

Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

Volume 11
Issue 1 *Controlled Burn*

Article 14

2022

Chinese Immigrant Women as Home Care Workers: Performing and Disrupting Narratives Through Labor Practices

Sophie Mark-Ng
Macalester College, smarkng@macalester.edu

Keywords:

anti-Asian violence, Asian American Pacific Islander, Chinese immigrant women, home care, labor, labor organizing, immigrant workers, stereotypes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries>

Recommended Citation

Mark-Ng, Sophie (2022) "Chinese Immigrant Women as Home Care Workers: Performing and Disrupting Narratives Through Labor Practices," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol11/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the American Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities* by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Chinese Immigrant Women as Home Care Workers: Performing and Disrupting Narratives Through Labor Practices

Sophie Mark-Ng

Introduction

With the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 and the accompanying hate incidents, violence against Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) entered American public consciousness in a more widespread way. This reached a climax with the Atlanta shootings in early 2021, when the hashtags #StopAAPIHate and #StopAsianHate started trending on social media.¹ Grounding our understanding of violence against AAPIs in history and institutionalized violence is essential. Narratives constructed around AAPIs, AAPI women in particular, contribute to the violence perpetrated against them. These narratives are often attributed to media depictions, including *Madam Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*, which are connected to U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia.² There has been a big push for more representation in media in order to change these narratives. However, aside from media representations, I will examine how labor contributes to

constructions of narratives which perpetuate ongoing violence against AAPIs.

In this paper, I argue that labor trends are guided by narratives surrounding certain demographics while simultaneously reinforcing these narratives. I will provide a brief Chinese American labor history, while also addressing AAPI labor history more broadly, as Chinese Americans have been racialized as Asian and the histories of separate ethnic groups are closely linked. This will serve as a background to discuss the contemporary trend of Chinese immigrant women entering the home care industry. This case study will examine how entry into this form of labor interacts with many competing narratives surrounding Chinese American women and results in physical and institutional violence.³ Lastly, I will examine how involving these women in organizing empowers these women and challenges predominant narratives.

My background as a second/fourth generation Chinese American immigrant woman, as well as my experience working with home care workers in Boston Chinatown

¹ On March 26, 2021, eight people were murdered by a gunman at three separate massage parlors in the Atlanta-area. Their names are Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Delaina Ashley Yaun, Paul Andre Michels, Xiaojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng. Six of the eight victims were Asian women.

² Sunny Woan, "White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence," *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice*, Vol. 14, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 275. Woan states "white sexual imperialism, through rape and war, created the hypersexualized stereotype of the Asian woman." Originating from the physical impacts of imperialism, this image has been continuously reinforced through media

depictions of US imperialism in Southeast Asia as well as depictions of Asian women in media more generally.

³ I use the term violence to refer to all harm, beyond just physical harm. Incarceration, immigration policy, and poverty could all be considered institutionalized forms of violence. Despite creating a distinction between physical and institutional violence, there is often no separation between the two. Physical violence can be made institutionalized, and institutional violence contains physical violence within it. Referring to the two separately is to add to our understanding of what violence looks like and to suggest that there are often institutions and systems which underlie seemingly isolated incidences. It is also to suggest that violence is not just physical and can contain emotional and psychological elements.

through labor and community organizing, guides my interest in this topic. These home care workers were predominantly first generation Chinese immigrants, Cantonese speaking, middle aged, and women. I want to acknowledge that I occupy a position of significantly more privilege having U.S. citizenship, fluency in English, and receiving higher education. However, these workers served as an inspiration to me, and I hope that my experience working alongside them will inform this paper in a non-exploitative and non-essentializing way.

