

Politicizing Motherhood
Chinese Garment Workers' Campaign for
Daycare Centers in New York City, 1977-1982

Xiaolan Bao

What impact does women's labor force participation have on transforming their positions in the family and their perceptions of life?¹ This has been an issue of major concern to scholars of women and labor in the last two decades. Various conclusions, often bifurcated and sometimes conflicting, have been reached in the studies of different groups of working women, focusing on different aspects of their lives, and written from different perspectives. Varied as the conclusions are, these studies have effectively challenged any simplistic attempt to dichotomize family and work by revealing the complex ways in which they intersect to shape the lives of working women.²

Unlike many studies that try to understand working women by studying the various forces that shape their lives, this chapter places women workers at the center of its analysis. Through an in-depth examination of a campaign for daycare centers initiated and organized by Chinese women garment workers in New York City, it reveals women immigrant workers' agency in reshaping their destinies in their new homeland and addresses some of the issues raised in the scholarship on women and labor.

The questions to be asked include: What are the major factors that have contributed to the rise of labor activism among the Chinese women workers? What strategies did they use, and how did these strategies contribute to their final success? What political implications did this campaign have for the workers, their community, and the labor movement in the United States? In what ways can this campaign complicate our understanding of women immigrant workers in the United States?

The analysis in this chapter is primarily based on information in the Chinese community newspapers and the author's interviews with individuals in the community from 1989 to 1998 for a larger project.³ Some of these individuals have actively participated in the daycare campaign. This study begins with a brief discussion of the history of the Chinese community in New York City, the impact of the Chinese garment industry on the city and the community, and women's changing roles in the Chinese immigrant working-class families. It then proceeds to analyze the causes of the campaign and to examine its development, and it explores the campaign's political impact on the women workers, their families, and their community, as well as its implications for the study of women and labor.

Women, Family, and the Garment Industry in New York's Chinatown: A Brief History

Unlike the situation in the major Chinese communities on the West Coast, the garment industry was not a part of the landscape of New York's Chinatown until the late 1960s. A principal reason for its absence was the scarcity of women in the community. Although the gender ratio was unequal in almost all Chinese communities in the United States before the end of the Second World War, it was even more so in New York City. By 1940, when the Chinese male-to-female ratio had dropped to about three to one nationally and two to one in California, it remained at more than six to one in New York City, and at more than nine to one among those fifteen years of age and older.⁴ Given the garment industry's long-standing tradition of relying on low-paid female immigrant labor, it is not accidental that New York's Chinatown had not been a center for the city's garment production.

The Chinese gender ratio began to change during and after the Second World War, following a series of changes in U.S. immigration laws.⁵ Women formed an overwhelming majority of the Chinese immigrants in the immediate postwar era. Between 1947 and 1952, 90 percent of the Chinese immigrants who entered the United States were women.⁶ Since many of these new immigrant women settled in New York City, the city's Chinese gender ratio dipped from more than 6 men to 1 woman in 1940 to 1.7 to 1 in 1960.⁷

Women's immigration in the post-World War II era has revitalized the economy of the community. For decades, restaurants and laundries remained the city's two major Chinese businesses and employed primarily men. After the war, with married women entering the community in significant numbers, many of the Chinese restaurants and laundries were transformed into family businesses and grew significantly. Women's economic contributions were largely ignored, however, because they worked primarily at home. Particularly in the Chinese family laundry businesses, women, sometimes with their children, worked in the living quarters behind or above the store, while fulfilling their household responsibilities, and their husbands took care of the family businesses at the storefront, dealing with their customers. Since most of the businesses registered under the names of their male family heads, and since women's labor at home was largely ignored by the society, it should come as no surprise that as late as 1950, U.S. Census data show that less than one-quarter of the adult Chinese females in New York State were in the labor force.⁸ The percentage was even lower among those who were foreign-born.⁹ This societal refusal to acknowledge women's domestic contribution, coupled with the peculiar setting of their family businesses, reinforced the concept of traditional gender roles in Chinese working-class families.

