

***Enduring Hardship: The Chinese Laundry in Canada.* By Ban Seng Hoe. Mercury Series, Cultural Studies Paper 76 (Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003. Pp. 86, ISBN 0660190788).**

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teachable work of value in a variety of disciplines and accessible even to the uninitiated in the fields of AIDS research, social policy, Newfoundland studies and Cultural Studies. Overall, *Once Upon a Virus* is a fine work of ethnographic research that in fact champions ethnography both by example and in its call for an ethnographic approach to understanding legend making.

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Enduring Hardship: The Chinese Laundry in Canada. By Ban Seng Hoe. Mercury Series, Cultural Studies Paper 76 (Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003. Pp. 86, ISBN 0660190788).

If you read the *Canadian Encyclopedia*'s entry on Chinese immigrants, you would learn nothing of the laundry business' importance for the Chinese in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. *Enduring Hardship* aims to fill this gap. Produced as a companion to the Canadian Museum of Civilization's permanent exhibition of the same title, this brief social and oral history of Chinese laundry workers in Canada contributes to the growing literature on the history of ethnic groups in Canada.

Enduring Hardship argues that Chinese immigrant men created laundry work as their niche in Canada's racist economy because systematic discrimination gave them few options. The book focuses on the people — the laundrymen and their families — and, through interviews and photographs, lets them talk about the arduous work of manually cleaning other people's soiled clothes and dirty linen.

Chinese men and a few women, mostly from California and China's Guangdong and Fujian provinces, came to British Columbia in the wake of the gold rushes of the 1850s and the building of the railways in the 1880s. By the end of the nineteenth century, some Chinese-Canadians began to settle in other provinces, where, the further east they went, the more likely they were to establish themselves in the laundry business. This was particularly true for Central Canada. Quebec's Chinese population was 2,750 in 1931, and there were 1,272 Chinese laundries. In the same year, Ontario counted 6,919 Chinese and 2,508

Chinese laundries. Yet, while there were 27,139 Chinese in BC in 1931, there were only 752 laundries (9). Chinese in BC were employed in many other low-paying, physically strenuous jobs in mines, sawmills, and canneries. At the same time, BC's anti-Asian business policies and propaganda made it more difficult for Chinese to establish laundries.

Chinese laundries were mostly one-man, father-son, or small partnership operations with perhaps one or two employees. Clansmen or friends were recruited as workers, and laundrymen temporarily returned to China to marry and have children. The conclusion that "these kinds of arrangements resulted in a form of early immigration chain, as well as clusters of certain occupations around certain clansmen within a particular area", (12) is insightful and contributes to the growing understanding of worldwide migrations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as "migration systems" or interconnected migrations within labour market segments (although the author does not reference this literature).

The core of the book is a presentation of excerpts from interviews with 36 male and 15 female former laundry workers from across Canada, as well as newspaper reports about Chinese laundries, jokes, songs, cartoons, price lists, and photographs of buildings, workers, and tools. Together, they tell the story of "toil and drudgery" during twelve hour workdays in cramped, steamy quarters and of the physically demanding manual, repetitive labour that was detrimental to the health of many. In their oral testimonies, the laundrymen also speak of their isolation and the monotony of their lives. As for all Chinese-Canadians, isolation resulted from the federal anti-Asian immigration policy, which prevented sojourning men from bringing their families. Many men who had come in the 1920s could not reunite with their wives and children until the 1950s and 1960s. Some laundrymen visited their families in China. In Canada, they socialized with compatriots in Chinatown and created mutual aid societies and credit unions.

The book also explores the hostile social context in which Chinese laundries operated. From the early twentieth century, white Canadians, from local and provincial governments to labour unions, attempted to keep down Chinese-owned laundries, through taxation and licensing fees, bylaws prohibiting Chinese laundries to open business on certain streets, vandalism, and racist media reports claiming clothes washed by Chinese were infected with germs. At the same time, white customers kept Chinese laundries in business because they were cheaper and did

a good job of cleaning their clothes. This white ambivalence to Chinese laundrymen emerged most clearly in industry's use of the positive stereotype of Chinese laundries by using them to advertise soap. The St. Laurence Starch Company advertised its Ivory Gloss Starch on a 1905 calendar with a picture of a Chinese laundryman pointing to the soap, saying "Me likee vely muchee" (56).

The Chinese hand laundry declined in the 1950s with the introduction of new technologies and textiles, but also because the Chinese laundrymen's children now had more occupational options and often chose not to work in the laundry business. The book concludes the narrative with excerpts from six interviews with laundrymen's children, in which they all testify that their parents' hard work inspired them "to work hard, to be frugal and tolerant, and to strive for a better tomorrow" (72). Unfortunately, critical issues raised by the interviewees, such as the role of gender, generational conflicts, life outside of Chinatown, relations with non-Chinese customers, or the creation of mutual aid societies are not explored.

The book has some problems. It fails to satisfactorily explain why it was the Chinese (rather than another immigrant group) who construed laundry work as an economic niche, and why they found the laundry business (rather than another business, as was the case in British Columbia) to be the most useful niche. Also, the overall presentation of the research seems to have been initially conceived not as a book but as an exhibition. This gives the book the appearance of a pastiche of only loosely connected or even unconnected exhibition artefacts. Considering the importance of the approximately 75 black-and-white photographs to the book, the poor quality of their reproduction, their insufficient subtitling and contextualization, and their only very loose connection to the main narrative are disappointing. Although illuminating, the interview excerpts are at times repetitive, and there is insufficient information about the creation of the interviews.

Despite these shortcomings of *Enduring Hardship*, Ban Seng Hoe, a folklorist, anthropologist, and museum curator has written an important first chapter of a so far neglected but significant part of the Chinese-Canadian experience.

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