A Brief Chinese American Labor History

In its beginnings, Asian American studies valorized the Asian American immigrant worker. Sucheng Chan writes that with the development of Asian American studies in the 1960s, workers were the focus of studies partially because of a Marxist influence, but also because in the first waves of Asian immigrants to the US, the vast majority of immigrants were working age men. She states:

Some 95 percent of the 1 million or so Asians (approximately 300,000 Chinese, 400,000 Japanese, 180,000 Filipinos, 7,000 Koreans, and 7,000 Indians) who came to the United States between 1849 and 1934 were unattached men (bachelors plus married men who came

without their wives) in their prime working years.⁴

Given the demographics of the early waves of Asian American immigrants, it makes sense that laborers were a focus in early Asian American studies. However, Chan notes that despite workers playing a central role in Asian American studies narratives, there was relatively little scholarship in the field of Asian American labor history. She attributes this to labor unions' historic exclusion of Asian Americans, limited sources on Asian American worker cultures, and the tendency for Asian American workers to work numerous and varied jobs in their lifetimes. Despite limited scholarship in Asian American labor studies, the history of Asian American labor is complex and central to the broader history of Asians in America.

Chinese American history is primarily understood through early Chinese immigrants' roles as laborers.⁵ The first wave of Chinese immigrants came in the mid-nineteenth century to take their chances at a fortune in the Gold Rush and were immediately recognized for their work ethic. Initially something to be admired, this work ethic would lead to subsequent labor exploitation, racial discrimination, and immigration exclusion. Their early work in restaurants, as laborers building the transcontinental railroad, and in laundries, further emphasized their value as workers and their potential to be underpaid and overworked.⁶

⁴ Sucheng Chan, "Asian American Labor History," *Radical History Review*, no. 63 (1995): 175.

⁵ It is important to note that although I will be discussing Chinese American workers and how their employment contributes to narratives surrounding them, these individuals and collectives were in no way passive subjects of their exploitation. While I will be discussing organizing home care workers later in this paper, because of limitations I will be unable to fully address how workers organized and interrupted dominant narratives in this brief history of Chinese American labor. The omission of Chinese American labor organizing in this section is not to deny its existence. Instead, it is to suggest that Chinese

American labor organizing does not exist in dominant American narratives. In fact, the labor organizing history of Chinese and Asian Americans has been strategically obscured to position Chinese workers in opposition to organized labor.

⁶ An additional layer to this was Chinese workers' entry into domestic service. On the West Coast of the US in the 1850s, the population was dominated by men. Because of this, Chinese men entered into domestic service, running laundries which white men considered women's work. In participating in a form of labor typically associated with women, Chinese men were emasculated. The entry of Chinese men into domestic work contributes

Beginning with their work on the Transcontinental Railroad, Chinese workers were strategically placed in opposition to white workers. Employers relied on Chinese workers to break up white workers' strikes, perform labor at lower costs, and complete work more quickly because of their diligence as workers.⁷ The resentment against Chinese workers led to physical violence in efforts to drive Chinese laborers away. Laborers not only faced violence from white workers, but they also faced an institutional form of violence because of the dangerous nature of the job.⁸ The total injuries and deaths of Chinese laborers were not measured, but it is estimated that over one thousand Chinese railroad workers died in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad.⁹ Violence against Chinese workers operated in multiple ways. Because they are viewed as an exploitable workforce, they are subjected to the violence of dangerous working conditions. Subsequently, in being cast as a threat to white workers, they are subject to violence from other workers. We see the continuation of this throughout history, as workers are simultaneously subject to poor working conditions and hate crimes.

While it was predominantly Chinese laborers working on the Transcontinental Railroad, as more Asians immigrated to the US, Asian workers more generally became cast as a threat to white workers. And, although rooted in labor and predominantly affecting workers, the effects of the narratives surrounding Asian

laborers extended beyond workers. Perhaps one of the most well known hate crimes against Chinese Americans is the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982. As his murderers beat him to death with a baseball bat, one yelled, "it's because of little motherfuckers like you that we're out of work."¹⁰ While in reference to the large number of Japanese auto workers in Detroit at the time, it did not matter to his murderers that Chin was neither Japanese nor an auto worker. The impact of narratives around racialized labor have impacts beyond the workers into broader national discourses and widespread violence.

