

Moving On:  
Chinese Garment Workers  
after 9/11

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# Two Levels

- Practical everyday concerns and safety net, making ends meet
- How an ethnic enclave transforms, ethnic networks –which is to understand the effects of 9/11 on Chinatown

# Chinatown before 9/11

- 56,000 Asian residents
- 240+ garment factories that employed 14,000 workers
- 250+ restaurants which often had customers from the World Trade site

# Why garment workers?

- Tied in myriad ways to local Chinatown economy
- Via work, shopping, banking, and other services – hair salon, travel agencies

# If garment factories close...

- Thousands of consumers lost
- Affecting all who live in Chinatown and the services that these women support
- What will happen to Chinatown, is the long term question?

# After 9/11

- Phone service disrupted for weeks
- Street closures
- 40+ - 70+ factories have closed
- Most factories shed workers
- 3500+ garment workers lost jobs

# Current conditions...

- Remaining factories have long term contracts or very steady orders (like hospital & American military uniforms)
- Majority of shops do not have more than 2-3 days of work, \$100/week
- Competition for available jobs

# Current conditions...

- Younger women working (those with childcare)
- Hoping to retain health insurance
- Waiting for retraining classes
- Workers do not want to risk losing retraining benefits

# Data

- Interviewed 61 (2 men)
- Summer and Fall 2002
- ESL classes at two Chinatown sites
- Cantonese
- 90-120 min each
- \$10 payment

# Demographics

- Average age is 53, youngest was 38 oldest was 62
- Educ-majority junior high, highest was HS, many only elementary
- Only 5 non-citizens (green card)

# Safety Net

- Unemployment insurance (not all)
- 9/11 Relief (not all)
- Health insurance
  - ◆ Disaster Relief Medicaid (expired)
  - ◆ Child Health Plus
  - ◆ Family Health Plus

# Making Ends Meet

- Husbands – many not in Chinatown restaurants, also do not have health insurance from work
- Children – older children (late 20s and 30s) often helped – paid rent, utility bills
- Parent's SSI, husband's pension
- Loans from other relatives
- Gov't housing, only 1 had food stamps
- Personal savings

# Job seeking

- First time they looked for jobs
- English skills is cure all
- Little idea of job seeking process
- Those that have tried mentioned humiliation of filling out an application
- Few jobs available to accommodate childcare schedule

# Job seeking and ethnic neighborhood

- Garment workers all Chinese
- Live in ethnic Chinese community
- Few friends with jobs outside of garment; most know no-one
- Very little info on jobs outside of community
- Interests-home health aid, hotel, food prep, childcare, office

# 38 yr old, 16 yrs in US

## ■ Chinatown

- Husband-restaurant
- Sister-garment
- 2 cousins-garment
- 2 cousins-restaurant
- Cousin-dumpling maker
- H's brother/wife –dim sum/garment
- H's brother/wife –cook/garment
- H's sister-garment
- H's sister-dumpling maker
- H's uncle/wife-doctor/pharmacist

## ■ Non-Chinatown

- Sister-pattern maker (midtown)
- Brother-computer (Florida)
- Sister/husband –restaurant (Puerto Rico)
- H's brother –electrician (hotel in midtown)

# 48 yr old, 21 yrs in US

## ■ Chinatown

- Mother-garment
- Sister/husband-garment/waiter
- Sister – garment
- Brother-restaurnat mgr
- Husb's sister/husband-garment/restaurant

## ■ Flushing

- Brother/wife-owns limo service
- Brother's wife-bank supervisor

## ■ Non-Chinatown

- Husband-trading company(NJ)
- Son-accountant (CT)
- Daughter-nurse(CT)
- Sister's husband-chef(midtown)
- Brother – truck driver
- Husband's sister –supermarket (VT)
- Husband's sister-nurse (CA)

# More to do...

- Nuances in larger questions about Chinatown, ethnic economies
- Continue tracking what is happening to buildings, workers and industry