Things changed significantly after 1965, when Congress passed an amendment to the McCarran-Walter Act. The family reunification preferences and the abolition of the discriminatory national quota system in this amendment triggered "chain immigration" from Asian countries. By the mid-1970s, Asian immigrants who arrived as family members of U.S. citizens or permanent residents constituted four-fifths of the total number of quota immigrants from Asia, and nearly one-fifth of those who arrived between 1965 and 1990 were Chinese.¹⁰

New York City, as the "port of immigrants," received the largest number of Chinese immigrants of any city in the nation. More than one-fifth of the Chinese immigrants who arrived between 1966 and 1976 registered New York City as their place of intended residence. With a fourfold increase in their numbers—growing from 32,831 to 124,764—Chinese began to account for 1.8 percent of the city's population. Women continued to form more than one-half of the Chinese immigrants coming into the city. As a result, the city's Chinese gender ratio reached a balance in 1980.¹¹

Many of the Chinese immigrants who arrived in the city during this period lacked skills marketable in the United States. The 1979 unpublished data of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) show that 70 percent of the Chinese immigrants who came to the city and reported their previous occupations had been blue-collar workers. This lack of skills was even more pronounced among immigrant women: only 28 percent of them reported having any previous employment experience, and of those who had been employed, 30 percent had worked in a factory and only 8.2 percent had experience in white-collar positions.¹² However, for the survival of their families they took whatever jobs that were available to them in their new homeland, since many of their husbands worked in restaurants or other low-paid labor sectors. Hence, new Chinese women immigrants became a much-desired labor reservoir for the city's garment industry.¹³

Chinese-owned garment shops first appeared in New York's Chinatown in the late 1940s, but their numbers remained small: about three in 1952 and eight in 1960. Many factors contributed to the growth of the Chinese garment industry in the late 1960s.¹⁴ The most important one was the emergence of ample, inexpensive Chinese female immigrant labor at a time when the city's garment industry was severely crippled by a labor shortage. As Chinese women entered the industry in large numbers, the number of jobs in the Chinatown garment production center grew from eight thousand to sixteen thousand between 1965 and 1980, while those in the midtown garment center fell from forty thousand to twenty-five thousand. By 1981, Chinatown had become the largest garment production center in New York City, contributing at least \$125 million annually to the city's economy in the form of wages and profits.¹⁵

The growth of the Chinatown garment industry was vital to the city's industry. As early as the 1920s, capital from the garment industry began to flow out of New York City. Although the absolute numbers of employees in the city's garment industry continued to grow, its share in the national industry declined rapidly. The growth of the Chinatown garment industry was not able to curb the continual decline of the city's garment industry, but it did help moderate it.¹⁶ By the early 1980s, producing two-thirds of the sportswear for the manufacturers affiliated with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) Local 23-25—work that otherwise would

have been shipped out of the city—the Chinatown manufacturing center had effectively anchored the garment industry to New York City.¹⁷

The growth of the Chinatown garment industry also revitalized the economy of the Chinese community in the city. Beginning in the 1940s, and particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the traditional Chinese laundry businesses were gradually edged out by the introduction of washing machines and dryers into the home and by the rise of laundromats in the city.¹⁸ It was at this historical juncture, when the Chinese working-class families were hard hit by the decline of this traditional trade, that the Chinese garment industry began to take off. As early as the 1970s, it replaced the laundry business as one of the major sources of income for these families. By the early 1980s, four out of ten Chinese households in the city and six out of ten in Chinatown had members working in the garment industry. Annually contributing at least \$32 million to the economic activities in Chinatown and \$14 million to those in other Chinese neighborhoods in the city, the garment industry was central to the economy of the Chinese community in New York City.¹⁹

The impact of the garment industry on the community was not merely economic but also cultural. With plenty of employment opportunities provided by the Chinatown garment industry, the number of the Chinese women in the labor force grew rapidly. As early as 1970, almost half of adult Chinese women were gainfully employed. The percentage continued to rise in the following decade.²⁰ Like their European predecessors in the city's garment industry, the Chinese immigrant women workers were hard-working and determined to build a better life in their new homeland. However, unlike their predecessors, more than 86 percent of Chinese immigrant women in 1980 were married, and many had young children.²¹ In a community where more than half the households were working-class and had members working in the ethnic economic sector, this high rate of married women's labor participation in the garment industry had a strong impact on transforming its working-class family culture. This cultural transformation has to be understood in terms of the economic structure of the community as well as women's increasingly important role in their families.

Since most of the working-class Chinese men worked in the low-paying labor sector, and their jobs offered no employment benefits, women's employment in the

garment industry became crucial for the well-being of their families. Both their economic contribution, which was indispensable to their families, and the benefits, particularly the family health insurance that came with their employment in the unionized garment industry, which their families would not otherwise have been able to obtain, were essential. The prolonged absence of the husbands due to long hours of work also led many women garment workers to play dual roles as major “rice winners” and care providers in the family. A new type of mother-centered culture thus began to emerge in many Chinese working-class families.