Initially dehumanized and framed as a labor threat, AAPIs were manipulated by white supremacist ideologies to occupy the role of "model minority" in national consciousness. This tactic justifies the racial subjugation of other groups and attempts to deny legitimacy to their oppression. While on average, AAPI workers occupy positions and have earnings comparable to white workers, this does not represent large portions of the AAPI population. For this reason, many scholars refer to it as the "model minority myth" and analyze the ways in which this narrative is harmful to Asian Americans excluded from this narrative.¹¹ Consequently, there has been a large push from various AAPI organizations for data disaggregation which would more accurately represent the diverse population captured under the category AAPI. The model minority myth exists in part because of the persistence of the

to the gendered racialization of both Asian men and women. The feminization of the Asian race as a whole, results in the subsequent emasculation of Asian men and hypersexualization of Asian women. This will be essential later in this paper in the discussion of Chinese immigrant women working in home care.

⁷ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003), 55.

⁸ Another institutional form of violence to be acknowledged comes in the form of immigration discrimination. With the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, Chinese immigration to the US became extremely restricted. This marked the first time that

immigration was limited on the basis of race and the legacy of xenophobia guiding immigration policy continues today.

⁹ Chang, *The Chinese in America*, 64.

¹⁰ Maria Cecilia Hwang and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, "The Gendered Racialization of Asian Women as Villainous Tempresses," *Gender & Society*, Vol. 35, no. 4 (2021): 569.

¹¹ ChangHwan Kim and Arthur Sakamoto, "The Earnings of Less Educated Asian American Men: Educational Selectivity and the Model Minority Image," *Social Problems*, Vol. 61, no. 2 (2014): 283–304.

AAPI work ethic narrative, which originates as early as with Chinese miners during the Gold Rush. This portrayal as the ideal worker may be a deterrence to AAPI labor organizing and advocating for improved working conditions regardless of occupation. Furthermore, this narrative has been used to position AAPIs in opposition to other people of color. This contributes to racial discrimination against other people of color and is a barrier to cross racial solidarity.¹² Narratives around AAPI labor have been weaponized against AAPIs and other communities of color in a multitude of ways.

This history of Chinese American labor is brief and is in no way comprehensive. Throughout history, Chinese workers have found employment in countless other locations such as canneries, garment and electronic factories, and restaurants. They have also held occupations over the course of US history that contradict the narratives presented in my analysis. Additionally, Chinese immigrant workers have continuously countered narratives surrounding them throughout history by participating in collective organizing.¹³ This section is limited in that it mainly addresses racialized labor of Chinese men and does not address the gendered racialization that Chinese women workers face. The gendered aspect will be further explored in the following sections on Chinese women home care workers.

Labor has a profound impact on the ways in which Chinese Americans have been perceived in American narratives. Underpinning narratives from the Transcontinental Railroad to

the model minority myth, is the designation of the Chinese worker as the ideal worker to the employer: hardworking, accepting of low pay, and unlikely to resist. This contributes to a racialized view of Chinese and AAPI workers as part of a disposable workforce, their historic exclusion from organized labor, and a strategic positioning of AAPIs as oppositional to movements for social and racial justice. As the labor of Chinese Americans has shifted over time, how has this narrative persisted and continued to affect Chinese American workers? What does this look like within the growing number of Chinese immigrant women in home care work? How are these narratives reinforced and contradicted by Chinese immigrant home care workers?

Chinese Immigrant Women Working in Home Care

While developing this project, I had trouble defining and categorizing the essential in-home care workers that I would focus on. The terms domestic worker, home care worker, and home healthcare worker often are used interchangeably without a clear definition or understanding of the relation between the terms. Despite performing distinct forms of labor, they occupy a similar position within the American imagination. I looked to Boris and Klein's chapter, "Neither Nurses, Nor Maids: Defining Home Care as Labor," for clarification on how these terms engaged with one another.¹⁴ Domestic work typically refers to

¹² Anti-Blackness and the rise of conservatism within AAPI communities is also a major barrier to cross racial solidarity. Asian Americans are not simply objects of white supremacy and racial subjugation and cannot be complacent in the system of white supremacy which disproportionately affects Black and Indigenous people. Acknowledging their own privilege and addressing the racism within Asian American communities is necessary in building cross racial solidarity.

