to 59 (Zhou 1992).
The arrival of female Chinese immigrants has dramatically altered the social fabric of New York City's Chinatown. As more and more women have immigrated, many coming to join their families, the once exclusive male character of Chinatown's demography has been transformed into a community bustling with young families. The 1980 Census shows that some 80 percent of the Chinese households in New York are family-type households, and 87 percent of the Chinese families are married-couple families (10% higher than the average numbers for New York State). Further, large-scale immigration of women has stimulated economic development in Chinatown. On the one hand, the sheer numbers of immigrants and the shift to a family-centered community has expanded the market for Chinese goods and services inaccessible in the larger society, creating opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurship. On the other hand, the availability of a large pool of low-skilled female labor at a critical time in the City's overall economic restructuring has promoted the rapid growth of informal or subcontracted operations in New York's garment industry (Waldinger 1986).

Immigrant Chinese women's concentration in the garment industry is extraordinary: while over half of all Chinese working women aged 16 to 64 in New York City were garment workers, 85 percent of the work force in the garment industry in Chinatown were immigrant women (Zhou 1992). In 1983, 70 percent of garments produced in New York City were sewn by Chinese immigrant women.

Characteristics of Immigrant Chinese Women

Table 1 illustrates major characteristics of Chinese women. In terms of family situation, foreign-born Chinese women share many characteristics similar to those of their U.S.-born counterparts and non-Hispanic women in general, except that they tend to have lower rates of divorce or separation and are more likely to live with school-aged children. However, foreign-born Chinese women show severe human capital deficiency. They have the lowest level of educational attainment and poorest English proficiency. Less than half of them have finished high school and only 42 percent of them speak English well.

Chinese women are traditionally regarded as temporary members of their birth families who make little effort to educate or train them. A 58-year-old Taiwanese immigrant we interviewed in 1990 explained that she had no schooling at all because it wasn't considered appropriate for girls. Her brothers, however, went to school and received additional tutoring at home. The lack of emphasis on women's education and training results in serious human capital deficiencies in women upon immigration.

Despite their lack of human capital, Chinese women immigrants display a particularly low rate of labor force non-participation. Inversely, the labor force participation rate of immigrant Chinese women is 73 percent, 24 percentage points higher than that of immigrant white women and 16 percentage points higher than U.S.-born white women. Over 40 percent of immigrant Chinese women are found employment in the garment industry, which suggests that Chinatown indeed provides job opportunities for immigrant women who would have had a hard time finding work in the larger economy because of the human capital deficiency.
Table 1. Major Characteristics of Females aged 16 to 64 from Family Households in New York City by Race and Place of Birth: 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Chinese Foreign Born</th>
<th>Chinese U.S. Born</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic White Foreign Born</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic White U.S. Born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently married (%)</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>87.2</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced or separated (%)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single or widowed (%)</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Types</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married-couple families (%)</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>82.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single female-headed households (%)</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single male-headed households (%)</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to Household Heads</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As household heads (%)</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As spouses (%)</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As children (%)</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With own children under 6 (%)</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With own children 6 to 17 (%)</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without own children (%)</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children ever born</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Capital</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean years of school completed</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduates (%)</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>79.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English proficiency (%)</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>99.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Market Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the garment industry</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In other industries</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in the labor force</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Cases</td>
<td>1,307</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>8,194</td>
<td>32,253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2 presents demographic characteristics of working women by industrial sectors. Overall, more than half of Chinese women found jobs in the garment industry compared to only 6 percent of white women. Chinese garment workers are generally younger than white garment workers but older than workers in other industries. Compared to Chinese workers in other industries and all white workers, Chinese garment workers are more likely to be married, to live in married-couple families as wives, to live with school-aged children, and to have a higher fertility rate. These intra- and inter-racial group differences highlight a unique context: most Chinese garment workers are married and have young children.