What was the impact of this change on women? It was mixed. Like working mothers almost all over the world, Chinese women garment workers had to shoulder double and even triple burdens in their lives. As family tensions were aggravated by the reversed gender roles, some women had to endure additional stress in their lives from strained relationships with their husbands and other family members.²² However, in many families, women’s increased responsibilities also won them growing respect from their family members, particularly their children. Many sons and daughters of garment workers, some of whom are now playing important roles in the community, have singled out their mothers as the driving force in their lives.²³ In some families, the increasingly interdependent relationship between the women workers and their husbands also had the potential to create a more equal relationship between them.

How did women workers themselves react to these changes? Many whom I interviewed took pride in the increased respect they enjoyed in their families and defined the goal of their lives as to fight for a better future for their families. This reaction should not be interpreted simply as the influence of an ethnic culture that valued traditional gender roles. Rather, it must also be understood in the context of their lives after their immigration to the United States. In a new social environment that offered them few alternatives, many women have developed their own visions of a better life. Influenced by a culture that considers education a major channel of upward mobility and that holds children responsible for the lives of their aging parents, the prospect that their wage-earning labor could help them provide their children with a better education led women to see the positive aspect of their labor in the garment shops, however hard it was. The dynamics generated by this interaction

of the influence of their ethnic culture and their realities encouraged them to struggle against any conditions at their workplaces that they perceived to be in conflict with their goals. Only in this context can we understand why, from the outset of the Chinatown garment industry, many Chinese women immigrant workers who appeared to be so culturally bound would have engaged in various forms of resistance to mistreatment imposed on them in the shops.

Like their counterparts in the earlier history of the city's garment industry, most Chinatown shops were contract shops. To make a profit out of the margin between payments offered by the manufacturers and the piece rates they offered their workers, many Chinese employers stretched the limits of labor laws. They argued that the flexible work hours in the garment shops had offered women workers an opportunity to balance their work and family responsibilities. However, the degree of flexibility that the workers presumably enjoyed was more myth than reality. Since work in the garment industry was seasonal and operated at piece rates, the working environment on the shop floor was highly competitive.

Nevertheless, for all the disadvantages of their workplaces, working in the garment shops provided the Chinese immigrant women with an important window to the world beyond their own ethnic setting. Unlike other ethnic enterprises in Chinatown, most of the Chinatown garment shops were unionized. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union began to organize the Chinese workers in the 1950s. With Chinese workers joining the union in increasingly large numbers, as early as 1971, Local 23-25 had become the largest ILGWU local and had the largest Chinese membership of any U.S. trade union. Being part of the city's garment industry and the only industry in Chinatown that was unionized by a major national labor organization, the Chinatown garment industry was structurally bound to the city's and the nation's economy. It could serve as an important link between the Chinese community and the larger society.

There were, however, problems embedded in the unionization of the Chinatown garment industry. A major one was the union's indifference to the particular interests of its Chinese members. This was reflected in its attitude toward the workers' childcare problems. Nevertheless, unionization also exposed the women workers to conditions outside their own ethnic community. The union benefits they enjoyed

allowed them to envision a better life in their new homeland. Learning to pressure leaders of their union and other institutions to improve their lives thereby became an important component as well as an index of their acculturation in the United States. This was demonstrated fully in their campaign for daycare centers from 1977 to 1982.

Politicizing Motherhood: The Campaign for Daycare Centers and Its Impact

To a person outside the community, the initiative of the campaign may appear to be accidental. However, it was by no means accidental to members of the community. The lack of childcare facilities was a problem faced by working women in almost all ethnic groups in New York City, but it was even more salient among Chinese women workers. This had a lot to do with their particular childbearing patterns, caused by the economic conditions of their families.

The 1983 *Chinatown Garment Industry Study* reports that the birthrate of New York's Chinese community dropped from 22.4 per 1,000 people in the 1970s to 13.1 in 1980, despite the fact that Chinese women of childbearing ages immigrated into the city in large numbers during this period. The study suggests that the drop was largely caused by the economic condition of many new immigrant families and the high cost of living in the city.²⁴ My interviews with Chinese garment workers further reveal that not only did they choose to have fewer children, but they also preferred shorter intervals between the births of their children. The women workers reasoned that raising more than one child at a time would add only a little more work than raising one, but longer intervals between children would shorten their work years. Since most of their husbands worked in low-paid jobs, their families could not afford to have the women stay out of the wage-earning labor force for any long period.