¹³ Chang, *The Chinese in America*, 62. As early as 1867, Chinese workers were participating in collective organizing. In the largest Chinese strike of the nineteenth

century, two thousand Chinese left their work on the Transcontinental Railroad to demand fewer hours and more pay. The strike lasted only a week as their employer cut off their food supply and most of the workers were unable to find alternative work or get back to California. However, because of their collective action, they were able to achieve a modest raise of two dollars per month.

¹⁴ Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, "Neither Nurses, Nor Maids: Defining Home Care as Labor," in *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

maids and housekeeping work, while home care work adds another dimension of care for elderly or ill people who may need assistance with more personal tasks. Home healthcare generally implies more clinical or skilled care. While initially looking to simply define the difference between the terms, I found that gender and racial divisions of labor play a major role in the conflation of these terms. For the duration of this paper, I will do my best to specify between home care, home healthcare, and domestic work although the boundaries between them are porous and they are often used interchangeably.

According to Boris and Klein, it was not until the New Deal, that care work was incorporated as a distinct occupation. Under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), “female public assistance recipients [were seen] as a ready supply of labor for home care.”¹⁵ The welfare recipients recruited for home care work were mostly Black women and they performed household tasks in addition to caring for the sick and elderly. Because of the demographic crossover between home care workers and maids as well as the characteristics of the labor itself, home care workers became equated with domestic work. Nurses also made a concerted effort to create a distinction between themselves and home care workers. The association of home care workers with domestic rather than healthcare work limited the potential for higher pay. This was codified in law under the New Deal and Fair Labor Standards Act:

The labor rights of the New Deal — old age insurance, unemployment benefits, collective bargaining, minimum wages, and maximum hours — excluded domestic workers... In 1940, the Fair Labor Standards Act categorized nurse-

companions and other in-home care workers hired directly by clients as domestic servants.¹⁶

The legacy of this legislation continued for decades, excluding home care workers from higher labor standards. Beyond legislation, the racialized and gendered conceptions of home care and domestic work continue to label this work as one of the lowest forms of labor which affects wages, working conditions, and prospects for organizing for change. Although home care work initially employed mostly Black women and the occupation was racially constructed to continue the subjugation of Black women, there have been an increasing number of other racial and ethnic groups entering home care work. How does the AAPI (or more specifically, Chinese) immigrant woman home care worker fit within, extend on, or alter the racialized and gendered ways in which home care work operates?

The home care occupation has undergone demographic changes since the 1930s when it was formalized as an occupation under the New Deal. However, the majority of home care workers are still non white and the vast majority are women, and as a whole, home care persists as a form of racialized and gendered labor.¹⁷ For working class Chinese immigrant women, the changing job market, in addition to the racialized and gendered push towards care work, has contributed to a growing number of Chinese immigrant women in home care work. Chun and Cranford write:

As the labor-intensive manufacturing sector has declined, particularly in the 1990s, many immigrant women who formerly worked as factory workers are finding new jobs in paid home care, which

¹⁵ Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39.

¹⁶ Boris and Klein, 24.

¹⁷ Julia Wolfe, Jori Kandra, Lora Engdahl, and Heidi Shierholz. “Domestic workers chartbook.” Economic

Policy Institute, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>.

is one of the most rapidly growing occupations in California and nationally.¹⁸

While historically, Chinese immigrant women have found employment in garment and electronic factories, they are increasingly moving into the home care industry.

