

Julie Ren (LSE) – Paul Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman*

One of the largest public lynchings in American history took place in 1871 in Los Angeles when a mob physically tortured and hung 18 Chinese people on the street. The next day, “the heroes of the raid paraded the streets of the town, displayed their booty, and were acclaimed by the mob. As a result of a subsequent grand jury investigation, one hundred fifty men were indicted for this murderous assault, but of those, only six were sentenced and they were soon released” (Siu 1987: 50). It reflected the tense anti-Chinese political environment in which the Chinese Exclusion Act would be passed through Congress about ten years later. The act would endure world wars and the Great Depression, barring Chinese immigration into the U.S. for 60 years as well as restricting the movement of Chinese already in the U.S. Further exacerbating the everyday lives of Chinese in California were state taxes and fines imposed on specifically Chinese businesses and residences that functionally rendered their lives illegal in California, and prompting them to disperse to other areas of the country (ibid: 51). This served as the backdrop for Paul Siu’s study of *The Chinese Laundryman* in Chicago.

In considering the enduring relevance of Siu’s study, a brief exposition on the material and a critical evaluation of the conditions in which Siu’s study is published serves to underline the contention that the relevance and generalizability of ethnographic works are situated in systems of knowledge production with an acutely parochial bias towards theory-building. This remains a challenge for urban theory today, and is perhaps particularly relevant for urban China researchers.

A brief exposition

The research for the *The Chinese Laundryman* began in 1938, and much of the cited material dates to the late 1930s and early 1940s. At the time of the research, Chinese men outnumbered women more than 4 to 1, and were seventy four times more likely to work in a laundry than any other occupation (Siu 1987: 250, 2). To different degrees, this occupational phenomenon is tied to the limited education of most of the Chinese immigrants to the U.S., as well as the rise of the young white-collar working class that served as the customer base for the laundry (ibid: 41). The lack of language skills and educational opportunity implied that “communication between the laundryman and his relatives and friends in China is far closer than with his next-door neighbors in America. His social contacts with people other than his fellow Chinese in this country tend to be commercial and impersonal. This is a case of social isolation” (ibid: 2). Thus, focusing on one ethnicity, gender, industry and city, the study explores the experience of social isolation connected to all these aspects of the group.

The figure of the sojourner serves as the conceptual cornerstone of *The Chinese Laundryman*; one of their primary characteristics is the temporality of their stay. The laundry is not the dream, but serves only as a temporary, necessary means of securing a better future. “No Chinese laundryman, as far as I know, has every seriously attempted to organize his life around the laundry, saying, ‘I feel at home in this country and laundry work is my life, my career, and my ambition. I hope to be a prosperous laundryman.’ He tends, on the contrary, to be interested in the quickest way to save money and make a return trip to his home. That is why, perhaps, he is willing to work so hard” (Siu 1987: 122). Indeed, Siu’s interviews render an unambiguous portrait of the temporary disposition towards laundry work, and the imperative of return:

“It is a very hard job, sure enough. But there is nothing else to do. This is the kind of life we have to take in America. I, as one of the many, do not like to work in the laundry, but what else can I do? You’ve got to take it; that’s all.” (119-120)

“We Chinese who are in this country are like convicts serving a term” (128)

“People think I am a happy person. I am not. I worry very much. First, I don’t like this kind of life; it is not human life. To be a laundryman is to be just a slave. I work because I have to. If I ever stop working, those at home must stop eating.” (130)

“To die in a foreign land, according to Chinese conventions, is a tragedy” (135)

In the two chapters on the newcomer and the old-timer, these interviews offer different voices that give a coherent view of the conditions in which these men work. It is connected to limited opportunities, familial obligations and the assumption of temporary stays. This narrative of return is complicated by the Chinese Exclusion Act, the losses incurred during the Great Depression as well as the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. Thus, rather than a sense of entrepreneurial optimism, the men included in the study express a feeling of entrapment. This feeling is particularly salient in the chapters that describe gambling, sex and leisure time – all marked by different forms of exclusion.