This particular childbearing pattern accentuated Chinese women workers' need for childcare facilities. Unfortunately, such facilities were few in Chinatown. In 1981, for example, when union members in Chinatown shops had an estimated one thousand preschool children and approximately ten thousand children needed childcare services, there were only about twelve daycare centers in the Chinatown neighborhood, with a capacity for serving fewer than twenty-five hundred children.²⁵

The waiting list was so long that even if their parents put them on a list from the day they were born, the majority of children were not admitted to a daycare center before they were ready for kindergarten. There were also few daycare centers in the city; most were expensive and difficult to find. Many workers noted that even if they managed to find such a facility, the fees usually amounted to 50 or 60 percent of their income from working in a Chinatown shop.

Many therefore took their children to work. Older children worked side by side with their mothers after school, contributing to the family income. Those too young to work played on the floor, and babies were placed in cardboard boxes next to their sewing mothers. Taking children to the shops was both illegal and dangerous. The shops not only contained dust, which was harmful to the children's health, but also had potentially fatal hazards. On February 22, 1979, for example, in an old building with a broken elevator, a twelve-year-old girl fell to her death as she left her mother's workplace.²⁶ Frightened by the dreadful shop conditions, many workers left their children at home, without adult supervision. This was equally risky. In 1982, on the eve of Mother's Day, when a mother was working in a Chinatown garment shop, her ten-year-old daughter at home, in the care of her teenage sister, fell to her death while trying to reach an air conditioner placed on an unstable windowsill.²⁷

Left with no better options, some women simply sewed at home, doing piecework. This was by no means a better solution. Women had to accept whatever work, and at whatever rates, offered by their employers. Although most of them were fully aware of the exploitative nature of their work, working at home remained the only possibility for them to resolve the conflict between their family responsibilities and economic need. Regrettably, for years, leaders of their union and major institutions in their own community ignored the workers' need for childcare facilities. It was therefore not surprising that the workers decided to take matters into their own hands.

In September 1977, when a public school building in Chinatown was available for other uses, a group of workers who were also union members issued their first call for a daycare center. They published an open letter to the union in the Chinese community newspapers, which begins as follows:

We are members of Local 23-25 and workers who are busy with their work. It is

difficult for us to choose between our work and our children. If we bring them to work, it is very dangerous; the union will not allow that, and it is also illegal; if we leave them at home, it is also extremely dangerous. Among members of our parents' association, some leave their children at home, others bring them to work. We do not know what to do, especially on public holidays when we have to work.... It is indeed very hard on us working mothers who are torn between their financial need and their children. Children become victims under such circumstances. We are forced to leave them at home without any care.

In truth, a generation gap already emerged in many of our families due to parental negligence or insufficient care. This problem is aggravated by the fact that most parents do not know English and cannot help their children when they have difficulty with their home-work. This lack of a loving mother's attention will lead to misunderstanding and problems in the future. With all this adding to our already very stressful life, our work is made even harder and our children find us even more disappointing. We are indeed torn between our work and our children.

The women workers then reported in great detail the childcare problems they faced. Shrewdly, they emphasized that they did not realize how important it was for a child to go to a daycare center until they saw how much their children had benefited from an after-school center run by a group of volunteer students at the City University of New York. These students, as they put it, "understood the difficulties in our lives and had kindly helped us to solve the problems." The women said they were saddened to see that the center was closing down because the building was reclaimed by the city but "saw a gleam of hope" when they found out that the building in Chinatown that had housed the former P.S. 23 was available. They decided to appeal to the union for help.

In the letter, they emphasized the importance of their cause and made concrete suggestions to the union about how it could help them pursue their cause. In the end, they reiterated their concern: "We, therefore, sincerely hope that the union will take our request seriously, extend us a hand in this matter, and will not let us give up halfway and end up being disappointed."²⁸ This carefully written letter did not receive any response from the union, however.

The call for a daycare center was reissued in October 1981, after a lapse of four

years. About fifteen women workers decided to petition the union when they sat down to talk about their lives and the difficulty of finding childcare facilities surfaced again. This time, they were determined to fight to the end. To demonstrate workers' need for day-care centers, they spent their precious lunch hours climbing up and down the narrow stairs of the tenement and industrial buildings in Chinatown to gather signatures of support. The response was immediate. As Katie Quan, a longtime labor activist in the Chinese community who herself was a garment worker and a daycare activist at that time, recalled, "We went up and down the factories using the bosses' P.A. systems to say what we were there for, and about 99 percent of the people in every shop signed."²⁹

Fearful that the union would not take them seriously, the women workers decided to garner support in their own community. On October 9, 1981, with crying babies in their arms, the women workers met with community newspaper reporters at the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association (CSWA) office.³⁰ At this press conference, rather than emphasizing the contradictions they faced in their lives as both mothers and workers, they gave the press a detailed report of the difficulties working-class families faced due to the lack of childcare facilities in the community.