As various groups have been home care workers throughout history, there are similarities and differences in which their labor has been racialized and gendered. For Chinese immigrant women working in home care, narratives surrounding Asian American workers, Asian women, and domestic workers have simultaneously affected them. Although I continue to refer to this specific sector of workers as Chinese immigrant women, immigration is an essential aspect that I will be unable to adequately address within this article. Immigration law has affected Chinese immigration to the U.S. from the very first racial and ethnic legislative restrictions on immigration: the Page Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act. Significant changes to Chinese immigration occurred with the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and subsequent amendments.¹⁹ This legislation paved the way for an increased number of professionals of higher economic status to immigrate to the U.S. Currently, Chinese immigrants are largely thought of as being part of this professional class; however, other forms of immigration such as family immigration and undocumented immigration have sustained large numbers of Chinese immigrants from non professional backgrounds. While immigrant workers are all treated with a degree of disposability, additional factors such as class, gender, and immigration status have impacted specific workers in more substantial ways.

¹⁸ Jennifer Jihye Chun and Cynthia Cranford, "Becoming Homecare Workers: Chinese Immigrant Women and the Changing Worlds of Work, Care and Unionism," *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 44, no. 7-8 (2018): 1018.

¹⁹ Arun Peter Lobo and Joseph J. Salvo, "Changing U.S. Immigration Law and the Occupational Selectivity of

Unfortunately, I will not be able to fully address how the being an immigrant intersects with other aspects of many Chinese home care workers identities and contributes to the narratives surrounding them.

Returning to the gendered racialization of home care work, the image of the Chinese worker created and reinforced throughout US history fits well into this field of work. Evelyn Nakano Glenn writes that racial stereotypes were justifications that racial groups were particularly suited for specific work. For Asian women, the belief that "Asian servants were naturally quiet, subordinate, and accustomed to a lower standard of living" justified their role as domestic workers.²⁰ In her analysis, Glenn states:

Even though racial stereotypes undoubtedly preceded their entry into domestic work, it is also the case that domestics were forced to enact the role of the inferior.²¹

The narratives surrounding racial groups exist before and may lead to entry into specific occupations, and these narratives are simultaneously reinforced through performance of these forms of labor.

In the previous section on Chinese American labor history, the primary focus was on the Chinese male laborer; however, the gendered racialization of Chinese women differed from that of Chinese men. While Chinese men were often feminized in their performance of domestic labor, Chinese women were hypersexualized and fetishized. Preceding the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the Page Act of 1875 barred the entry of Chinese women into the United States and "established the gendered racialization of Chinese women as

Asian Immigrants," *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 32, no. 3 (1998): 737-60.

²⁰ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs*, Vol. 18, no. 1 (1992): 14.

²¹ Glenn, 15.

diseased immoral prostitutes.”²² While being more representative of common perception than reality, in being coded as prostitutes, Chinese women were made the objects of desire while simultaneously being despised and feared. The stereotype of Chinese and Asian women as submissive and subservient underpins their sexualization and fetishization and contributes to their assumed labor.²³ This stereotype contributes to the continued association of Asian women to sex work and domestic work, and subsequent violence they may endure within these occupations or because of association to this labor.²⁴

While the image of the Asian woman sex worker is different from that of the Asian woman home care worker, the ways these narratives engage with each other needs further analysis. The underlying stereotype of Asian women as submissive and subservient plays out in complex and varied ways. For example, when would this narrative code Asian women as sex workers versus domestic workers? My first thought was age: the younger Asian woman sex worker and the older Asian domestic worker. However, in the case of the Atlanta murders, the Asian women who were presumed to be sex workers were mostly older or middle-aged. Despite the difference in these two narratives, both position the bodies of Asian women as being able to be possessed, and therefore disposed of. The concept of ownership and disposal of Asian women bodies could be utilized to justify the violence perpetuated against them in exploitative labor practices, sexual violence, and hate incidents including the 2021 Atlanta shootings. Perhaps these two

narratives are not fixed, and they can be shaped, changed, and used simultaneously in different circumstances.