Within the story of the sojourn, therefore, there is a story about place and about being Chinese in America. “Three generations of exclusion had given the Chinese in America a feeling of insecurity and inferiority, and the consciousness of being discriminated against” (209). The sojourner, in this way, is ultimately marked not by the journey but by the experience in place. Siu’s final analysis comparing the American missionary in China and the Chinese laundry man in America underscores this point: “The degree of influence of the functional roles of the job in the social order of the respective countries of sojourn seems to be in two extremes. The work of the mission has virtually upset every institution of the folk society, while the laundryman serves only in the purely symbiotic level of the urban community in the struggle for survival” (301).

The figure of the sojourner can be found in contemporary urban research on both transnational and rural to urban migration research. From the studies on remittances to the separation of rural families, from immigrant and ethnic economies in general to the study of “overseas Chinese” in particular, from studies researching ideas of home and belonging to studies of masculinity and the performance of gender, themes throughout *The Chinese Laundryman* touch on a vast repertoire of urban research.

The parochialism of urban theory

One of the notable aspects of the UVA workshop program are the dates and the publishers for the seminal Chicago School monographs selected to be reviewed. Of the 11 books, all are published before 1942 by the University of Chicago Press except for Paul Siu. Siu’s work was published by New York University in 1987. How did this come to be, and what might it reveal about knowledge production, particularly as it relates to urban theory?

John Kuo Wei Tchen would stumble across *The Chinese Laundryman* as an unpublished dissertation in 1980 while working on his research about Chinatowns. In his *Editor’s Introduction*, he recounts seeking out Paul

Siu, who had retired from a professorial career marked by intolerance institutionally and interpersonally, until serving as the chairman of the department at the Detroit Institute of Technology. This is echoed in Tchen's description of the publishing process, "This work should have been published long ago. The reason it wasn't? The consequence of a subtle cultural discrimination process" (Tchen 1987: xxiv). More specifically, Tchen details that "The University of Chicago Press felt that his dissertation was not sufficiently 'marketable' for publication" and recounts how "Dr. Siu was told by the University of Chicago Press that a book about Chinese launderers would not sell but that a book on 'sojourners' might" (ibid: xxxiv and footnote 36). Indeed, Siu would publish an article on the figure of the sojourner in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1952).

Yet the substantive material ensconced in the book remained unpublished, the ethnographic details, the maps of the proliferation of laundries, the images of advertising and ticket stubs, the tables integrating immigration patterns, the letters, the newspaper advertisements, and the extensive interviews –all serving as the basis for the concept of the sojourner, remained unpublished until after Paul Siu died.

The Chicago School's "Eurocentrism" (ibid: xxx) reflects the backgrounds of most of their key figures, but it also is a reminder of the institutional and historical context in which these key texts are developed.

"The Chinks are all right if they remain in their place. I don't mind their working in the laundry business, but they should not go any higher than that" (Siu 1987: 22).

Provided to Siu by Burgess and Blumer, this quotation was from a set of interview materials that detailed the experiences that college students had with Chinese laundrymen and serve as the basis for "Chapter 2: The Chinese Laundryman in the Eyes of the American Public." They also evoke a sense of unease when reflecting on Siu's professional career, and his "place" in the field in which he worked. Siu's book dedication is to Burgess as his "teacher and friend," and it is likewise difficult to imagine the discussion they might have had about this material, and the place of the Chinese in America.

Though the discriminatory context in which Siu was working has changed, there are echoes of University of Chicago Press's concerns about what makes for marketable research that remain familiar today. This may be particularly true for researchers working on urban China. Despite the eruption of research on cities in China, the publications remain relegated to a kind of empirical case position, in the "shadows" of urban theory-making (McFarlane 2008). Urbanists concerned with this problem might find Siu's experience illuminating for understanding some of the past of urban theory's parochialisms (See e.g. Edensor and Jayne 2012; Robinson 2015). It raises the uncomfortable question: Why did Wirth's study of "The Ghetto" become a seminal work on the concept of ghettos, and not about Jewish communities, while Siu's work serves as a reference for publications about Chinese Americans or Asian Americans rather than the experience of immigration?

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