As they argued, working-class families in the community would face severe financial problems if women simply stayed home taking care of their children, because the income earned by their husbands could be easily exhausted. However, if women sewed at home, not only would it make the situation difficult for the union to regulate piece rates, but it would also be harmful to the health of the children. Furthermore, they argued that women who sewed at home could not concentrate on their work, nor could they provide their children with adequate attention. As a result, cases in which children were injured due to accidental falling or fighting with each other while their mothers were sewing were not uncommon in these workers' families. To divert their children's attention from one another, some workers who sewed at home simply turned on their televisions round the clock, which led to a peculiar phenomenon in their families: two-year-old children were shortsighted and had to wear glasses. Discouraged by the problems those who worked at home faced, some workers placed their children in the care of other women while they were working in the shops. However, they were distressed to find that their wages were

half gone after they paid the caregivers. Some elements in the women's report might be disputed, such as watching television being the sole cause of children's poor eyesight. However, their appeal for support touched the right chords in the community, since the shortage of childcare facilities was an acute and widespread problem in Chinatown.

The daycare activists continued to work closely with the community press after their first press conference. They informed the newspaper reporters of every move they would take or had taken. A major event was their meeting with union leaders, after they had successfully amassed more than twenty-five hundred signatures from workers in Chinatown. To ensure support from the community, they held another press conference prior to the meeting. The women explained to the press that they were not being unreasonable with the union. They were only expecting the union to take the lead in fundraising and to partially finance the future daycare center. Fully aware of the intense political divisions within the community, they made it clear that they were not affiliated with any political organization, nor had they contacted any leaders of such organizations for support. They initiated the campaign simply because of their own experience as working mothers.³¹ By publicizing their purpose for meeting with the union leaders, the women workers drew the community's attention to the event, which exerted a significant degree of pressure on the union before the meeting.

On the day of the meeting, November 11, 1981, the ways in which the women dealt with their own childcare problems were themselves a powerful demonstration of the seriousness of the problem. Four daycare activists, either carrying babies on their backs or holding them in their arms, went to the union headquarters in midtown Manhattan. However, the two sides gave very different reports on the meeting thereafter. Jay Mazur, the secretary-manager of the ILGWU Local 23-25 at that time, described it to the press as "friendly, congenial and open and above board," but the workers did not think so. According to them, the union's attitude was indecisive and evasive. The meeting lasted for almost two hours, with Mazur doing most of the talking, leaving them with little time to present their case. Even though the union leader said he was "100 percent" sympathetic with the workers and that they had his full support, Mazur also insisted that providing daycare was unprecedented in the

history of the local and that the local did not have sufficient resources for this purpose. When the women tried to argue for their case, he became so impatient that he slapped the table, startling a child from her sleep and making her cry. No wonder that one of the workers called him a master of “shadow-boxing” (game of evasion). The meeting did not lead to any immediate result.³²

However, the daycare activists refused to give up. They did not wait for the union’s decision to move on. Rather, they took the initiative to explore potential resources to pursue their cause. In January 1982, for example, when the board of the Confucian Plaza, a high-rise residential building for middle-income families in the Chinatown area, announced its decision to turn its basement into a rental for a daycare center, the women activists wasted no time in jumping at the opportunity and approached the building management. Although their efforts did not lead to a fruitful ending, many community members were moved by their sincerity in fighting for their cause.

In the meantime, the activists also learned to mobilize their fellow workers to support their cause. This effort, as Quan later recalled, proved very challenging. While the activists themselves were inexperienced in organizing, the women workers whom they tried to mobilize were overwhelmed by their work and household responsibilities. It was extremely difficult to find a meeting time to accommodate the schedules of all the workers. It was equally difficult to maintain order when the meetings were finally held. Those who did come talked about daycare centers, their kids, and their families while changing their younger children’s diapers and yelling at their older ones, almost all at once.³³ Nevertheless, the activist workers persisted.

Their dedication won the support of the community. From the outset, responses to their appeal, particularly from the progressive press, were strong and immediate. The *China Daily News* not only publicized every move they took and its outcome but also conducted its own investigation and published a series of reports in early 1982, detailing the childcare problem in the community.³⁴ Sui Fu, a reporter who wrote six out of the seven pieces published in this newspaper, estimated that three-fourths of the young children in the community were left without care when their mothers were working in the garment shops and thus concluded that the need for daycare centers was urgent. Firmly siding with the women workers, he portrayed them as women who had “a very strong sense of family obligations” and who regarded bringing up their

offspring “as a duty bestowed from heaven.”³⁵ Emphasizing the hardships of Chinese working-class families and the acute shortage of daycare centers in Chinatown and elsewhere in the city, he spoke highly of the daycare activists and their cause: “For half a year, the Chinatown workers of Local 23-25 have been soliciting help from every possible source. ... They used their free time to work on the issue.... Their enthusiasm to fight for the interest of their sister workers is indeed *ke ge ke qi* [moving one to sing and cry for them].”³⁶ The newspaper coverage effectively rallied community support for the campaign. With this strong support behind them, the daycare activists were even more determined.