For Chinese women home care workers, how do different narratives circulate and affect their labor in physical ways? They may be subject to sexual harassment in their workplaces because of their hypersexualization and fetishization, or subject to exploitation because of the assumption that Asian home care workers will not organize because they are submissive and subservient. Narratives surrounding Chinese women contribute to their entry into home care work and lead to the subsequent violence they face in this occupation. Effectively kept in poverty through this low wage work, home care workers are demanded both physical and emotional labor. Many home care workers work 24 hours shifts, sometimes for multiple days, but are only paid 13 hours each day because of time off for sleep and meals, despite the fact that clients often require their care around the clock. Many labor rights activists regard this 13 hour policy as a form of legal wage theft.²⁵ During the outbreak of the global COVID-19 health crisis, home care workers were lauded as essential workers for continuing to go to work while many other workers either shifted to remote work or stopped working and survived on unemployment insurance. Although they were recognized for being essential, home care workers did not receive treatment that indicated this. Many were forced to continue working under unsafe working conditions—not provided the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), at higher risk for exposure to COVID-19,

²² Hwang and Parreñas, “The Gendered Racialization of Asian Women as Villainous Tempresses,” 572.

²³ Margaret Huang, “Interview: Margaret Huang on Confronting the History of Anti-Asian Hate and White Supremacy in the United States and Abroad,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (2021): 164-65.

²⁴ Hwang and Parreñas, “The Gendered Racialization of Asian Women as Villainous Tempresses,” 569-70. It is not stereotypes alone which designate people to specific

forms of labor. Hwang and Parreñas note that “‘interlocking systems’ of gender and race oppression relegate many women of color and immigrant women to poorly paid and unregulated caring jobs, including domestic work and sex work.”

²⁵ Liz Donovan and Muriel Alorcón, “Long Hours, Low Pay, Loneliness and a Booming Industry,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/25/business/home-health-aides-industry.html>.

and not told of their right to paid time off.²⁶ Although the importance of care work is recognized, the working conditions and fair compensation for these workers does not reflect that.

It is ironic that in providing care work, home care workers are made unable to care for their own families. In addressing the domestic work of immigrant women, Grace Chang writes, “this labor is extracted in such a way as to make immigrant women’s sustenance of their own families nearly impossible.”²⁷ Not only are domestic workers and home care workers not receiving the money to financially care for their families, their physical and emotional labor are being extracted to care for their clients. While their clients benefit from the care they are receiving, this care has been taken away from the family of the worker. Because home care operates along racial and class-based lines, if care is considered a resource, it becomes another item which is allocated from poorer, largely communities of color to more privileged communities. So beyond just the worker themselves, the families and communities of the home care worker are also affected. In a world where care work is, and will remain, essential, are there ways in which the home care industry can operate that provide beneficial outcomes to both workers and clients?

Organizing Home Care Workers

In this section, I use the term organizing to refer to the collective organizing of home care workers, whether this occurs within organized labor (unions), community organizations, or elsewhere. Within the community and labor organizing spaces that I have been a part of, there is often a deliberate effort to differentiate between activism and organizing. Organizing implies a direct connection to the organizing

base whether that is workers, tenants, or community members. It also implies a long term commitment to fighting for the shared interests of the collective base rather than a singular issue or action. While worker organizing has historically been understood through unionization and the collective bargaining and striking processes that occur within unions, there is growing recognition of the worker organizing that occurs outside of organized labor. Worker centers provide essential spaces for collective organizing of workers that may feel marginalized within unions based on a variety of factors—gender, immigration status, language ability, etc. Within these various spaces, organizing workers directly involves them and promotes self advocacy. Therefore, it has the potential to not only transform working conditions, but the workers themselves.

For home care and other occupations which have historically been excluded by the organized labor movement, organizing has even further potential to transform these fields of work. In discussing the labor organizing of home care workers, Boris and Klein highlight the importance in “[gaining] visibility and dignity, two key phases in both self and media representations of home care providers.”²⁸ Home care workers have been made invisible because their work is in the home and often considered outside of the economic sphere; they have been robbed of their dignity in how their work has been categorized as a low form of unskilled labor. Regaining visibility and dignity of the self through organizing and empowerment can lead to subsequent changes in both media representations and public discourse. This shapes the perception of the workforce and disrupts the narratives performed in home care work.