Table 3 further reveals selected socioeconomic characteristics of working women by industrial sectors. Compared to other Chinese workers and white workers, Chinese garment workers show several marked differences. First, Chinese garment workers are extremely poor in human capital. They have only an average of 6.5 years of schooling; only 22 percent of them have finished high school; and they
Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Females aged 16 to 64 from Family Households in New York City by Race: Garment Workers versus Other Workers, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Chinese Garment Workers</th>
<th>Chinese All Other Workers</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic White Garment Workers</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic White All Other Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent group total N</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>94.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently married (%)</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced or separated (%)</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single or widowed (%)</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Types</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married-couple families (%)</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>80.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single female-headed households (%)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single male-headed households (%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to Household Heads</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As household heads (%)</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As spouses (%)</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As children (%)</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With own children under 6 (%)</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With own children 6 to 17 (%)</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without own children (%)</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children ever born</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Cases</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>1,264</td>
<td>21,211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Even Chinese workers speak little English. Second, they are mostly immigrants; a third of whom arrived after 1975. Third, Chinese garment workers disproportionately occupy the lowest occupational rank as operators. Compared to other workers, they general work longer hours per week, and their unemployment rate is much lower, though their rate of full-time, year-round employment is lower than that of other workers (but higher than that of white garment workers). Fourth, Chinese garment workers have the lowest earnings compared to other groups, and over half of them work at minimum or lower wages, but their contribution to the family is quite substantial. Their household incomes are the lowest, and the poverty rate the highest. Finally, Chinese garment workers come from households where household heads, mostly males, also have poor education and work at low wages.

In sum, immigrant Chinese working women display the following disadvantages. They lack human capital and English language ability. They are disproportionately recent arrivals. They are low-wage workers at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. They are mostly wives of low-wage workers and mothers of school-age children. They are concentrated in low-income households. Given these disadvantages, immigrant Chinese women are in a situation where they face few options: and most of them are limited to working in Chinatown, which is to say...
Table 3. Socioeconomic Characteristics of Females aged 16 to 64 from Family Households in New York City by Race: Garment Workers versus Other Workers, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Capital</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean years of school completed</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduates (%)</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>84.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English proficiency (%)</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>97.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign born (%)</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrated after 1975 (%)</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive/profession occupations (%)</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operator/laborer occupations (%)</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other occupations (%)</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>70.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean usual hours worked per week</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time, year-round employment (%)</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (%)</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean earnings</td>
<td>$3,207</td>
<td>$10,480</td>
<td>$7,789</td>
<td>$10,887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working at minimum wages or lower (%)</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earnings as a percentage of dual earnings a</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$14,130</td>
<td>$23,108</td>
<td>$22,325</td>
<td>$28,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households below 1.00 poverty level (%)</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Household Heads</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (%)</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean years of school completed</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At work (%)</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean income from all sources</td>
<td>$7,242</td>
<td>$13,269</td>
<td>$14,164</td>
<td>$18,517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Cases</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>1,264</td>
<td>21,211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Of all foreign born persons.
* Employed 35 hours a week and 48 weeks a year.
* The sum of wages, and farm or non-farm self-employment incomes.
* Own earnings divided by the sum of household head and own earnings, limited to married couple families only.

to low-wage menial jobs in Chinatown's garment industry. The alternative to not working in the garment shops is not working anywhere at all. Because their husbands make low wages and because they are at the stage of survival, the latter is not feasible. Questions are thus raised: How does immigrant Chinese women's paid work relate to the family? How do they juggle paid work and home work? How do they perceive low-wage work in the garment industry? How does this perception affect their orientation toward work? What have they achieved through this line of work? Next, we explore these issues through our field observations.

Immigrant Women's Paid Work and the Family

Traditionally, a Chinese woman's tangible value lies in her ability to provide support to both her birth family and her husband's family upon marriage through unpaid or paid labor and in her ability to produce sons for her husband's family. She is expected to be responsible for all domestic work and work outside the home. Her life is tied to the family to which she belongs and her own self is buried in her family. Women's subordinate status is reflected in a popular Chinese folk song:

Marry a rooster, follow a rooster.
Marry a dog, follow a dog.
Marry to a cudgel, married to a pestle.
Be faithful to it. Follow it (Kingston 1975, p. 193).

