

Life in a Laundry: Chinese in Pre-World War II Yonkers

To the student: This question is based on the accompanying documents. It has been created in order to test your ability to work with historical documents. Some of these documents have been edited for the purposes of this question. As you analyze the documents, try to understand the source of the document and any point of view that is presented in the document.

Historical context: In 1848, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in Sacramento, California. Great numbers of Chinese immigrants entered the western U.S. in the gold rush that followed. When the gold rush ended, Chinese laborers worked on the transcontinental railroad, and thousands more were encouraged to immigrate as laborers. After the railroad was completed, tension increased as Chinese immigrant laborers competed for jobs with white labor. White labor retaliated with discrimination and mob violence, driving many Chinese eastward to New York. By 1880, a growing Chinatown was flourishing in New York City, and Chinese businesses began in other cities of New York. In 1882, Congress passed Exclusion Laws that prevented the immigration of Chinese laborers. The prejudice and discrimination that Chinese immigrants faced made it difficult for them to find a job. In response, many set up restaurants or hand laundries. Laundries took little capital to establish and classified the operators as merchants, an allowed immigration category under Exclusion laws.

Task: Using information from the following documents and your own knowledge of history, answer the questions that follow each document in Part A. Your answers to the questions will help you to accomplish the writing assignment given in Part B.

Part A Short-Answer Questions

Directions: Read and analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions in the space provided. Prepare for the reading of the document(s) by studying vocabulary definitions that are given before each document.

Document 1

NOTE: Insert Database from CD Rom

Document 1: Database created from excerpted records of the New York Chinese Exclusion Index, National Archives and Records Administration, Northeast Region.

Document 2

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Laundries—Chinese

Chung Chas 214 Nepperhan av
Gee Louis 4 Post
Hing Harry 80 Radford
Hop Lee Lau 117 Nepperhan av
Howe Chas 312 New Main
Huie Harry 1038½ McLean av
Jin Chas 103 Ashburton av
Koon Charley 146 Palisade av
Lau Bow 573 Central Park av
Lau Chas 48 Riverdale av
Lau Fong 11 Riverdale av
Lau Tom 319 Saw Mill River rd
Lee Chas 163 Elm
Lee Chen 1205 Yonkers av
Lee Sam 226 Ashburton av
Liberty Hand Laundry 525 S Bway
Lou Charlie 767 Palisade av
Quong Lau S 65a Warburton av
Sem Charley 36 Lawrence
Sing Lee 207 Ashburton av
Sue Wah 248 New Main
Tom Yee 10 Caryl av
Wah Willie H 283 Riverdale av
Wing Donald 99 StAndrews pl
Wo Geo 11 Locust Hill av
Yee Edw A 262 S Bway
Ying Charlie 139 Riverdale av
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Document 2: Chinese Laundries in Yonkers, from 1936 City of Yonkers Directory. Courtesy of Westchester Historical Society.

Document 1 and 2 Short-Answer Questions

1. How many *different* laundries existed in Yonkers in 1936?
2. What road had the most Chinese laundries?
3. Why do you think there were so many Chinese laundries in Yonkers?

Document 3 Vocabulary

Capital: Money.

“The reason why so many Chinese go into the laundry business in this country is because it requires little **capital** and is one of the few opportunities that are open. Men of other nationalities who are jealous of the Chinese, because he is a more faithful worker than one of their people, have raised such a great outcry about Chinese cheap labor that they have shut him out of working on farms or in factories or building railroads or making streets or digging sewers. He cannot practice any trade, and his opportunities to do business are limited to his own countrymen. . . .”

Document 3: Excerpt from Lee Chew, “The Biography of a Chinaman,” from The Independent 55:2829 (February 19, 1903).

Document 3 Short-Answer Questions

1. According to the author, what are two reasons why so many Chinese Americans went into the laundry business?
2. What jobs have Chinese American labor been “shut” out of working?

Document 4 Vocabulary

Inexhaustible: Unending.

Patronage: Business, support.

TO THE PUBLIC:

MEN FROM CHINA come here to do LAUNDRY WORK. The Chinese Empire contains 600,000,000 (six hundred millions) inhabitants.

The supply of these men is inexhaustible.

Every one doing this work takes BREAD from the mouths of OUR WOMEN.

So many have come of late, that to keep at work, they are obliged to cut prices.

And now, we appeal to the public, asking them will they be partners to a deal which is only one of their many onward marches in CRUSHING OUT THE INDUSTRIES OF OUR COUNTRY from our people by grasping them themselves. Will you oblige the AMERICAN LAUNDRIES to CUT THE WAGES OF THEIR PEOPLE by giving your patronage to the CHINAMEN?