²⁶ Donovan and Alorcón.

²⁷ Grace Chang, *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), 14.

²⁸ Boris and Klein, *Caring for America*, 16.

Within the labor movement, home care has had to fight particularly hard to have their work recognized. Organized labor has historically been dominated by white men, but this has been changing. Chang writes:

In the last decade, mainstream organized labor has begun to understand the potential power of immigrant women and women-of-color low-wage workers in particular.²⁹

Sectors of labor, such as home care, which has been gendered as women's work have had to overcome additional obstacles specific to the occupation in order to unionize. Factors such as dispersed workers in isolated workplaces, language access and childcare needs of workers, and emotional connection with clients make it more difficult to threaten to strike and pressure employers for improved working conditions. Because of these obstacles, unions were forced to adapt new strategies to unionize home care workers. But, despite these challenges, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the union home care workers are a part of, became the "major organizing and political force among wage earners" at the end of the twentieth century.³⁰ This is a testament to the growing power of home care workers in labor organizing and the increased recognition of low-wage women of color workers' essential role in the labor movement.

For Chinese immigrant women working in home care, organizing not only advocates for better working conditions and compensation, but it also counters narratives which justify Chinese immigrant women as home care workers in the first place. In being stereotyped as submissive and subservient, there is the

assumption that Chinese women will not organize and advocate for their rights. Being involved in labor and community organizing empowers these workers to stand up and speak out. Chun and Cranford conducted a series of interviews with Chinese immigrant women working in home care, and many spoke to the personal transformations they experienced upon getting involved in organizing work. One worker said: "I was timid in China, but I have become braver to fight for my rights since I arrived in the US."³¹ In my experience organizing in Boston Chinatown, I have been inspired by the home care workers who have moved from being rank-and-file members of their local SEIU chapter, to occupying more involved positions in their union, community organizations, and American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) constituency groups.³² In advocating for themselves and their rights, Chinese women home care workers challenge the stereotypes that they are diminutive and submissive, and demand to be seen and heard.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have explored the ways in which racialized and gendered narratives are constructed, perpetuated, and challenged through labor practices, specifically for Chinese immigrant women home care workers. I have highlighted the power of narratives in shaping labor trends and the power of labor in performing hierarchical gender and racial relationships. Lastly, I have discussed how organizing workers both improves working conditions for workers and counters predominant narratives.

²⁹ Chang, *Disposable Domestic*, 14.

³⁰ Boris and Klein, *Caring for America*, 7.

³¹ Chun and Cranford, "Becoming Homecare Workers," 1022.

³² The AFL-CIO has several constituency groups for different marginalized identities including Asian, Black, LGBTQ+, Latino, veteran, and women workers. The

constituency group for Asian workers, Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), has a local Massachusetts chapter. Chinese immigrant home care workers from SEIU 1199 compose the majority of the APALA Massachusetts chapter membership and hold many of the leadership positions within the chapter.

Narratives and stereotypes have been recognized as essential aspects of maintaining racial and gender subordination; subsequently, media representations have been the prime target of AAPI activism. However, the focus on the issue of representation is relatively easy and uncontroversial. The term “boba liberalism” first emerged on Twitter in early 2021 to describe the shortcomings of mainstream AAPI politics.³³ Similar to boba—a popular sweet, milk tea originating from Taiwan—“boba liberalism” is generally unifying and palatable to a wider audience. Focusing on media invisibility as a primary issue and lauding the emergence of shows and movies with larger Asian casts, are a large part of “boba liberalism.” Many have critiqued this growing trend towards a more shallow AAPI political identity for failing to recognize the diversity within the category of AAPI. Additionally, this form of AAPI liberalism does not engage with the recent physical acts of violence against members of the AAPI community including the Atlanta shootings, attacks on elderly Asians in Chinatowns across the U.S., and the deportations of Southeast Asian immigrants. “Boba liberalism” is easy because it does not require critical reflection of positionality and privilege, engaging directly with the AAPI communities that are most marginalized, and extensive amounts of time and money. Its failure is that it places AAPIs as adjacent to whiteness, rather than address the continued violence that many members within the AAPI community face.