For Chinese women, the family comes first. This cultural value persists not just symbolically but realistically after immigration to the United States. Many Chinese women have come to the United States to join their families in search of an American dream. Once settled, they are expected (and expect themselves) to help their families adjust to the new environment, to sponsor other family members to immigrate, or to make regular remittances to their families in their countries of origin. For most immigrant women, the only way to meet these goals and expectations is to work to make money. Some of our interviews are illustrative:

Ah Mei only had four years of formal schooling in rural China. She was one of the trans-Pacific brides in Chinatown. She came join her husband, who worked in a Chinatown grocery store. Her husband did not want his new bride to work outside the home because she was pregnant. Ah Mei found a job in a garment factory. She made about $200 a week in the first few months. Eventually her weekly wages rose to $350, and she was able to take some of her garment work home. She said:

"Nobody I know comes here just to sit around at home. Everybody works. My husband is not rich. If I don't work, I don't see how we can save money. Besides, I need money to send home to my parents. I can't just ask my husband for money."

Mrs. Li was in her early fifties. She and her husband were very well established in China. She was qualified for immigration into the United States under the fourth preference category because her mother was a U.S. citizen. Mrs. Li and her husband did not want to emigrate initially. However, because it was the only way they could help their three adult unmarried children immigrate, they came. Mrs. Li recalled:

"I came only for my children. Because, under the immigration law, my mother could only sponsor me, but not her grandchildren. I came so that I could send for my adult children. What else is in it for myself? Not much. My husband, a college professor, returned to China shortly because he could not stand..."
working in a tofu shop. I had to stay around to take care of my children. I am still working in a garment shop to help pay some of the bills. My children are attending college while working part-time. Once they graduate from college, I will return to China too.”

These interviews suggest that immigrant Chinese women’s economic contribution to the family is crucial for survival, especially during early stages of immigration. These women seem to be more concerned about their families, which are extended beyond the nuclear family, than about their own individual needs. However, through our observations of and interviews with garment workers, we found that their paid work has not only contributed to their families’ economic well-being, but also created a sense of confidence and self-fulfillment which they may never have experienced in traditional Chinese society. Some garment workers interviewed made the following remarks without hesitation: “My husband dares not look down on me; he knows he can’t provide for the family by himself”, “I do not have to ask my husband for money, I make my own”, and “I help pay for the house.”

Women’s Triple Role

While a woman’s paid employment is regarded as an obligation for her family’s welfare, she is still bound by her role as wife and/or mother, whether or not she works outside the home. Even though their employment becomes necessary in Chinatown, immigrant Chinese women are not expected to develop careers as their primary concern. Rather, they are expected, and expect themselves, to earn wages in ways that do not conflict with their traditional roles as wives and/or mothers.

Chinatown’s garment industry provides unique opportunities to integrate employment with traditional role expectations for Chinese women. First, the garment industry offers both full-time and part-time jobs to women, regardless of their prior labor market experience. Although most of the women have not worked in the job before immigration, they learn as they work because the required skills are minimal. Within a short period of time, many become experienced sewing machine operators. Moreover, the garment industry is easily accessible and does not require a strong commitment to work. Immigrant Chinese women are expected to act in the best interests of the family. Even though they work outside the home, they are still expected to carry major household responsibilities at home. Working wives or mothers prefer jobs that leave them flexibility and time for taking care of their children and home work. Garment work does not need to be done on a fixed schedule, and many Chinese garment contractors offer flexible work hours and favorable locations to their workers, in part to compensate for low wages.

The majority of the Chinatown garment workers are mothers of small children. They juggle everything—working, arranging baby-sitters, grocery shopping, cooking and household chores. They frequently rely on ethnic relations and family members for support. Workers bargain with their co-ethnic bosses to take time off during the day to drop-off and pick up their children at school or to nurse their babies. Bosses allow children to come to the garment shop and wait for their mothers. Working mothers usually take their children to school before they go to
work. If school is in Chinatown, children simply walk to the garment shops after school and wait for their mothers to finish work. Some grade school youths help their mothers in the garment shops by hanging up finished garments, turning belts, or preparing garments for sewing (Sung 1987, p. 86). But if children are not in Chinatown schools, mothers have to arrange pickup and extended daycare for their children. Whether a woman is working or not, she is expected to do most of the housework and child-care. The following story reflects the busy life of these garment workers.