On March 17, 1982, shortly before the beginning of negotiations for a new union contract, the ILGWU Local 23-25 held a meeting to gather support from its members. More than one thousand members attended the meeting, and one-third of them were Chinese. At the meeting, the Chinese daycare activists courageously raised the issue of childcare. They detailed the problems women workers faced and proposed a daycare benefit be included in the new contract. Union leader Jay Mazur again dodged the issue by emphasizing the need to investigate the situation and the union’s lack of financial resources for that purpose. Persistently, the Chinese daycare activists asked how he could be so sure the costs would supercede the amount that the union could afford even before investigating the actual situation and exploring other potential funding sources. The same question was in the mind of almost every Chinatown worker.³⁷

Negotiations for a new union contract began shortly after the meeting. However, the talks were deadlocked when Chinese employers refused to sign the contract, which had been signed by other employers in the city. The Chinese employers claimed that they were underrepresented in the negotiation process and that both the union and the contractors’ association, being dominated by other ethnic groups, ignored their demands. Concerned about the unfavorable outcome of this deadlock, the daycare activists, along with other Chinatown workers, pressured the union to call a strike. When the union finally decided to do so, they again played an important role in mobilizing Chinatown workers, volunteering their time to serve at information centers and phone banks organized by the union. Thanks to their efforts, more than twenty thousand Chinese garment workers took to the streets to attend the two union

rallies on June 24 and July 15. A strike began after the end of the second rally. Although it lasted for only a couple of hours, as the Chinese contractors rushed to sign the contract, it is to date the largest labor strike in the history of New York City's Chinatown. Chinese women garment workers stood firm in defending their right to a union contract in this final showdown with their employers. In doing so, they demonstrated their capacity for militant activism.

Impressed by its Chinese members' determination and collective strength, the union leadership formed a committee to champion a daycare center in Chinatown, almost immediately after the strike. Susan Cowell, then Jay Mazur's assistant, was assigned to lead the committee. As she explored funding sources in the city, the Chinese activists endeavored to locate potential sites in Chinatown for a daycare center. With financial contributions from the union, the employers, and the city, this joint effort between union officials and its Chinese rank-and-file members finally led to the opening of a Chinatown daycare center for the children of women garment workers in late 1983. The formal dedication of this center took place in January 1984, seven years after the Chinese women workers issued their first call.³⁸

This daycare center gained publicity in almost all major city and community newspapers. Although its capacity was limited, offering care for only seventy preschool children per year, it brought the needs of Chinese women workers to the attention of the community and the union. As early as 1983, when a major building was proposed to be built in Chinatown and the discussions about the use of its space ensued, for the first time in the history of New York's Chinatown saving space for a daycare center was placed on the agenda of its decision-making committee, made up of community leaders and union representatives. Shui Mak Ka, a former garment worker and a major organizer of the 1982 strike, who began working in the union's research department after the strike, served on the committee. In 1993, with the union and other institutions contributing to fundraising efforts, the second union-involved daycare center was established in the newly constructed Chung Pak Building at the center of Chinatown. Although the two daycare centers are insufficient in meeting the tremendous needs of working mothers in the community, they are evidence that childcare as an issue could no longer be easily brushed aside by the two major institutions in the lives of Chinese women workers: their community

and the union.

Women, Work, and Family: Some Reflections

The Chinese women workers' campaign for daycare centers allows us to revisit some issues raised in the scholarship on women and labor. Although participation in wage-earning labor does not necessarily transform women's position in the family and their perception of life, it did for many women garment workers in New York's Chinatown. This has to be understood in the changing context of their community and their lives after immigration.

As the economic structure of their community changed, so did the gender roles in many Chinese immigrant working-class families. While changing gender roles might aggravate tensions in many families and add additional burdens on women workers, family life in many cases provided women with emotional support and instilled in them hope and self-esteem in their new homeland. When this increased optimism and confidence contradicted the reality at their workplace, characterized by its low return for workers' hard labor and the union's failure to deliver its promise, it generated an enormous dynamic of labor activism among the workers. Not only the workers' daily resistance on the shop floor but also their determination and courage in initiating and organizing the daycare campaign, which culminated in the historic 1982 strike, demonstrate this labor activism. The Chinese women workers' experiences challenge scholars to enlarge the scope of their investigations to encompass not only workplaces and families but also all major intersections of working women's lives. Without understanding fully the contradictions they encounter at various sites of their lives and how these contradictions intersect to shape their perceptions, one cannot fully understand these working women.