While media plays a crucial role in creating and reinforcing narratives around specific groups, it is not media alone which establishes and perpetuates these narratives. Even within the field of media and cultural studies, there is recognition that media narratives do not emerge out of nowhere. To

preface his dissertation on Asian portrayals in American films, Franklin Wong writes:

Although the film industry has treated Asians from a predominantly fictional perspective, much of the material produced by the industry has had a non-fictional base.³⁴

Media representations undoubtedly have a role in perpetuating harmful narratives; however, these narratives are also formed and reproduced in many other areas of daily life, including in gendered and racialized divisions of labor. Collectively organizing workers has the power to transform stereotypes which guide labor practices and perpetuate violence. Despite its deprioritization in mainstream AAPI liberalism, labor organizing should be viewed as an essential site for the future of AAPI organizing.

³³ Frias, Lauren, “Boba liberalism: How the emergence of superficial activism could cause more harm than good to the AAPI community,” Insider, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/boba-liberalism-critique-on-a-shallow-political-identity-amid-crisis-2021-3>

³⁴ Wong, Eugene Franklin. “On Visual Media Racism: Asians in the American Motion Pictures.” New York: Arno Press, 1978.

Works Cited

- Boris, Eileen, and Jennifer Klein. *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Chan, Sucheng. "Asian American Labor History." *Radical History Review*, no. 63 (1995): 174-188.
- Chang, Grace. *Disposable Domesticity: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000.
- Chang, Iris. *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2003.
- Chun, Jennifer Jihye, and Cynthia Cranford. "Becoming Homecare Workers: Chinese Immigrant Women Changing Worlds of Work, Care and Unionism." *Critical Sociology* 44, no. 7-8 (2018): 1013-1027.
- Donovan, Liz, and Muriel Alorón. *Long Hours, Low Pay, Loneliness and a Booming Industry*. September 25, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/25/business/home-health-aides-industry.html> (accessed November 29, 2021).
- Frias, Lauren. *Boba liberalism: How the emergence of superficial activism could cause more harm than good to the AAPI community*. May 5, 2021. <https://www.insider.com/boba-liberalism-critique-on-a-shallow-political-identity-amid-crisis-2021-3> (accessed November 21, 2021).
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor." *Signs* 8, no. 1 (1992): 1-43.
- Huang, Margaret. "Interview: Margaret Huang on Confronting the History of Anti-Asian Hate and White Supremacy in the United States and Abroad." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2021): 162-166.
- Hwang, Maria Cecilia, and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas. "The Gendered Racialization of Asian Women as Villainous Tempresses." *Gender & Society* 35, no. 4 (2021): 567-576.
- Kim, ChangHwan, and Arthur Sakamoto. "The Earnings of Less Educated Asian American Men: Educational Selectivity and the Model Minority Image." *Social Problems* 61, no. 2 (2014): 283-304.
- Lobo, Arun Peter, and Joseph J. Salvo. "Changing U.S. Immigration Law and the Occupational Selectivity of Asian Immigrants." *The International Migration Review* 32, no. 3 (1998): 937-960.
- Mukkamala, S, and K.L. Suyemoto. "Racialized Sexism/Sexualized Racism: A Multimethod Study of Intersectional Experiences of Discrimination for Asian American Women." *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2018): 32-46.
- Shimizu, Celine Parreñas. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Woan, Sunny. "White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence." *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice* 14, no. 2 (2008): 275-301.
- Wolfe, Julia, Jori Kadra, Lora Engdahl, and Heidi Shierholz. *Domestic workers chartbook*. 2020. <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the->

demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

Wong, Eugene Franklin. *On Visual Media Racism: Asians in the American Motion Pictures*. New York: Arno Press, 1978.