Mrs. Chow was a recent immigrant with a 4-year-old daughter and an 18-month-old son. She lived in Woodside, Queens, and worked in a garment factory in Manhattan's Chinatown. She and her husband, who works in a restaurant in Bronx, were on different work schedules, and they rarely had time together.

Every day, Mrs. Chow got up at 5:00 in the morning to prepare breakfast for the children. She left the house with her two children at 6:30 a.m. while her husband was still sleeping. She fed the children on the subway train. Getting off the subway, she dropped the older child off at the Chinatown Daycare Center and left the smaller one at her baby-sitter's home not far from her factory. She started work at 8:00 a.m. and got off at 5:00 p.m. She went to see her baby during the mid-day break. After work, she hurried to pick up some ready-made food and groceries nearby. Then she picked up her kids. The three arrived home around 7:00 p.m. Then she prepared dinner for the children and herself. She bathed the children and put them to bed at 8:30 p.m. She went to bed around 9:30, while her husband was still at work.

Mrs. Chow worked about 35 to 40 hours a week, but was laid off about three months a year when there was not enough work at the factory. She was able to take the time off during the day to go to the baby-sitter's house to see her baby. When the children were sick she could take a day or two off, or take the garment work home. She wanted to work as much as she could so that her family could save money to open up a small family business. With two young children and her husband's long working hours, she could only manage a job with a flexible schedule.

Some garment workers rely on kinship networks and family members for child-care support. In Chinatown, many older retired women take care of their grandchildren as older women are traditionally expected to. Private daycare in individual homes is another alternative. Some mothers choose not to work and stay home with their children. They usually baby-sit two or three more children in addition to their own in order to make some extra money and find playmates for their own children. The costs range from $14.00 to $20.00 per day, and the services are reliable and flexible. It has become an effective means to solve the child-care problem. Working mothers usually spend half of their wages on child-care.

**Perception of Low-Wage Work**

Although immigrant Chinese women have particularly high labor force participation rates, they are disproportionately concentrated in the low wage garment industry in Chinatown. As our data suggest, the average annual wage in
1979 was a little over $5,000 and the median hourly wage was only $2.90, lower than the minimum wage of $3.10 at the time.

Are immigrant Chinese women willing to accept substandard wages? The answer is that they are not. Then, why are they overrepresented in the low-wage work force in the garment industry? Part of the reason is that immigrant Chinese women do not generally rely on the American frame of reference in their perception of their work and their evaluation of their behavior. As recent arrivals, they tend to translate American wages in absolute terms into Chinese wages. Thus, they consider low wages in the United States to be invariably higher than wages they earned in China.

Moreover, many Chinese women are accustomed to working outside the home. Low-wage jobs and long working hours do not seem to create new pressures on them since these women, most of whom are from the rural areas, are used to doing back-breaking farm work and menial factory work. Long before immigration they knew that the material standard of living in America is better than that in China and that, if they were willing to work just as hard as in China, they could make a lot more money and become much “richer.” So they are ready and eager to work, either to help bring in additional income to for their own families, or to save money to remit to their birth families in China.

Further, most garment workers are uneducated, unskilled, and lack English language ability. Their options are limited to working in garment shops in Chinatown or staying home. Few are able to take even the same type of jobs beyond Chinatown. Moreover, in the garment industry, they can quickly learn the minimum skills required to operate a sewing machine. Thus, they perceive the availability of garment work in Chinatown as an opportunity. Holding a job helps them to withstand social and psychological pressures associated with immigrant status rather than creating pressures relating to their own perceptions about themselves. The following examples illustrate how women perceive their work and their wages.

When in China, Mrs. Cheng, a former garment worker in Chinatown, quit school in the fourth grade to work with other women in the fields to help support her family, making less than $125 a year. Regarding garment work, she said:

“I was paid by the piece. On average, I probably made about $4.50 an hour.
My weekly wages were a lot more than my annual wages in China.”