The language and strategy employed by the Chinese daycare activists can also enhance our understanding of the contested meanings of women workers' traditional gender roles. Under different circumstances, the Chinese daycare activists shifted the emphasis in their presentation. However, motherhood remained at the center of their rhetoric. This strategy contributed significantly to the successful outcome of their campaign. To understand why this strategy worked, we need to consider its political

implications in different contexts.

While dealing with leaders of their union, the activist workers emphasized the difficulty of their lives as mothers and workers, as well as the union's responsibility to its members. This approach was effective because it left the union leaders with no legitimacy to publicly deny their request, since the union had long been advocating a pro-family policy and had taken pride in its history of fighting for the interests of its members and their families. However, facing their own community, most of whom still held onto traditional gender roles, no matter how invalid these were in reality, the workers changed the focus of their presentation. Rather than detailing the difficulties in their lives, they emphasized the retarding impact of the lack of childcare facilities on the lives of working-class families and presented themselves as working mothers and wives fighting for their families' interest. By projecting an apolitical image of themselves as concerned and responsible mothers and wives, an image reinforced by the community newspaper coverage, they managed to galvanize the broadest possible support in a relatively conservative community split by political factions.

In both cases, motherhood and the family were politicized. They enabled the daycare activists to gain additional credibility to challenge the authority of their community and the union. In challenging these two largely male-dominated institutions, the workers' role as mothers allowed them to subvert the patriarchal structure under which they operated. The campaign for daycare centers also empowered them in other ways. Through participating in the campaign as working mothers defending their children's interest, they learned about the U.S. political system and labor laws. They also gained experience in delivering public speeches, dealing with establishments such as labor institutions, and organizing workers. All this prepared them to become a new driving force of the U.S. labor movement in the years to come.

It should therefore come as no surprise that many of the daycare activists played an important role in the historic 1982 strike and continued to reform the union from within afterward. In 1984, together with other labor activists, they formed the Chinese Committee of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). Since the committee's founding, the members have actively participated in various union

activities, particularly those aimed at linking their community with the outside world. Some of these workers attended the UN Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1986; others attended the Beijing conference in 1995. By so doing, they have become part of the larger labor and women's movements in the United States and the world. In the course of their struggle, a number of women have risen to leading positions in the union. The most prominent is Katie Quan, who was elected the first Chinese vice president of UNITE in 1997, the union that emerged after the former ILGWU merged with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in 1995.³⁹

The women workers' campaign for daycare centers might not appear as significant as the historic 1982 strike. However, in fostering labor activism among the Chinese women workers and preparing them for future militant action, it can be considered a prelude to the 1982 strike. Unlike the 1982 strike, in which the union claimed a leading role, the daycare campaign was initiated and carried out by the women workers themselves. It challenges scholars to broaden their scope of study and to question their preconception of immigrant women workers. The Chinese women workers' strategy in this campaign has forcefully put to the test any simplistic proclivity to treat their rhetoric as a transparent representation of their lives and their minds. A closer examination of how the women modified their language and self-representation for different situations and the political implications of these variations reveals the workers' agency in shaping their circumstances to achieve their goals. Such an analysis of the meanings embedded in their rhetoric and representation contests stereotypical notions of Chinese immigrant women as passive and bound by traditional ethnic culture. It enables us to better understand their complex lives as working-class women and their potential to become a dynamic force in the U.S. labor movement.

NOTES

¹. This essay is revised and expanded from the discussion of the campaign in my book *Holding Up More than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948-1992* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 185-87. A large part of the discussion about the history of the Chinese garment industry in New

York City also appears in the same book, chap. 3.

2. For essays that explore the interrelationships between various aspects of working women's lives and challenge the dichotomizing of women's private and public lives, see Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *"To Toil the Livelong Day": America's Women at Work, 1780-1980* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby, *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992). For scholarly reflections on the issues raised by Louise Tilly and Joan Scott more than two decades ago in *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), see *Journal of Women's History* 11:3 (Autumn 1999): 9-30.

3. For the larger project, see Bao, *More than Half the Sky*.

4. *U.S. Census of Population*, 1940.