We invite you to give a thorough investigation of the STEAM LAUNDRY BUSINESS of the country; in doing so you will find that not only does it GIVE EMPLOYMENT TO A VAST NUMBER OF WOMEN, but a great field of labor is opened to a great number of mechanics of all kinds whose wages are poured back into the trade of the country.

If this undesirable element "THE CHINESE EMIGRANTS" are not stopped coming here, we have no alternative but that we will have California and the Pacific Slope's experience, and the end will be that our industries will be absorbed UNLESS we live down to their animal life.

We say in conclusion that the CHINAMAN is a labor consumer of our country without the adequate returns of prosperity to our land as is given by the labor of our people to our glorious country.

Our motto should be:

OUR COUNTRY, OUR PEOPLE, GOD, AND OUR NATIVE LAND.

Pioneer Laundry Workers Assembly, K. of L. Washington, D.C.

Document 4: "China's Menace to the World," Thomas Magee, Knights of Labor. Washington, D.C., 1878. From "African American Perspectives: Pamphlets from the Daniel A.P. Murray Collection, 1818-1907. Library of Congress. Available online at www.loc.gov.

Document 4 Short-Answer Questions

1. Who wrote the above document?
2. Who did laundry work before Chinese laundries began doing it?
3. Judging by Document 4, what attitude did white labor have towards Chinese immigrants?

Document 5

“They (the Chinese) become laundrymen here simply because there is no other occupation by which they can make money as surely and quickly. The prejudice against the race has much to do with it. They are fine cooks, neat and faithful servants, and above all, very skillful mechanics at any trade they have a mind to try. In the Western States, they are used in as many different positions as any other foreigners, and the laundry business is occupied only by those who fail to find other employment.

“But here in New York as yet there is no other alternative. Many an able-minded man as well as skillful mechanic who came to America to better his condition may be found wielding the polishing-irons in a New York Chinese laundry.”

Document 5: Excerpt from Wong, Chin Foo. “The Chinese in New York.” Cosmopolitan 5 (March-October 1888): 297-311.

Document 5 Short-Answer Questions:

1. Why does the writer believe Chinese become laundryman, and what attitude “has much to do with it”?

Document 6 Vocabulary

Premium: Amount of excess paid over the value, in this case, similar to interest.

Whey: A Chinese tradition to gather money for beginning new businesses.

Invariably: Always.

Principal: Sum of money lent and yielding interest.

“Suppose I have an established laundry, and want to borrow two hundred dollars at a certain percent **premium**, but I cannot find any one Chinaman who is able to loan me the amount. I put up a notice in Mott Street that upon such and such a day I wish to make a “**whey**” of twenty men, who all are supposed to be situated like myself, each wanting to borrow two hundred dollars. When we twenty borrowers all come together, we each put down ten dollars. Then each one secretly writes upon a slip of paper the amount of interest he is willing to give to get the two hundred dollars. These slips are carefully sealed and thrown into a bowl. At a given time they are opened, and to the highest bidder goes the two hundred dollars, less the interest, which is **invariably** deducted immediately from the **principal**. Frequently as high as four dollars is offered for the use of ten dollars for a single month. In such cases each of the nineteen other borrowers gives to the lucky one only six dollars apiece for the ten dollars apiece which they make him pay next month. Then the next highest bidder gets the two hundred dollars, less the interest he offered, and so on, until the entire twenty, at twenty different times, have obtained the use of this two hundred dollars; but the one that comes the last, having offered the least interest of them all, reaps the harvest of the “whey.” This method is adopted by most Chinese laundrymen, in New York and other large cities, to open new laundries.”

Document 6: Excerpt from Wong, Chin Foo. “The Chinese in New York.” Cosmopolitan 5 (March-October 1888): 297-311.

Document 6 Short-Answer Questions:

1. How did some Chinese obtain a “loan” so that they could begin a laundry business?
2. Why did you think that the Chinese did not simply go to a bank for a loan?
3. How would the “whey” system effect the number of Chinese laundries that were able to begin business?

Document 7 Short-Answer Questions:

1. Approximately how many Chinese worked in hand laundries in New York?
2. What were the working conditions like in a Chinese laundry?
3. According to the author, what health problems developed after working in Chinese laundries?

Document 8



Document 8: LC-USF34-013506-C. Parks, Gordon. Washington, D.C, Johnnie Lew's Chinese laundry. *America from the Great Depression to World War II: Black-and-White Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945.. Library of Congress, available online at www.loc.gov.*

Document 8 Short-Answer Questions

1. Document 8 shows the interior of a typical Chinese laundry of the depression era. What adjective would you use to describe the room, and why?
2. What would it be like to work ten-hour days in such a room?