Mrs. Wu, a recent immigrant who came from one of the villages in Taishan to join her husband, had a similar story. Wu had only three years of schooling, did not know a single word of English, and had few occupational skills; yet she was more than willing to work and make money. The second week after she arrived, she got a job in a garment factory through a relative who was also a sewing machine operator. When asked whether the low wages and long working schedule had been a problem, she said:

“I never thought of it as a problem. I am a semi-illiterate country girl. I know nothing but work. As long as I have a job, I am happy. I have a chance to make money. Here I am paid by the piece, and I can make an average of $3.00 per hour. A lot of my co-workers can make more than this; some make $5.00
per hour. By the end of the week I can bring home about $180 to $200 dollars (for a 60-hour work week). If I work for lo-fan (referring to Americans), my take-home money would be less because of tax deductions and shorter working hours. I like to be able to work extra hours and over the weekend. That’s what I was used to when I was in China.”

Mrs. Liang remarks also reflects the perception of low wages among the garment workers. She said:

“If you are a new hand, you do not demand higher wages. All you want is some sort of job, and wages do not seem too bad to you even at $2.50 an hour. You tend compare this rate to the rate in China which equaled to a week’s pay at the time I left. Thus, getting a job is only lucky for you. If you complain, you are simply out of work. The boss can easily get a replacement by firing you. But if you are really good and quick-handed, the boss tends to keep you by offering higher wages, or you can ‘fire’ him.”

Mrs. Zhao added:

“Some girls can make as much as $400 a week. That’s hard-earned money from back-breaking jobs, of course, but it’s more than two years’ pay in China. At whatever wages, most of us just want to work. Also, we are used to hard work and long hours. In China, working six days a week is routine, and working overtime without pay is encouraged as some sort of moral obligation to socialism. Here, if you work harder, you make more. You can’t compare with lo-fan. If you don’t accept the wage, you will have no job at all.”

In sum, immigrant Chinese women in Chinatown are extremely low paid. Three out of five women are low-wage garment workers. Based on interviews with garment workers, most of the factories set the hourly rate according to experience. For new hands, it is below or at the minimum wage rate. For more skilled workers, the rate varies from $4.25 to $5.50. However, older women who do miscellaneous work in the factory (e.g., cleaning, cutting thread, and wrappings) are paid $2.50 to $3.00 per hour.

They are aware that owners can and do take advantage of workers. Despite open acknowledgment of “exploitation” in Chinatown, however, they do not seem to feel themselves unduly disadvantaged, nor do most knowledgeable observers we have interviewed perceive them that way. Rather, they are hard workers, matter-of-fact about their employment conditions, but purposeful and determined to do the best they can in a very difficult transitional situation (Sung 1987:197). From the point of view of these women workers, the garment industry is their only opportunity. As Mrs. Chen put it, “I would have to go back to China if there wasn’t a garment industry in Chinatown.” Besides, they are skewed to less educated and less skilled workers unable to speak English. Under these constraints, immigrant workers have overworked and leading to depression of wages and declines in working conditions.
The willingness of immigrant Chinese women to accept sub-standard working conditions and wages is certainly a problem because it can create pressure on other enclave workers to reduce what they are willing to work for. However, getting a job and being paid fairly remain two separate issues for many immigrant Chinese women.

In Chinatown, most immigrant families cannot possibly survive with only one income. Women's paid work is an economic necessity to maintain daily household life. It was estimated that Chinatown's garment workers made a total of $105 million in wages in 1981. Most of the income was spent on food, housing, clothing, and shelter (ILGWU 1983). Women are well aware of this reality because they are the ones who handle the rent, bills and everyday expenses; and they are the ones who know exactly how much is required to meet the basic household needs. Women have to worry how to make ends meet daily. Thus, they are more concerned about having a job of some sort to help their families to get settled and move ahead than they are about their own rights, particularly during the earlier stages of immigrant adaptation.