5. They included the repeal of all the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1943, the amendment of the War Bride Act in 1946, and the passing of a series of Displaced Persons and Refugee Relief Acts in the late 1940s and 1950s. On changes in U.S. immigration laws between the 1940s and 1960s, see David Reimers, *Still the Golden Door: The Third World Comes to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 21-29; Roger Daniels and Harry H. L. Kitano, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 16-18; and Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 121, 140-41.

6. See U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (hereafter INS), *Annual Report*, for 1948-1953.

7. *U.S. Census of Population*, 1940 and 1960.

8. *U.S. Census of Population*, 1950.

9. No statistics are available for this category in 1950. However, U.S. Census publications report that only 16 percent of the foreign-born were gainfully employed in 1940, as compared to about a quarter of all adult Chinese women in the city that year. See *U.S. Census of Population*, 1940.

10. *U.S. Census of Population*, 1980.

11. Abeles, Schwartz, Haeckel, and Silverblatt, Inc., *The Chinatown Garment Industry Study* (New York: ILGWU Local 23-25 and the New York Skirt and

Sportswear Association, 1983), 97-98 (hereafter *Study*).

12. *Study*, 98-99, Table 20. However, my interviews show that the majority of the new immigrant women who registered themselves as “housewives,” with an implication of no previous employment experience, had worked on the farm in China or engaged in wage-earning labor at home in Hong Kong. On homeworkers in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, see Janet W. Salaff, *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety or Power in the Family?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 259.

13. See Bao, *More than Half the Sky*, chap.1.

14. *Ibid.*, 66-68.

15. *Study*, 5.

16. The city’s garment industry declined by only 3.6 percent between 1975 and 1996, as compared to 23.6 percent from 1958 to 1974. See Roger Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York’s Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 54; and Mark Levitan, “Opportunity at Work, The New York City Garment Industry” (New York: Community Service Society of New York, 1998), 24.

17. *Study*, 5.

18. While the laundry business employed 42 percent of all gainfully employed Chinese male workers in New York State in 1930, the percentage had dropped to 19.5 percent by 1950 and was less than 16 percent in 1970. See *U.S. Census of Population*, 1930, 1950, and 1960.

19. *Study*, 5.

20. *U.S. Census of Population*, 1970 and 1990.

21. For the percentage of married women among the Chinese women garment workers in 1980, see Min Zhou, *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), Tables 4-2 and 8-3.

22. This also includes their relationship with their mothers-in-law and other members traditionally in an authoritative position in the family. For more details, see Bao, *More than Half the Sky*, chap.5.

23. For example, both Fay Chew, the former director of the New York Chinese American Historical Museum, and Doris Ling-Cohan, an attorney dedicated to

serving the community, are daughters of women garment workers. They both considered their mothers their role models when they looked back on their early lives. For an interview with Cohan, see *Justice* 125:3 (April 1993): 11.

[24](#). *Study*, 93-94.

[25](#). See *China Daily News* (hereafter *CDN*), February 26 and March 3, 1982. The statistics there are different from those given by Katie Quan. Quan noted only three daycare centers, with a capacity of serving five or six hundred children, when ten thousand openings were needed. See Ruth Milkman, "Organizing Immigrant Women in New York's Chinatown: An Interview with Katie Quan," in *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership*, ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1993), 288; and Katie Quan, "Chinese Garment Workers in New York City," *Migration World* 14^{1/2} (1986): 49.

[26](#). *CDN*, February 22, 1979.

[27](#). *CDN*, May 12, 1982.

[28](#). *CDN*, September 21, 1977.

[29](#). Milkman, "Organizing Immigrant Women," 290.

[30](#). *CDN*, November 13, 1982; and Milkman, "Organizing Immigrant Women," 290.

[31](#). *CDN*, November 13, 1981.

[32](#). *CDN*, November 16, 1981.

[33](#). Interviews by the author with Katie Quan, New York, April 27 and 29, 1989, in a mixed language of English and Cantonese. Also see Milkman, "Organizing Immigrant Women," 289.

[34](#). See *CDN*, February 26 and 27; March 3, 8, 15, 17, and 18, 1982.

[35](#). *CDN*, February 27, 1982.

[36](#). *CDN*, March 15, 1982.

[37](#). The above discussion is based on *CDN*, March 20, 1982. Jay Mazur later denied having said this. Katie Quan's account in the interview by Ruth Milkman in 1990 was somewhat different. According to Quan, after they collected all the signatures, the union said it was for daycare and they did not have to go through all this. See Milkman, "Organizing Immigrant Women," 290.

[38](#). For a brief discussion of this collaborative effort between the union officials and

the workers, see Milkman, "Organizing Immigrant Women," 290-91.

39. Quan soon resigned and accepted a new position at the Institute of Industrial Relations of the University of California, Berkeley.