The Prospect of Social Mobility

The strong desire of immigrant Chinese women to work and their acceptance of low wages and unpopular labor practices, which may be considered abusive and/or illegal by U.S. standards, cannot simply be understood as an individualist drive for social mobility. In the eyes of immigrant Chinese women, emigration is a form of upward social mobility; and they often base their value judgments on comparisons with their past experience. Moreover, social mobility is an important part of the collective effort to fulfill family obligations, helping the family to move ahead in the U.S. society. Thus, women's low-wage labor in Chinatown's garment industry facilitates upward social mobility of the family.

But beyond survival, immigrant Chinese families have their notion of the American Dream—home ownership or business ownership. To realize the dream, women's contribution is indispensable. With women's wages to help pay for household expenses, many immigrant families are able to save money. As Mrs. Zhao said:

"The worst thing of not working is that you can't even survive. Even if you can afford to stay home, you won't be able to save much money. Every immigrant family here dreams to buy a home. If you don't start working and saving, you can never make things happen."

Mrs. Cheng, the garment worker we had interviewed earlier, and her husband, a former restaurant worker, had just started a fast-food takeout restaurant in Brooklyn. With savings from her garment work, she not only helped build her family business, but also paid all traveling and settlement expenses for her mother and brother to immigrate. Mrs. Cheng was satisfied and felt her hard work paid off. She said:
"Now my husband and I are working for our own business. I work more hours than I did in the garment shop. Neither of us gets paid regularly. If business goes well, we both make money; otherwise, we both lose money. The difference is that the restaurant is ours."

When families open up small businesses, women frequently quit their garment jobs and became unpaid family labor. When the primary goal is to own a house, women's cash contribution is equally important to that of men.

Mrs. Chang was an experienced seamstress and had been in the Chinatown garment industry for quite some time. When she was first interviewed in 1988, she and her husband were making plans to buy a small business and to move out of their one bedroom apartment in Chinatown. Mrs. Chang's income contributed substantially to her family's savings. In the spring of 1992, she was interviewed in her new home in Brooklyn. The family owned a home—a step closer to their dream. But Mrs. Chang continued to commute to Chinatown to work. She told us why:

"You can never afford not to work. We used to pay only $75 for the rent controlled apartment in Chinatown. Now we have a big mortgage note to pay each month. My husband does not have a stable job. So my family depends on me, especially when he gets laid off. You just have to keep on working."

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Working wives and mothers are traditionally considered secondary wage earners, and employment is not automatically accompanied by occupational attainment of individual workers. For immigrant women, the double burden is compounded by lack of English, transferable education and skills, and knowledge of the larger economy. In this article, we have illustrated the special meanings of immigrant women's work in the context of ethnic enclave employment and family responsibility, based on the experience of garment workers in New York's Chinatown. Our findings from census data and fieldwork suggest that the particularly high rate of immigrant Chinese women's labor market participation is largely accounted for by the availability of jobs provided by the ethnic enclave economy, that those women are overrepresented in low-wage menial jobs mostly concentrated in Chinatown, and that they tend to perceive their work as meaningful, despite low wages, long working hours and poor working conditions. Although their labor practices may not be compatible with American middle-class values and norms and they are poor by American standard, Chinese garment workers do not seem to feel exploited and hopeless. These findings suggest that immigrant Chinese women's positions are embedded in ethnic social networks which are built into the structure of social relations and cultural values. Their work is crucial to status attainment for their families.

Our research provides several tentative conclusions that support the sociocultural-context approach and the reference-group approach. First, working outside the home is an economic necessity. For immigrant Chinese women, participation in paid work is nothing new since it was part of their everyday life
before immigration. After entering the United States, social and economic adaptation became a family affair for immigrant Chinese, both men and women. Because of disadvantages associated with immigrant status, the chance of individual achievement is slim. It becomes necessary that all adult family members work together to conquer difficulties in getting settled down and save money for future plans. Although incomes contributed by women may still be considered secondary, they are in fact indispensable.

Second, Chinese culture gives priority not to individual achievement but to the welfare of the family and the community. As part of cultural expectations, women's lives are tied to their families. When families are in difficult economic situations during transition from one country to another, it is women's obligation to work outside of the home. However, their employment does not mean that they neglect their primary responsibilities in the home such as housework and child-rearing. Sewing at piecework rates is a good fit for these expectations: working hours are flexible; and a higher income can be gained by working faster and longer, even if the pay per piece is low. Many middle-aged women, those who immigrated at age forty or fifty, accept a short-term orientation toward work; their purpose is not to develop a working career (this applies to many who had professional occupations in China) but to contribute immediately to the household income for the benefit of younger members. Thus, they are usually content with what they have in Chinatown.

Third, immigration and employment in Chinatown creates a specific sociocultural situation in which low-wage work does not spontaneously exploit and impoverish workers. Rather, it is considered a time-honored path to social mobility. In Chinatown, there is a consensus that low wages are compensated for by the savings of time and effort involving in finding "good" jobs in the larger labor market, by the choice of working longer hours and more days, by a familiar work environment where English is not required, and by the prospect of learning the skills of a trade, and accumulating capital for eventual transition to business or home ownership (Zhou 1992).

However, acceptance of substandard wages and labor practices does not necessarily suggest that immigrant Chinese women are docile and retiring. Rather, they use their past work experience as a point of reference in evaluating their current position in Chinatown and perceive their struggle between home and the workplace as part of the struggle to achieve the American Dream. For these women, immigration is a process; and in the earlier stages of immigrant adaptation at least, survival is more important to them than their own rights in the workplace.

Our analysis has produced results implying that immigrant incorporation is not a simple unilateral process from community to individuality. We believe that menial, low-wage work in Chinatown's garment factories cannot be viewed solely from a frame of analysis which treats men as women's reference group, nor can it be understood from a frame of analysis which compares immigrant working women with American middle-class women. For immigrant women, the choice of reference group is a result of the specific sociocultural conditions which brought them to the United States; and many compare their current situation to their own past, perceiving immigration to the United States as a process of long-term social mobility for their families.
Our study raises some questions about the role of ethnic enclave economies in facilitating, or impeding, long-term economic mobility. Do ethnic economies benefit from purposely keeping their co-ethnic members from adapting to American society, or do they provide their co-ethnic members with an alternative to compensate for lingering labor market disadvantages? Is low-wage employment in ethnic economies an effective strategy for co-ethnic members to fight poverty, or is it a “trap” in a dead-end situation? Should public policy be directed in discouraging or promoting ethnic economies? In our opinion, the key issue is less what kind of jobs ethnic economies offer, but whether ethnic economies open employment or self-employment opportunities otherwise unavailable for co-ethnic members. In Chinatown, the availability of jobs enables immigrant women to become major players in the struggle for survival and adaptation to American society. Their wage labor is an indispensable part of the collective family effort for social mobility; and the payoff for earlier stints of low-wage work contributes to the socioeconomic gains of the family, as commonly seen in entrepreneurship, home ownership, and, for many, educational and occupational attainments of their children. The work experience of immigrant Chinese women suggests that, for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, it is difficult to achieve long-term social mobility merely through individual efforts. The ethnic community, the family, ethnic networks, and ethnic normative structures function to support or constrain individual economic behavior to facilitate economic success. Therefore, policies dealing with those groups mired in poverty and confined to survival at the margins of society should put more emphasis on community development in connection to the promotion of individual education and job training.

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NOTES

4. Fieldwork data were collected by periodic observations in Chinatown and through extensive interviews with garment workers and entrepreneurs. We also interviewed community leaders, community organizers and union activists, investors, bankers, real estate agents, and long-time residents. The snowball sampling method was used in selecting about 60 informants. The authors (one of whom is a native from Canton), conducted all of the face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews with informants during the 1988-1989 period. Follow-up field observations and some six follow-up interviews were conducted between 1991 and 1992. For the sake of confidentiality, only pseudo names of the interviewees are used.
5. The War Brides Act was passed on December 28 1945 to allow wives of members of the American armed forces to enter the United States. The following year fiancées of American soldiers were allowed to immigrate. Public Law 271. United States Statutes at Large: 1945. Vol. 59, Part II, Public Laws, p. 659.


15. Personal interview with Mrs. Liang, January 1989.


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